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ve Knausgaard

My Struggle

BOOK ONE

Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett

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Almost ten years have passed since Karl Ove's father drank himself to death. Vulnerable and assailed by doubts, he is now embarking on a new novel. With an uncanny eye for detail, Knausgaard breaks down his own life story into its elementary particles, reliving memories, reopening wounds, and examining with candor the turbulence and epiphanies that emerge from his own experience of fatherhood, the fallout in the wake of his father's death, and his visceral connection to music, art, and literature. Negotiating intimacy, love, and fear lie at the heart of his movements and mind as he moves from self-deprecation to self-absorption, from craving solitude to exposing an insatiable need for love and admiration, from alienation to harmony. Karl Ove's dilemmas strike nerves that give us raw glimpses of our particular moment in history as we witness what happens to the sensitive and churning mind of a young man trying – as if his very life depended on it – to find his place in the disjointed world around him. This Proustian masterpiece opens a window into one of the most original minds writing today.

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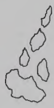

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Karl Ove Knausgaard

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SECOND HARDCOVER PRINTING

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First published as *Min kamp 1* by Forgalet Oktober in 2009.

Archipelago Books
232 3rd Street, Suite A111
Brooklyn, NY 11215
www.archipelagobooks.org

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Knausgård, Karl Ove, 1968–
[Min kamp. English]
My struggle / Karl Ove Knausgaard ; translated from the Norwegian
by Don Bartlett. – 1st Archipelago Books ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 978-0-914671-00-8 (alk. paper)
I. Bartlett, Don. II. Title.
PT8951.21.N38M5613 2012
839.82'37—dc23 2011048978

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Distributed by Random House
www.randomhouse.com

Cover art: Anselm Kiefer

The publication of *My Struggle* was made possible with support from
the Black Mountain Institute, Lannan Foundation, the National
Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts,
a state agency, NORLA (Norwegian Literature Abroad),
and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

Part 1

For the heart, life is simple: it beats for as long as it can. Then it stops. Sooner or later, one day, this pounding action will cease of its own accord, and the blood will begin to run towards the body's lowest point, where it will collect in a small pool, visible from outside as a dark, soft patch on ever whitening skin, as the temperature sinks, the limbs stiffen and the intestines drain. These changes in the first hours occur so slowly and take place with such inexorability that there is something almost ritualistic about them, as though life capitulates according to specific rules, a kind of gentleman's agreement to which the representatives of death also adhere, inasmuch as they always wait until life has retreated before they launch their invasion of the new landscape. By which point, however, the invasion is irrevocable. The enormous hordes of bacteria that begin to infiltrate the body's innards cannot be halted. Had they but tried a few hours earlier, they would have met with immediate resistance; however everything around them is quiet now, as they delve deeper and deeper into the moist darkness. They advance on the Havers Channels, the Crypts of Lieberkühn, the Isles of Langerhans. They proceed to Bowman's Capsule in the Renes, Clark's Column in the Spinalis, the black substance in the Mesencephalon. And they arrive at the heart. As yet, it is intact, but deprived of the activity to which end its whole construction has been designed, there is something strangely desolate about it, like a production plant that workers have been forced to flee in haste, or so it appears, the stationary vehicles shining yellow against the darkness of the forest, the huts deserted, a line of fully loaded cable- buckets stretching up the hillside.

The moment life departs the body, it belongs to death. At one with lamps, suitcases, carpets, door handles, windows. Fields, marshes, streams, mountains, clouds, the sky. None of these is alien to us. We are constantly surrounded by objects and phenomena from the realm of death. Nonetheless, there are few things that arouse in us greater distaste than to a see a human being caught up in it, at least if we are to judge by the efforts we make to keep corpses out of sight. In larger hospitals they are not only hidden away in discrete, inaccessible rooms, even the pathways there are concealed, with their own elevators and basement corridors, and should you stumble upon one of them, the dead bodies being wheeled by are always covered. When they have to be transported from the hospital it is through a dedicated exit, into vehicles with tinted glass; in the church grounds there is a separate, windowless room for them; during the funeral ceremony they lie in closed coffins until they are lowered into the earth or cremated in the oven. It is hard to imagine what practical purpose this procedure might serve. The uncovered bodies could be wheeled along the hospital corridors, for example, and thence be transported in an ordinary taxi without this posing a particular risk to anyone. The elderly man who dies during a cinema performance might just as well remain in his seat until the film is over, and during the next two for that matter. The teacher who has a heart attack in the school playground does not necessarily have to be driven away immediately; no damage is done by leaving him where he is until the caretaker has time to attend to him, even though that might not be until sometime in the late afternoon or evening. What difference would it make if a bird were to alight on him and take a peck? Would what awaits him in the grave be any better just because it is hidden? As long as the dead are not in the way there is no need for any rush, they cannot die a second time. Cold snaps in the winter should be particularly propitious in such circumstances. The homeless who freeze to death on benches and in doorways, the suicidal who jump off high buildings and bridges, elderly women who fall down staircases, traffic victims trapped in wrecked cars, the young man who, in a drunken stupor, falls into the lake after a night on the town, the small girl who ends up under the wheel of a bus, why all this haste to remove them from the public eye? Decency? What could be more decent than to allow the girl's mother and father to see her an hour or two later, lying in the snow at the site of the accident, in full view, her crushed head and the rest of her body, her blood-spattered hair and the spotless padded jacket? Visible to the whole world, no secrets, the way she was. But even this one hour in the snow is unthinkable. A town that does not keep its dead out of sight, that leaves people where they died, on highways and byways, in parks and parking lots, is not a town but a hell. The fact that this hell reflects our life experience in a more realistic and essentially truer way is of no consequence. We know this is how it is, but we do not want to face it. Hence the collective act of repression symbolized by the concealment of our dead.

What exactly it is that is being repressed, however, is not so easy to say. It cannot be death itself, for its presence in society is much too prominent. The number of deaths reported in newspapers or shown on the TV news every day varies slightly according to circumstances, but the annual average will presumably tend to be constant, and since it is spread over so many channels virtually impossible to avoid. Yet *that* kind of death does not seem threatening. Quite the contrary, it is something we are drawn to and will happily pay to see. Add the enormously high body count in fiction and it becomes even harder to understand the system that keeps death out of sight. If the phenomenon of death does not frighten us, why then this distaste for dead bodies? It must mean either that there are two kinds of death or that there is a disparity between our conception of death and death as it actually turns out to be, which in effect boils down to the same thing. What is significant here is that our conception of death is so strongly rooted in our consciousness that we are not only shaken when we see that reality deviates from it, but we also try to conceal this with all the means at our disposal. Not as a result of some form of conscious deliberation, as has been the case with funeral rites, the form and meaning of which are negotiable nowadays, and thus have shifted from the sphere of the irrational to the rational, from the collective to the individual – no, the way we remove bodies has never been the subject of debate, it has always been just something we have done, out of a necessity for which no one can state a reason but everyone feels: if your father dies on the lawn one windswept Sunday in autumn, you carry him indoors if you can, and if you can't, you at least cover him with a blanket. This impulse, however, is not the only one we have with regard to the dead. No less conspicuous than our hiding the corpses is the fact that we always lower them to ground level as fast as possible. A hospital that transports its bodies upward, that sites its cold chambers on the upper floors is practically inconceivable. The dead are stored as close to the ground as possible. And the same principle applies to the agencies that attend them; an insurance company may well have its offices on the eighth floor, but not a funeral parlor. All funeral parlors have their offices as close to street level as possible. Why this should be so is hard to say; one might be tempted to believe that it was based on some ancient convention that originally had a practical purpose, such as a cellar being cold and therefore best suited to storing corpses, and that this principle had been retained in our era of refrigerators and cold-storage rooms, had it not been for the notion that transporting bodies upward in buildings seems *contrary to the laws of nature*, as though height and death are mutually incompatible. As though we possessed some kind of chthonic instinct, something deep within us that urges us to move death down to the earth whence we came.

II

It might thus appear that death is relayed through two distinct systems. One is associated with concealment and gravity, earth and darkness, the other with openness and airiness, ether and light. A father and his child are killed as the father attempts to pull the child out of the line of fire in a town somewhere in the Middle East, and the image of them huddled together as the bullets thud into flesh, causing their bodies to shudder, as it were, is caught on camera, transmitted to one of the thousands of satellites orbiting the Earth and broadcast on TV sets around the world, from where it slips into our consciousness as yet another picture of death or dying. These images have no weight, no depth, no time, and no place, nor do they have any connection to the bodies that spawned them. They are nowhere and everywhere. Most of them just pass through us and are gone; for diverse reasons some linger and live on in the dark recesses of the brain. An off-piste skier falls and severs an artery in her thigh, blood streams out leaving a red trail down the white slope; she is dead even before her body comes to a halt. A plane takes off, flames shoot out from the engines as it climbs, the sky above the suburban houses is blue, the plane explodes in a ball of fire beneath. A fishing smack sinks off the coast of northern Norway one night, the crew of seven drown, next morning the event is described in all the newspapers, it is a so-called mystery, the weather was calm and no mayday call was sent from the boat, it just disappeared, a fact which the TV stations underline that evening by flying over the scene of the drama in a helicopter and showing pictures of the empty sea. The sky is overcast, the gray-green swell heavy but calm, as though possessing a different temperament from the choppy, white-flecked waves that burst forth here and there. I am sitting alone watching, it is some time in spring, I suppose, for my father is working in the garden. I stare at the surface of the sea without listening to what the reporter says, *and suddenly the outline of a face emerges*. I don't know how long it stays there, a few seconds perhaps, but long enough for it to have a huge impact on me. The moment the face disappears I get up to find someone I can tell. My mother is on the evening shift, my brother is playing soccer, and the other children on our block won't listen, so it has to be Dad, I think, and hurry down the stairs, jump into shoes, thread my arms through the sleeves of my jacket, open the door, and run around the house. We are not allowed to run in the garden, so just before I enter his line of vision, I slow down and start walking. He is standing at the rear of the house, down in what will be the vegetable plot, lunging at a boulder with a sledgehammer. Even though the hollow is only a few meters deep, the black soil he has dug up and is standing on together with the dense clump of rowan trees growing beyond the fence behind him cause the twilight to deepen. As he straightens up and turns to me, his face is almost completely shrouded in darkness.

Nevertheless I have more than enough information to know his mood. This is apparent not from his facial expressions but his physical posture, and you do not read it with your mind but with your intuition.

He puts down the sledgehammer and removes his gloves.

"Well?" he says.

"I've just seen a face in the sea on TV," I say, coming to a halt on the lawn above him. The neighbor had felled a pine tree earlier in the afternoon and the air is filled with the strong resin smell from the logs lying on the other side of the stone wall.

"A diver?" Dad says. He knows I am interested in divers, and I suppose he cannot imagine I would find anything else interesting enough to make me come out and tell him about it.

I shake my head.

"It wasn't a person. It was something I saw in the sea."

"Something you saw, eh," he says, taking the packet of cigarettes from his breast pocket.

I nod and turn to go.

"Wait a minute," he says.

He strikes a match and bends his head forward to light the cigarette. The flame carves out a small grotto of light in the gray dusk.

"Right," he says.

After taking a deep drag, he places one foot on the rock and stares in the direction of the forest on the other side of the road. Or perhaps he is staring at the sky above the trees.

"Was it Jesus you saw?" he asks, looking up at me. Had it not been for the friendly voice and the long pause before the question I would have thought he was poking fun at me. He finds it rather embarrassing that I am a Christian; all he wants of me is that I do not stand out from the other kids, and of all the teeming mass of kids on the estate no one other than his youngest son calls himself a Christian.

But he is really giving this some thought.

I feel a rush of happiness because he actually cares, while still feeling vaguely offended that he can underestimate me in this way.

I shake my head.

"It wasn't Jesus," I say.

"That's nice to hear," Dad says with a smile. Higher up on the hillside the faint whistle of bicycle tires on tarmac can be heard. The sound grows, and it is so quiet on the estate that the low singing tone at the heart of the whistle resonates loud and clear, and soon afterward the bicycle races past us on the road.

Dad takes another drag at the cigarette before tossing it half-smoked over the fence, then coughs a couple of times, pulls on his gloves, and grabs the sledgehammer again.

"Don't give it another thought," he says, glancing up at me.

I was eight years old that evening, my father thirty-two. Even though I still can't say that I understand him or know what kind of person he was, the fact that I am now seven years older than he was then makes it easier for me to grasp some things. For example, how great the difference was between our days. While my days were jam-packed with meaning, when each step opened a new opportunity, and when every opportunity filled me to the brim, in a way which now is actually incomprehensible, the meaning of his days was not concentrated in individual events but spread over such large areas that it was not possible to comprehend them in anything other than abstract terms. “Family” was one such term, “career” another. Few or no unforeseen opportunities at all can have presented themselves in the course of his days, he must always have known in broad outline what they would bring and how he would react. He had been married for twelve years, he had worked as a middle-school teacher for eight of them, he had two children, a house and a car. He had been elected onto the local council and appointed to the executive committee representing the Liberal Party. During the winter months he occupied himself with philately, not without some progress: inside a short space of time he had become one of the country’s leading stamp collectors, while in the summer months gardening took up what leisure he had. What he was thinking on this spring evening I have no idea, nor even what perception he had of himself as he straightened up in the gloom with the sledgehammer in his hands, but I am fairly sure that there was some feeling inside him that he understood the surrounding world quite well. He knew who all the neighbors on the estate were and what social status they held in relation to himself, and I imagine he knew quite a bit about what they preferred to keep to themselves, as he taught their children and also because he had a good eye for others’ weaknesses. Being a member of the new educated middle class he was also well-informed about the wider world, which came to him every day via the newspaper, radio, and television. He knew quite a lot about botany and zoology because he had been interested while he was growing up, and though not exactly conversant with other science subjects he did at least have some command of their basic principles from secondary school. He was better at history, which he had studied at university along with Norwegian and English. In other words, he was not an expert at anything, apart from maybe pedagogy, but he knew a bit about everything. In this respect he was a typical school teacher, though, from a time when secondary school teaching still carried some status. The neighbor who lived on the other side of the wall, Prestbakmo, worked as a teacher at the same school, as did the neighbor who lived on top of the tree-covered slope behind our house, Olsen, while one of the neighbors who lived at the far end of the ring road, Knudsen, was the head teacher of another middle school. So when my father raised the sledgehammer above his head and let it fall on the rock that spring evening in the mid 1970s, he was doing so in a world he knew and was familiar with. It was not until I myself reached the same age that I understood there was indeed a price to pay for this. As your perspective of the world increases not only is the pain it inflicts on you less but also its meaning. Understanding the world requires you to take a certain distance from it. Things that are too small to see with the naked eye, such as molecules and atoms, we magnify. Things that are too large, such as cloud formations, river deltas, constellations, we reduce. At length we bring it within the scope of our senses and we stabilize it with fixer. When it has been fixed we call it knowledge. Throughout our childhood and teenage years, we strive to attain the correct distance to objects and phenomena. We read, we learn, we experience, we make adjustments. Then one day we reach the point where all the necessary distances have been set, all the necessary systems have been put in place. That is when time begins to pick up speed. It no longer meets any obstacles, everything is set, time races through our lives, the days pass by in a flash and before we know what is happening we are forty, fifty, sixty . . . Meaning requires content, content requires time, time requires resistance. Knowledge is distance, knowledge is stasis and the enemy of meaning. My picture of my father on that evening in 1976 is, in other words, twofold: on the one hand I see him as I saw him at that time, through the eyes of an eight-year-old: unpredictable and frightening; on the other hand, I see him as a peer through whose life time is blowing and unremittingly sweeping large chunks of meaning along with it.

The crack of sledgehammer on rock resounded through the estate. A car came up the gentle slope from the main road and passed, its lights blazing. The door of the neighboring house opened, Prestbakmo paused on the doorstep, pulled on his work gloves, and seemed to sniff the clear night air before grabbing the wheelbarrow and trundling it across the lawn. There was a smell of gunpowder from the rock Dad was pounding, of pine from the logs behind the stone wall, freshly dug soil and forest, and in the gentle northerly breeze a whiff of salt. I thought of the face I had seen in the sea. Even though only a couple of minutes had passed since I last considered it, everything had changed. Now it was Dad's face I saw.

Down in the hollow he took a break from hammering at the rock.

"Are you still there, boy?"

I nodded.

"Get yourself inside."

I started to walk.

"And Karl Ove, remember," he said.

I paused, turned my head, puzzled.

"No running this time."

I stared at him. How could he know I had run?

"And shut your maw," he said. "You look like an idiot."

I did as he said, closed my mouth and walked slowly around the house. Reaching the front, I saw the road was full of children. The oldest stood in a group with their bikes, which in the dusk almost appeared as an extension of their bodies. The youngest were playing Kick-the-Can. The ones who had been tagged stood inside a chalk circle on the pavement; the others were hidden at various places in the forest down from the road, out of sight of the person guarding the can but visible to me.

The lights on the bridge masts glowed red above the black treetops. Another car came up the hill. The headlights illuminated the cyclists first, a brief glimpse of reflectors, metal, Puffa jackets, black eyes and white faces, then the children, who had taken no more than the one necessary step aside to allow the car to pass and were now standing like ghosts, gawking.

It was the Trollneses, the parents of Sverre, a boy in my class. He didn't seem to be with them.

I turned and followed the red taillights until they disappeared over the summit of the hill. Then I went in. For a while I tried to lie on my bed reading, but could not settle, and instead went into Yngve's room, from where I could see Dad. When I could see him I felt safer with him, and in a way that was what mattered most. I knew his moods and had learned how to predict them long ago, by means of a kind of subconscious categorization system, I have later come to realize, whereby the relationship between a few constants was enough to determine what was in store for me, allowing me to make my own preparations. A kind of metereology of the mind . . . The speed of the car up the gentle gradient to the house, the time it took him to switch off the engine, grab his things, and step out, the way he looked around as he locked the car, the subtle nuances of the various sounds that rose from the hall as he removed his coat – everything was a sign, everything could be interpreted. To this was added information about where he had been, and with whom, how long he had been away, before the conclusion, which was the only part of the process of which I was conscious, was drawn. So, what frightened me most was when he turned up *without warning* . . . when for some reason I had been *inattentive* . . .

How on earth did he know I had been running?

This was not the first time he had caught me out in a way I found incomprehensible. One evening that autumn, for example, I had hidden a bag of sweets under the duvet for the express reason that I had a hunch he would come into my room, and there was no way he would believe my explanation of how I had laid my hands on the money to buy them. When, sure enough, he did come in, he stood watching me for a few seconds.

"What have you got hidden in your bed?" he asked.

How could he possibly have known?

Outside, Prestbakmo switched on the powerful lamp that was mounted over the flagstones where he usually worked. The new island of light that emerged from the blackness displayed a whole array of objects that he stood stock-still ogling. Columns of paint cans, jars containing paintbrushes, logs, bits of planking, folded tarpaulins, car tires, a bicycle frame, some toolboxes, tins of screws and nails of all shapes and sizes, a tray of milk cartons with flower seedlings, sacks of lime, a rolled-up hose pipe, and leaning against the wall, a board on which every conceivable tool was outlined, presumably intended for the hobby room in the cellar.

Glancing outside at Dad again, I saw him crossing the lawn with the sledgehammer in one hand and a spade in the other. I took a couple of hasty steps backward. As I did so the front door burst open. It was Yngve. I looked at my watch. Twenty-eight minutes past eight. When, straight afterward, he came up the stairs with the familiar, slightly jerky, almost duck-like gait we had developed so as to be able to walk fast inside the house without making a sound, he was breathless and ruddy-cheeked.

"Where's Dad?" he asked as soon as he was in the room.

"In the garden," I said. "But you're not late. Look, it's half past eight *now*."

I showed him my watch.

He walked past me and pulled the chair from under the desk. He still smelled of outdoors. Cold air, forest, gravel, tarmac.

"Have you been messing with my cassettes?" he asked.

"No," I answered.

"What are you doing in my room then?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Can't you do nothing in your own room?"

Below us, the front door opened again. This time it was Dad's heavy footsteps traversing the floor downstairs. He had removed his boots outside, as usual, and was on his way to the washroom to change.

"I saw a face in the sea on the news tonight," I said. "Have you heard anything about it? Do you know if anyone else saw it?"

Yngve eyed me with a half-curious, half-dismissive expression.

"What are you babbling on about?"

"You know the fishing boat that sank?"

He gave a barely perceptible nod.

"When they were showing the place where it sank on the news I saw a face in the sea."

"A dead body?"

"No. It wasn't a real face. The sea had formed into the shape of a face."

For a moment he watched me without saying anything. Then he tapped a forefinger on his temple.

"Don't you believe me?" I said. "It's absolutely true."

"The truth is you're a waste of space."

At that moment Dad switched off the tap downstairs, and I decided it was best to go to my room now so that there was no chance of meeting him on the landing. But, I did not want Yngve to have the last word.

"You're the one who's a waste of space," I said.

He could not even be bothered to answer. Just turned his face toward me, stuck out his top teeth and blew air through them like a rabbit. The gesture was a reference to my protruding teeth. I broke away and made off before he could see my tears. As long as I was alone my crying didn't bother me. And this time it had worked, hadn't it? Because he hadn't seen me?

I paused inside the door of my room and wondered for moment whether to go to the bathroom. I could rinse my face with cold water and remove the telltale signs. But Dad was on his way up the stairs, so I made do with wiping my eyes on the sleeve of my sweater. The thin layer of moisture that the dry material spread across my eye made the surfaces and colors of the room blur as though it had suddenly sunk and was now under water, and so real was this perception that I raised my arms and made a few swimming strokes as I walked toward the writing desk. In my mind I was wearing a metal diver's helmet from the early days of diving, when they bestrode the seabed with leaden shoes and suits as thick as elephant skin, with an oxygen pipe attached to their heads like a kind of trunk. I wheezed through my mouth and staggered around for a while with the heavy, sluggish movements of divers from bygone days until the horror of the sensation slowly began to seep in like cold water.

A few months before, I had seen the TV series *The Mysterious Island*, based on Jules Verne's novel, and the story of those men who landed their air balloon on a deserted island in the Atlantic had made an enormous impact on me from the very first moment. Everything was electric. The air balloon, the storm, the men dressed in nineteenth-century clothing, the weather-beaten, barren island where they had been marooned, which apparently was not as deserted as they imagined, mysterious and inexplicable things were always happening around them . . . but in that case who were the others? The answer came without warning toward the end of one episode. There was someone in the underwater caves . . . a number of humanoid creatures . . . in the light from the lamps they were carrying they saw glimpses of smooth, masked heads . . . fins . . . they resembled a kind of lizard but walked upright . . . with containers on their backs . . . one turned, he had no eyes . . .

I did not scream when I saw these things, but the horror the images instilled would not go away; even in the bright light of day I could be struck with terror by the very thought of the frogmen in the cave. And now my thoughts were turning me into one of them. My wheezing became theirs, my footsteps theirs, my arms theirs, and closing my eyes, it was those eyeless faces of theirs I saw before me. The cave . . . the black water . . . the line of frogmen with lamps in their hands . . . it became so bad that opening my eyes again did not help. Even though I could see I was in my room, surrounded by familiar objects, the terror did not release its grip. I hardly dared blink for fear that something might happen. Stiffly, I sat down on the bed, reached for my satchel without looking at it, glanced at the school timetable, found Wednesday, read what it said, *math*, *orientation*, *music*, lifted the satchel onto my lap and mechanically flipped through the books inside. This done, I took the open book from the pillow, sat against the wall and began to read. The seconds between looking up soon became minutes, and when Dad shouted it was time for supper, nine o'clock on the dot, it was not horror that had me in its thrall but the book. Tearing myself away from it was quite an effort too.

We were not allowed to cut bread ourselves, nor were we allowed to use the stove, so it was always either Mom or Dad who made supper. If Mom was on the evening shift, Dad did everything: when we came into the kitchen there were two glasses of milk and two plates, each with four slices of bread plus toppings, waiting for us. As a rule, he had prepared the food beforehand, and then kept it in the fridge, and the fact that it was cold made it difficult to swallow, even when I liked the toppings he had chosen. If Mom was at home there was a selection of meats, cheeses, jars on the table, either hers or ours, and this small touch, which allowed us to choose what would be on the table or on our sandwiches, in addition to the bread being at room temperature, this was sufficient to engender a sense of freedom in us: if we could open the cupboard, take the plates, which always made a bit of a clatter when they knocked against each other, and laid them on the table; if we could open the cutlery drawer, which always rattled, and place the knives beside our plates; if we could set out the glasses, open the fridge, take the milk and pour it, then you could be sure we would open our mouths and speak. One thing led naturally to another when we had supper with Mom. We chatted away about anything that occurred to us, she was interested in what we had to say, and if we spilt a few drops of milk or forgot our manners and put the used tea bag on the tablecloth (for she made us tea as well) it was no huge drama. But if it was our participation in the meal that opened this sluice gate of freedom, it was the extent of my father's presence that regulated its impact. If he was outside the house or down in his study, we chatted as loudly and freely and with as many gesticulations as we liked; if he was on his way up the stairs we automatically lowered our voices and changed the topic of conversation, in case we were talking about something we assumed he might consider unseemly; if he came into the kitchen we stopped altogether, sat there as stiff as pokers, to all outward appearances sunk in concentration over the food; on the other hand, if he retired to the living room we continued to chat, but more warily and more subdued.

This evening, the plates with the four prepared slices awaited us as we entered the kitchen. One with brown goat's cheese, one with ordinary cheese, one with sardines in tomato sauce, one with clove cheese. I didn't like sardines and ate that slice first. I couldn't stand fish; boiled cod, which we had at least once a week, made me feel nauseous, as did the steam from the pan in which it was cooked, its taste and consistency. I felt the same about boiled pollock, boiled coley, boiled haddock, boiled flounder, boiled mackerel, and boiled rose fish. With sardines it wasn't the taste that was the worst part – I could swallow the tomato sauce by imagining it was ketchup – it was the consistency, and above all the small, slippery tails. They were disgusting. To minimize contact with them I generally bit them off, put them to the side of my plate, nudged some sauce toward the crust and buried the tails in the middle, then folded the bread over. In this way I was able to chew a couple of times without ever coming into contact with the tails, and then wash the whole thing down with milk. If Dad was not there, as was the case this evening, it was possible of course to stuff the tiny tails in my trouser pocket.

Yngve would frown and shake his head when I did that. Then he smiled. I returned the smile.

In the living room Dad stirred in his chair. There was the faint rustle of a box of matches, followed by the brief rasp of the sulfur head across the rough surface and the crackle as it burst into flame, which seemed to merge into the subsequent silence. When the smell of the cigarette seeped into the kitchen, a few seconds later, Yngve bent forward and opened the window as quietly as he could. The sounds that drifted in from the darkness outside transformed the whole atmosphere in the kitchen. All of a sudden it was a part of the country outside. *It's like we're sitting on a shelf*, I thought. The thought caused the hairs on my forearm to stand on end. The wind rose with a sough through the forest and swept over the rustling bushes and trees in the garden below. From the intersection came the sound of children, still crouched over their bikes, chatting. On the hill up to the bridge a motorbike changed gear. And, far off, as if raised above all else, was the drone of a boat on its way into the fjord.

Of course. He had heard me! My feet running on the shingle!

"Want to swap?" Yngve mumbled, pointing to the clove cheese.

"Alright," I said. Elated to have solved the riddle, I washed down the last bite of the sardine sandwich with a tiny sip of milk and started on the slice Yngve had put on my plate. The trick was to eke out the milk because if you came to the last and there was none left it was almost impossible to swallow. Best of all, of course, was to save a drop until everything was eaten, the milk never tasted as good as then, when it no longer had to fulfill a function, it ran down your throat in its own right, pure and uncontaminated, but unfortunately it was rare for me to manage this. The needs of the moment always trumped promises of the future, however enticing the latter.

But Yngve did manage it. He was a past master at economizing.

Up at Prestbakmo's, there was a click of bootheels on the doorstep. Then three short cries cut through the night.

"*Geir! Geir! Geir!*"

The response came from John Beck's drive after such a time lag that everyone who heard concluded that he had been considering it.

"*Right*," he shouted.

Straight after, there was the sound of his running feet. As they approached Gustavsen's wall, Dad got up in the living room. Something about the way he crossed the floor made me duck my head. Yngve ducked too. Dad came into the kitchen, walked over to the counter, leaned forward without a word, and closed the window with a bang.

"We keep the window closed at night," he said.

Yngve nodded.

Dad looked at us.

"Eat up now," he said.

Not until he was back in the living room did I meet Yngve's glance.

"Ha, ha," I whispered.

"Ha ha?" he whispered back. "He meant you as well."

He was two slices ahead of me and was soon able to leave the table and slip into his room, leaving me to chew for a few more minutes. I had been planning to see my father after supper and tell him they would probably be showing the story with the face in the sea on the late-night news, but under the circumstances it was probably best to ditch that plan.

Or was it?

I decided to play it by ear. After leaving the kitchen I usually stuck my head into the living room to say good night. If his voice was neutral or, if luck was with me, friendly even, I would mention it. Otherwise not.

Unfortunately he had chosen to sit on the sofa at the back of the room, and not in one of the two leather chairs in front of the TV, as was his wont. To gain eye contact I could not just poke my head in at the door and say good night, en passant, as it were, which I could have done if he had been sitting in one of the leather chairs, but would have had to take several steps into the room. That would obviously make him aware that I was after something. And that would defeat the whole purpose of playing things by ear. Whatever tone he replied in I would have to come clean.

It wasn't until I was out of the kitchen that I realized this and was caught in two minds. I came to a halt, all of a sudden I had no choice, for of course he heard me pause, and that was bound to have made him aware I wanted something from him. So I took the four steps to enter his field of vision.

He was sitting with his legs crossed, his elbows on the back of the sofa, head reclining, resting on his interlaced fingers. His gaze, which had been focused on the ceiling, directed itself at me.

"Good night, Dad," I said.

"Good night," he said.

"I'm sure they'll be showing it again on the news," I said. "Just thought I'd tell you. So that you and Mom can see it."

"Showing what?"

"The face." I said.

"The face?"

I must have been standing there with my mouth agape, because he suddenly dropped his jaw and gawked in a way I understood was supposed to be an imitation of me.

"The one I told you about," I said.

He closed his mouth and sat up straight without averting his eyes.

"Now let's not be hearing anymore about that face," he said.

"Alright," I said.

As I made my way down the corridor I could feel his glare relinquishing its hold on me. I brushed my teeth, undressed, got into pajamas, switched on the lamp above my bed, turned on the main light, settled down, and started reading.

I was only allowed to read for half an hour, until ten o'clock, but usually read until Mom came home at around half past ten. Tonight was no exception. When I heard the Beetle coming up the hill from the main road, I put the book on the floor, switched off the light, and lay in the dark listening for her: the car door slamming, the crunch across the gravel, the front door opening, her coat and scarf being removed, the footsteps up the stairs . . . The house seemed different then, when she was in it, and the strange thing was that I could *feel* it; if, for example, I had gone to sleep before she returned and I awoke in the middle of the night, I could sense she was there, something in the atmosphere had changed without my being able to put my finger on quite what it was, except to say that it had a reassuring effect. The same applied to those occasions when she had come home earlier than expected while I was out: the moment I set foot in the hall I knew she was home.

Of course I would have liked to speak to her, she of all people would have understood the face business, but it did not seem like a burning necessity. The important thing was that she was here. I heard her deposit her keys on the telephone table as she came up the stairs, open the sliding door, say something to Dad and close it behind her. Now and then, especially after evening shifts on the weekend, he would cook a meal for when she arrived. Then they might play records. Once in a while there was an empty bottle of wine on the counter, always the same label, a run-of-the-mill red, and on rare occasions, beer, again the same Vinmonopolet label, two or three bottles of pils from the Arendal brewery, the brown 0.7 liter one with the yellow sailing ship logo.

But not tonight. And I was glad. If they ate together they did not watch TV, and they would have to if I was to accomplish my plan, which was as simple as it was bold: at a few seconds to eleven I would sneak out of bed, tiptoe along the landing, open the sliding door a fraction, and watch the late news from there. I had never done anything like this before, nor even contemplated it. If I wasn't allowed to do something, I didn't do it. Ever. Not once, not if my father had said no. Not knowingly at any rate. But this was different since it was not about me, but about them. After all I had seen the image of the face in the sea, and did not need to see it again. I just wanted to find out if they could see what I had seen.

Such were my thoughts as I lay in the dark following the green hands of my alarm clock. When it was as quiet as it was now, I could hear cars driving past on the main road below. An acoustic racetrack that started as they came over the ridge by B-Max, the new supermarket, continued down the cutting by Holtet, past the road to Gamle Tybakken and up the hill to the bridge, where it finished as quietly as it had begun half a minute earlier.

At nine minutes to eleven the door of the house across the road opened. I knelt up in bed and peered out the window. It was Fru Gustavsen; she was walking across the drive with a garbage bag in her hand.

I only realized how rare a sight this was when I saw her. Fru Gustavsen hardly ever showed herself outside; either she was seen indoors or in the passenger seat of their blue Ford Taunus, but even though I knew that, the thought had never struck me before. But now, as she stood by the garbage can, removing the lid, chucking the bag in and closing the lid, all with that somewhat lazy grace that so many fat women possess, it did. She was never outdoors.

The streetlamp beyond our hedge cast its harsh light over her, but unlike the objects she was surrounded by – the garbage can, the white walls of the trailer, the paving slabs, the tarmac – which all reflected the cold, sharp light, her figure seemed to modulate and absorb it. Her bare arms gave off a matte gleam, the material of her white sweater shimmered, her mass of grayish-brown hair appeared almost golden.

For a while she stood looking around, first over at Prestbakmo's, then up at the Hansens', then down at the forest across the road.

A cat strutted down towards her, stopped and watched her for a moment. She ran one hand up her arm a few times. Then she turned and went inside.

I glanced at the clock again. Four minutes to eleven. I shivered and wondered briefly whether I should put on a sweater, but concluded that would make everything seem too calculated if I was caught. And it was not going to take very long.

I crept warily to the door and pressed my ear against it. The only real element of risk was that the toilet was on this side of the sliding door. Once there, I would be able to keep an eye on them and have a chance to retreat if they should get up, but if the sliding door was closed, and they came toward me, I wouldn't know until it was too late.

But in that case I could pretend I was going to the toilet!

Pleased with the solution, I cautiously opened the door and stepped into the passage. Everything was quiet. I tiptoed along the landing, felt the dry wall-to-wall carpeting against my sweaty soles, stopped by the sliding door, heard nothing, pulled it open a fraction, and peered in through the crack.

The TV was on in the corner. The two leather chairs were empty.

So they were on the sofa, both of them.

Perfect.

Then the globe with the N sign whirled round on the screen. I prayed to God they would show the same news report, so that Mom and Dad could see what I saw.

The newscaster started the program by talking about the missing fishing boat, and my heart was pounding in my chest. But the report they showed was different: instead of pictures of calm sea a local police officer was being interviewed on a quay, followed by a woman with a small child in her arms, then the reporter himself spoke against a background of billowing waves.

After the item was over there was the sound of my father's voice, and laughter. The shame that suffused my body was so strong that I was unable to think. My innards seemed to blanch. The force of the sudden shame was the sole feeling from my childhood that could measure in intensity against that of terror, next to sudden fury, of course, and common to all three was the sense that I *myself* was being erased. All that mattered was precisely *that* feeling. So as I turned and went back to my room, I noticed nothing. I know that the window in the stairwell must have been so dark that the hall was reflected in it, I know that the door to Yngve's bedroom must have been closed, the same as the one to my parents' bedroom and to the bathroom. I know that Mom's bunch of keys must have been splayed out on the telephone table, like some mythical beast at rest, with its head of leather and myriad metal legs, I know that the knee-high ceramic vase of dried flowers and straw must have been on the floor next to it, unreconciled, as it were, with the synthetic material of the wall-to-wall carpet. But I saw nothing, heard nothing, thought nothing. I went into my room, lay down on my bed, and switched off the light, and when the darkness closed itself around me, I took such a deep breath that it quivered, while the muscles in my stomach tightened and forced out whimpering noises that were so loud I had to direct them into the soft, and soon very wet, pillow. It helped, in much the same way that vomiting helps when you are nauseous. Long after the tears had stopped coming I lay sobbing. That had a soothing effect. When it too had worn itself out I lay on my stomach, rested my head against my arm, and closed my eyes to sleep.

* * *

As I sit here writing this, I recognize that more than thirty years have passed. In the window before me I can vaguely make out the reflection of my face. Apart from one eye, which is glistening, and the area immediately beneath, which dimly reflects a little light, the whole of the left side is in shadow. Two deep furrows divide my forehead, one deep furrow intersects each cheek, all of them as if filled with darkness, and with the eyes staring and serious, and the corners of the mouth drooping, it is impossible not to consider this face gloomy.

What has engraved itself in my face?

Today is the twenty-seventh of February. The time is 11:43 p.m. I, Karl Ove Knausgaard, was born in December 1968, and at the time of writing I am thirty-nine years old. I have three children – Vanja, Heidi, and John – and am in my second marriage, to Linda Boström Knausgaard. All four are asleep in the rooms around me, in an apartment in Malmö where we have lived for a year and a half. Apart from some parents of the children at Vanja and Heidi's nursery we do not know anyone here. This is not a loss, at any rate not for me, I don't get anything out of socializing anyway. I never say what I really think, what I really mean, but always more or less agree with whomever I am talking to at the time, pretend that what they say is of interest to me, except when

I am drinking, in which case more often than not I go too far the other way, and wake up to the fear of having overstepped the mark. This has become more pronounced over the years and can now last for weeks. When I drink I also have blackouts and completely lose control of my actions, which are generally desperate and stupid, but also on occasion desperate and dangerous. That is why I no longer drink. I do not want anyone to get close to me, I do not want anyone to see me, and this is the way things have developed: no one gets close and no one sees me. This is what must have engraved itself in my face, this is what must have made it so stiff and masklike and almost impossible to associate with myself whenever I happen to catch a glimpse of it in a shop window.

* * *

The only thing that does not age in a face is the eyes. They are no less bright the day we die as the day we are born. The blood vessels in them may burst, admittedly, and the corneas may be dulled, but the light in them never changes. There is, in London, a painting that moves me as much every time I go and see it. It is a self-portrait painted by the late Rembrandt. His later paintings are usually characterized by an extreme coarseness of stroke, rendering everything subordinate to the expression of the moment, at once shining and sacred, and still unsurpassed in art, with the possible exception of Hölderlin's later poems, however dissimilar and incomparable they may be – for where Hölderlin's light, evoked through language, is ethereal and celestial, Rembrandt's light, evoked through color, is earthy, metallic, and material – but this one painting which hangs in the National Gallery was painted in a slightly more classically realistic, lifelike style, more in the manner of the younger Rembrandt. But what the painting portrays is the older Rembrandt. Old age. All the facial detail is visible; all the traces life has left there are to be seen. The face is furrowed, wrinkled, sagging, ravaged by time. But the eyes are bright and, if not young, then somehow transcend the time that otherwise marks the face. It is as though someone else is looking at us, from somewhere inside the face, where everything is different. One can hardly be closer to another human soul. For as far as Rembrandt's person is concerned, his good habits and bad, his bodily sounds and smells, his voice and his language, his thoughts and his opinions, his behavior, his physical flaws and defects, all the things that constitute a person to others, are no longer there, the painting is more than four hundred years old, and Rembrandt died the same year it was painted, so what is depicted here, what Rembrandt painted, is this person's very being, that which he woke to every morning, that which immersed itself in thought, but which itself was not thought, that which immediately immersed itself in feelings, but which itself was not feeling, and that which he went to sleep to, in the end for good. That which, in a human, time does not touch and whence the light in the eyes springs. The difference between this painting and the others the late Rembrandt painted is the difference between seeing and being seen. That is, in this picture he sees himself seeing whilst also being seen, and no doubt it was only in the Baroque period with its penchant for mirrors within mirrors, the play within the play, staged scenes and a belief in the interdependence of all things, when moreover craftsmanship attained heights witnessed neither before nor since, that such a painting was possible. But it exists in our age, it sees for us.

* * *

The night Vanja was born she lay looking at us for several hours. Her eyes were like two black lanterns. Her body was covered in blood, her long hair plastered to her head, and when she stirred it was with the slow movements of a reptile. She looked like something from the forest lying there on Linda's stomach, staring at us. We could not get enough of her and her gaze. But what was it that lay in those eyes? Composure, gravity, darkness. I stuck out my tongue, a minute passed, then she stuck out her tongue. There has never been so much future in my life as at that time, never so much joy. Now she is four, and everything is different. Her eyes are alert, switch between jealousy and happiness at the drop of a hat, between sorrow and anger, she is already practiced in the ways of the world and can be so cheeky that I completely lose my head and sometimes shout at her or shake her until she starts crying. But usually she just laughs. The last time it happened, the last time I was so furious I shook her and she just laughed, I had a sudden inspiration and placed my hand on her chest.

Her heart was pounding. Oh, my, how it was pounding.

It is now a few minutes past eight o'clock in the morning. It is the fourth of March 2008. I am sitting in my office, surrounded by books from floor to ceiling, listening to the Swedish band Dungen and thinking about what I have written and where it is leading. Linda and John are asleep in the adjacent room, Vanja and Heidi are in the nursery, where I dropped them off half an hour ago. Outside, at the front of the enormous Hilton Hotel, which is still in shadow, the lifts glide up and down in three glass shafts. Next door there is a redbrick building which, judging by all the bay windows, dormers, and arches, must be from the end of the nineteenth century or early twentieth. Beyond that, there is a glimpse of a tiny stretch of Magistrat Park with its denuded trees and green grass, where a motley gray house in a seventies style breaks the view, and forces the eye up to the sky, which for the first time in several weeks is a clear blue.

Having lived here for a year and a half, I know this view and all its nuances over the days and the year, but I feel no attachment to it. Nothing of what I see here means anything to me. Perhaps that is precisely what I have been searching for, because there is something about this lack of attachment that I like, may even need. But it was not a conscious choice. Six years ago I was ensconced in Bergen writing, and while I had no intentions of living in the town for the rest of my life I certainly had no plans to leave the country, let alone the woman to whom I was married. On the contrary, we envisaged having children and maybe moving to Oslo where I would write a number of novels and she would keep working in radio and television. But of the future we shared, which actually was just an extension of the present with its daily routines and meals with friends and acquaintances, holiday trips, and visits to parents and in-laws, all enriched by the dream of having children, there was to be nothing. Something happened, and from one day to the next I moved to Stockholm, initially just to get away for a few weeks, and then all of a sudden it became my life. Not only did I change city and country, but also all the people. If this might seem strange, it is even stranger that I hardly ever reflect on it. How did I end up here? Why did things turn out like this?

Arriving in Stockholm, I knew two people, neither of them very well: Geir, whom I had met in Bergen and saw for a few weeks during the spring of 1990, so twelve years previously, and Linda, whom I had met at a debut writers' seminar in Biskops-Arnö in the spring of 1999. I emailed Geir and asked if I could stay with him until I had found a place of my own, he said yes, and then I phoned in a "Flat Wanted" ad to two Swedish newspapers. I received more than forty replies, from which I selected two. One was in Bastugatan, the other in Brännkyrkgatan. After viewing both, I opted for the latter, until in the hallway my eye fell on the list of tenants, which included Linda's name. What were the chances of that happening? Stockholm has more than one and a half million inhabitants. If the flat had come to me via friends and acquaintances the odds would not have been so slim, for all literary circles are relatively small, irrespective of the size of the town, but this had come about as a result of an anonymous advertisement, read by several hundred thousand people and, of course, the woman who responded knew neither Linda nor me. From one moment to the next I changed my mind, it would be better to take the other flat because if I were to take this one Linda might think I was pursuing her. But it was an omen. And one laden with meaning, it turned out, for now I am married to Linda and she is the mother of my three children. Now she is the woman with whom I share my life. The sole traces of my previous existence are the books and records I brought with me. Everything else I left behind. And while I spent a lot of time thinking about the past then, almost a morbid amount of time, I now realize, which meant that I not only read Marcel Proust's novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* but virtually imbibed it, the past is now barely present in my thoughts.

I believe the main reason for that is our children, since life with them in the here and now occupies all the space. They even squeeze out the most recent past: ask me what I did three days ago and I can't remember. Ask me what Vanja was like two years ago, Heidi two months ago, John two weeks ago, and I can't remember. A lot happens in our little everyday life, but it always happens within the same routine, and more than anything else it has changed my perspective of time. For, while previously I saw time as a stretch of terrain that had to be covered, with the future as a distant prospect, hopefully a bright one, and never boring at any rate, now it is interwoven with our life here and in a totally different way. Were I to portray this with a visual image it would have to be that of a boat in a lock: life is slowly and ineluctably raised by time seeping in from all sides. Apart from the details, everything is always the same. And with every passing day the desire grows for the moment when life will reach the top, for the moment when the sluice gates open and life finally moves on. At the same time I see that precisely this repetitiveness, this enclosedness, this unchangingness is necessary, it protects me. On the few occasions I have left it, all the old ills return. All of a sudden I am beset by every conceivable thought about what was said, what was seen, what was thought, hurled, as it were, into that uncontrollable, unproductive, often degrading, and ultimately destructive space where I lived for so many years. The yearning is as strong there as it is here, but the difference is that there the goal of my yearning is attainable, but not here. Here I have to find other goals and come to terms with them. The art of living is what I am talking about. On paper it is no problem, I can easily conjure up an image of Heidi, for example, clambering out of a bunk bed at five in the morning, the patter of little feet across the floor in the dark, her switching the light on and a second later standing in front of me – half asleep and squinting up at her – and then she says: "*Köket*. Kitchen!" Her Swedish is still idiosyncratic; her words carry a different meaning from what is usual, and "kitchen" means muesli with curdled blueberry milk. In the same way, candles are called "Happy birthday!" Heidi has large eyes, a large mouth, a big appetite, and she is a ravenous child in all senses, but the robust, unadulterated happiness she experienced in her first eighteen months has been overshadowed this year, since John's birth, by other hitherto unknown emotions. In the first months she took almost every opportunity to try to harm him. Scratch marks on his face were the rule rather than the exception. When I arrived home after a four-day trip to Frankfurt in the autumn, John looked as if he had been through a war. It was difficult because we didn't want to keep him away from her either, so we had to try to read her moods and regulate her access to him accordingly. But even when she was in high spirits her hand could shoot out in a flash and slap or claw him. Alongside this, she was beginning to have fits of rage, the ferocity of which I would never have considered her capable two months before. In addition, an equally hitherto unsuspected vulnerability surfaced: the slightest hint of severity in my voice or behavior and she would lower her head, shy away, and start to cry, as though wanting to show us her anger and hide her feelings. As I write, I am filled with tenderness for her. But this is on paper. In reality, when it really counts, and she is standing there in front of me, so early in the morning that the streets outside are still and not a sound can be heard in the house, she, raring to start a new day, I, summoning the will to get to my feet, putting on yesterday's clothes and following her into the kitchen, where the promised blueberry-flavored milk and the sugar-free muesli await her, it is not tenderness I feel, and if she goes beyond my limits, such as when she pesters and pesters me for a film, or tries to get into the room where John is sleeping, in short, every time she refuses to take no for an answer but drags things out ad infinitum, it is not uncommon for my irritation to mutate into anger, and when I then speak harshly to her, and her tears flow, and she bows her head and slinks off with slumped shoulders, I feel it serves her right. Not until the evening when they are asleep and I am sitting wondering what I am really doing is there any room for the insight that she is only two years old. But by then I am on the outside looking in. Inside, I don't have a chance. Inside, it is a question of getting through the morning, the three hours of diapers that have to be changed, clothes that have to be put on, breakfast that has to be served, faces that have to be washed, hair that has to be combed and pinned up, teeth that have to be brushed, squabbles that have to be nipped in the bud, slaps that have to be averted, rompers and boots that have to be wriggled into, before I, with the collapsible double stroller in one hand and nudging the two small girls forward with the other, step into the elevator, which as often as not resounds to the noise of shoving and shouting on its descent, and into the hall where I ease them into the stroller, put on their hats and mittens and emerge onto the street already crowded with people heading for work and deliver them to the nursery ten minutes later, whereupon I have the next five hours for writing until the mandatory routines for the children resume.

I have always had a great need for solitude. I require huge swathes of loneliness and when I do not have it, which has been the case for the last five years, my frustration can sometimes become almost panicked, or aggressive. And when what has kept me going for the whole of my adult life, the ambition to write something exceptional one day, is threatened in this way my one thought, which gnaws at me like a rat, is that I have to escape. Time is slipping away from me, running through my fingers like sand while I . . . do what? Clean floors, wash clothes, make dinner, wash up, go shopping, play with the children in the play areas, bring them home, undress them, bathe them, look after them until it is bedtime, tuck them in, hang some clothes to dry, fold others, and put them away, tidy up, wipe tables, chairs and cupboards. It is a struggle, and even though it is not heroic, I am up against a superior force, for no matter how much housework I do at home the rooms are littered with mess and junk, and the children, who are taken care of every waking minute, are more stubborn than I have ever known children to be, at times it is nothing less than bedlam here, perhaps we have never managed to find the necessary balance between distance and intimacy, which of course becomes increasingly important the more personality is involved. And there is a quite a bit of that here. When Vanja was around eight months old she began to have violent outbursts, like fits at times, and for a while it was impossible to reach her, she just screamed and screamed. All we could do was hold her until it had subsided. It is not easy to say what caused it, but it often occurred when she had had a great many impressions to absorb, such as when we had driven to her grandmother's in the country outside Stockholm, when she had spent too much time with other children, or we had been in town all day. Then, inconsolable and completely beside herself, she could scream at the top of her voice. Sensitivity and strength of will are not a simple combination. And matters were not made any easier when Heidi was born. I wish I could say I took everything in stride, but sad to say such was not the case because my anger and my feelings too were aroused in these situations, which then escalated, frequently in full public view: it was not unknown for me in my fury to snatch her up from the floor in one of the Stockholm malls, sling her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes and carry her through town kicking and punching and howling as if possessed. Sometimes I reacted to her howls by shouting back, throwing her down on the bed and holding her tight until it passed, whatever it was that was tormenting her. She was not very old before she found out exactly what drove me wild, namely a particular variety of scream, not crying or sobbing or hysteria but focused, aggressive screams that, regardless of the situation, could make me totally lose control, jump up, and rush over to the poor girl, who was then shouted at or shaken until the screams turned to tears and her body went limp and she could at last be comforted.

Looking back on this, it is striking how she, scarcely two years old, could have such an effect on our lives. Because she did, for a while that was all that mattered. Of course, that says nothing about her, but everything about us. Both Linda and I live on the brink of chaos, or with the feeling of chaos, everything can fall apart at any moment and we have to force ourselves to come to terms with the demands of a life with small children. We do not plan. Having to shop for dinner comes as a surprise every day. Likewise, having to pay bills at the end of every month. Had it not been for some sporadic payments being made into my account, such as rights fees, book club sales, or a minor amount from schoolbook publications or, as this autumn, the second installment of some foreign income I had forgotten, things would have gone seriously wrong. However, this constant improvisation increases the significance of the moment, which of course then becomes extremely eventful since nothing about it is automatic and, if our lives feel good, which naturally they do at times, there is a great sense of togetherness and a correspondingly intense happiness. Oh, how we beam. All the children are full of life and are instinctively drawn to happiness, so that gives you extra energy and you are nice to them and they forget their defiance or anger in seconds. The corrosive part of course is the awareness that being nice to them is not of the slightest help when I am in the thick of it, dragged down into a quagmire of tears and frustration. And once in the quagmire each further action only serves to plunge me deeper. And at least as corrosive is the awareness that I am dealing with *children*. That it is *children* who are dragging me down. There is something deeply shameful about this. In such situations I am probably as far from the person I aspire to be as possible. I didn't have the faintest notion about any of this before I had children. I thought then that everything would be fine so long as I was kind to them. And that is actually more or less how it is, but nothing I had previously experienced warned me about the invasion into your life that having children entails. The immense intimacy you have with them, the way in which your own temperament and mood are, so to speak, woven into theirs, such that your own worst sides are no longer something you can keep to yourself, hidden, but seem to take shape outside you, and are then hurled back. The same of course applies to your best sides. For, apart from the most hectic periods, when first Heidi, then John, were born, and the emotional life of those who experienced them was dislocated in ways that can only be described as tantamount to a crisis, their life here is basically stable and secure, and even though I do occasionally lose my temper with them, they are still at ease with me and come to me whenever they feel the need. Their demands are very basic, there is nothing they like better than outings with the whole family, which are full of adventure: a trip to the Western Harbor on a sunny day, starting with a walk through the park, where a pile of logs is enough to keep them entertained for half an hour, then past the yachts in the marina, which really capture their attention, after that lunch on some steps by the sea, eating our panini from the Italian café, that a picnic didn't occur to us goes without saying, and afterward an hour or so to run around and play and laugh, Vanja with her characteristic lope, which she has had since she was eighteen months, Heidi with her enthusiastic toddle, always two meters behind her big sister, ready to receive the rare gift of companionship from her, then the same route back home. If Heidi sleeps in the car we go to a café with Vanja, who loves the moments she has alone with us and sits there with her lemonade asking us about everything under the sun: Is the sky fixed? Can anything stop autumn coming? Do monkeys have skeletons? Even if the feeling of happiness this gives me is not exactly a whirlwind but closer to satisfaction or serenity, it is happiness all the same. Perhaps even, at certain moments, joy. And isn't that enough? Isn't it enough? Yes, if joy had been the goal it would have been enough. But joy is not my goal, never has been, what good is joy to me? The family is not my goal either. If it had been, and I could have devoted all my energy to it, we would have had a fantastic time, of that I am sure. We could have lived somewhere in Norway, gone skiing and skating in winter, with packed lunches and a thermos flask in our backpacks, and boating in the summer, swimming, fishing, camping, holidays abroad with other families, we could have kept the house tidy, spent time making good food, being with our friends, we could have been blissfully happy. That may all sound like a caricature, but every day I see families who successfully organize their lives in this way. The children are clean, their clothes nice, the parents are happy and although once in a while they might raise their voices they never stand there like idiots bawling at them. They go on weekend trips, rent cottages in Normandy in the summer, and their fridges are never empty. They work in banks and hospitals, in IT companies or on the local council, in the theater or at universities. Why should the fact that I am a writer exclude me from that world? Why should the fact that I am a writer mean our strollers all look like junk we found on a junk heap? Why should the fact that I am a writer mean I turn up at the nursery with crazed eyes and a face stiffened into a mask of frustration? Why should the fact that I am a writer mean that our children do their utmost to get their own way, whatever the consequences? Where does all the mess in our lives come from? I know I can change all this, I know we too can become that kind of family, but then I would have to want it and in which case life would have to revolve around nothing else. And that is not what I want. I do everything I have to do for the family; that is my duty. The only thing I have learned from life is to endure it, never to question it, and to burn up the longing generated by this in writing. Where this ideal has come from I have no idea, and as I now see it before me, in black and white, it almost seems perverse: why duty before happiness? The question of happiness is banal, but the question that follows is not, the question of meaning. When I look at a beautiful painting I have tears in my eyes, but not when I look at my children. That does not mean I do not love them, because I do, with all my heart, it simply means that the meaning they produce is not sufficient to fulfill a whole life. Not mine at any rate. Soon I will be forty, and when I'm forty, it won't be long before I'm fifty. And when I'm fifty, it won't be long before I'm sixty. And when I'm sixty, it won't be long before I'm seventy. And that will be that. My epitaph might read: *Here lies a man who grinned and bore it. And in the end he perished for it*. Or perhaps better:

Here lies a man who never complained
A happy life he never gained
His last words before he died
And went to cross the great divide
Were: Oh, Lord, there's such a chill
Can someone send a happy pill?

Or perhaps better:

Here lies a man of letters
A noble man of Nordic birth
Alas, his hands were bound in fetters
Barring him from knowing mirth
Once he wrote with dash and wit
Now he's buried in a pit

Come on, worms, take your fill,
Taste some flesh, if you will
Try an eye
Or a thigh
He's croaked his last, have a thrill

But if I have thirty years left you cannot take it for *granted* that I will be the same. So perhaps something like this?

From all of us to you, dear God
Now you have him beneath the sod,
Karl Ove Knausgaard is finally dead
Long is the time since he ate bread
With his friends he broke ranks
For his book and his wanks
Wielded pen and dick but never well
Lacked the style but tried to excel
He took a cake, then took one more
He took a spud, then ate it raw
He cooked a pig, it took a while
He ate it up and belched a Heil!
I'm no Nazi, but I like brown shirts
I write Gothic script until it hurts!

Book not accepted, the man blew his top
He guzzled and belched and couldn't stop
His belly it grew, his belt got tight,
His eyes glared, his tongue alight
"I only wanted to write what was right!"

The fat it blocked his heart and vein
Till one day he screamed in pain:

Help me, help me, hear me wailing
Get me a donor, my heart is failing!
The doctor said no, I remember your book
You'll die like a fish, like a fish on a hook.
Do you feel much pain, are you near the end?
The stab in the heart, this is death, my friend!

Or perhaps, if I am lucky, a bit less personal?

Here lies a man who smoked in bed
With his wife he wound up dead
Truth to say
It is not they
Just some ashes, it is said

When my father was the same age as I am now, he gave up his old life and started afresh. I was sixteen years old at the time and in the first class at Kristiansand Cathedral School. At the beginning of the school year my parents were still married and although they were having problems I had no reason to suspect what was about to happen with their relationship. We were living in Tveit then, twenty kilometers outside Kristiansand, in an old house on the very edge of the built-up area in the valley. It was high in the mountains with the forest at our backs and a view of the river from the front. A large barn and an outhouse also belonged to the property. When we moved in, the summer I was thirteen, Mom and Dad had bought chickens, I think they lasted six months. Dad grew potatoes in a patch beside the lawn, and beyond that was a compost heap. One of the many occupations my father fantaszed about was becoming a gardener, and he did have a certain talent in that direction – the garden around the house in the small town we came from was magnificent, and not without exotic elements, such as the peach tree my father planted against the south-facing wall, and of which he was so proud when it actually bore fruit – so the move to the country was full of optimism and dreams of the future, where slowly but surely irony began to rear its head, for one of the few concrete things I can remember about my father's life there during those years is something he came out with as we sat at the garden table one summer evening barbecuing, he and Mom and I.

"Now we're living the life, aren't we, eh!"

The irony was plain, even I caught it, but also complicated because I did not understand the reason for it. For me an evening like the one we were having was living the life. What the irony implied ran like an undercurrent throughout the rest of the summer: we swam in the river from early morning, we played soccer on grass in the shade, we cycled to the Hamresanden campsite and swam and watched the girls, and in July we went to the Norway Cup, a youth soccer tournament, where I got drunk for the first time. Someone knew someone who had a flat, someone knew someone who could buy beer for us, and so I sat there drinking in an unfamiliar living room one summer afternoon, and it was like an explosion of happiness, nothing held any danger or fear anymore, I just laughed and laughed, and in the midst of all this, the unfamiliar furniture, the unfamiliar girls, the unfamiliar garden outside, I thought to myself, this was how I wanted things to be. Just like this. Laughing all the time, following whatever fancies took me. There are two photographs of me from that evening, in one I am lying under a bundle of bodies in the middle of the floor, holding a skull in one hand, my head apparently unconnected with the hands and feet protruding on the other side, my face contorted into a kind of euphoric grimace. The other photo is of me on my own, I am lying on a bed with a beer bottle in one hand and holding the skull over my groin in the other, I am wearing sunglasses, my mouth is wide open, roaring with laughter. That was the summer of 1984, I was fifteen years old and had just made a new discovery: drinking alcohol was fantastic.

For the next few weeks my childhood carried on as before, we lay on the cliffs beneath the waterfall and dozed, dived into the pool now and then, caught the bus into town on Saturday mornings, where we bought sweets and went round the record shops, while expectations of upper secondary school, the *gymnas*, which I was soon to start, loomed on the horizon. This was not the only change in the family: my mother had taken a sabbatical from her job at the nursing school, and was going to study that year in Bergen, where Yngve already lived. So the plan was that my father and I would live alone up there, and we did for the first few months, until he suggested, presumably to get me out of the way, that I could live in the house my grandparents owned on Elvegata, where Grandad had for many years had his accounting office. All my friends lived in Tveit, and I didn't think I knew the kids at my new school well enough to spend time with them after school, so when I wasn't at soccer training, which I had five times a week in those days, I sat on my own in the living room watching TV, did my homework at the desk in the loft, or lay on the bed next door reading and listening to music. Once in a while I popped up to Sannes, as our house was called, to pick up clothes or cassettes or books, sometimes I slept there as well, but I preferred the digs at my grandparents', a chill had settled over our house, I suppose because nothing went on there anymore, my father ate out for the most part, and did only a minimum of chores at home. This left its mark on the aura of the house which, as Christmas was approaching, had taken on an air of abandonment. Tiny, desiccated lumps of cat shit littered the sofa in front of the TV on the first floor, old unwashed dishes on the kitchen drainer, all the radiators, apart from an electric heater which he moved to the room where he was living, were turned off. As for him, his soul was in torment. One evening I went up to the house, it must have been at the beginning of December, and after depositing my bag in my ice-cold bedroom I bumped into him in the hall. He had come from the barn, the lower floor of which had been converted into a flat, his hair was unkempt, his eyes black.

"Can't we put on the heating?" I asked. "It's freezing in here."

"Fweezing?" he mimicked. "We're not putting on any heating, however fweezing it is."

I couldn't roll my "r"s, never had been able to say "r", it was one of the traumas of my late childhood. My father used to mimic me, sometimes to

The bus rolled up, its lights sweeping the road, I showed my card to the driver and sat down one seat from the back on the left, which I always did if it was free. There wasn't much traffic, we zipped along Solsletta, Ryensletta, drove by the beach at Hamresanden, into the forest on the way to Timenes, out onto the E18, over Varodd Bridge, past the gymnas in Gimle, and into town.

The flat was down by the river. Grandad's office was on the left as you came in. The flat was on the right. Two living rooms, a kitchen, and a small bathroom. The first floor was also split into two, on one side there was a huge loft, on the other the room where I lived. I had a bed, a desk, a small sofa, and a coffee table, a cassette player, a cassette rack, a pile of schoolbooks, a few magazines including some music mags, and in the cupboard a heap of clothes.

The house was old, it had once belonged to my father's paternal grandmother, in other words, my great-grandmother, who had died there. As far as I had gathered, Dad had been close to her when he was growing up and spent a lot of time down here then. For me she was a kind of mythological figure, strong, authoritative, self-willed, mother of three sons, of whom my father's father was one. In the photographs I had seen she was always dressed in black buttoned-up dresses. Toward the end of her life, that began in the 1870s, she had been senile for almost an entire decade or had started to "unravel" as the family called it. That was all I knew about her.

I took off my boots and went up the staircase, steep as a ladder, and into my room. It was cold; I put on the fan heater. Switched on the cassette player. Echo and the Bunnymen, *Heaven Up Here*. Lay down on the bed and began to read. I was halfway through *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. I had already read it once, the year before, but it was just as intense and fantastic this time. The town outside, with its low, steady drone of cars and buildings, was absent from my consciousness, returning only in waves as though I were in motion. But I was not, I lay reading, completely motionless, until half past eleven when I brushed my teeth, undressed, and went to bed.

It was a very special feeling to wake up in the morning, all alone in a flat, it was as though emptiness were not only around me but also inside me. Until I started at the gymnas I had always woken to a house where Mom and Dad were already up and on their way to work with all that entailed, cigarette smoke, coffee drinking, listening to the radio, eating breakfast, and car engines warming up outside in the dark. This was something else, and I loved it. I also loved walking the kilometer or so through the old residential area to school, it always filled me with thoughts I liked, such as that I was someone. Most of the kids at school came from town or neighboring areas, it was only me and a handful of others who came from the country, and that was a huge disadvantage. It meant that all the others knew one another and met outside school hours, hung around together in cliques. These cliques were also operative during school hours, and you couldn't just tag along, not at all, so during every break there was a problem: where should I go? Where should I stand? I could sit in the library and read, or sit in the classroom and pretend to be going through homework, but that was tantamount to signaling I was one of the outsiders and was no good in the long run, so in October that year I started smoking. Not because I liked it, nor because it was cool, but because it gave me somewhere to be: now I could skulk around doorways with the other smokers in every break without anyone asking questions. When school was over and I was walking back to my place the problem ceased to exist. First of all, because I would usually go to Tveit to train or to meet Jan Vidar, my best pal from the last school, and secondly because no one saw me and therefore could not know that I sat on my own in the flat all those evenings that I did.

It was different in the lessons. I was in a class with three other boys and twenty-six girls, and I had a role, I had a place, I could speak there, answer questions, discuss, do schoolwork, be someone. I had been brought together with others, all of them had been, I had not forced myself on anyone and my being there was not questioned. I sat at the back in the corner, beside me was Bassen, before me Molle, at the front of the same row Pål, and the rest of the classroom was occupied by girls. Twenty-six sixteen-year-old girls. I liked some better than others, but none of them enough to say I was in love.

There was Monica, whose parents were Hungarian Jews, she was as sharp as a razor, knowledgeable, and doggedly defended Israel to the bitter end when we debated the Palestine conflict, a stance I could not understand, it was so obvious, Israel was a military state, Palestine a victim. And there was Hanne, an attractive girl from Vågsbygd, who sang in a choir, was a Christian and quite naïve, but someone whose appearance and presence cheered you up. Then there was Siv, blond, tanned, and long-legged who on one of the first days had said the area between the Cathedral School and the Business School was like an American campus, a statement which singled her out for me at first as she knew something I didn't, about a world of which I would have liked to be part. She had lived in Ghana for the last few years and boasted too much and laughed too loud. There was Benedicte too with sharp, almost fifties-like facial features, curly hair, clothes with a hint of class. And Tone, so graceful in her movements, dark-haired and serious, she sketched, and seemed more independent than the others. And Anne, who had braces on her teeth and whom I had made out with in Bassen's mother's hairdressing chair at a class party that autumn; there was Hilde, fair-haired and rosy-cheeked, firm of character but still somehow anonymous, who often turned around to me; and there was Irene, the girls' focal point, she had that attractiveness that can dazzle and wilt in the space of one glance; and there was Nina who had such a robust, masculine frame but also something fragile and bashful about her. And Mette, small, edgy, and scheming. She was the one who liked Bruce Springsteen and always wore denim, the one who was so small and laughed all the time, the one who dressed in clothes that were as provocative as they were vulgar and smelled of smoke, the one whose gums were visible every time she smiled, attractive apart from that, but her laughter, a kind of constant giggle that accompanied everything she said, and all the stupid things she came out with, and the fact that she had a slight lisp, detracted from her beauty, in a way, or invalidated it. I was in the midst of a deluge of girls, a torrent of bodies, a sea of breasts and thighs. Seeing them in formal surroundings alone, behind their desks, only made their presence stronger. In a way it gave my days meaning, I looked forward to entering the classroom, sitting where I was entitled to sit, together with all these girls.

That morning I went down to the canteen, bought a bun and a Coke, then took my place and consumed my snack while flicking through a book, as the classroom around me slowly filled with pupils, still sluggish in both movement and expression after a night's sleep. I exchanged a few words with Molle, he lived in Hamresanden; we had been in the same class at our old school. Then the teacher came, it was Berg, wearing a smock, we were going to have Norwegian. Besides history, this was my best subject, I was on the cusp between an A and an A plus, couldn't quite make the top grade, but I was determined to try for it at the exam. The natural sciences were of course my weakest subjects, in math I was getting a D, I never did any homework, and the teaching was already way above my head. The teachers we had for math and natural sciences were old-school, for math we had Vestby, he had lots of tics, one arm jiggled and writhed the whole time. In his lessons I sat with my feet on the table chatting to Bassen until Vestby, his compact, fleshy face ablaze, screeched out my name. Then I put my feet down, waited until he had turned and continued to chat. The science teacher, Nygaard, a small, thin, wizened man, with a satanic smile and childlike gestures, was approaching retirement age. He too had a number of tics, one eye kept blinking, his shoulders twitched, he tossed his head, he was a parody of a tormented teacher. He wore a light-colored suit in the summer months, a dark suit in the wintertime, and once I had seen him use the blackboard compasses as a gun: we were hunched over a test, he scanned the classroom, clapped the compasses together, put the instrument to his shoulder and sprayed the class with jerking motions, an evil smile on his face. I could not believe my own eyes, had he lost his senses? I chatted in his classes too, so much so that now I had to pay the penalty for whoever did any talking: Knausgaard, he said if he heard some mumbling somewhere, and raised his palm: that meant I had to stand beside my desk for the rest of the lesson. I was happy to do so because inside me I had a rebellious streak developing, I longed not to give a damn about anything, to start skipping classes, drinking, bossing people around. I was an anarchist, an atheist, and became more and more anti–middle class with every day that passed. I flirted with the idea of having my ears pierced and my head shaved. Natural sciences, what use was that to me? Math, what use was that to me? I wanted to play in a band, to be free, to live as I pleased, not as others pleased.

In this I was alone, in this I had no one with me, so for the time being it remained unrealized, it was a thing of the future and was as amorphous as all future things are.

Not doing any homework, not paying attention in class was part and parcel of the same attitude. I had always been among the best in every subject, I had always enjoyed showing it, but not anymore, now there was something shameful about good grades, it meant you sat at home doing your homework, you were a stick-in-the-mud, a loser. It was different with Norwegian, I associated that with writers and a bohemian lifestyle, besides you couldn't gut it out, it required something else, a feeling, a natural talent, personality.

I doodled my way through lessons, smoked outside the doorway in breaks, and this was the rhythm for the whole day, as the sky and the countryside beneath slowly brightened, until the bell rang for the last time at half past two, and I could make my way home to my digs. It was the fifth of December, the day before my birthday, my sixteenth, and Mom was coming home from Bergen. I was looking forward to seeing her. In many ways it was fine being alone with Dad, in the sense that he kept as far away as possible, stayed at Sannes when I stayed in town and vice versa. When Mom came this would end, we would all be living together up there until well into the new year, so the disadvantage of meeting Dad every day was almost completely outweighed by Mom's presence. She was someone I could talk to. I could talk to her about everything. I couldn't say anything to Dad. Nothing beyond purely practical things such as where I was going and when I was coming home.

When I arrived at the flat his car was outside. I went in, the hall reeked of frying; from the kitchen I could hear clattering noises and the radio.

I poked my head in.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello," he said. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes, quite. What are you making?"

"Chops. Take a seat, they're ready."

I went in and sat down at the round dining table. It was old, I assumed it had belonged to his grandmother.

Dad put two chops, three potatoes, and a small pile of fried onions on my plate. Sat down and heaped his plate.

"Well?" he said. "Anything new at school?"

I shook my head.

"You didn't learn anything today?"

"No."

"No, of course not."

We ate in silence.

I didn't want to hurt him, I didn't want him to think this was a failure, that he had a failed relationship with his son, so I sat wondering what I could say. But I couldn't come up with anything.

He wasn't in a bad mood. He wasn't angry. Just preoccupied.

"Have you been up to see Grandma and Grandad recently?" I asked.

He looked at me.

"Yes, I have," he said. "Dropped in yesterday afternoon. Why do you ask?"

"No special reason," I said, feeling my cheeks flushing. "Just wondered."

I had cut off all the meat I could with the knife. Now I put the bone in my mouth and began to gnaw. Dad did the same. I put down the bone and drank the water.

"Thanks for making me a meal," I said, and got up.

"Was the parents' evening at six, did you say?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Are you staying here?"

"Think so."

"Then I'll come and get you afterward and we can drive up to Sannes. Is that alright?"

"Yeah, course."

I was writing an essay about an advertisement for a sports drink when he came back. The door opening, the surge of sounds from the town, the thudding of footsteps on the hall floor. His voice.

"Karl Ove? Are you ready? Let's get going."

I had packed everything I would need in my bag and satchel, they were at bursting point because I was staying for a month and didn't quite know what I might need.

He watched me as I came downstairs. He shook his head. But he wasn't angry. There was something else.

"How did it go?" I asked without meeting his eyes, even though that was one of his bugbears.

"How did it go? Well, I'll tell you how it went. I was given an earful by your math teacher. That's how it went. Vestby, isn't it?'

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me? I had no idea. I was caught completely off-guard."

"So what did he say?" I asked and started to get dressed, infinitely relieved that Dad had kept his temper.

"He said you sat with your feet on the table in lessons, and that you were obstreperous and smart-alecky, and talked in class and you didn't do classwork or your homework. If this continues he will fail you. That's what he said. Is it true?"

"Yes, I suppose it is in a way," I said, straightening up, dressed and ready to go.

"He blamed me, you know. He went on at me for having such a lout as a son."

I cringed.

"What did you say to him?"

"I gave him an earful. Your behavior at school is his responsibility. Not mine. But it wasn't exactly pleasant. As I'm sure you understand."

"I do," I said. "Sorry."

"Fat lot of good that is. That's the last parents' evening I'll ever go to, that's for sure. Well then. Shall we go?"

We went out to the street, to the car. Dad got in, leaned over, and unlocked my side.

"Can you open up at the back as well?" I asked.

He didn't answer, just did it. I put the bag and the satchel in the trunk, closed the lid carefully so as not to rouse his ire, took a seat at the front, pulled the belt across my chest, and clicked the buckle into the locking mechanism.

"That was excruciatingly embarrassing, no two ways about it," Dad said, starting the engine. The dashboard lit up. The car in front of us and a section of the slope down to the river as well. "But what's he like as a teacher, this Vestby?"

"Pretty bad. He's got discipline problems. No one respects him. And he can't teach either."

"He got some of the top university grades ever recorded, did you know that?" Dad said.

"No, I didn't," I said.

He reversed a few meters, swung out onto the road, turned, and began to head out of town. The heater roared, the tire studs bit into the tarmac with a regular high-pitched whirr. He drove fast as usual. One hand on the wheel, one resting on the seat beside the gear stick. My stomach quivered, tiny flashes of happiness shot into my body for this had never happened before. He had never taken my side. He had never chosen to overlook anything reprehensible in my behavior. Handing over my report before the summer and Christmas holiday was always something I had anticipated with dread during the previous weeks. The slightest critical remark and his fury washed over me. The same with parents' evenings. The tiniest comment about my talking too much or a lack of care was followed by a venting of anger. Not to mention the few times I had been given a note to take home. That was Judgment Day. All hell broke loose.

Was it because I was becoming an adult that he treated me in this way?

Were we becoming equals?

I felt an urge to look at him as he sat there with his eyes fixed on the road as we raced along. But I could not, I would have to say something then, and I had nothing to say.

Half an hour later we went up the last hill and entered the drive in front of our house. With the engine still running, Dad got out to open the garage door. I walked to the front door and unlocked it. Remembered our bags, went back as Dad switched off the engine and the red taillights died.

"Could you open the trunk?" I asked.

He nodded, inserted the key, and twisted. The lid rose like the tail of a whale, it seemed to me. Going into the house, I knew at once he had been cleaning. It smelled of green soap, the rooms were tidy, the floors shiny. And the dried-up cat shit on the sofa upstairs, that was gone.

Of course he had done it because my mother was coming home. But even though there was a specific reason and he had not done it simply because it had been so unbelievably filthy and disgusting there, it was a relief to me. Some order had been reestablished. Not that I had been worried or anything, it was more that I found it unsettling, especially as it had not been the only sign. Something about him had changed during the autumn. Presumably because of the way we lived, he and I together, barely that, it was palpable. He had never had any friends, never had people around at home, apart from the family. The only people he knew were colleagues and neighbors, when we were in Tromøya, I should add; here he didn't even know the neighbors. Although just a few weeks after Mom had moved to Bergen to study he had organized a gathering with a few work colleagues in the house at Sannes, they were going to have a little party, and he wondered whether I might perhaps spend that night in town? If I felt lonely I could always go up to my grandparents' if I wanted. But being alone was the last thing I feared, and he dropped by in the morning with a frozen pizza, Coke, and chips for me, which I ate in front of the television.

The next morning I caught the bus to Jan Vidar's, stayed a few hours, and then bussed back up to our house. The door was locked. I opened the garage to check whether he had just gone for a walk, or taken the car. It was empty. I walked back to the house and let myself in. On the table in the living room there were a few empty bottles of wine, the ashtrays were full, but considering no one had cleaned up it didn't look too bad, and I thought it must have been a small party. The stereo set was usually in the barn, but he had put it on a table beside the radiator, and I knelt down in front of the limited selection of records partly stacked against a chair leg and partly scattered across the floor. They were the ones he had played for as long as I could remember. Pink Floyd. Joe Dassin. Arja Saijonmaa. Johnny Cash. Elvis Presley. Bach. Vivaldi. He must have played the last two before the party started, or perhaps it was this morning. But the rest of the music wasn't very party-like either. I stood up and went into the kitchen, where there were a few unwashed plates and glasses in the sink, opened the fridge, which apart from a couple of bottles of white wine and some beers was as good as empty, and continued up the stairs to the first floor. The door to Dad's bedroom was open. I went over and looked inside. The bed from Mom's room had been moved in and was next to Dad's in the middle of the floor. So it had got late, and since they had been drinking and the house was so far off the beaten track that a taxi to town, or Vennesla, where Dad worked, would have been much too expensive, someone had slept over. My room was untouched, I grabbed what I needed, and although I had planned to sleep there I went back to town. Something unfamiliar had descended over all the things in the house.

Another time I had gone up there without warning, it was evening, I was too tired to go back to town after soccer practice, and Tom from the team had driven me. In the light from the kitchen I could see Dad sitting with his head supported on one hand and a bottle of wine in front of him. That was new too, he had never drunk before, at least not while I had been around, and certainly not alone. I saw it now and didn't want to know, but I couldn't go back, so I kicked the snow off my shoes as loudly and obviously as I could against the steps, jerked the door open, slammed it shut again, and so that he would be in no doubt as to where I was, I turned on both bath taps, sat on the toilet seat and waited for a few minutes. When I went into the kitchen no one was there. The glass was on the drainer, empty, the bottle in the cupboard under the sink, empty, Dad was in the flat beneath the hayloft. As if this were not mysterious enough I also saw him driving past the shop in Solsletta one early afternoon; I had skipped the last three classes and gone to Jan Vidar's before the evening training session in Kjevik sports hall. I was sitting on the bench outside the shop smoking when I saw Dad's snot-green Ascona, it was unmistakeable. I threw away the cigarette, but saw no reason to hide, and stared at the car as it passed, even raised my hand to wave. He didn't see me, he was talking to someone in the passenger seat. The next day he came by, I mentioned this to him, it had been a colleague, they were working together on a project and had spent a few hours after school at our house.

There was a great deal of contact with his colleagues during this period. One weekend he went to a seminar in Hovden with them, and he went to more parties than I can ever remember him going to before. No doubt because he was bored, or didn't like being on his own so much, and I was glad, at that time I had begun to see him with different eyes, no longer the eyes of a child, rather those of someone approaching adulthood, and from that point of view I preferred him to socialize with friends and colleagues, as other people did. At the same time I did not like the change, it made him unpredictable.

The fact that he had defended me at the parents' evening contributed to this view of him. Indeed, it was perhaps the most significant factor of them all.

I collected together the clothes in the room, replaced the cassettes one by one in the rack on the desk and stacked the schoolbooks in a neat pile. The house had been built in the mid-1800s, all the floors creaked, sounds permeated the walls, so I knew not only that Dad was in the living room below but also that he was sitting on the sofa. I had planned to finish *Dracula* but I didn't feel I could until the situation between us had been clarified. In other words, until he knew what I was planning to do and I knew what he was planning to do. Furthermore, I couldn't just go downstairs and say: "Hi, Dad, I'm upstairs reading." "Why are you telling me that?" he would ask, or at least think. But the imbalance had to be rectified, so I went downstairs, took a detour through the kitchen, something to do with food maybe, before taking the final steps into the living room, where he was sitting with one of my old comics in his hand.

"Are you eating this evening?" I asked.

He glanced up at me.

"You just help yourself," he said.

"Okay," I said. "I'll be up in my room afterward, alright?"

He didn't answer, kept reading *Agent X9* in the light from the sofa lamp. I cut off a large chunk of sausage and ate it while sitting at the desk. He probably hadn't bought me a birthday present, it occurred to me, Mom would be bringing one with her from Bergen. But wasn't it his job to order a cake? Had he thought about it?

When I returned home from school the next day, Mom was there. Dad had picked her up from the airport, they were sitting at the kitchen table, there was a roast in the oven, we ate with candles on the table, I was given a check for five hundred kroner and a shirt she had bought in Bergen. I didn't have the heart to say I would never wear it, after all she had gone around a string of shops in Bergen looking for something for me, found this, which she thought was great and I would like.

I put it on, we ate cake and drank coffee in the living room. Mom was happy, she said several times it was good to be home. Yngve rang to say happy birthday, he probably wouldn't be home until Christmas Eve, and I would get my present then. I left for soccer practice; when I returned at around nine they were up at the flat in the barn.

I would have liked to chat with Mom on my own, but it didn't look as if that was going to be possible, so after waiting up for a while I went to bed.

The next day I had a test at school, the last two weeks had been full of them, I walked out of every one early, frequented record shops or cafés in town, sometimes with Bassen, sometimes with some of the girls in the class, if it happened casually and couldn't be interpreted as my forcing myself on them. But with Bassen it was okay, we had begun to hang out together. One evening I had been at his place, all we did was play records in his room, even so I was flushed with happiness, I had found a new friend. Not a country boy, not a heavy metal fan, but someone who liked Talk Talk and U2, the Waterboys and Talking Heads. Bassen, or Reid, which was his real name, was dark and good-looking, immensely attractive to girls, although this didn't seem to have gone to his head, because there was nothing showy about him, nothing smug, he never occupied the position he could have, but he wasn't modest either, it was more that he had a ruminative, introverted side to him which held him back. He never gave everything. Whether that was because he didn't want to or he couldn't, I don't know, often of course they are two sides of the same coin. For me his most striking feature, though, was that he had his own opinions about things. Whereas I tended to think in boxes, for example in politics, where one standpoint automatically presupposed another, or in terms of taste, where liking one band meant liking similar bands, or in relationships, where I never managed to free myself from existing attitudes regarding others, he was an independent thinker, using his own more or less idiosyncratic judgments. Not even this did he boast about, on the contrary, you had to know him for quite a while before it became apparent. So this was not something he used, it was what he was. If I was proud to be able to call Bassen a friend it was not only because he had so many good qualities, or because of the friendship itself, but also, and not least, because his popularity might rub off on me as well. I was not conscious of this, but in retrospect, if nothing else, it is patently obvious; if you are on the outside you have to find someone who can let you in, at any rate when you are sixteen years old. In this case the exclusion was not metaphorical, but literal and real. I was surrounded by several hundred boys and girls of my age, but could not enter the milieu to which they all belonged. Every Monday I dreaded the question they would all ask, namely, "What did you do over the weekend?" You could say "Stayed at home watching TV" once, "Played records at a friend's house" once as well, but after that you had to come up with something better if you didn't want to be left out in the cold. This happened to some on day one, and that was how it stayed for the rest of their time at school, but I didn't want to end up like them at any price, I wanted to be one of those at the center of things, I wanted to be invited to their parties, go out with them in town, to live their lives.

The great test, the year's biggest party, was New Year's Eve. For the last few weeks people had been talking about nothing else. Bassen was going to be with someone he knew in Justvik, there was no chance of hanging onto his shirttails, so when school broke up for Christmas I had not been invited anywhere. After Christmas I sat down with Jan Vidar, who lived in Solsletta, about four kilometers down the hill from us, and that autumn had started to train as a pâtissier at the technical college, to discuss what possibilities were open to us. We wanted to go to a party and we wanted to get drunk. As far as the latter was concerned, that would not be much of a problem: I played soccer for the juniors, and the goalkeeper, Tom, was an all-round fixer and he wouldn't mind buying beer for us. A party, on the other hand . . . There were some ninth-class semicriminal, dropout types who apparently were getting together in a house nearby, but that was of no interest whatsoever, I would rather have stayed home. There was another crowd we knew well, but we were not part of it, they were based in Hamresanden and included people with whom we had either gone to school or played soccer, but we had not been invited and although we could probably have gate-crashed somehow they didn't have enough class in my eyes. They lived in Tveit, went to the technical college or had jobs, and those of them who had cars had fur-covered seats and Wunderbaum car fresheners dangling from the mirror. There were no alternatives. You had to be invited to New Year's parties. On the other hand, at twelve o'clock people came out, assembled in the square and at the intersection to fire off rockets and let the new year in amid screams and shouts. No invitation needed to participate in that. Lots of people at school were going to parties in the Søm area, I knew, so what about going there? It was then Jan Vidar remembered that the drummer in our group, whom we had accepted out of sheer desperation, an eighth-class kid from Hånes, had said he was going to Søm for New Year's Eve.

Two telephone calls later and everything had been arranged. Tom would buy beer for us and we would be with kids from the eighth and ninth classes, hang around in their cellar till midnight, then go to the intersection where everyone gathered, find some people I knew from school and hook up with them for the rest of the evening. It was a good plan. When I got home that afternoon, in a studied casual way, I told Mom and Dad I had been invited out on New Year's Eve, there was a party in Søm with some of my class, was it all right if I went? We had guests coming, my father's parents and brother, Gunnar, and his family, but neither Mom nor Dad had any objections to my going.

"How nice!" Mom said.

"That's alright," Dad said. "But you've got to be home by one."

"But it's New Year's Eve," I said. "Couldn't we make it two?"

"Okay. But two o'clock then, not half past. Is that understood?"

So, on the morning of the thirty-first we cycled to the shop in Ryensletta, where Tom was waiting, gave him the money, and were handed two bags, each containing ten bottles, in return. Jan Vidar hid the bags in the garden outside his house, and I cycled home. Mom and Dad were in full swing, cleaning and tidying in preparation for the party. The wind had picked up. I stood outside my bedroom window for a moment watching the snow whirl past, and the gray sky that seemed to have descended over the black trees in the forest. Then I put on a record, grabbed the book I was reading and lay down on the bed. After a while Mom knocked on the door.

"Jan Vidar on the phone," she said.

The telephone was downstairs in the room with the clothes cupboards. I went down, closed the door, and picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Disaster," Jan Vidar said. "That bastatd Leif Reidar . . ."

Leif Reidar was his brother. He was twenty-something years old, drove a souped-up Opel Ascona, worked at the Boen parquet factory. His life was not oriented toward the southwest, toward the town, toward Kristiansand, like mine and most other people's, but toward the northeast, to Birkeland and Lillesand, and because of the age gap I never quite got a handle on him, on who he was, what he actually did. He had a moustache and often wore aviator sunglasses, but he was not the average poser, there was a correctness about his clothes and behavior that pointed in another direction.

"What's he done?" I asked.

"He found the bags of beer in the garden. Then he couldn't keep his damn mitts off, could he. The bastard. He's such a hypocritical jerk. He told me off, *him*, of all people. I was only sixteen and all that crap. Then he tried to make me tell him who had bought the beer. I refused of course. Doesn't have shit to do with him. But then he said he was going to tell my dad if I didn't spill the beans. The fucking hypocrite. The . . . Jesus Christ, I had to say. And do you know what he did? Do you know the little shit did?"

"No," I said.

In the gusts of wind, the snow projected like a veil from the barn roof. The light from the ground-floor windows shone softly, almost clandestinely, into the deepening dusk. I glimpsed a movement inside, it must have been Dad, I thought, and sure enough, the next second his face took shape behind the windowpane, he was looking straight at me. I lowered my eyes, half-turned my head.

"He forced me into the car and drove down to Tom's with the bags."

"You're kidding."

"What a prick he is. He enjoyed it. He seemed to be fucking reveling in it. Taking the moral high ground all of a sudden, the shit. *Him*. That really pissed me off."

"What happened?" I asked.

When I glanced over at the windows again the face had gone.

"What happened? What do you think? He gave Tom an earful. Then he told me to give the bags of beer to Tom. So I did. And then Tom had to give me the money. As though I were a little brat. As if he hadn't done the same when he was sixteen. Fuck him. He was lapping it up, he was, wallowing in it. The indignation, driving me there, giving Tom hell."

"What are we going to do now? Go there without the beer? We can't do that."

"No, we can't, but I winked at Tom as we left. He got the message. So I called him when I got home and said sorry. He still had the beers. So I told him to drive up to your place with them. He's picking me up on the way, so I can pay him."

"Are you coming *here*?"

"Yes, he'll be at my place in ten minutes. So we'll be with you in fifteen."

"I've got to think."

It was then I noticed that the cat was lying in the chair beside the telephone. It looked at me, started licking one paw. In the living room the vacuum cleaner roared into life. The cat turned its head in the direction of the sound. The next second it relaxed. I leaned over and stroked its chest.

"You can't drive all the way up. That's no good. But we can just leave the bags at the roadside somewhere. No one will find them up here anyway.

"Bottom of the hill maybe?"

"Below the house?"

"Yes."

"Bottom of the hill below the house in fifteen minutes?"

"Yes."

"All right. So remember to tell Tom not to turn around in our drive, and not by the mailboxes either. There's a shoulder a bit higher up the road. Can he use that?"

"Okay. See you."

I hung up and went into the living room to Mom. She switched off the vacuum cleaner when she saw me.

"I'm off to see Per," I said. "Just want to wish him a happy new year."

"Fine," Mom said. "Send our regards if you see his parents."

Per was a year younger than me and lived in the neighboring house a couple of hundred meters down the hill. He was the person I spent the most time with in the years we lived here. We played soccer as often as we could, after school, on Saturdays and Sundays, during vacations, and a lot of that was spent finding enough players for a decent game, but if we couldn't, we played two-a-side for hours, and if we couldn't do that, it was just Per and me. I booted the ball at him, he booted it at me, I crossed to him, he crossed it to me, or we played twosies, as we called it. We did this, day in, day out, even after I had started at the gymnas. Otherwise we went swimming, either under the waterfall, in the deep part of the pool and where you could dive from a rock, or down by the rapids where the torrent swept us along. When the weather was too bad to do anything outside, we watched a video in their cellar or just hung around chatting in the garage. I liked being there, his family was warm and generous, and even though his father could not stand me I was welcome all the same. Yet despite the fact that Per was the person I spent the most time with, I did not consider him a friend, I never mentioned him in any other context, both because he was younger than me, which was not good, and because he was a country boy. He wasn't interested in music, hadn't a clue about it, he wasn't interested in girls or drinking either, he was quite content to sit at home with his family on the weekends. Turning up for school in rubber boots didn't bother him, he was just as happy walking around in knitted sweaters and cords as jeans he'd outgrown and T-shirts emblazoned with Kristiansand Zoo. When I first moved here he had never been to Kristiansand on his own. He had hardly ever read a book, what he liked was comics, which for that matter I also read, but always alongside the endless list of MacLean, Bagley, Smith, Le Carré, and Follet books I devoured, and which I eventually got him interested in as well. We went to the library together some Saturdays, and to Start FC's home games every other Sunday, we trained with the soccer team twice a week, in the summer we played matches once a week, in addition to which we walked together to and from the school bus every day. But we didn't share the same seat, for the closer we got to school and the life there, the less of a friend Per became, until by the time we got to the playground we had no contact at all. Strangely enough, he never protested. He was always happy, always open, had a well-developed sense of humor and was, like the rest of his family, a warm person. Over the Christmas period I had been down to his place a couple of times, we had watched some videos and we had skied on the slopes behind our house. It had not occurred to me to invite him out on New Year's Eve, the idea didn't even exist as a possibility. Jan Vidar had a non-relationship with Per, they knew each other, of course, as everyone knew everyone else up here, but he was never alone with him and saw no reason to be either. When I moved here Jan Vidar hung out with Kjetil, a boy our age who lived in Kjevil, they were best friends and always in and out of each other's houses. Kjetil's father was in the service, and they had moved around a lot, from what I understood. When Jan Vidar started to spend time with me, mostly because of a common interest in music, Kjetil tried to win him back, kept calling and inviting him over, made inside jokes that only they understood when the three of us were together at school; if that didn't work he resorted to more devious methods and invited both of us. We cycled around the airport, hung out in the airport café, went to Hamresanden and visited one of the girls there, Rita. Both Kjetil and Jan Vidar were interested in her. Kjetil had a bar of chocolate which he shared on the hill with Jan Vidar, without offering me any, but that fell flat as well because all Jan Vidar did was break his piece in two and pass me half. Then Kjetil released his grip, directed his attention elsewhere, but for as long as we went to the same school he never found any friends who were as close as Jan Vidar had been. Kjetil was a person everyone liked, especially the girls, but no one wanted to be with him. Rita, who was generally cheeky and tough, and never spared anyone, had a soft spot for him, they were always laughing together and had their own special way of talking, but they were never more than friends. Rita always saved her most mordant sarcasm for me, and I was always on my guard when she was around, I never knew when or how the attack would be launched. She was small and delicate, her face thin, her mouth small, but her features were well-formed and her eyes, which were often so full of scorn, shone with a rare intensity; they almost sparkled. Rita was attractive, but still wasn't seen as such, and could be so unpleasant to others that perhaps she never would be.

One evening she called me.

"Hi, Karl Ove, this is Rita," she said.

"Rita?" I repeated.

"Yes, you cretin. Rita Lolita."

"Oh, yes," I said.

"I have a question for you," she said.

"Yes?"

"Would you like to date me?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"One more time. Would you like to date me? It's a simple question. You're supposed to say yes or no."

"I don't know . . ." I said.

"Oh, come on. If you don't want to, just say so."

"I don't think I do . . ." I said.

"Alright then," she said. "See you at school tomorrow. Bye."

And she hung up. The next day I behaved as if nothing had happened, and she behaved as if nothing had happened, though she was perhaps even keener to get a dig in whenever the opportunity arose. She never mentioned it, I never mentioned it, not even to Jan Vidar or Kjetil, I didn't want to be one up on them.

After I had said goodbye to Mom and she had switched the vacuum cleaner back on, I wrapped myself up warm in the hall and ventured out, my head ducked into the wind. Dad had opened one garage door and was dragging out the snowblower. The gravel inside was snow-free and dry, which aroused a faint unease in me, as always, because gravel belonged outdoors, and whatever was outdoors should be covered in snow, creating an imbalance between inside and outside. As soon as the door was closed I didn't think about it, it never crossed my mind, but when I saw it . . .

"I'm just off to see Per," I shouted.

Dad, who was having a tremendous battle with the snowblower, turned his head and nodded. I half-regretted having suggested meeting on the hill, it might be too close, my father tended to have a sixth sense when it came to deviations from the norm. On the other hand, it was quite a while now since he had taken any interest in me. On reaching the mailbox I heard the snowblower start. I looked up to check whether he could see me. He couldn't, so I walked down the hill, hugging the side to reduce the chance of being observed. At the bottom I stopped and gazed across the river while I waited. Three cars in succession drove past on the other side. The light from their headlights was like small stabs of yellow in the immense grayness. The snow on the flats had turned the color of the sky, whose light seemed to be enmeshed by the falling darkness. The water in the channel of the iced-up river was black and shiny. Then I heard a car charging down along the bend a few hundred meters away. The engine sounded tinny, it must have been an old car. Tom's probably. I peered up the road, raised a hand as it appeared around the bend. It braked and came to a halt beside me. Tom rolled down the window.

"Hi, Karl Ove," he said.

"Hi," I said.

He smiled.

"Did you get an earful?" I asked.

"What a stupid bastard, he is," said Jan Vidar, sitting in the seat beside him.

"No big deal," Tom said. "So, you boys are going out tonight?"

"Yes. And how about you?"

"May have a wander."

"Everything okay otherwise?"

"Yep, fine."

He looked at me with those good-natured eyes of his and smiled.

"Your stuff's in the trunk."

"Is it open?"

"Yep."

I went around and opened the trunk, took the two red-and-white bags lying among the clutter of tools, toolboxes, and those elastic thingies with hooks to secure stuff to the car roof.

"Got them," I said. "Thanks, Tom. We won't forget this."

He shrugged.

"See you then," I said to Jan Vidar.

He nodded, Tom wound up the window, cheerfully saluted with his fingers to his temple as always, put the car in gear and drove up the hill. I stepped over the bank of snow and went into the trees, followed the snow-covered stream perhaps twenty meters uphill, laid the bottles under an easily recognizable birch trunk and heard the car passing on its descent.

I stood at the edge of the forest waiting for a few minutes so that I wouldn't have been away for a suspiciously short time. Then I walked up the hill where Dad was busy clearing a broader path to the house. He was wearing neither gloves nor a hat as he walked behind the machine dressed in his old lambskin coat with a thick scarf loosely wrapped around his neck. The fountain of snow that was not carried off by the wind cascaded onto the ground a few meters away. I nodded to him as I passed, his eyes registered me fleetingly, but his face was impassive. When I went into the kitchen, after hanging my outdoor clothes in the hall, Mom was sitting there smoking. A candle flickered on the windowsill. The clock on the stove said half past three.

"Everything under control?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "It's going to be nice. Do you want something to eat before you go?"

"I'll make a few sandwiches," I said.

On the counter was a large white packet of lutefisk. The sink was full of dark, unwashed potatoes. In the corner the coffee machine light was on. The pot was half full.

"I think I'll wait a bit though," I said. "Don't have to go before seven or so. When are they coming?"

"Dad's going to fetch your grandparents. Think he's off soon. Gunnar will be here at around seven."

"Then I'll just manage to catch them," I said, and went into the living room, stood in front of the window and gazed across the valley, went to the coffee table, took an orange, sat down on the sofa and began to peel. The to deviations from the norm. On the other hand, it was quite a while now since he had taken any interest in me. On reaching the mailbox I heard the snowblower start. I looked up to check whether he could see me. He couldn't, so I walked down the hill, hugging the side to reduce the chance of being observed. At the bottom I stopped and gazed across the river while I waited. Three cars in succession drove past on the other side. The light from their headlights was like small stabs of yellow in the immense grayness. The snow on the flats had turned the color of the sky, whose light seemed to be enmeshed by the falling darkness. The water in the channel of the iced-up river was black and shiny. Then I heard a car charging down along the bend a few hundred meters away. The engine sounded tinny, it must have been an old car. Tom's probably. I peered up the road, raised a hand as it appeared around the bend. It braked and came to a halt beside me. Tom rolled down the window.

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"See you then," I said to Jan Vidar.

He nodded, Tom wound up the window, cheerfully saluted with his fingers to his temple as always, put the car in gear and drove up the hill. I stepped over the bank of snow and went into the trees, followed the snow-covered stream perhaps twenty meters uphill, laid the bottles under an easily recognizable birch trunk and heard the car passing on its descent.

I stood at the edge of the forest waiting for a few minutes so that I wouldn't have been away for a suspiciously short time. Then I walked up the hill where Dad was busy clearing a broader path to the house. He was wearing neither gloves nor a hat as he walked behind the machine dressed in his old lambskin coat with a thick scarf loosely wrapped around his neck. The fountain of snow that was not carried off by the wind cascaded onto the ground a few meters away. I nodded to him as I passed, his eyes registered me fleetingly, but his face was impassive. When I went into the kitchen, after hanging my outdoor clothes in the hall, Mom was sitting there smoking. A candle flickered on the windowsill. The clock on the stove said half past three.

"Everything under control?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "It's going to be nice. Do you want something to eat before you go?"

"I'll make a few sandwiches," I said.

On the counter was a large white packet of lutefisk. The sink was full of dark, unwashed potatoes. In the corner the coffee machine light was on. The pot was half full.

"I think I'll wait a bit though," I said. "Don't have to go before seven or so. When are they coming?"

"Dad's going to fetch your grandparents. Think he's off soon. Gunnar will be here at around seven."

"Then I'll just manage to catch them," I said, and went into the living room, stood in front of the window and gazed across the valley, went to the coffee table, took an orange, sat down on the sofa and began to peel. The

Christmas tree candles shone, the flames in the fire sparkled and the crystal glasses on the laid table at the far end glistened in the room lights. I thought of Yngve, wondered how he had coped with these things when he was at gymnas. Now at any rate he didn't have any problems; he was at a cabin in Aust-Agder with all his friends. He had come home at the latest possible moment, on Christmas Eve, and departed as soon as he could, on the twenty-seventh. He had never lived here. The summer we moved he was set to start the third and final year and did not want to leave his friends. That had made Dad furious. But Yngve had been uncompromising, he was not moving. He took out a study loan, because Dad refused to give him a single krone, and he rented digs not so far from our old house. Dad barely exchanged a word with him the few weekends he spent with us. The atmosphere between them was icy. The year after, Yngve did his national service, and I remember him coming home one weekend with his girlfriend, Alfhild. It was the first time he had done anything like this. Dad had of course stayed away, it had been just Yngve and Alfhild, Mom and me there. Not until the weekend was over and they were on their way downhill to catch the bus did Dad drive up. He stopped the car, rolled down the window, and gave them a friendly hello to Alfhild. The smile that accompanied it was something I had never seen on him before. It was radiant with happiness and fervor. He had certainly never looked at any of us in such a way. Then he shifted his gaze, put the car in first, and drove up the hill while we continued our descent to the bus.

Was that our father?

All Mom's kindness and thoughtfulness toward Alfhild and Yngve was completely overshadowed by Dad's four-second gaze. For that matter, this is how Mom had probably been on weekends as well, when Yngve was here alone and Dad stayed on the ground floor of the barn as much as possible, only turning up for meals, at which his refusal to ask Yngve a single question or grace him with even a minimum of attention is what lingered in the mind after the weekend, despite all Mom's efforts to make Yngve feel at home. It was Dad who set the tone at home; there was nothing anyone could do.

Outside, the roar of the snowblower suddenly stopped. I got up, grabbed the orange peel, went into the kitchen, where Mom was scrubbing potatoes, opened the cupboard beside her and dropped the peel in the wastebasket, watched Dad walk across the drive, running a hand through his hair in that characteristic way of his, after which I went upstairs to my room, closed the door behind me, put on a record and lay down on my bed again.

We had pondered for a while how we were going to get to Søm. Both Jan Vidar's father and my mother would certainly have offered to give us a ride, which in fact they did as soon as we told them of our plans. But the two bags of beer ruled out that possibility. The solution we arrived at was that Jan Vidar would tell his parents that my mother was taking us while I would say that it was Jan Vidar's father who was taking us. This was a bit of a risk because our parents did occasionally meet, but the odds on the driver question surfacing in conversation were so minute it was a chance we were prepared to take. Once that was resolved there was just the matter of getting there. Buses didn't come out here on New Year's Eve, but we found out that some passed the Timenes intersection about ten kilometers away. So we would have to hitch a ride – if we were lucky a car would take us the whole way, if not, we could catch the bus from there. To avoid questions and suspicion it would all have to happen after the guests had arrived. That is, after seven o'clock. The bus left at ten past eight, so with a bit of luck everything would work out fine.

Getting drunk required careful planning. Alcohol had to be procured safely in advance, a secure place for storage had to be found, transport there and back had to be arranged, and parents had to be avoided when you got home. After the first blissful occasion in Oslo I had therefore got drunk only twice. The second time threatened to go awry. Jan Vidar's sister Liv had just got engaged to Stig, a soldier she had met in Kjevik, where her and Jan Vidar's father worked. She wanted to get married young, have children, and be a housewife, a rather unusual dream for a girl of her age, so even though she was only a year older than us, she lived in quite a different world. One Saturday evening the two of them invited us to a little gathering with some of their friends. Since we didn't have any other plans, we accepted and a few days later were sitting on a sofa in a house somewhere drinking homemade wine and watching TV. It was meant to be a cozy evening at home, there were candles on the table and lasagne was served, and it probably would have been cozy had it not been for the wine, of which there was an immense quantity. I drank, and I became as euphoric as the first time, but on this occasion I had a blackout and remembered nothing between the fifth glass and the moment I woke up in a dark cellar wearing jogging bottoms and a sweatshirt I had never seen before and lying on top of a duvet covered with towels, my own clothes next to me bundled up and spattered with vomit. I could make out a washing machine by the wall, a basket of dirty laundry beside it, a chest freezer by the other wall with some waterproof trousers and jackets on the lid. There was also a pile of crab pots, a landing net, a fishing rod, and a shelf full of tools and junk. I took in these surroundings so new to me in one sweep of the eye, then woke up rested and with a clear head. A door a few strides from my head was ajar, I opened it and walked into the kitchen where Stig and Liv were sitting, hands interlaced and glowing with happiness.

"Hi," I said.

"Well, if it isn't Garfield," Stig said. "How are you?"

"Fine," I said. "What happened actually?"

"Don't you remember?"

I shook my head.

"Nothing?"

He laughed. At that moment Jan Vidar came in from the living room.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said.

He smiled.

"Hi, Garfield," he said.

"What's with this Garfield?" I asked.

"Don't you remember?"

"No. I can't remember a thing. But I see that I must have thrown up."

"We were watching TV. A Garfield cartoon. Then you got up and beat your chest and shouted 'I'm Garfield.' Then you sat down again and chuckled.

Then you did it again. 'I'm Garfield! I'm Garfield!' Then you threw up. In the living room. On the carpet. And then you were out like a light. Bang. Thud. Sound asleep. In a pool of vomit. And it was absolutely impossible to communicate with you."

"Oh, shit," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Stig said. "The carpet's washable. Now we have to get you two home."

It was only then that fear gripped me.

"What's the time?" I asked.

"Almost one."

"No later? Oh, well, that's okay. I said I would be at home by one. I'll just be a few minutes late."

Stig didn't drink, and we followed him down to the car, got in, Jan Vidar in the front, me in the back.

"Do you really not remember anything?" Jan Vidar asked me as we drove off.

"No, I don't, nothing at all."

That made me proud. The whole story, what I had said and what I had done, even the vomiting, made me feel proud. It was close to the person I wanted to be. But when Stig stopped the car by the mailboxes and I walked up the dark driveway clad in someone else's clothes, with my own in a bag hanging from my wrist, I was scared.

Please let them be in bed. Please let them be in bed.

And it looked as if they were. The kitchen lights were off at any rate, and that was always the last thing they did before going to bed. But when I opened the door and tiptoed into the hall, I could hear their voices. They were upstairs on the sofa by the TV chatting. They never did that.

Were they waiting for me? Were they checking up on me? My father was the type to smell my breath. His parents had done that, they laughed about it now, but I bet he hadn't at the time.

It would have been impossible to sneak past them, the top of the stairs was right next to them. May as well face the music.

"Hello?" I said. "Anyone up there?"

"Hello, Karl Ove," Mom said.

I trudged up the stairs and stopped when I was in their field of vision.

They were sitting beside each other on the sofa, Dad with his arm resting on the side.

"Did you have a nice time?" Mom asked.

Couldn't she *see*?

I couldn't believe it.

"It was okay," I said, advancing a few steps. "We watched TV and had some lasagne."

"Nice," Mom said.

"But I'm pretty tired," I said. "Think I'll hit the hay."

"You do that," she said. "We'll be on our way soon."

I stood on the floor four meters from them, wearing someone else's jogging pants, someone else's sweatshirt, with my own soiled clothes in a plastic bag. And reeking of booze. But they didn't notice.

"Good night then," I said.

"Good night," they said.

And that was that. I didn't understand how I had managed it; I just accepted my good fortune. I hid the bag of clothes in a cupboard, and the next time I was alone in the house I rinsed them in the bath, hung them up to dry in the bedroom wardrobe, then put them in the laundry basket as usual.

Not a word from anyone.

Drinking was good for me; it set things in motion. And I was thrust into something, a feeling of . . . not infinity exactly, but of, well, something unlimited. Something I could go into, deeper and deeper. The feeling was so sharp and distinct.

No bounds. That was what it was, a feeling of boundlessness.

So I was full of anticipation. And even though it had passed off well enough previously I had taken a few precautionary measures this time. I would take a toothbrush and toothpaste with me, and I had bought eucalyptus pastilles, Freshmint, and chewing gum. And I would take an extra shirt.

In the living room below I could hear Dad's voice. I sat up, stretched my arms over my head, bent them backward, then stretched them out as far as they would go, first one way, then the other. My joints ached, and had all autumn. I was growing. In the ninth-class photograph, taken in late spring, my height was average. Now I was suddenly approaching six two. My great fear was that I would not stop there but just keep growing. There was a boy in the class above me at school who was close to six eight, and as thin as a rake. That I might follow in his shoes was something I imagined with horror several times a day. Now and then I prayed to God, in whom I did not believe, not to let this happen. I didn't believe in God, but I had prayed to him as a young boy, and doing it now was as if my childlike hope had returned. Dear God, please let me stop growing, I prayed. Let me stay six two, let me reach six two and a half or six three, but no more! I promise to be as good as gold if you do. Dear God, dear God, can you hear me?

Oh, I knew it was stupid, but I did it anyway, there was nothing stupid about my fear, it was just unbearable. Another even greater fear I had at that time was the one I had experienced on discovering that my dick was bent upright when I had an erection. I was deformed, it was misshapen, and ignorant as I was, I didn't know if there was anything you could do about it, have an operation or whatever options there had been then. At night I got out of bed, went to the bathroom and made myself erect to see if it had changed. But no, it never had. It was nearly touching my bloody stomach! And wasn't it crooked as well? It was as crooked and distorted as a fucking tree root in the forest. That meant I would never be able to go to bed with anyone. Since that was the only thing I really wanted, or dreamt about, my despair knew no bounds. It did enter my head of course that I could pull it down. And I did try, I pushed it down as far as it would go, until it ached. It was straighter. But it hurt. And you couldn't have sex with a girl with your hand on your dick like that, could you? What the hell should I do? Was there anything I could do? This preyed on my mind. Every time I had a hard-on, I was desperate. If I was making out with a girl on a sofa, and perhaps got my hand up her sweater, and my dick was as stiff as a ramrod against my trouser leg, I knew that was the closest I would get, and it would always be the closest I would get. It was worse than impotence because this not only rendered me incapable of action, but it was also grotesque. But could I pray to God for this to stop? Yes, in the end I could, and did, too. Dear God, I prayed. Dear God, let my sexual organ straighten when it fills with blood. I will only pray for this once. So please be kind and let my wish come true.

When I started at gymnas all the first-years were assembled one morning on the stage at Gimle Hall, I no longer remember the occasion, but one of the teachers, a notorious nudist from Kristiansand, who was said to have painted his house wearing no more than a tie, and was generally scruffy, dressed in a provincial bohemian manner, had curly, unkempt, white hair, anyway he read us a poem, walking along the rows on the stage proclaiming and, to general laughter, suddenly singing the praises of the upright erection.

I didn't laugh. I think my jaw fell when I heard that. With mouth agape and eyes vacant I sat there as the insight slowly sank in. All erect dicks are bent. Or, if not all, then at least enough of them to be eulogized in a poem.

Where did the grotesqueness come from? Only two years earlier, when we moved here, I had been a small thirteen-year-old with smooth skin, unable to articulate my "r"s and more than happy to swim, cycle, and play soccer in the new place where, so far at least, no one had it in for me. Quite the opposite, in fact, during the first few days at school everyone wanted to talk to me, a new pupil was a rare phenomenon there, everyone wondered of course who I was, what I could do. In the afternoons and on weekends girls sometimes cycled all the way from Hamresanden to meet me. I could be playing soccer with Per, Trygve, Tom, and William when, who was that cycling along the road, two girls, what did they want? Our house was the last; beyond it there was just forest, then two farms, then forest, forest and more forest. They jumped off their bikes on the hill, glanced across at us, disappeared behind the trees. Cycled down again, stopped, looked.

"What are they doing?" Trygve asked.

"They've come to see Karl Ove," Per said.

"You're kidding," Trygve said. "They can't have cycled all the way from Hamresanden for *that*. That's got to be ten kilometers!"

"What else would they come up here for? They certainly didn't come here to see you," Per said. "You've always been here, haven't you."

We stood watching them scramble through the bushes. One was wearing a pink jacket, the other light blue. Long hair.

"Come on," Trygve said. "Let's play."

And we continued to play on the tongue of land extending into the river where Per's and Tom's father had knocked together two goals. The girls stopped when they came to the swathe of rushes about a hundred meters away. I knew who they were, they were nothing special, so I ignored them, and after standing there in the reeds for ten minutes, like some strange birds, they walked back and cycled home. Another time, a few weeks later, three girls came up to us while we were working in the large warehouse at the parquet factory. We were stacking short planks onto pallets, each layer separated by stays, it was piecework, and once I had learned to throw an armful at a time, so that they fell into place, there was a bit of money in it. We could come and go as we pleased, we often popped in on the way home from school and did one stack, then went home and had a bite to eat, went back and stayed for the rest of the evening. We were so hungry for money we could have worked every evening and every weekend, but often there wasn't anything to do, either because we had filled the warehouse or because the factory workers had done the work during their normal hours. Per's father worked in the office, so it was either through Per or William, whose father was employed as a truck driver for the firm, that the eagerly awaited announcement came: there is work. It was on one such evening that the three girls came to see us in the warehouse. They lived in Hamresanden too. This time I had been warned, a rumor had been circulating that one of the girls in the seventh class was interested in me, and there she was, considerably bolder than the two wading birds in the rushes, for Line, that was her name, came straight over to me and rested her arms on the frame around the stack, stood there confidently chewing gum, watching what I was doing while her two friends kept in the background. On hearing that she was interested, I had thought that I should strike while the iron was hot, for even though she was only in the seventh class, her sister was a model, and even if she hadn't gotten that far herself yet, she was going to be good. That was what everyone said about her, she was going to be good, that was what everyone praised, her potential. She was slim and long-legged, had long, dark hair, was pale with high cheekbones and a disproportionately large mouth. This lanky, slightly gangly and calflike quality of hers made me skeptical. But her hips were nice. And her mouth and eyes too. Another factor to count against her was that she could not say her "r"s, and there was something a tad stupid or scatterbrained about her. She was known for it. At the same time she was popular in her class, the girls there all wanted to be with her.

"Hi," she said. "I've come to visit you. Does that make you happy?"

"There you go," I said. Turned aside, balanced a pile of planks on my forearm, hurled them into the frame where they clattered into place, pushed in the ones sticking out, grabbed another armful.

"How much do you earn an hour?" she asked.

"It's piecework," I said. "We get twenty kroner for a stack of doubles, forty for a stack of fours."

"I see," she said.

Per and Trygve, who were in the parallel class to hers, and had repeatedly expressed their disapproval of her and her crowd, were working a few meters away. It struck me that they looked like dwarfs. Short, bent forward, grim-faced, they stood in the middle of the enormous factory floor with pallets up to the roof on all sides, working.

"Do you like me?" she asked.

"Well, what's not to like?" I said. The moment I had seen her coming through the gates I had decided to go for it, but now, with her standing there and an open road ahead, I still couldn't do it, I still couldn't come up with the goods. In a way I didn't quite understand, yet sensed nonetheless, she was far more sophisticated than I was. Okay, she may have been a bit dim, but she was sophisticated. And it was this sophistication that I could not handle.

"I like you," she said. "But you already know that, don't you."

I leaned forward and adjusted one of the stays, flushing quite unexpectedly.

"No," I said.

Then she didn't say anything for a while, just lolled over the frame, chewing gum. Her girlfriends over by the pile of planks appeared impatient. In the end, she straightened up.

"Right," she said, turned and was gone.

Passing up the opportunity was not a huge problem for me; far more important was the way it had happened, not having the pluck to take the final steps, to cross that last bridge. And when the novelty interest in me had died down nothing was served on a plate anymore. On the contrary, the old judgments of me slowly trickled back. I could sense them close at hand, felt the reverberations, even though there was no contact between the two places I had lived. On the very first day at school I had spotted a particular girl, her name was Inger, she had beautiful narrow eyes, a dark complexion, a childish short nose which broke up otherwise long, rounded features, and she exuded distance, except when she smiled. She had a liberating, gentle smile that I admired and found endlessly appealing, both because it did not embrace me or others like me, it belonged to the very essence of her being, to which only she herself and her friends had recourse, and also because her top lip was slightly twisted. She was in the class below me, and in the course of the two years I spent at that school I never exchanged a single word with her. Instead, I got together with her cousin, Susanne. She was in the parallel class to mine, and lived in a house on the other side of the river. Her nose was pointed, her mouth small, and her front teeth a touch harelike, but her breasts were well-rounded and pert, her hips just the right width and her eyes provocative, as if they were always clear about what they wanted. She was always comparing herself with others. Whereas Inger in all her unattainability was full of mystery and secrets, and her appeal consisted almost entirely of things unknown, suspicions, and dreams, Susanne was more of an equal and more likeminded. With her I had less to lose, less to fear, but also less to gain. I was fourteen years old, she was fifteen and within a few days we drifted together, as can often happen at that age. Shortly afterward Jan Vidar got together with her friend, Margrethe. Our relationships were located somewhere between the world of the child and that of the adult and the boundaries between the two were fluid. We sat on the same seat on the school bus in the morning, sat beside each other when the whole school gathered for morning assembly on Fridays, cycled together to the confirmation classes held once a week in the church, and hung out together afterward, at an intersection or in the parking lot outside the shop, all situations where the differences between us were played down and Susanne and Margrethe were like pals. But on weekends it was different, then we might go to the cinema in town or sit in some cellar room eating pizza and drinking Coke while we watched TV or listened to music, entwined in each other's arms. It was getting closer, the thing we were all thinking about. What had been a huge step forward a few weeks ago, the kiss, had long been achieved: Jan Vidar and I had discussed the procedure, the practical details, such as which side to sit, what to say to initiate the process that would culminate in the kiss, or whether to act without saying anything at all. By now it was well on the way to becoming mechanical: after eating pizza or lasagne the girls sat on our laps and we started canoodling. Occasionally we stretched out on the sofa too, one couple at each end, if we felt sure no one would come. One Friday evening Susanne was alone at home. Jan Vidar cycled up to my place in the afternoon, we set off along the river, over the narrow footbridge and up to the house where she lived. They were waiting for us. Her parents had made a pizza, we ate it, Susanne sat on my lap, Margrethe on Jan Vidar's, Dire Straits was on the stereo, "Telegraph Road," and I was kissing Susanne, and Jan Vidar was fooling around with Margrethe, for what seemed like an eternity in the living room. *I love you, Karl Ove*, she whispered in my ear after a while. *Shall we go to my room?* I nodded, and we got up, holding hands.

"We're going to my room," she said to the two others. "So you can have a bit of peace here."

They looked up at us and nodded. Then they went back to it. Margrethe's long, black hair almost completely covered Jan Vidar's face. Their tongues went round and round in each other's mouths. He was stroking her back, up and down his fingers went, his body otherwise motionless. Susanne sent me a smile, squeezed my hand harder, and led me through the hall and into her bedroom. It was dark inside, and colder. I had been there before, and liked being in her house, even though her parents were always there, and in principle we only did what Jan Vidar and I normally did, that is, we sat chatting, moved into the living room and watched TV with her parents, had a bite to eat in the kitchen, went for long walks along the river, for this was not Jan Vidar's dark, sweaty room we were sitting in, with his amplifier and stereo equipment, his guitar and records, his guitar magazines and comics, no, this was Susanne's light, perfumed room, with its white flowery wallpaper, its embroidered bedspread, its white shelf full of ornaments and books, its white cupboard with her clothes nicely folded and hung up. When I saw a pair of her blue jeans there, or hanging over a chair, I gulped, because she would be pulling these very trousers over her thighs, hips, zipping up and buttoning. Her room was filled with such promise, which I could barely put it into words, it just sent surges of emotion through me. There were other reasons I liked being there. Her parents, for example; they were always friendly, and there was something in the family's manner that made it clear I meant something to them. I was a person in Susanne's life, someone she told her parents and younger sister about.

Now she went over to close the window. Outside it was misty, even the lights in the neighboring houses were almost invisible in the grayness. On the road below, a few cars drove past with their stereos throbbing. Then it went quiet again.

"Hmm," I said.

She smiled.

"Hmm," she said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. I had no expectations, other than that we would lie here rather than nestling against each other. Once I had put my hand inside her Puffa jacket and placed it on a breast, and she had said no, and I had removed it again. The "no" had not been sharp or reproachful, more a statement of fact, as if it invoked some law to which we were subject. We did some caressing, that was what we did, and even though I was always ready for it whenever we met, I soon became tired of it. After a while I felt almost nauseous because there was something futile and unresolved about this caressing, my whole being longed for a way out, which I knew existed, but it was not a route that could be taken. I wanted to move on, but was forced to remain where I was, in the vale of rotating tongues and hair perpetually falling over my face.

I sat down beside her. She smiled at me. I kissed her, she closed her eyes and leaned back onto the bed. I crawled up on top of her, felt her soft body beneath mine, she groaned a little, was I too heavy? I lay beside her instead, with my leg over hers. Caressed her shoulder and down, along her arm. When my hand reached her fingers she squeezed it hard. I lifted my head and opened my eyes. She was looking at me. Her face, white in the semi-darkness, was serious. I bent forward and kissed her neck. I had never done that before. Rested my head on her chest. She ran her hand through my hair. I could hear her heart beating. I stroked her hips. She tensed. I lifted her top and placed my hand on her stomach. Leaned forward and kissed it. She grabbed the hem of her top and slowly pulled it up. I couldn't believe my eyes. There, right in front of me, were her naked breasts. In the living room, "Telegraph Road" was played again. I did not hesitate and closed my mouth around them. First one, then the other. I rubbed my cheeks against them, licked them, sucked them, finally put my hands on them and kissed her, for a few seconds I had completely forgotten her. My dreams or imagination had never stretched beyond this point, and now I was there, but after ten minutes there was the same sense of satedness, all of a sudden it was not enough, not even this, however great it was, I wanted to move on wherever it led, and made an attempt, started fumbling with her trouser button. It came open, she said nothing, lay with her eyes closed as before and her sweater pulled up under her chin. I undid the zip. Her white panties came into view. I swallowed hard. I tugged her trousers around her hips and drew them down. She said nothing. Wriggled a bit so that it was easier to remove them. When they were down to her knees I put my hand on her panties. Felt the soft hair beneath. *Karl Ove*, she said. I lay on top of her again, we kissed, and while we kissed I pulled down her panties, not a lot, but enough to slip in a finger, it glided down through the hair, and the moment I felt her moistness against my fingertip, something in me seemed to crack. It was like a pain shooting through my abdomen, followed by a kind of spasm in my loins. The next second everything was alien to me. From one moment to the next, her naked breasts and her naked thighs lost all meaning. But I could see that she was not having the same experience as me, she was lying as before, with eyes closed, mouth half-open, breathing heavily, engrossed in what I had been engrossed, but was not any longer.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "But perhaps we should join the others?"

"No," she said. "Let's wait a bit."

"Okay," I said.

So we resumed. We embraced, but it did not arouse anything in me, I might just as well have been cutting a slice of bread, I kissed her breasts, that aroused nothing in me, everything was strangely neutral, her nipples were nipples, her skin was skin, her navel a navel, but then to my amazement and delight, everything about her suddenly changed back, and again there was nothing I would rather do than lie there kissing everything I touched.

That was when someone knocked on the door.

We sat up; she quickly wriggled her trousers into position and pulled down her top.

It was Jan Vidar.

"Are you coming out?" he asked.

"Yes," said Susanne. "We're on our way. Hang on."

"It's half past ten, you know," he said. "We'd better be off before your parents come back."

While Jan Vidar was collecting his records I met Susanne's eyes and smiled at her. When we were in the hall, ready to go, about to kiss them goodbye, she winked at me.

"See you tomorrow!" she said.

Outside, it was drizzling. The light from the streetlamps we walked under seemed to merge with every single water particle in large haloes.

"Well?" I said. "How did it go?"

"The usual," said Jan Vidar. "We made out. I'm not sure I want to be with her much longer."

"Oh yeah," I said. "You're not exactly in love then."

"Are you?"

I shrugged.

"Maybe not."

We arrived at the main road and set off up the valley. On one side there was a farm, the waterlogged ground that glistened in the light by the road disappeared in the darkness and did not reappear until the farmhouse, which was brightly illuminated. On the other side there were a couple of old houses with gardens reaching down to the river.

"How did it go with you?" Jan Vidar asked.

"Pretty well," I said. "She took off her top."

"What? Really?"

I nodded.

"You're lying, come on! She didn't."

"She did."

"Not Susanne surely?"

"She did."

"What did you do then?"

"Kissed her breasts. What else?"

"You lying toad. You didn't."

"I did."

I didn't have the heart to tell him she had also taken off her panties. If he had made any progress with Margrethe, I would have told him. But as he hadn't I didn't want to brag. Besides, he would never have believed me. Never.

I could hardly believe it myself.

"What were they like?" he asked.

"What were what like?"

"Her breasts of course."

"They were great. Just the right size and firm. Very firm. Stood up even though she was lying down."

"You bastard. It's not true."

"It is, for Christ's sake."

"Shit."

After that we didn't say anymore. Crossed the suspension bridge where the river, so shiny and black, silently swelled, went through the strawberry field, and onto the tarmac road which, after a sharp bend, climbed a steep pass with black spruce trees leaning over, and then after a couple of curves at the top passed our house. Everything was dark and heavy and wet, apart from my consciousness of what had happened, which overrode everything and rose to the light like bubbles. Jan Vidar had accepted my explanation, and I was burning to tell him that her breasts were not the whole story, there was more, but as soon as I saw his sullen look I let it go. And that was fine too, to keep it a secret between Susanne and me. Yet the spasm worried me. I had almost no pubes on my dick, just a couple of long, black hairs, otherwise it was mostly down, and one of the things I feared was that this would come to the ears of the girls, and in particular Susanne's. I knew I couldn't sleep with anyone until the hair was in situ, so I assumed the spasm was a kind of false orgasm, and that I had done more and gone further than what my dick was actually up to. And that was why it had hurt. That I had had a kind of "dry" ejaculation. For all I knew it might be dangerous. On the other hand, my underpants were wet. It might be pee, it might also be semen. Or blood even? The latter two I considered unlikely, after all I was not sexually mature, and I had not experienced pains in my loins until that moment. Whatever the reason, it had hurt, and I was concerned.

Jan Vidar had left his bike outside our garage, we stood there chatting, then he cycled home, and I went in. Yngve was at home that weekend, he was sitting with Mom in the kitchen. I could see them through the window. Dad must have been in the flat in the barn. After taking off my outdoor clothes, I went to the toilet, locked the door, dropped my trousers to my knees, lifted my underpants and pressed my forefinger against the damp patch. It was sticky. I raised my finger, rubbed it against my thumb. Shiny and sticky. Smelt of the sea.

Sea?

That must be semen then?

Of course it was semen.

I was sexually mature.

Exultant, I went into the kitchen.

"Do you want some pizza? We saved a few slices for you," Mom said.

"No thanks. We ate out there."

"Did you have a good time?"

"Of course," I said, unable to suppress a smile.

"His cheeks are all red," Yngve said. "Is that with happiness, I wonder?"

"You'll have to invite her here one day," Mom said.

"Yes, I will," I said and just went on smiling.

The relationship with Susanne came to an end two weeks later. Long ago I had made a deal with Lars, my best friend in Tromøya, to swap pictures of the most beautiful girls there with pictures of the most beautiful girls here. Don't ask me why. I had forgotten all about it until one afternoon when I received an envelope in the mail containing photographs. Passport photos of Lene, Beate, Ellen, Siv, Bente, Marianne, Anne Lisbet, or whatever they were all called. They were Tromøya's finest. Now I had to get my hands on pictures of Tveit's finest. I conferred regularly with Jan Vidar over the next days, we drew up a list and then all I had to do was get hold of the photos. I could ask some girls directly, such as Susann, the friend of Jan Vidar's sister, who was old enough for me to care about what she thought; I could get Jan Vidar to ask others for pictures of their girlfriends. As for myself, my hands were tied because asking for a photo was tantamount to showing an interest in them, and since I was going out with Susanne such an interest would be inappropriate enough for rumors to spread. But there were other methods. Per, for example, did he have any photos of Kristin in his class perhaps? He did, and in this way I eventually managed to scrape together six photos. That was more than enough, but the jewel in the crown, the most beautiful of them all, Inger, whom I very much wanted to show Lars, was missing. And Inger was Susanne's cousin . . .

So one afternoon I got my bike out of the garage and cycled to Susanne's. We hadn't made any arrangement and she seemed happy when she came downstairs to answer the door. I said hello to her parents, we went to her room and sat down for a while, discussed what we would do, without making any plans, chatted a bit about school and the teachers, before I presented my question as casually as I could. Did she have a photo of Inger I could borrow?

Sitting on the bed, she stiffened and stared at me with incredulity.

"Of Inger?" she queried, at length. "What do you want that for?"

It hadn't occurred to me that this might cause a problem. After all, I was going out with Susanne, and the fact that I was asking her, of all people, could only imply that my motives were pure.

"I can't tell you," I said.

And it was true. If I told her that I was going to send photos of the eight most attractive girls in Tveit to a pal in Tromøya she would expect to be among them. She was not, and I could not tell her that.

"You're not having a photo of Inger until you tell me what you're going to do with it," she said.

"But I can't," I said. "Can't you just give me a photo? It's not for me if that's what you're thinking."

"Who's it for then?"

"I can't say."

She got up. I could see she was furious. All her movements were truncated, clipped as it were, as if she no longer wanted to give me the pleasure of seeing them unfold freely and thereby let me share their fullness.

"You're in love with Inger, aren't you," she said.

I didn't answer.

"Karl Ove! Aren't you? I've heard lots of people say you are."

"Let's forget about the photo," I said. "Forget it."

"So you are?"

"No," I said. "Perhaps I was when I first moved here, right at the beginning, but I am not any longer."

"What do you want the photo for then?"

"I can't tell you."

She started to cry.

"You are,' she said. "You're in love with Inger. I know you are. I know."

If Susanne knew, it suddenly struck me, then Inger must know as well.

A sort of light flashed in my head. If she knew, then it might not be so difficult to get off with Inger. At a school party, for example, I could go over and ask her to dance and she would know what was what, would know she was not just one among many. She might even begin to show some interest in me. Sobbing, Susanne went to her desk at the other end of the room and pulled out a drawer.

"Here's your photo," she said. "Take it, and I never want to see you here again."

She held one hand in front of her face and handed me the photo of Inger with the other. Her shoulders were quivering.

"It's not for me," I said. "I promise. It's not me who wants it."

"You sack of shit," she said. "Get out of here!"

I took the photo.

"Is it over then?" I asked.

Two years had passed since that freezing cold, windblown New Year's Eve when I lay on my bed reading while waiting for the night's festivities to begin. Susanne had found someone else just a few months later. His name was Terje; he was small, plump, with a perm and an idiotic moustache. To me it was incredible that she could allow someone like him to take my place. All right, he was eighteen years old and, fair enough, he did have a car which they drove around in after school and on the weekends, but nevertheless: him instead of me? A short, fat dolt with a moustache? In that case, it definitely didn't matter about Susanne. That was what I had thought, and that was what I still thought, lying on the bed. However, now I was no longer a child, now I was sixteen years old, now I wasn't at Ve Middle School but Kristiansand Cathedral School.

From outside came the grating, unlubricated sound of the garage door being opened. The thud as it fell into position, the car being started straight afterward, its engine idling briefly. I went to the window and waited until the two red lights vanished around the bend. Then I went downstairs to the kitchen and boiled some water, took some of the Christmas fare, ham, brawn, lamb sausage, liver paté, cut a few slices of bread, fetched the newspaper from the living room, spread it out over the table and sat down to read it as I ate. It was pitch-black outside now. Inside it was nice and cozy with the red cloth on the table and the small candles flickering on the windowsill. When the water was boiling I warmed the teapot, dropped a couple of fingerfuls of tea leaves, and poured on the steaming hot water, calling: "Mom, do you want any tea?"

No answer.

I sat down and kept eating. After a while I picked up the teapot and poured. Dark brown, almost like wood, the tea rose inside the white cup. A few leaves swirled and floated up, the others lay like a black mat at the bottom. I added milk, three teaspoons of sugar, stirred, waited until the leaves had settled on the bottom, and drank.

Mmm.

Down on the road a snowplow raced past with lights flashing. Then the front door was opened. I heard the sound of shoes being kicked against the step and turned in time to see Mom, wearing Dad's capacious lambskin jacket, come in the door with an armful of wood.

Why was she wearing his clothes? That wasn't like her.

She went into the living room without a glance in my direction. She had snow in her hair and on her lapels. A loud thud in the wood basket.

"Would you like some tea?" I asked when she came back.

"Yes, please," she said. "I'll just get my things off first."

I stood up and found her a cup, placed it on the other side of the table and poured.

"Where have you been?" I asked as she sat down.

"Out fetching wood, that's all," she said.

"But before that? I've been sitting here for a while. It doesn't take twenty minutes to fetch wood, does it."

"Oh, I was changing a lightbulb on the Christmas tree. So now it works."

I turned and looked through the window in the other room. The spruce tree at the end of our plot glittered in the darkness.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked.

"No, everything's ready now. I just need to iron a blouse. And then there's nothing to do until the food has to be cooked. But Dad'll do that."

"Could you iron my shirt while you're at it?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Just put it on the ironing table."

After eating I went up to my room, switched on the amplifier, plugged in the guitar, and sat down to play a little. I loved the smell the amplifier gave off when it got warm, I could play for that reason alone, almost. I also loved all the accessories guitar-playing involved, the fuzz box, the chorus pedal, the leads, the plugs, the plectrums, and the small packets of strings, the bottleneck, the capo, the lined guitar case and all its small compartments. I loved the brand names: Gibson, Fender, Hagstrøm, Rickenbacker, Marshall, Music Man, Vox, and Roland. I went into music shops with Jan Vidar and inspected the guitars with the air of a cognoscente. For my own guitar, a cheap Stratocaster imitation I had bought with my confirmation money, I had ordered new pick-ups, state of the art I was told, and a new pick guard from one of Jan Vidar's mail order catalogues. All that was great. The playing, on the other hand, was not so great. Even though I had been playing regularly and tenaciously for a year and a half, I had made very little progress. I knew all the chords and had practiced all the scales ad infinitum, but I never managed to free myself from them, never managed to *play*, there was no rapport between my mind and my fingers, my fingers didn't seem to belong to me, but to the scales, which they could play with ease, and what then emerged from the amplifier had nothing to do with music. I could spend a day or two learning a solo note by note, and then I could play it, but no more than that, it always stopped there. It was the same for Jan Vidar. But he was even more ambitious than me, he really practiced a lot, he did virtually nothing else at times, but his amplifier too produced nothing more than scales and copies of solos. He filed his nails so that they would be better for playing with, he let the nail of his right thumb grow so that he could use it as a pick, he bought a kind of training apparatus for his fingers which he was always flexing to strengthen them, he rebuilt his guitar, and with his father, who was an electrical engineer in Kjevik, he experimented with a kind of homemade guitar synthesizer. I often took my guitar to his place, the case dangling from one hand, while I steered my bike with the other, and even though what we played in his room didn't sound brilliant, it was still okay because I at least *felt* like a musician when I was carrying the case, it looked really cool, and if we were not yet where we would like to be, things might well change one day. We didn't know what the future might hold; no one could know how much practice was necessary for the situation to ease. A month? Six months? A year? In the meantime we kept playing. We also managed to get a sort of band up and running; one Jan Henrik in the seventh class could play a bit of guitar, and even though he wore yachting shoes and posh clothes and used hair cream we asked him if he wanted to play bass with us. He did, and I, being the worst guitarist, had to start playing drums. The summer we were about to begin the ninth class, Jan Vidar's father drove us up to Evje where we picked up a cheap drum kit we had pooled together to buy, and we were all set. We spoke to the headmaster, were given permission to use a classroom, and once a week we assembled the drums and amplifiers and away we went.

The year before, when I moved, I had been listening to groups like The Clash, The Police, The Specials, Teardrop Explodes, The Cure, Joy Division, New Order, Echo and the Bunnymen, The Chameleons, Simple Minds, Utravox, The Aller Værste, Talking Heads, The B52s, PiL, David Bowie, The Psychedelic Furs, Iggy Pop, and Velvet Underground, all of them via Yngve, who not only spent all his money on music but also played guitar, with his very own sound and distinctive style, and wrote his own songs. In Tveit there was no one who had even heard of all these groups. Jan Vidar, for example, listened to people like Deep Purple, Rainbow, Gillan, Whitesnake, Black Sabbath, Ozzy Osbourne, Def Leppard, and Judas Priest. It was impossible for these worlds to meet, and since an interest in music was what we shared, one of us had to give way. Me. I never bought any records by these bands but I listened to them at Jan Vidar's and familiarized myself with them whereas I reserved my own bands, who at that time were extremely important to me, for when I was alone. And then there were a few "compromise bands," which both he and I liked, first and foremost Led Zeppelin, but also Dire Straits, for his part because of the guitar riffs. Our most frequent discussion concerned feeling versus technique. Jan Vidar would buy records by a group called Lava because they were such good musicians, and he wasn't averse to TOTO, who had their two hits at that time, while I despised technique with all my heart, it went against everything I had learned from reading my brother's music magazines, where musical competence was the foe, and the ideal was creativity, energy, and power. But no matter how much we talked about this or how many hours we spent in music shops or poring over mail order catalogues, we couldn't get our band to swing, we were useless at our instruments, and remained so, and we did not have the wit to compensate, by writing our own music for example, oh no, we played the most hackneyed, uninventive cover versions of them all: "Smoke on the Water" by Deep Purple, "Paranoid" by Black Sabbath, "Black Magic Woman" by Santana, as well as "So Lonely" by The Police, which had to be in our repertoire because Yngve had taught me the chords for it.

We were utterly hopeless, completely out of our depth, there was not a snowball's chance in hell of anything coming of this, we wouldn't even be good enough to perform at a school party, but although this was the reality we never experienced it as such. On the contrary, this was what gave our lives meaning. It wasn't my music we played, but Jan Vidar's, and it went against everything I believed in, yet this is what I trusted. The intro to "Smoke on the Water," the very incarnation of stupidity, the very antithesis of cool, was what I sat practicing at Ve School in 1983: first the guitar riff, then the cymbal, *chicka-chicka, chicka-chicka, chicka-chicka, chicka-chicka*, then the bass drum, *boom, boom, boom*, then the snare, *tick, tick, tick*, and then the stupid bass line kicked in, where we often looked at each other with a smile while nodding our heads and shaking our legs as the chorus, played completely out of sync, took off. We didn't have a vocalist. When Jan Vidar started at technical college he heard about a drummer from Hånes, admittedly he was only in the eighth class, but he would have to do, everything had to do, and he also had access to a practice room out there, with drums and PA, the whole thing, so there we were: me, first-year gymnas student dreaming about a life in indie music, but unmusical, on rhythm guitar; Jan Vidar, trainee pâtissier who practiced enough to be a Yngwie Malmsteen, an Eddie van Halen, or a Ritchie Blackmore, but who couldn't free himself from his finger exercises, on lead guitar; Jan Henrik whom we would have preferred to avoid outside the group, on bass, and Øyvind, a happy, thickset kid from Hånes without any ambitions at all, on drums. "Smoke on the Water," "Paranoid," "Black Magic Woman," "So Lonely" and, eventually, early Bowie's "Ziggy Stardust" and "Hang onto Yourself," for which Yngve had also taught me the chords. No singer, only the accompaniment. Every weekend. Guitar cases on the bus, long conversations on the beach about music and instruments, on the benches outside the shop, in Jan Vidar's room, in the airport café, in Kristiansand. Later on, we recorded our practice sessions, which we carefully analyzed in our futile, doomed attempt to raise the band to the level we were at in our heads.

Once I had taken a cassette recording of our sessions to school. I stood in the break with the headset on listening to our music while wondering whom I could play it to. Bassen had the same musical taste as I did, so that was no use, because this was quite different, and he would not understand it. Hanne maybe? She was a singer after all, and I liked her a lot. But that would be too big a risk to take. She knew I played in a band and that was good, it gave me a kind of elevated status, but my status might crumble if she heard us playing. Pål? Yes, he could listen to it. He played in a band himself, Vampire it was called, played fast, Metallica-inspired. Pål who was usually shy, sensitive, and delicate to the point of being almost effeminate, but who wore black leather, played bass, and howled onstage like the devil incarnate, he would understand what we were doing. So in the next break I went over to him, told him we had recorded a few songs the previous weekend, would he have a listen and say what he thought? Of course. He put on the headset and pressed play while I anxiously scrutinized his face. He smiled and stared at me quizzically. After a few minutes he started laughing and removed the headset.

"This is crap, Karl Ove," he said. "This is a joke. Why are you bothering me with this? Why should I listen to this stuff? Are you kidding me?"

"Crap? What do you mean crap?"

"You can't play. And you don't sing. There's nothing in it!"

He threw out his arms.

"I'm sure we can improve," I said.

"Give up," he said.

Do you think your band is so great then? I thought of saying, but I didn't.

"Okay, okay," I said instead. "Thanks, anyway."

He laughed again and sent me a look of astonishment. No one could fathom Pål because of his whole speed-metal thing, and the clueless side of him which made the class laugh, and which did not square with his shyness at all, which in turn did not square at all with the almost complete openness he could display making him unafraid of anything. Once, for example, he showed us a poem he had had published in a girls' magazine, *Det Nye*, which had also interviewed him. Outspoken, brazen, sensitive, shy, aggressive, rough. That was Pål. In a way it was good that it was Pål who heard our band because Pål's response didn't mean anything, whatever made him laugh didn't matter. So I calmly put the Walkman back in my pocket and went into class. He was probably right that we weren't very good. But since when was it important to be good? Hadn't he heard of punk? New Wave? None of those bands could play. But they had guts. Power. Soul. Presence.

Not long after this, in early autumn 1984, we got our first gig. Øyvind had set it up for us. Håne Shopping Center was celebrating its fifth anniversary; the occasion was to be marked with balloons, cakes, and music. The Bøksle Brothers, who had been famous all over the region for two decades with their interpretations of Sørland folk songs, were going to play. Then the center owner also wanted something local, preferably with some youth interest, and, since we practiced only a few hundred meters from the mall, we fitted the bill perfectly. We were to play for twenty minutes and would be paid five hundred kroner for the job. We hugged Øyvind when he told us. At long last it was our turn.

The two weeks before the gig, which was scheduled for eleven o'clock on a Saturday morning, passed quickly. We rehearsed several times, the whole band and Jan Vidar and I on our own, we discussed the order of our set list to and fro and back and forth, we bought new strings well in advance so that we could break them in, we decided what clothes we would wear, and when the day arrived we met early in the practice room to go through the set several times before the performance, for even though we were aware there was a risk we would peak too soon, we figured it was more important to feel at home with the songs.

How good I felt as I strolled across the parking lot of the shopping center, guitar case in hand. The equipment was already set up on one side of the passage leading to the square in the middle. Øyvind was adjusting the drum set, Jan Vidar was tuning his guitar with the new tuner he had bought for the occasion. Some kids were standing around watching. Soon they would be watching me too. I'd had my hair cut very short, I had a green military jacket on, black jeans, studded belt, blue-and-white baseball cleats. And of course the guitar case in my hand.

On the other side of the passage the Bøksle Brothers were already singing. A small crowd of people, maybe ten in all, was watching. There was a steady stream of passersby on their way to or from the shops. The wind was blowing, and something about it reminded me of The Beatles' concert on the roof of the Apple building in 1970.

"Everything alright?" I asked Jan Vidar, put down the guitar case, took out the guitar, found the strap and hung it over my shoulder.

"Yeah," he said. "Shall we plug in? What time is it, Øyvind?"

"Ten minutes past."

"Ten to go. Let's wait a bit. Five minutes, okay?"

He went over to the amplifier and took a swig of Coke. Around his forehead he had tied a rolled-up scarf. Otherwise he was wearing a white shirt with the tails hanging over a pair of black trousers.

The Bøksle Brothers were still singing.

I glanced at the set list stuck up behind the amplifier.

Smoke on the Water
Paranoid
Black Magic Woman
So Lonely

"Can I borrow the tuner?" I asked Jan Vidar. He passed it to me, and I plugged in the lead. The guitar was tuned, but I fiddled with the knobs anyway. Several cars drove into the parking area and slowly circled, looking for an empty spot. As soon as the doors were open the children on the rear seats crawled out, ran around a bit on the tarmac and grabbed their parents' hands on their way towards us. Everyone stared as they went by, no one stopped.

Jan Henrik plugged his bass into the amplifier and twanged a string hard.

It resounded across the tarmac.

BOOM.

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

Both the Bøksle Brothers glared over at us while they were singing. Jan Henrik stepped over to the amp and fiddled with the volume button. Played a couple more notes.

BOOM. BOOM.

Øyvind tried a few thumps on the drums. Jan Vidar played a chord on the guitar. It was incredibly loud. Everyone in sight stared in our direction.

“Hey! Pack that in!” shouted one of the Bøksle Brothers.

Jan Vidar stared them out, then turned and took another swig of Coke. There was sound in the bass amp, there was sound in Jan Vidar’s guitar amplifier. But what about mine? I lowered the volume on the guitar, struck a chord, raised it slowly until the amplifier seemed to leap at the sound and then raised it some more, all the time staring at the two guitar-strumming men on the other side of the passage, with legs akimbo and a smile on their faces, singing their droll ballads about seagulls, fishing boats, and sunsets. The moment they looked across at me, with glares it is difficult to describe as anything other than ferocious, I lowered the volume again. We had sound, everything was okay.

“What’s the time now?” I asked Jan Vidar. His fingers were gliding up and down the neck of the guitar.

“Twenty past,” he said.

“Retards,” I said. “They should have finished by now.”

The Bøksle Brothers represented everything I was against, the respectable, cozy, bourgeois world, and I looked forward to turning up the amplifier and blowing them off the block. So far my rebelliousness had consisted of expressing divergent opinions in class, resting my head on the desk and falling asleep and, once when I had thrown a used paper bag on the pavement and an elderly man had told me to pick it up, I told him to pick it up himself if it was so damn important to him. When I walked off, my heart was pounding so hard in my chest I could scarcely breathe. Otherwise, it was through listening to the music that I liked, uncompromising, anti-commercial, underground, bands that made me a rebel, someone who did not accept conventions, but fought for change. And the louder I played it, the closer I came to that ideal. I had bought an extra-long guitar lead so that I could stand in front of the hall mirror and play, with the amplifier upstairs in my room at full blast, and then things really started to happen, the sound became distorted, piercing, and almost regardless of what I did, it sounded good, the whole house was filled with the sound of my guitar, and a strange congruence evolved between my feelings and these sounds, as though *they* were me, as though *that* was the real me. I had written some lyrics about this, it had actually been meant as a song, but since no tune came to mind, I called it a poem when I later wrote it in my diary.

I distort my soul's feedback
I play my heart bare
I look at you and think:
We're at one in my loneliness
We're at one in my loneliness
You and me
You and me, my love

I wanted to be out, out in the great, wide world. And the only way I knew how, the only way I had, was through music. That was why I was standing outside this shopping center in Hånes on this day in early autumn, 1984, with my white-lacquered confirmation present, an imitation Stratocaster, hanging from my shoulder and my forefinger on the volume control, ready to flick it the moment the Bøksle Brothers' last chord faded.

The wind suddenly picked up across the square, leaves whirled past, rustling as they went, an ice cream ad spun round and round, flapping and clattering. I thought I felt a raindrop on my cheek, and peered up at the milky white sky.

"Is it starting to rain?" I asked.

Jan Vidar held out his palm. Shrugged his shoulders.

"Can't feel anything," he said. "But we'll play whatever. Even if it pisses down."

"Yes," I said. "You nervous?"

He resolutely shook his head.

Then the brothers were finished. The few people who were standing around clapped and the brothers gave a slight bow.

Jan Vidar turned to Øyvind.

"Ready?" he asked.

Øyvind nodded.

“Ready, Jan Henrik?”

“Karl Ove?”

I nodded.

“Two, three, four,” said Jan Vidar, mostly to himself, and he played the first bars of the riff on his own.

The next second the sound of his guitar tore across the tarmac. People jumped with alarm. Everyone turned toward us. I counted in my head. Placed my fingers on the fret. My hand was shaking.

ONE TWO THREE – ONE TWO THREE FOUR – ONE TWO THREE – ONE TWO.

Then I was supposed to come in.

But there was no sound!

Jan Vidar stared up at me, his eyes frozen. I waited for the next round, cranked the volume up, came in. With two guitars it was deafening.

ONE TWO THREE – ONE TWO THREE FOUR – ONE TWO THREE – ONE TWO.

Then the hi-hat came in.

Chicka-chicka, chicka-chicka, chicka-chicka, chicka-chicka.

The bass drum. The snare.

And then the bass.

BOM-BOM-BOM bombombombombombombombombombom-BOM

BOM-BOM-BOM-bombombombombombombombombombom-BOM

It was only then I looked at Jan Vidar again. His face was contorted into a kind of grimace as he strained to say something without using his voice.

Too fast! Too fast!

And Øyvind slowed down. I tried to follow suit, but it was confusing because both the bass and Jan Vidar’s guitar kept going at the same tempo, and when I changed my mind and followed them they suddenly slowed down, and I was the only one left playing at breakneck speed. Amidst this chaos I noticed the wind blowing through Jan Vidar’s hair, and that some of the kids were standing in front of us with their hands over their ears. The next moment we had reached the first chorus and were more or less in synch. Then a man in tan slacks, a blue-and-white striped shirt and a yellow summer blazer came marching across the tarmac. It was the shopping center manager. He was heading straight for us. Twenty meters away he waved both arms as if trying to stop a ship. He kept waving. We continued to play, but as he stopped right in front of us, still gesticulating, there was no longer any doubt that he was addressing us, and we stopped.

"What the hell do you think you are doing!" he said.

"We were asked to play here," Jan Vidar answered.

"Are you out of your tiny minds! This is a shopping center. It's Saturday. People want to shop and have a good time. They don't want to listen to that goddawful racket."

"Shall we turn it down a bit?" Jan Vidar asked. "We can easily do that."

"Not just a bit," he said.

A crowd had gathered around us now. Maybe fifteen, sixteen people, including the kids. Not bad.

Jan Vidar craned around and lowered the volume on the amplifier. Played a chord and sent the shop owner an inquiring look.

"Is that okay?" he asked.

"Lower!" said the manager.

Jan Vidar lowered the volume a bit more, struck a chord.

"Is that alright then?" he asked. "We're not a dance band, you know," he added.

"Right," said the manager. "Try that, or even lower."

Jan Vidar made another adjustment. He seemed to be fiddling with the knob, but I saw he was only feigning.

"There we are," he said.

Jan Henrik and I also adjusted our volume.

"Let's start again," Jan Vidar said.

And we started again. I counted in my head.

ONE TWO THREE – ONE TWO THREE FOUR – ONE TWO THREE – ONE TWO.

The manager was walking back towards the main entrance to the shopping center. I watched him as we played. When we got to the part where we were interrupted he stopped and turned. Looked at us. Turned back, took a few steps toward the shops, turned again. Suddenly he came toward us, once again gesticulating furiously. Jan Vidar didn't see him, he had his eyes closed. Jan Henrik, however, did and raised an eyebrow.

"No, no, no," the manager yelled, stopping in front of us.

"It's no good," he said. "Sorry, you'll have to pack it in."

"What?" objected Jan Vidar. "Why? Twenty-five minutes you said."

"It's no good," he said, lowering his head and waving his hand in front of it.

"Sorry, guys."

"Why?" Jan Vidar repeated.

"I can't listen to that," he said. "You don't even sing! Come on. You'll get your money. Here you are."

He took an envelope from his inside pocket and held it out to Jan Vidar.

"Here you are," he said. "Thanks for pitching up. But that wasn't what I had in mind. No hard feelings, okay?"

Jan Vidar grabbed the envelope. He turned away from the manager, pulled the plug from the amplifier, switched it off, lifted the guitar over his head, went to his guitar case, opened it and replaced the guitar. People around us were smiling.

"Come on," Jan Vidar said. "We're going home."

After that the status of the band was shrouded in doubt; we practiced a few times but our hearts weren't in it, then Øyvind said he couldn't make the next session, and the time after that there was no drum set, and the time after that I had soccer practice . . . Meanwhile Jan Vidar and I saw less of each other since we went to different schools, and some weeks later he mumbled about having met someone in another class he jammed with, so when I played now it was mostly to pass the time.

I sang "Ground Control to Major Tom," strummed the two minor chords I liked so much and thought about the two bags of beer lying in the forest.

When Yngve had been home for Christmas he had brought a book of

Bowie songs. I had copied them into an exercise book which I now pulled out, complete with chords, lyrics and notes. Then I put “Hunky Dory” on the record player, track four, “Life on Mars?,” and began to play along, softly so that I could hear the words and the other instruments. It sent a shiver down my spine. It was a fantastic song and as I followed the chord sequence on the guitar it was as if the song was opening itself up to me, as if I were inside it, and not outside, which was how it felt when I only listened. If I were to open a song and enter it unaided I would need several days because I couldn’t hear which chords were being played, I had to grope my way painstakingly forward, and even if I found some chords which sounded similar I was never sure they were really the same ones. I put down my pen, listened with intense concentration, picked up the pen, strummed a chord. Hmmm. . . . Put down the pen, listened once again, played the same chord, was it *that* one? Or perhaps *this* one? Not to mention all the other guitar techniques that went on in the course of a song. It was hopeless. While Yngve, for example, only had to listen to a song once and then he could play it to perfection after a couple of stabs. I had known other people like him, they seemed to have the gift, music was not distinct from thinking, or it had nothing to do with thinking, it lived its own life inside them. When they played, they played, they didn’t mechanically repeat some pattern they had taught themselves, and the freedom in that, which was what music was actually about, was beyond me. The same was true of drawing. Drawing conferred no status, but I liked it all the same and spent quite some time doing it when I was alone in my room. If I had a specific model, such as a cartoon character, I could make a tolerable attempt, but if I didn’t copy and just sketched freehand the result was never any good. Here too I had seen people who had the gift, perhaps Tone in my class for one, who with minimal effort could draw whatever she wanted, the tree in the grounds outside the window, the car parked beyond it, the teacher standing in front of the board. When we had to choose optional subjects I wanted to take Form and Color, but since I knew how things stood, that the other students knew how to draw, had the gift, I decided against it. Instead I chose cinematography. The thought of this could sometimes weigh me down because I wanted so much to be someone. I wanted so much to be special.

I got up, placed the guitar on its stand, switched off the amplifier and went downstairs where Mom was ironing. The circles of light around the lamps above the door, and on the barn walls outside, were almost completely covered with snow.

"What weather!" I said.

"You can say that again," she said.

As I walked into the kitchen I remembered a snowplow had recently driven past. Perhaps it would be a good idea to clear the ridge of snow.

I turned to Mom.

"I think I'll go and shovel some snow before they come," I said.

"Fine," she said. "Can you light the torches while you're at it? They're in the garage, in a bag hanging on the the wall."

"Sure. Do you have a lighter?"

"In my handbag."

I put on my outdoor things and went out, opened the garage door, grabbed the shovel, knotted the scarf around my face, and went down to the intersection. Even with my back to the snow sweeping across the fields it stung my eyes and cheeks as I dug at the pile of new snow and the old clumps. After a few minutes I heard a bang, faraway and muffled, as if inside a room, and raised my head in time to see a flash of light from a tiny explosion in the depths of the windswept darkness. It must have been Tom and Per and their father testing the rockets they had bought. That may have excited them, but it drained me, for the only thing the tiny flash had done was intensify the feeling of uneventfulness that followed. There was not a car, not a soul around, just the murky forest, the driving snow, the motionless ribbon of light along the road. The darkness in the valley below. The scraping of the shovel's metal blade against the rock-hard lumps of compressed snow, my own breathing, somehow amplified by the scarf tightly trussed around my hat and ears.

When I had finished I went back up to the garage, replaced the shovel, found the four torches in the bag, lit them one by one in the dark, not without pleasure, for the flames were so gentle, and the blue in them rose and sank according to which way the current of air carried them. I considered for a moment what positions would be best and concluded that two should be placed on the front doorstep and two on top of the wall in front of the barn.

I had hardly put the torches out, the two on the wall with a small protective shield of snow behind them, and closed the garage door, when I heard a car coming around the bend below the house. I opened the garage door again and hurried into the house, I had to be *completely* ready before they came, with no visible signs of my recent activities. This little obsession grew so strong in me that I ran into the bathroom at full tilt, grabbed a towel, and dried my boots on it, so that the fresh snow would not be seen on them in the hall, after which I took off my outdoor clothes, that is, coat, hat, scarf, and mittens, in my room. Going downstairs, I saw the car idling outside, with the red taillights lit. My grandfather was waiting with his hand on the car door as my grandmother climbed out.

When I was at home on my own, every room had its own character, and though not directly hostile to me they were not exactly welcoming, either. It was more as if they did not want to subordinate themselves to me, but wanted to exist in their own right, with their own individual walls, floors, ceilings, skirting boards, yawning windows. I was aware of a deadness about the rooms, that was what made me uncomfortable, by which I mean not dead in the sense of life having ceased, but rather life being absent, the way that life is absent from a rock, a glass of water, a book. The presence of our cat, Mefisto, was not strong enough to dispel this, I just saw the cat in the yawning room; however, were a person to come in, even if it were only a small baby, the yawning room was gone. My father filled the rooms with disquiet, my mother filled them with gentleness, patience, melancholy, and on occasion, if she came home from work and was tired, also with a faint yet noticeable undercurrent of irritability. Per, who never ventured farther than the front hall, filled it with happiness, expectation, and submission. Jan Vidar, who was so far the only person outside my family to have been in my room, filled it with obstinacy, ambition, and friendliness. It was interesting when several people were present because there wasn't any space for the sway of more than one, at most two wills in a room, and it was not always the strongest that was the most obvious. Per's submissiveness, for example, the politeness he displayed to adults, was at times stronger than my father's lupine nature, such as when he came in, barely nodding to Per as he walked past. But it was rare there was anyone at home apart from us. The exception was visits by my father's parents and his brother Gunnar and family. They came every so often, perhaps seven or eight times a year, and I always looked forward to their arrival with pleasure. Partly because the person my grandmother had been for me while I was growing up had not changed to take account of the person I was now, and the radiance that emanated from her – which was not so much a result of the presents she always brought but stemmed from her genuine love of children – still shone in my image of her. But my pleasure was partly due to my father always perking up for such events. He became more friendly towards me, took me into his confidence, so to speak, and regarded me as someone to be considered, but this was not the most important thing, for this friendliness he showed to his son was merely one aspect of a greater magnanimity that infused him on such occasions: he became charming, witty, knowledgeable, and entertaining, which in a way justified the fact that I had such mixed emotions about him and was so preoccupied with them.

When they came into the porch, Mom opened the door to meet them.

"Hello, and lovely to see you!" she said.

"Hello, Sissel," said Grandad.

"What foul weather!" Grandma said. "Have you ever seen anything like it? But the torches were great, I must say."

"Let me take your coats," Mom said.

Grandma was wearing a dark, round fur hat, which she took off and slapped against her hand a few times to shake off the snow, and a dark fur coat, which she passed to Mom with the hat.

"Good thing you came to pick us up," she said, turning to Dad. "We certainly couldn't have driven in this weather."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Grandad said. "But it is quite a distance, and a windy road as well."

Grandma came into the hall, straightened her dress with her hands, and adjusted her hair.

"So there you are!" she said to me with a quick smile.

"Hello," I said.

Behind her came Granddad, carrying his gray coat. Mom took a stride past Grandma and grabbed it, hung it on the hall stand beside the mirror under the stairs. Outside, Dad came into view; he was kicking the snow off his shoes against the side of the doorstep.

"Hello there, you," Grandad said. "Your father says you're going to a New Year's Eve party."

"That's right," I said.

"How you children have grown," Grandma said. "Just imagine, a New Year's Eve party."

"Yes, seems like we're not good enough anymore," Dad said from the hall. He ran his hand through his hair, shook his head a couple of times.

"Shall we go into the living room?" Mom said.

I followed them in, sat in the wicker chair by the garden door as they took a seat on the sofa. Dad's heavy footsteps could be heard as he went upstairs, and then above the ceiling at the back of the living room, where his bedroom was.

"I'll go and put some coffee on," Mom said, getting up. The ensuing silence in the room after she had gone became my responsibility.

"Erling's in Trondheim, isn't he?" I said.

"I suppose he is, yes," Grandma said. "They should be at home relaxing this evening."

She was wearing a blue silk dress with a black pattern on her chest. White pearls in her ears, gold chain around her neck. Her hair was dark, it must have been dyed, but I wasn't sure, because if it was, why wasn't the gray lock over her forehead dyed? She wasn't fat, or even plump, yet somehow she still had a full figure. Her movements, always so lively, were in marked contrast to this. But what you noticed when you saw my grandmother, what struck you first about her, was her eyes. They were light blue and crystal clear, and whether it was because of their unusual color or because it contrasted with her otherwise dark appearance, they seemed almost artificial, as if they were made of stone. My father's eyes were exactly the same, and gave the same impression. Apart from her love for children, her other most prominent quality was her green thumb. When we visited her during the summer she was generally in the garden and when I thought about her it was often in a garden setting. Wearing gloves, her hair ruffled by the wind, walking across the lawn with an armful of dry twigs to be burnt, or kneeling in front of a little hole she had just dug, carefully loosening the bag around the roots to plant a tiny tree, or glancing over her shoulder to check that the sprinkler has started to rotate as she turns on the tap under the veranda and then standing with her hands on her hips enjoying the sight of the water being hurled into the air, sparkling in the sunlight. Or crouching on the slope behind the house to weed the beds that had been made in all the dips and hollows of the rocky mountainside, similar to the way that water forms pools on the sea-smoothed rocks in the archipelago, cut off from their original environment. I remember feeling sorry for these plants, positioned on their separate crags, lonely and exposed, how they must have yearned for the life they saw unfolding beneath them. Down where the plants merged into one another, continuously forming new combinations according to the time of day and year, like the old pear and plum trees she had once brought from her grandparents' country cottage, where the shadows flickered over the grass as the wind swept through the foliage on one of those lazy summer days while the sun was setting beyond the horizon at the mouth of the fjord and you could hear the distant sounds from the town rising and falling like the swell of waves in the air, mingling with the hum of wasps and bees at work among the rosebushes against the wall, where the pale petals shone white and calm in all the green. The garden already had the character of something old, a dignity and a fullness that only time can create and no doubt was the reason she had positioned a greenhouse at the bottom, half hidden behind a rock, where she could extend her handiwork and also cultivate rarer trees and plants without the rest of the garden being marred by the industrial and provisional nature of the construction. In the autumn and winter we caught glimpses of her down there, a faint silhouette of color behind the shiny walls, and, it was not without a touch of pride that she remarked, in a casual sort of way, that the tomatoes and cucumbers on the table didn't come from the shop but from her greenhouse in the garden.

Grandad was not interested in the garden at all, and when Grandma and Dad or Grandma and Gunnar, or Grandma and Grandad's brother Alf discussed various plants, flowers, or trees, our family had quite a passion for anything that grew, he preferred to take out a newspaper and flick through it, unless, of course, it was a pools coupon and the week's league tables he was consulting. I always thought it was so strange that a man whose job was about figures also spent his free time with figures and not, for example, doing gardening or carpentry or other hobbies that exercised the whole body. But no, it was figures at work, tables and figures in his leisure time. The only other thing I knew he liked was politics. If the conversation moved that way he always livened up, he had strong opinions, but his eagerness to debate was stronger, so if anyone contradicted him he appreciated that. At any rate, his eyes expressed nothing but kindness the few times Mom had presented her left-wing views, even though his voice grew louder and sharper. Grandma, for her part, always asked him to talk about something else, or calm down, on such occasions. She often made a sarcastic comment and could also be quite caustic, but he took it, and if we were present she would send us a wink so that we understood that it wasn't meant that seriously. She laughed easily and loved to recount all the amusing incidents she had experienced or had heard. All the funny remarks Yngve had made when he was little she remembered, those two were especially close, he had lived there for six months when he was a young boy, and had been there a lot later too. She also told us about the strange things Erling had experienced at his school in Trondheim, but her richest store was the stories from the 1930s when she had worked as a chauffeur for an elderly, presumably senile, capitalist's wife.

Now they were in their seventies, my grandma a few years older than my grandad, but both were hale and hearty, and they still traveled abroad in the winter, as they always had.

No one had spoken for some seconds. I strained to come up with something to say. Looked out of the window to make the silence less obtrusive.

"How's it going at the Cathedral School?" Grandad eventually asked. "Has Stray had anything sensible to say?"

Stray was our French teacher. He was a small, squat, bald, energetic man of around seventy who owned a house close to my grandfather's office. As far as I had gleaned they had been at loggerheads over something, perhaps a boundary issue; I didn't quite know whether it had gone to court, or even whether the matter had been settled, but at any rate they no longer greeted each other, and hadn't for many a year.

"Well," I said. "He just calls me 'the brat in the corner.'"

"Yes, I'm sure he does," Grandad says. "And old Nygaard?"

I shrugged.

"Fine, I suppose. Keeps doing the same old stuff. He's old-school, that one. How do you know him, by the way?"

"Through Alf," Grandad said.

"Oh of course," I said.

Grandad got up and walked over to the window, stood with his hands behind his back peering out. Apart from the sparse light that came through the windows, it was completely dark on this side of the house.

"Can you see anything, Father?" Grandma asked, with a wink at me.

"This place is very nicely situated," Grandad said.

At that moment Mom came into the living room carrying four cups. He turned to her.

"I was just telling Karl Ove that this house is very nicely situated!"

Mom stopped, as if unable to say anything while walking.

"Yes, we're very happy with the location," she said. Stood there with the cups in her hands, looking at Grandad with a tiny smile playing on her lips. There was something . . . yes, approaching a flush on her face. Not that she was blushing or she was embarrassed, it wasn't that. It was more that she wasn't hiding behind anything. She never did. Whenever she spoke it was always straight from the heart, never for the sake of speaking.

"The house is so old," she said. "These walls have years in them. That's both good and bad. But it's a nice place to live."

Grandad nodded and continued to stare out into the darkness. Mom went to the table to set the cups down.

"What has become of my host then?" Grandma asked.

"I'm here," Dad said.

Everyone turned. He was standing by the laid table in the dining room, stooping beneath the ceiling beams, with a bottle of wine, which he had obviously been studying, in his hands.

How had he got in there?

I hadn't heard a sound. And if there was one thing I was aware of in this house it was his movements.

"Will you get some more wood in before you go, Karl Ove?" he said.

"Okay," I answered, got up, and went into the hall, booted up, and opened the front door. The wind blasted my face. But at least it had stopped snowing. I crossed the yard and went into the woodshed under the barn. The light from the naked bulb hanging from the ceiling glared against the rough brick walls. The floor was almost completely covered with bark and wood chips. An ax was lodged in the chopping block. In one corner lay the orange-and-black chain saw my father had bought when we moved here. There had been a tree on the property he wanted to fell. When he was ready to set to work he couldn't get the saw to start. He eyed it for a long time, cursed it, and went to call the shop where he had bought it to complain. "What was wrong?" I asked on his return. "Nothing," he replied, "it was just something they had forgotten to tell me." It must have been a safety device of some kind, I inferred, to prevent children from using them. But now he had it started, and after felling the tree he spent the entire afternoon cutting it up. He liked the work, I could see that. Once it was done though, he had no further use for the saw, and since then it had been lying on the floor in here.

I loaded myself up with as many logs as I could carry, kicked open the door, and staggered back across the yard – the thought of how impressed they would be uppermost in my mind – levered off my boots and walked leaning backward slightly, almost collapsing under the weight, into the living room.

"Look at him!" said Grandma as I came in. "That's quite a load you've got there!"

I halted in front of the wood basket.

"Hang on a sec, I'll give you a hand," Dad said and came toward me, took the top logs, and put them in the basket. His lips were drawn, his eyes cold. I knelt down and let the rest tumble in.

"Now we've got enough wood until summer," he said.

I straightened up, picked some splinters of wood off my shirt, and sat in the chair while Dad crouched down, opened the stove door and pushed in a couple of logs. He was wearing a dark suit and a dark-red tie, black shoes, and a white shirt, which contrasted with his ice-blue eyes, black beard, and lightly tanned complexion. He spent the whole of the summer in the sun whenever he could, by August his skin was usually very dark, but this winter he must have gone to a tanning salon, it struck me now, unless he had eventually had so much sun that the tan had become permanent.

Around his eyes the skin had begun to crack, the way dry leather does, and form fine, closely set wrinkles.

He looked at his watch.

"Gunnar will have to get a move on if we're going to eat before midnight," he said.

"It's the weather," Grandma said. "He'll be driving carefully tonight."

Dad turned to me.

"Isn't it time you were on your way?"

"Yes," I said. "But I was going to say hello to Gunnar and Tove first."

Dad gave a snort.

"Off you go and enjoy yourself. You don't have to sit here with us, you know."

I got up.

"Your shirt's hanging over the cupboard in the other room," Mom said.

I took it up to my room with me and changed. Black cotton trousers, wide at the thigh, narrow at the calf, and with side pockets, white shirt, black suit jacket. I rolled up the studded belt I had planned to wear and put it in the bag, for though they might not actually forbid me to wear it, they would notice, and I didn't want to go through all that now. I added a pair of black Doc Martens, an extra shirt, two packs of Pall Mall mild, some chewing gum, and pastilles. When I was finished I stood in front of the mirror. It was five past seven. I should have been on my way, but had to wait for Gunnar for as long as possible because if he hadn't come there was a risk I would meet him on the road. With two bags of beer in my hands that was not a great idea.

Apart from the wind, and the trees at the forest edge, which you could just make out on the periphery of the light from the house, nothing stirred.

If they weren't here within five minutes, I would have to go anyway.

I put on my outdoor clothes, stood at the window for a moment straining to hear the drone of a car engine while staring down at the place where the headlights would come into view first, then turned, switched off the light, and went downstairs.

Dad was in the kitchen pouring water into a large pan. He looked up as I went in.

"Are you going?" he asked.

I nodded.

"Have a nice evening," he said.

At the bottom of the hill, where the morning's tracks had been covered over by the wind and snow, I stood stock-still and listened for a few seconds. When I was sure there were no cars coming I went up the slope and into the trees. The bags were where I had left them, covered with a thin layer of snow that slid down the smooth plastic when I picked them up. With one in each hand I walked back down, stopped behind a tree to listen, and when there was still nothing to be heard, I struggled over the bank of snow at the roadside and loped down to the bend. Not many people lived out here, and through-traffic used the road on the other side of the river, so if a car did come there was a good chance it would be Gunnar's. I walked up the hill, around the bend where William's family lived. Their house was set back a bit, right up against the forest that rose steeply behind it. The blue shimmer from the television flickered through the living room. The house was a seventies' build, the plot unworked, full of stones, uncovered rock, with a broken swing, a pile of wood under a tarpaulin, a wrecked car, and some tires. I didn't understand why they lived like that. Didn't they want to live like normal people? Or couldn't they? Didn't it matter to them? Or did they in fact think that they were living like normal people? The father was kind and gentle, the mother always angry, the three children always dressed in clothes that were either too big or too small.

One morning on my way to school I had seen the father and daughter clambering up a pile of rocks on the other side of the road, both bleeding from the forehead, the girl with a white scarf drenched with blood tied around her head. There had been something animal-like about them, I remember thinking, because they didn't say anything, didn't shout, just calmly climbed up the rocks. At the bottom, with its hood against a tree, was their truck. Beneath the trees flowed the dark, lustrous river. I had asked them if I could help, the father had told me they didn't need any help; they were fine, he had called from the slope, and even though the sight was so unexpected that it was almost impossible to drag yourself away, it also felt wrong to stand there watching, so I continued on my way to the bus stop. On turning, the one time I had allowed myself to do so, I saw them hobbling along the road, he was dressed in overalls as always, with his arm around his daughter's fragile eleven-year-old body.

We used to tease her and William, it was easy to make them lose their tempers and easy to put them in their place, words and ideas were not their strong suits, but I didn't realize this had any impact on them until one ordinary boring summer's day Per and I had rung William's doorbell to get him to come out and play soccer and their mother had come onto the veranda and given us an earful, especially me, because I thought I was superior to everyone else, and her son and daughter in particular. I answered her back, it turned out she was not very adept with words either, but her anger on the other hand was not to be quelled, so all I gained was Per's laughing admiration for my wit, which was forgotten a few hours later. But the people living on the bend did not forget. The father was too kind to intervene, but the mother . . . her eyes darkened every time she saw me. To me they were people I could lord it over, nothing more. If William came to school wearing trousers at half-mast he had made a monumental blunder; if he misused a word, there was no reason he shouldn't hear about it. That was only the truth, wasn't it? And it was up to him to stop our fun or find a way to overcome it. I was not exactly invulnerable, my weaknesses were there for all to see and exploit, and the fact that they didn't, because they didn't have enough insight to be able to see them, was surely not my problem. The conditions were the same for all. At school William hung out with a crowd who smoked in the wet weather shed, the ones who rode mopeds from the age of thirteen, who began to drop out of school when they were fourteen, who had fights and drank, and they too made fun of William, but in a way he could tolerate, because there was always something he could compare himself with, there were always ways of getting his own back. With us, that is, those who lived in the houses up here, it was different, here it was sarcasm, irony, and the killer remark that held sway, things which could drive him insane as it all was beyond his reach. But he needed us more than we needed him, and he kept coming back. For me this was a question of freedom. When I moved there, no one knew me, and although I was basically the same person as before it gave me the chance to do things I had never done. There was, for example, an old-fashioned village shop by the bus stop in which goods were bought and sold over the counter, and that was owned by two sisters aged around seventy. They were nice, and particularly slow off the mark. If you asked them for something on one of the top shelves they turned their backs to you for a minute or two, and this was your chance to stuff as much chocolate and as many sweets as you could in your jacket. Not to mention the opportunities if you asked them for something from the cellar. In Tromøya I would never have dreamed of doing such a thing, but here I didn't hesitate, here I was not only a person who stole chocolate and sweets from old ladies but also a person who enticed others into doing the same. They were a year younger than me and had hardly been out of the local area; compared to them I felt like a man of the world. They had all scrumped strawberries, for example, but I introduced a touch of refinement and got them to take plates, spoons, milk, and sugar into the strawberry field.

Down in the factory building we had to fill in lists of the work we had done and were paid accordingly, and apparently it had never even occurred to them that the system could be abused and it was possible to cheat. But that was where we came in. The most important change in my behavior, however, was linguistic; I had discovered the edge that words gave you to bully others. I taunted and harassed, manipulated and ridiculed, and never, not once, did it strike them that the basis of this power I had was so insecure that one single well-directed blow could have knocked it flying. I had a speech impediment, you see! I couldn't say my "r"s. After having been shown up by me it would have been enough for them to mimic me and I would have been crushed. But they never did.

Well, actually, Per's brother, who was three years younger than me, did do it once. Per and I were talking in their stable, which his father had just built onto the garage, to house the pony he had bought for his daughter, Per and Tom's little sister, Marit, we had been out all evening and ended up here, in the snug, warm room that smelled of horse and hay, when Tom, who didn't like me, presumably because I laid claim to the brother who previously had always been at his disposal, suddenly mimicked me.

"Fowd Siewa?" he said. "What's a Fowd Siewa when it's at home?"

"Now, now, Tom," Per reproved.

"A Fowd Siewa's a car," I said. "Never heard of one?"

"I haven't heard of any cars being called Fowds," he said. "And certainly not a Siewa."

"Tom!" Per shouted.

"Oh, you mean *Ford*!" Tom said.

"Yes of course," I answered.

"Why didn't you say so then?" he said. "Forrrrrd! Sierrrra!"

"Get lost, Tom," Per said. When Tom showed no signs of moving he punched him on the shoulder.

"Ow!" Tom howled. "Stoppit!"

"Scram, you brat!" Per said, and punched him again.

Tom left and we continued to chat as if nothing had happened.

It was remarkable that this was the only time any of the kids up there had made fun of my weaknesses, especially considering I pushed them around all the time. But they hadn't. Up there I was king, king of the young kids. But my power was limited. If anyone appeared who was as old as me, or who lived farther down the valley, it ceased to exist. So I kept a beady eye on those around me, then as now.

I put the bags down on the road for a second, opened my jacket and pulled out the scarf, and wound it around my face, grabbed the bags again, and kept on walking. The wind whistled round my ears, whisked up the snow on all sides, swept it into the air and swirled it around. It was four kilometers to Jan Vidar's place so I needed to hurry. I broke into a jog. The bags hung from my arms like lead weights. Farther along the road, on the far side of the bend, two headlights came into view. The beams sliced through the forest. The trees there seemed to flare up, one by one. I stopped, put one foot on the edge of the ditch and carefully rested the bags in the ditch below me. Then I walked on. I turned my head as the car passed. An old man I didn't recognize was in the driver's seat. I walked back the twenty meters and retrieved the bags from the ditch, carried on walking, rounded the bend, passed the house where the old man lived alone, emerged from the forest to see the factory lights, hazy in the snow-flurried darkness, walked past the small, dilapidated farm, in darkness tonight, and had almost reached the last house before the intersection with the main road when another car came along. I did the same as before, quickly hid the bottles in the ditch and carried on walking, empty-handed. It wasn't Gunnar this time either. After the car had passed I ran back, picked up the bags and set off even faster; it was already half past seven. I hurried along and was not far from the main road when three more cars appeared. I put down the bags again. Let it be Gunnar, I thought, because as soon as he had gone by I wouldn't need to keep stopping to hide the beer. Two of the cars drove across the bridge, the third turned off and passed me, but that wasn't Gunnar either. I collected the bags and made for the main road, followed it past the bus stop, the old-fashioned shop, the garage, the old houses, all of them bathed in light, all of them windblown, all deserted. Approaching the top of the long, gentle gradient I saw the headlights of another car coming over the brow. There was no ditch here, so I had to put the bottles in the banked up snow, and as they were visible, hurriedly put a few meters between them and me.

I peered into the car as it passed. This time it was Gunnar. He turned his head at that moment and, on recognizing me, braked. With a trail of swirling snow, reddish in the brake lights, the car gradually slowed down and when, twenty meters farther on, it finally came to a halt, he began to reverse. The engine was whining.

He opened the door when he was alongside me.

"Is that you out in this weather!" he cried.

"Brrr, yes," I answered.

"Where are you off to?"

"To a party."

"Jump in, and I'll drive you there," he said.

"No, don't bother," I said. "I'm almost there. I'm fine."

"No, no, no," Gunnar said. "Jump in."

I shook my head.

"You're late as well," I said. "It's almost eight."

"No problem at all," Gunnar said. "Hop in. After all, it's New Year's Eve and all that. We can't have you walking in the freezing cold, you know. We'll take you there. End of discussion."

I couldn't protest anymore without arousing suspicion.

"Okay then," I said. "That's very kind of you."

He snorted.

"Jump into the back," he said. "And tell me where to go."

I got in. It was nice and warm. Harald, their soon three-year-old son, was sitting in the child seat and silently watching me.

"Hi, Harald," I said to him with a smile.

Tove, who was sitting at the front, turned to me.

"Hi, Karl Ove," she said. "Good to see you."

"Hi," I said. "And Merry Christmas."

"Let's go then," Gunnar said. "I assume we have to turn around?"

I nodded.

We drove to the bus stop, turned, and drove back up. As we passed the place where I left the bags I resisted leaning forward to see if they were there. They were.

"Where are you going?" Gunnar asked.

"First to a pal's in Solsletta. Then we're going to Søm, to a party there."

"I can drive you all the way if you like," he said.

Tove sent him a look.

"No need," I said. "We're going to meet some others on the bus anyway."

Gunnar was ten years younger than my father and worked as an accountant in quite a large firm in town. He was the only one of the sons to follow in his father's footsteps; both the others were teachers. Dad at an upper secondary school in Vennesla, Erling at a middle school in Trondheim. Erling was the only one for whom we used the epithet "uncle," he was more laid-back and not so status conscious as the other two. We didn't see much of my father's brothers when we were growing up, but we liked them both, they were always fooling around, especially Erling, but also Gunnar, whom both Yngve and I liked best, perhaps because he was relatively close to us in age. He had long hair, played the guitar, and not least, he kept a boat with a twenty horse power Mercury engine at the cabin outside Mandal where he stayed for long stretches at a time in the summer when we were growing up. In my mind, the friends he talked about were wreathed in an almost mythical glow, partly because my father didn't have any, partly because we hardly ever saw them, they were just people he went out to meet in his boat, and I imagined their lives as an endless cruise between islets and skerries in racing boats during the daytime, with their long, blond hair fluttering in the wind and tanned, smiling faces; playing cards and strumming guitars in the evenings, when they were in the company of girls.

But now he was married and had children, and even though he still had the boat the aura of island romanticism had gone. The long hair too. Tove came from a police family somewhere in Trøndelag, and worked as a primary school teacher.

"Have you had a good Christmas?" she asked, turning to me.

"Yes, great," I said.

"Yngve was home, I heard?" Gunnar said.

I nodded. Yngve was his favorite, no doubt because he was the first-born and had been at my grandparents' for so long while Gunnar still lived there. But also presumably because Yngve had not been as fragile and weepy as I had been as a child. He had had great fun with Yngve. So when I saw them together I tried to counteract that, tried to be funny, to crack lots of jokes, to show them I was just as easygoing as they were, just as fun-loving, just as much of a Sørlander as they were.

"He went back a couple of days ago," I said. "Off to a cabin with some friends."

"Yes, he's turning into an Arendaler, you know," Gunnar said.

We passed the chapel, drove around the bend by the ravine where the sun never shone, crossed the tiny bridge. The windshield wipers beat a rhythm. The fan hummed. Beside me Harald sat blinking.

"Whose party is it?" Gunnar asked. "Someone in your class, I suppose?"

"Girl in the parallel class actually," I said.

"Yes, everything changes when you go to gymnas," he said.

"You went to the Cathedral School, didn't you? " I asked.

"I did," he said, twisting his head far enough to meet my eyes before returning his attention to the road. His face was long and narrow, like my father's, but the blue of his eyes was darker, more like Grandad's than Grandma's. The back of his head was big, like Grandad's and mine, while his lips, which were sensitive and almost revealed more information about his inner being than his eyes, were the same as Dad's and Yngve's.

We left the forest behind, and the light from the headlights which had for so long picked out trees and crags, sides of houses and escarpments, finally had some space around them.

"It's at the end of this stretch," I said. "You can pull up over by the shop there."

"Okay," said Gunnar. Slowed to a stop.

"Have a nice time," I said. "And Happy New Year!"

"Happy New Year to you too," Gunnar said.

I slammed the door and started to walk towards Jan Vidar's house while the car turned around and drove back the way we had come. When it was out of sight I began to run. Now we really were pressed for time. I jumped down the escarpment to their property, saw the light in his room was on, went over and banged on the window. His face appeared a second later, staring out into the dark through narrowed eyes. I pointed toward the door. When, at last, he saw me, he nodded, and I walked around to the other side of the house.

"Sorry," I said. "But the beers are up by Kragebo. We'll have to get a move on and fetch them."

"What are they doing there?" he asked. "Why didn't you bring them with you?"

"My uncle came along while I was walking here," I said. "I just managed to sling the bags in the ditch before he stopped. And then bugger me if he didn't insist on driving me here. I couldn't say no, he would have become suspicious, wouldn't he."

"Oh no," Jan Vidar said. "Shit. What a drag."

"I know," he said. "But come on. Let's get going."

A few minutes later we were clambering up the slope to the road. Jan Vidar had his hat down over his forehead, his scarf wrapped around his mouth, jacket collar up over his cheeks. The only part of his face that was visible was the eyes, and then only because the round John Lennon glasses he was wearing were misted up, which I noticed as he met my gaze.

"Let's go for it then," I said.

"I guess we'd better," he agreed.

At a steady pace, dragging our legs so as not to use up all our energy at once, we began to run along the road. We had the wind in our faces. The snow swept past. Tears trickled from my tightly pinched eyes. My feet began to go numb, they no longer did what I wanted them to do; they just lay inside my boots, stiff and loglike.

A car drove past, making our lack of speed painfully obvious as a moment later it rounded the curve at the end of the road and was gone.

"Shall we walk for a bit?" Jan Vidar asked.

I nodded.

"Let's just hope the bags are still there!" I said.

"What?" Jan Vidar shouted.

"The bags!" I said. "Hope no one's taken them!"

"There's no bugger around now!" Jan Vidar yelled.

We laughed. Came to the end of the flat and broke into a run again. Up the hill, where the gravel road led to the strange manorlike property by the river, over the little bridge, past the ravine, the ramshackle garage-cum-repair shop, the chapel and the small white 1950s houses on both sides of the road, until we finally arrived at the spot where I had left the two bags. We grabbed one each and began to walk back.

As we reached the chapel, we heard a car behind us.

"Shall we hitch a ride?" Jan Vidar suggested.

"Why not?" I said.

With our left hands clutching the bags and our right thumbs raised we stood with a smile on our faces until the car came. It didn't even dip its headlights. We jogged on.

"What are we going to do if we don't get a ride?" Jan Vidar asked after a while.

"We'll get one," I answered.

"Two cars go by every hour," he said.

"Have you got any better suggestions since you're asking the questions?" I said.

"None," he said. "But there are a few people at Richard's."

"No way," I said.

"And Stig and Liv are in Kjevik with some friends," he said. "That's a possibility too."

"We decided on Søm, didn't we," I said. "You can't start suggesting new places to go on New Year's Eve! This *is* New Year's Eve, you know."

"Yes, and we're standing at the roadside. How much fun is that?"

Headlights approached behind us.

"Look," I said. "Another car!"

It didn't stop.

By the time we got back to Jan Vidar's house, it was eight thirty. My feet were frozen, and for a brief instant I was at the point of suggesting we should give the beer a miss, go to his house and celebrate New Year's Eve with his parents. Lutefisk, soft drinks, ice cream, cakes, and fireworks. That was what we had always done. As our eyes met I knew the same thought had struck him. But we went on. Out of the residential area, past the road down to the church, around the bend up to the little cluster of houses where, among others, Kåre from our class lived.

"Do you think Kåre has gone out tonight?" I asked.

"Yes, he has," Jan Vidar said. "He's at Richard's."

"Yet another reason not to go there," I said.

There was nothing wrong with Kåre, but neither was there anything right. Kåre had large protruding ears, thick lips, thin, sandy hair, and angry eyes. He was invariably angry, and probably had good reason to be. The summer I began at the school he had been in the hospital with broken ribs and a broken wrist. He had been in town with his father to pick up some building materials, plasterboard, and they had put the sheets on the trailer behind the car, but failed to secure them properly so, as they were approaching Varodd Bridge, Kåre's father had asked him to get out and sit in the trailer to make sure the materials didn't move. He had been blown off along with the materials and knocked senseless. We laughed at that all autumn, and it was still one of the first things that came to mind whenever Kåre made an appearance.

Now he had got himself a moped and had started hanging around with the rest of the moped gang.

On the other side of the bend was Liv's house, Liv, for whom Jan Vidar had always had a soft spot. I could control myself. She had a nice body, but there was something boyish about her humor and manner that seemed to cancel out her breasts and hips. Besides, I had been sitting in front of her in the bus once when she waved her hands at some of the other girls, waved them about madly, and then said, "Yuck, they're so horrible! Those long hands of his! Have you seen them?" Surprised by the lack of reaction – the girls she was addressing were staring straight at me – she turned to me and blushed in a way I had never seen her blush, thereby removing any doubt that may have lingered about whose hands she found so disgusting.

Below was the community center, then came a short but steep hill down to the shop where the vast Ryen Plain began and finished at the airport.

"I think I'll have a smoke," I said, nodding in the direction of the bus stop on the other side of the community center. "Shall we stand there for a bit?"

"Go on, you have a smoke," Jan Vidar said. "It's New Year's Eve after all."

"How about a beer as well?" I suggested.

"Here? What's the point of that?"

"Are you in a bad mood or what?"

"Depends what you call bad."

"Oh come on now!" I said. I took off my rucksack, found the lighter and the packet of cigarettes, fished one out, shielded it against the wind with my hand, and lit up.

"Want one?" I asked, proffering the packet.

He shook his head.

I coughed and the smoke that seemed to get trapped in the upper part of my throat sent a feeling of nausea through my stomach.

"Agh, shit," I said.

"Is it good?" Jan Vidar asked.

"I don't usually cough," I said. "But the smoke went down the wrong way. It's not because I'm not used to it."

"No," Jan Vidar said. "Everyone who smokes takes it down the wrong way and coughs. It's a well-known phenomenon. My mother has been smoking for thirty years. Every time she smokes it goes down the wrong way and she coughs."

"Ha ha," I said.

Around the bend, out of the darkness, came a car. Jan Vidar took a step forward and stuck out his thumb. The car stopped! He rushed over and opened the door. Then he turned to me and waved. I threw away the cigarette, slung the rucksack onto my back, grabbed the bag, and walked over. Susanne stepped out of the car. She bent down, pulled a little lever, and slid the seat forward. Then she looked at me.

"Hi Karl Ove," she said.

"Hi Susanne," I said.

Jan Vidar was already on his way into the darkness of the car. The bottles clinked in the bag.

"Do you want to put the bag in the trunk?" Susanne suggested.

"No thanks," I said. "It's fine."

I got in, squeezed the bag down between my legs. Susanne got in. Terje, who was behind the wheel, turned around and looked at me.

"Are you hitchhiking on New Year's Eve?" he asked.

"We-ell . . . ," Jan Vidar hedged, as if he considered that this was not actually hitchhiking. "We've just been pretty unlucky this evening."

Terje put the car in gear, the wheels spun around until they caught up with the engine, and we rolled down the hill and onto the flat.

"Where are you going, boys?" he asked.

Boys.

What an idiot.

How could he go around with a perm and imagine it looked good? Did he think he looked tough with the moustache and the perm?

Grow up. Lose twenty kilos. Get rid of the stache. Get your hair cut. Then we can start talking.

What did Susanne see in him?

"We're going to Søm. To a party," I said. "How far are you going?"

"Well, we're just going to Hamre," he answered. "To Helge's party. But we can drop you at the Timenes intersection if you like."

"Great," Jan Vidar said. "Thanks. Very nice of you."

I looked at him. But he was staring out of the window and didn't catch my look.

"Who's going to Helge's then?" he asked.

"The usual suspects," Terje said. "Richard, Ekse, Molle, Jøgge, Hebbe, Tjådi. And Frode and Jomås and Bjørn."

"No girls?"

"Yes of course. Do you think we're stupid?"

"Who then?"

"Kristin, Randi, Kathrine, Hilde . . . Inger, Ellen, Anne Kathrine, Rita, Vibecke . . . Why? Would you like to join us?"

"No, we're going to another party," I said before Jan Vidar could say a word. "And we're pretty late already."

"Especially if you're going to hitch," he said.

Ahead of us, the airport lights came into view. On the other side of the river, which we crossed the very next second, the little slalom slope below the school was bathed in light. The snow had an orange tint.

"How's it going at commercial school, Susanne?" I asked.

"Fine," she said from her inviolable seat in front of me. "How's it going at Cathedral School?"

"It's fine," I said.

"You're in the same class as Molle, aren't you," Terje said, sending me a quick glance.

"That's right."

"Is that the class with twenty-six girls?"

"Yes."

He laughed.

"Quite a few class parties then?"

The camping site, snow-covered and forlorn, appeared on one side of the road; the little chapel, the supermarket, and the Esso garage on the other. The night sky above the rooftops of the houses huddled together on the hillside was riven with flares and flashes from fireworks. A crowd of children stood around a Roman candle in the parking lot, it was shooting up tiny balls of light that exploded in a myriad of sparks. A stream of cars crawled, bumper to bumper, along the road that ran parallel to ours for a stretch. On the other side was the beach. The bay was hidden beneath a white layer of ice that fissured and broke into a sea of blackness a hundred meters out.

"What time is it?" Jan Vidar asked.

"Half past nine," Terje said.

"Shit. That means we won't manage to get drunk before twelve," Jan Vidar said.

"Have you got to be home by twelve?"

"Ha ha," said Jan Vidar.

A few minutes later Terje pulled in by the bus stop at the Timenes intersection, and we climbed out and waited under the bus shelter with our bags.

"Wasn't the bus supposed to leave at ten past eight?" Jan Vidar asked.

"It was," I replied. "Could be late though?"

We laughed.

"Christ," I said. "Well, at least we can have a beer now!"

I couldn't open the bottles with the lighter, so I passed it to Jan Vidar. Without saying a word, he whipped the tops off both and handed me one.

"Oooh, that was good," I said, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "If we knock back two or three now we've got ourselves a base for later."

"My feet are fucking frozen," Jan Vidar said. "How about yours?"

"Same," I said.

I put the bottle to my mouth and drank for as long as I could. There was just a drop left after I lowered it. My stomach was full of froth and air. I tried to belch, but no air came up, just bubbles of froth that ran back into my mouth.

"Open another, will you," I said.

"Okay," Jan Vidar said. "But we can't stand here all night."

He flipped off another cap and passed me the bottle. I put it to my mouth and closed my eyes in concentration. I downed just over half. Another frothy belch followed.

"Oh *Christ*," I moaned. "Maybe not such a good idea drinking this fast."

The road we were standing by was the main thoroughfare between the towns in Sørland. It was normally packed with traffic. But in the ten minutes we had stood there only two cars had passed, both heading for Lillesand.

The air beneath the powerful streetlamps was full of swirling snow. The wind, made visible by the snow, rose and fell like waves, sometimes in long, slow surges, sometimes with sudden twists and twirls. Jan Vidar kicked his left foot against his right, the right against the left, the left against the right . . .

"Come on, drink" I said. I knocked back the rest, threw the empty into the forest behind the shelter.

"Another one," I demanded.

"You'll be chucking up soon," Jan Vidar said. "Take it easy."

"Come on," I said. "One more. Soon be damn near ten o'clock, won't it?"

He flipped the top off another bottle and passed it to me.

"What shall we do?" he asked. "It's too far to walk. The bus has gone. There are no cars to get a lift with. There isn't even a telephone box nearby so that we can ring someone to pick us up."

"We're going to die here," I said.

"Hey!" Jan Vidar shouted. "There's a bus. It's an Arendal bus."

"Are you kidding?" I said, staring up the hill. He wasn't, for there, around the bend at the top, came a wonderful, tall bus.

"Come on, sling the bottle," Jan Vidar said. "And smile nicely."

He stuck out his hand. The bus flashed, stopped, and the door opened.

"Two to Søm," Jan Vidar said, handing the driver a hundred-krone note. I looked down the aisle. It was dark and completely empty.

"You'll have to wait to drink that," the driver said, taking the change from his bag. "Okay?"

"Of course," Jan Vidar said.

We took a seat in the middle. Jan Vidar leaned back and placed his feet against the panel that shielded the door.

"Aahh, that's better," I said. "Nice and warm."

"Mm," Jan Vidar concurred.

I bent forward and started to unlace my boots.

"Have you got the address of where we're going?" I asked.

"Elgstien something or other," he said. "I know more or less where it is."

I removed my feet from the boots and rubbed them between my hands. When we came to the small unmanned service station, which had been there for as long as I could remember and had always been a sign that we were approaching Kristiansand and on our way to see my grandparents, I put my feet back, tied the laces, and was finished just as the bus pulled into the Varodd Bridge stop.

"Happy New Year," Jan Vidar shouted to the driver, before leaping into the darkness after me.

Even though I had driven past on numerous occasions I had never set foot here, except in my dreams. Varodd Bridge was one of the places I dreamt of most. Now and then I just stood at the foot and gazed at the towering mast, or I walked onto it. Then the railing usually disappeared and I had to sit down on the road and try to find something to hold onto, or the bridge suddenly disintegrated and I slid inexorably toward the edge. When I was smaller it was Tromøy Bridge that fulfilled this function in my dreams. Now it had become Varodd Bridge.

"My father was at the opening," I said, nodding toward the bridge as we crossed the road.

"Lucky him," Jan Vidar said.

We plodded in silence toward the built-up area. Normally there was a fantastic view from here, you could see Kjevik and the fjord that came into the land on one side and stretched far out to the sea on the other. But tonight everything was as black as the inside of a sack.

"Has the wind dropped a bit?" I asked at some point.

"Seems like it," Jan Vidar said, turning to me. "Have those beers had any effect, by the way?"

I shook my head.

"Nothing. What a waste."

As we walked, houses began to appear. Some were empty and dark, some were full of people dressed in party clothes. Here and there people were letting off rockets from verandas. In one place I saw a gaggle of children waving sparklers in the air. My feet were frozen again. I had curled up my fingers in the mitten not holding the bag of bottles, to little effect. Now we would soon be there, according to Jan Vidar, who then stopped in the middle of an intersection.

"Elgstien's up there," he pointed. "And up there. And down there, and down there too. Take your pick. Which one shall we take?"

"Are there four roads called Elgstien?"

"Apparently so. But which one should we take? Use your feminine intuition."

Feminine? Why did he say that? Did he think I was a woman?

"What do you mean by that?" I asked. "Why do you think I have feminine intuition?"

"Come on, Karl Ove," he said. "Which way?"

I pointed to the right. We started to walk that way. We were looking for number thirteen. The first house was twenty-three, the next twenty-one, so we were on the right track.

Some minutes later we were standing outside the house. It was a seventies build, and looked a bit run-down. The snow on the path to the front door had not been cleared, not for a long time, judging by the line of knee-deep tracks that wound toward the house.

"What was his name, the boy whose party this is?" I asked as we stood by the door.

"Jan Ronny," Jan Vidar said, and rang the bell.

"Jan Ronny?" I repeated.

"That's his name."

The door opened, it must have been the host standing in front of us. He had short, blond hair, pimples on his cheek and around the top of his nose, wore a gold chain around his neck, black jeans, a cotton lumberjack shirt, and white tennis socks. He smiled and pointed at Jan Vidar's stomach.

"Jan Vidar!" he said.

"Right first time," Jan Vidar said.

"And you are . . . ," he said, brandishing his finger at me. "Kai Olav!"

"Karl Ove," I said.

"What the fuck. Come on in! We've already started!"

We took off our outdoor clothes in the hall and followed him downstairs to a cellar room, where there were five people. Watching TV. The table in front of them was covered with beer bottles, bowls of chips, packs of cigarettes and tobacco pouches. Øyvind, who was sitting on the sofa with his arms around his girlfriend, Lene, only in the seventh class but still great and so forward you never thought about the age difference, smiled at us as we went in.

"Hi there!" Øyvind said. "Great you could make it!"

He introduced the others. Rune, Jens, and Ellen. Rune was in the ninth class, Jens and Ellen were in the eighth while Jan Ronny, who was Øyvind's cousin, was at technical school, a budding mechanic. None of them had dressed up. Not so much as a white shirt.

"What are you watching?" Jan Vidar asked, sitting on the sofa and taking out a beer. I leaned against the wall under the low cellar window, which was completely covered by snow on the outside.

"A Bruce Lee film," Øyvind replied. "It's almost over. But we've got *Bachelor Party* as well, and a Dirty Harry film. And Jan Ronny's got a few of his own. What would you like to see? We're easy."

Jan Vidar shrugged.

"I'm easy. What do you say, Karl Ove?"

I shrugged.

"Is there a bottle opener around?" I asked.

Øyvind bent forward and took a lighter from the table, tossed it over to me. But I couldn't open bottles with lighters. Nor could I ask Jan Vidar to open the bottle for me, that was too homo.

I took a bottle from the bag and put the top between my teeth, twisted it so the cap was right over a molar and bit. The cap came off with a hiss.

"Don't do that!" said Lene.

"It's fine," I said.

I downed the beer in one gulp. Apart from all the carbon dioxide filling my stomach with air, which meant I had to swallow the tiny belches that came up, I still didn't feel anything. And I couldn't manage another beer in one go.

My feet ached as the warmth began to return.

"Anyone got any liquor?" I asked.

They shook their heads.

"Just beer, I'm afraid," Øyvind said. "But you can have one if you want."

"Already got some, thanks," I said.

Øyvind raised his bottle.

"Clink'n'sink!" he said.

"Clink'n'sink!" the others said, touching bottles. They laughed.

I fished out the pack of cigarettes from the bag and lit up. Pall Mall mild, not exactly the coolest cigarette around and, standing there with the all-white cigarette in my hand – the filter was white too, I regretted not having bought Prince. But my mind had been focused on the party we were going to after twelve, the one that Irene from the class was throwing, and Pall Mall mild would not be too conspicuous there. It was, also, the brand that Yngve smoked. At least it had been the one time I had seen him smoking, one evening in the garden when Mom and Dad had been at Alf's, Dad's uncle's.

Time for another bottle. I didn't want to use my teeth again, something told me that sooner or later I would come up short, sooner or later the molar would give way and break. And now that I had shown that I could open bottles with my teeth, perhaps it wouldn't seem so homo to let Jan Vidar open it for me.

I went over to him, nabbed a few chips from the bowl on the table.

"Can you open this for me?"

He nodded, without taking his eyes off the film.

Over the last year he had been doing some kickboxing. I kept forgetting, was just as surprised every time he invited me to a session or some such thing. Of course I always refused. But this was Bruce Lee, the fighting was the whole point, and he had one foot in the door.

With a beer bottle in my hand I went back to my place by the wall. No one said anything. Øyvind looked at me.

"Take the weight off your feet, Karl Ove," he said.

"I'm fine standing," I said.

"Well, *skål*, anyway!" he said, raising his bottle to mine. I took two paces over to him, and we clinked.

"Down in one, John!" he said. His Adam's apple pumped up and down like a piston as he drained the bottle.

Øyvind was big for his age, and unusually powerful. He had the body of a grown man. He was also good-natured, and didn't take much notice of what was going on around him, or at least he was always relaxed about it. As if he were immune to the world. He played drums with us, yes, why not, might as well. He went out with Lene, yes, why not, might as well. He didn't talk much to her, dragged her around to see his friends mostly, but that was fine, she wanted to be with him more than anyone else. I had checked her out once, a couple of months ago, just to see how the land lay, but even though I was two years older than them she was not in the slightest bit interested. Oh, how stupid that was. Surrounded by girls at the gymnas and I tried it on with her. Girl from the seventh class. But her breasts looked great under her T-shirt. I still wanted to take it off. I still wanted to feel her breasts in my hands, whatever her age. And there was nothing about her body or manner that indicated she was only fourteen.

I put the bottle to my lips and downed the rest. I really wouldn't be able to keep this up, I thought as I placed it on the table and opened another with my teeth. My stomach was exploding with all the carbon dioxide. Any more and froth would be oozing out of my ears. Fortunately, it was nearly eleven now. At half past eleven we would leave and then be at the other party for the rest of the night. If not for that, I would have gone long ago.

A boy called Jens suddenly half-rose from the sofa, grabbed the lighter from the table and held it to his ass.

"Now!" he said.

He farted as he flicked the lighter, and a ball of flame flared out behind him. He laughed. The others laughed too.

"Stop that!" Lene said.

Jan Vidar smiled, and was careful not to meet my gaze. Bottle in hand, I wandered over to the far door in the room. Behind it there was a small kitchen. I leaned over the counter. The house was on a slope, and the window, well above ground level, faced the back of the garden. Two pine trees were swaying in the wind. There were more houses farther down. Through the window of one I saw three men and a woman standing, glass in hand, talking. The men wore black suits, the woman a black dress with bare arms. I went to the other door and opened it. A shower. On the wall was a wetsuit. Well, that's something at least, I thought, closed the door and went back to the living room. The others were sitting, as before.

"Can you feel anything?" Jan Vidar asked.

I shook my head.

"No. Not a thing. You?"

He smiled.

"A bit."

"We'll have to be off soon," I said.

"Where are you going?" Øyvind asked.

"Up to the intersection. Where everyone's going at twelve."

"But it's only eleven! And we're going there too. We can go together, for Christ's sake."

He looked at me.

"Why do you want to go there now?"

I shrugged.

"I've arranged to meet someone there."

"She'll wait for you, don't worry," Jan Vidar said.

It was half past eleven when we made a move to go. The quiet residential area where, apart from a few people on the odd veranda or drive, there had not been a soul half an hour earlier was now full of life and activity. Smartly dressed partygoers streamed out of the houses. Women with shawls over their shoulders, glasses in their hands and high-heeled evening shoes on their feet, men with coats over their suits, patent leather shoes, holding bags of fireworks, excited children running among them, many with fizzing sparklers, filled the air with shouts and laughter. Jan Vidar and I were carrying our white plastic bags of beer and walking alongside the pimply schoolkids dressed in everyday clothes with whom we had spent the evening. In actual fact, we were not alongside them. I kept a few steps ahead in case we should meet anyone I knew from school. Pretended to look with interest this way and that so it would be impossible for anyone who saw us to imagine we were together. Which of course we were not. I looked good, white shirt, sleeves rolled up the way Yngve had told me they should be that autumn. Over the suit jacket and my black suitlike trousers I was wearing a grey coat, on my feet Doc Martens, and leather straps around my wrists. My hair was long at the back and short, almost spiky, on top. The only thing that didn't belong was the bag of beer. Of that, however, I was painfully aware. It was what also linked me with the shabby crowd lurching along behind me, because they had plastic bags as well, each and every one of them.

At the intersection, which was on higher ground, and had been an assembly point because you could see the whole bay from there, there was total chaos. People stood shoulder to shoulder, most were drunk, and everyone was letting off fireworks. There were bangs and crackles on all sides, the smell of gunpowder tore at your nostrils, smoke drifted through the air and one after another multicolored rockets exploded beneath the cloudy sky. It shook with flashes of light looking as if it could rupture and burst at any moment.

We stood on the perimeter of the noise. Øyvind, who had brought along fireworks, took out a huge, dynamite-shaped stick and placed it in front of his feet. He seemed to be swaying to and fro as he did so. Jan Vidar was jabbering away, as he did when he was drunk, with a permanent smile on his lips. At the moment he was talking to Rune. They had found a common theme in kickboxing. His glasses were still misted up, but he could no longer be bothered to remove or wipe them. I was standing a few steps away and allowed my gaze to wander through the crowd. When the stick exploded for the first time and a red light was eructated right next to me I jumped out of my skin. Øyvind burst out laughing.

"Not bad!" he shouted. "Shall we try it again?" he said, putting down another firework and lighting it, without waiting for an answer. It immediately began to spew forth balls of light, and this, the steady succession of the explosions, excited him so much that he rummaged around in feverish haste for a third even before this one had died.

He couldn't contain his laughter.

Beside us, a man in a light-blue jacket, white shirt and red leather tie tumbled headlong into a snowdrift. A woman ran over to him in her high heels and pulled at his arm, not hard enough to lift him but enough to motivate him to stand up under his own steam. He brushed himself down while staring straight ahead as though he had not just been lying in the snow but had merely stopped to get a better overall view of the situation. Two boys were standing on the bus shelter roof, each holding a rocket at an angle; they lit them, and with their faces averted, gripped them in their hands as they hissed and fizzed until the rockets took off, flew a couple of meters and exploded with such intensity and power that all the bystanders looked round.

"Hey, Jan Vidar," I said. "Can you open this one as well?"

With a smile, he flipped the top off the bottle I passed him. At last I could feel something, but not pleasure nor a somberness, more a rapidly increasing blunting of the senses. I drank, lit a cigarette, looked at my watch. Ten to twelve.

"Ten minutes to go!" I said.

Jan Vidar nodded, went on chatting with Rune. I had decided not to look for Irene until after twelve. Those at the party would stick together until twelve, I was sure of that, then they would hug and wish one another a happy New Year, they already knew one another, they were friends, a clique, like everyone at my school they had their own, and I was too far outside this one to mingle. But after twelve, things would loosen up, they would stand around drinking, they would not return right away, and with the clique in this vaguely spontaneous, loose state, I would be able to make contact, chat and casually, or at least without revealing any obvious intentions, wheedle my way in and stay.

The problem was Jan Vidar. Would he want to come with me? They were all people he didn't know, people I had more in common with than he did. He seemed to be enjoying himself where he was, didn't he?

I would have to ask him. If he didn't want to come with me, that was up to him. But I would definitely never set foot in that damn cellar again, that was for certain.

And there she was.

Some distance away, perhaps thirty meters from us, surrounded by her party guests. I tried to count them, but outside the inner circle it was difficult to work out who belonged to her party and who belonged elsewhere. I was sure it was somewhere between ten and twelve people. I had seen almost all the faces before; she hung out with them during the breaks. She was not beautiful, I suppose, she had a bit of a double chin and chubby cheeks – although she was not in any way fat – blue eyes and blond hair. She was short and there was something duck like about her. But none of this mattered one bit in my judgment of her, for she had something else, which was more important: she was a focal point. No matter where she went or what she said, people paid attention. She was out every weekend, in Kristiansand or at private parties, unless she was staying in a chalet at a skiing center or in some other big town. Always with her clique. I hated these cliques, I really did, and when I stood listening to her going on about all the things she had done recently I hated her too.

Tonight she was wearing a dark-blue, knee-length coat. Underneath I glimpsed a light-blue dress and skin-colored tights. On her head she had . . . well, yes, it was a diadem, wasn't it? Like some little princess?

Around me the intensity had gradually increased. Now all you could hear was bangs and explosions and shouting on all sides. Then, as if from above, as though it was God himself making his pleasure known at the advent of the New Year, the sirens began to sound. The cheering around us rose in volume. I looked at my watch. Twelve.

Jan Vidar met my gaze.

"It's twelve o'clock!" he shouted. "Happy New Year!"

He started to trudge toward me.

No, shit, he wasn't going to hug me, was he?

No, no, no!

But over he came, put his arms around me and pressed his cheek against mine.

"Happy New Year, Karl Ove," he said. "And thanks for everything in the old one!"

"Happy New Year," I said. His stubble rubbed against my smooth cheek. He thumped me on the back twice, then took a step back.

"Øyvind!" he said, going toward him.

Why the hell did he have to hug me? What was the point? We never hugged. We weren't the sort of guys who would hug.

What a pile of shit this was.

"Happy New Year, Karl Ove!" said Lene. She smiled at me, and I leaned forward and gave her a hug.

"Happy New Year," I said. "You're so beautiful."

Her face, which seconds before had floated around and been part of everything else that was happening, froze.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. "Thank you for the old year."

She smiled.

"I heard what you said," she said. "Happy New Year too."

As she moved away, I had a stiffy.

Oh, not that as well.

I drank the rest of my beer. There were only three left in the bag. I ought to have saved them, but I needed something to occupy myself with, so I took one, opened it with my teeth and gulped it down. I lit a cigarette as well. They were my tools; with those in my hands I was equipped and ready to go. A cigarette in the left hand, a bottle of beer in the right. So I stood there lifting them to my mouth, first one, then the other. Cigarette, beer, cigarette, beer.

At ten past, I slapped Jan Vidar on the back and said I was going to join some friends, would be back soon, don't go away, he nodded, and I made my way through to Irene. At first she didn't notice me, she was standing with her back to me talking to some people.

"Hi, Irene!" I said.

As she didn't turn, presumably because my voice could not be heard over the ambient noise, I felt obliged to tap her on the shoulder. This was not good, this approach was too direct, tapping someone on the shoulder is not the same as bumping into them, but I would have to take a chance.

At any event, she did turn.

"Karl Ove," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"We're at a party nearby. Then I saw you up here and thought I would wish you a happy New Year. Happy New Year!'

"Happy New Year!" she said. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Certainly am!" I said. "And you?"

"Yes, having a great time."

There was a brief silence.

"You're throwing a party, aren't you?" I said.

"Yes."

"Anywhere near?"

"Yes, I live over there."

She pointed up the hill.

"In that house?" I said, nodding in the same direction.

"No, behind it. You can't see it from the road."

"I couldn't tag along, could I?" I said. "Then we could chat a bit more. That would be nice."

She shook her head and wrinkled her nose.

"Don't think so," she said. "It isn't a class party, you see."

"I know," I said. "But just for a little chat? Nothing more. I'm at a party quite close by."

"Go there then!" she said. "We can see each other at school in the New Year!"

She had completely out-maneuvered me. There was nothing else to say.

"Nice to see you," I said. "I've always liked you."

Then I about-faced and walked back. It had been hard to articulate the stuff about always liking her, because it was not true, but at least it would deflect her attention from the fact that I had tried to cadge an invitation to her party. Now she would think I asked because I was coming on to her. And I was coming on to her because I was drunk. Who doesn't do that on New Year's Eve?

Bitch. Fucking bitch.

Jan Vidar looked up at me when I got back.

"There won't be any party," I said. "We're not invited."

"Why not? Thought you said you knew them."

"Invited guests only. And we're not. Assholes."

Jan Vidar snorted.

"We'll just go back. It was great there, wasn't it."

I sent him a vacant stare and yawned, to let him know how great it was. But we had no choice. We couldn't call his father before two o'clock. We couldn't very well call at ten minutes past twelve on New Year's Eve. So once again it was the crowd of pimply schoolkids dressed in everyday clothes that I walked ahead of through the residential district of Søm on that windblown New Year's Eve of 1984/1985.

At twenty past two Jan Vidar's father pulled up outside the house. We were ready and waiting. I, who was less drunk, sat in the front while Jan Vidar, who only one hour earlier had been jumping around with a lampshade on his head, sat in the back, as we had planned. Fortunately, after he had thrown up and after drinking a few glasses of water and washing his face thoroughly under the tap, he was in a state to phone his father and tell him where we were. Not very convincingly. I stood beside him and heard him almost spewing up the first part of the word, then swallowing the last, but he did manage to spit out the address, and I don't suppose our parents imagined we were nowhere near alcohol on occasions such as these.

"Happy New Year, boys!" his father said as we got in. "Have you had a good time?"

"Yes," I said. "Lots of people out and about at twelve. Quite a scene. How was it in Tveit?"

"Fine," he said, stretching his arm along the back of my seat and craning his neck to reverse. "Whose house was it, actually?"

"Someone Øyvind knows. The one who plays drums in the band."

"Oh yes," the father said, changing gear and driving back the way he had just come. The snow in some of the gardens was stained with fireworks. A few couples were walking along the road. The occasional taxi passed. Otherwise all was quiet and peaceful. There was something I had always liked about gliding through the darkness with the dashboard illuminated beside a man who was confident and calm in his movements. Jan Vidar's father was a good man. He was friendly and interested, but also left us in peace when Jan Vidar indicated we had had enough. He took us on fishing trips, he repaired things for us – once when my bike had been punctured on the way there he had fixed the tire for me, without a word, it was all ready when I had to leave – and when they went on family holidays they invited me. He asked after my parents, as did Jan Vidar's mother, and whenever he drove me home, which was not so seldom, he always had a chat with Mom or Dad, if they were around, and he invited them over to his place. It wasn't his fault that they never went. But he also had a temper, I knew that, even though I had never seen any evidence of it, and hatred was also among the many feelings Jan Vidar had for him.

"So it's 1985," I said as we joined the E18 by Varodd Bridge.

"Indeed," Jan Vidar's father said. "Or what do you say in the back?"

Jan Vidar didn't say anything. And he hadn't when his father got there either. He had just stared straight ahead and got in. I twisted around in my seat and looked at him. He was sitting with his head transfixed and his eyes focused on a point in the neck rest.

"Lost your tongue?" his father asked, smiling at me.

Still total silence from the rear.

"Your parents," his father went on. "Did they stay at home tonight?"

I nodded.

"My grandparents and my uncle came over. Lutefisk and aquavit."

"Glad you weren't there?"

"Yes."

Onto the Kjevik road, past Hamresanden, along Ryensletta. Dark, peaceful, nice and warm. I could sit like this for the rest of my life, I thought. Past their house, into the bends up by Kragebo, down to the bridge on the other side, up the hill. It hadn't been cleared and was covered with five centimeters of fresh snow. Jan Vidar's father drove more slowly over the last stretch. Past the house where Susann and Elise lived, the two sisters who had moved here from Canada, and no one could quite figure out, past the bend where William lived, down the hill, and up the last bit.

"I'll drop you here," he said. "Then we won't wake them if they're asleep. Okay?"

"Okay," I said. "And thank you very much for the ride. See you, Jayvee!"

Jan Vidar blinked, then opened his eyes wide.

"See you, yes," he said.

"Are you going to sit in the front?" Jan Vidar's father asked.

"I don't," Jan Vidar said. I closed the door, raised my hand to wave goodbye and heard the car reversing behind me as I walked up the road to the house. "Jayvee"! Why had I said that? The nickname that signaled a friendship I didn't need to signal; I had never used it before since, in fact, we were friends.

The windows in the house were unlit. So they must have gone to bed. I was glad, not because I had anything to hide, but because I wanted to be left in peace. After hanging up my outdoor clothes in the hall I went into the living room. All traces of the party had been removed. In the kitchen the dishwasher was humming softly. I sat down on the sofa and peeled an orange. Although the fire had gone out you could still feel the heat from the wood burner. Mom was right, it was good living here. On the wicker chair the cat lazily raised its head. Meeting my gaze, it got up, padded across the floor and jumped onto my lap. I got rid of the orange peel, which the cat hated.

"You can lie here for a bit," I said, stroking it. "You can. But not all night, you know. I'm going to bed soon."

It began to purr as it curled up on me. Its head sank slowly, resting on one paw, and its eyes, which first had closed with pleasure, were closed in sleep within seconds.

"It's alright for some," I said.

The next morning I awoke to the radio in the kitchen, but stayed where I was, there was nothing to get up for anyway today, and I soon fell sleep again. The next time I awoke it was half past eleven. I got dressed and went downstairs. Mom was sitting at the kitchen table reading and looked up as I came in.

"Hi," she said. "Did you have a good time last night?"

"Yes," I said. "It was fun."

"When did you get home?"

"Half past two-ish. Jan Vidar's dad brought us back."

I sat down and spread some liver pâté on a slice of bread, succeeded after several attempts in spearing a pickle with a fork, put it on top, and lifted the teapot to feel if it was empty.

"Is there any left?" Mom asked. "I can boil some more water."

"Could probably squeeze a little cup out," I said. "But it might be cold."

Mom got up.

"Stay where you are," I said. "I can do it myself."

"It's fine," she said. "I'm sitting right by the stove."

She filled the saucepan and put it on the burner, which soon began to crackle.

"And what did you have to eat?" she asked.

"It was a cold buffet," I said. "I think the girl's mother made it. It was the usual . . . you know, shrimp and vegetables in jelly, transparent . . . ?"

"Shrimp in aspic?" Mom queried.

"Yes, shrimp in aspic. And ordinary shrimp. And crab. Two lobsters, there wasn't enough for everyone, but we all got to taste a bit. And then, oh yeah, some ham and other things."

"Sounds good," Mom said.

"Yes, it was," I said. "Then we went out at twelve, down to the intersection where everyone gathered and let off rockets. Well, we didn't, but lots of the others did."

"Did you meet anyone new?"

I hesitated. Took another slice of bread, scanned the table for something to put on it. Salami with mayonnaise, that looked good.

"Not exactly," I said. "Mostly I stuck with people I know."

I looked at her.

"Where's Dad?"

"In the barn. He's off to Grandma's today. Feel like going?"

"No, I'd rather not," I said. "There were so many people last night. I feel like being on my own now. Perhaps I'll wander down to Per's. But that's all. What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure. Read a bit, maybe. And make a start on my packing. The plane leaves early tomorrow morning."

"That's right," I said. "When's Yngve off?"

"In a few days, I think. Then it'll be just you and Dad here."

"Yes," I said. I clapped my eyes on the brawn Grandma had made. Perhaps brawn wouldn't be a bad idea for the next slice? And then one with lamb sausage.

Half an hour later I was ringing the doorbell at Per's house. His father opened. He appeared to be on his way out: he was wearing a lined, green military jacket over a shiny blue tracksuit and had light-colored boots on; in his hand he had a lead. Their dog, an old Golden Retriever, was wagging its tail between its legs.

"Ah, it's you," he said. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year," I said.

"They're in the living room," he said. "Just go right in."

He walked past me, whistling, onto the forecourt and over to the open garage. I kicked off my shoes and went into the house. It was large and open, built not so many years ago, by Per's father, as far as I had understood, and you had a view of the river from almost all the rooms. From the hall there was first the kitchen, where Per's mother was working, she turned her head as I passed, smiled and said hello, then the living room, where Per was sitting with his brother Tom, sister Marit, and best friend Trygve.

"What are you watching?" I asked.

"*Guns of Navarone*," Per said.

"Been watching it long?"

"No. Half an hour. We can rewind it if you want."

"Rewind?" said Trygve. "Aw, we don't want to see the beginning again."

"But Karl Ove hasn't seen it," Per said. "It won't take long."

"It won't take long? It'll take half an hour," Trygve said.

Per went to the video player and knelt down.

"You can't decide that unilaterally," Tom said.

"Oh?" Per said.

He pressed STOP and then REWIND.

Marit got up and headed for the staircase.

"Call me when we're back to where we were," she said. Per nodded. The video machine click-clacked a few times while emitting some tiny hydraulic whines until it was ready to start, and the tape began to whir backwards with ever-increasing speed and volume until it came to a stop well before the end, whereafter the last part rotated extremely slowly, in a manner reminiscent of a plane which after flying at breakneck speed through the air approaches the ground at reduced speed and brakes on the runway, and then calmly and carefully taxis toward the terminal building.

"I suppose you were at home with Mommy and Daddy last night?" I said, looking at Trygve.

"Yes?" he said. "And I suppose you went out drinking?"

"Yes," I said. "I was having a drinky-winky, but I wish we'd stayed at home. We didn't have a party to go to, so we just trudged around in the storm each lugging a bag of beer bottles. We walked the whole way to Søm. But just wait. Soon it will be your turn to wander around aimlessly with plastic bags at night."

"Okay," Per said.

"Oh, this is fun," Trygve said as the first frames from the film appeared on the screen. Outside, everything was still, as only winter can be. And even though the sky was overcast and gray, the light over the countryside shimmered and was perfectly white. I remember thinking all I wanted to do was sit right there, in a newly built house, in a circle of light in the middle of the forest and be as stupid as I liked.

The next morning Dad drove Mom to the airport. When he returned, the buffer between us was gone, and we resumed the life we had lived all that autumn without further delay. He was back in the flat in the barn, I caught the bus down to Jan Vidar's house where we plugged into his amplifier and sat around playing for a while until we got sick of that and ambled over to the shop, where nothing happened, ambled back and watched some ski-jumping on TV, played a few records, and talked about girls. At around five I caught the bus back up, Dad met me at the door, asked if he could drive me to town. Great, I said. On the way he suggested dropping in on my grandparents, I was probably hungry, we could eat there.

Grandma stuck her head out of the window as Dad parked the car outside the garage.

"Oh, it's you!" she said.

A minute later she unlocked the front door.

"Nice to see you again!" she said. "It was lovely at your house."

She looked at me.

"And you had a good time too, I heard?"

"Yes, I did."

"Give me a hug then! You're a big boy now, but you can still give your grandmother a hug, can't you!"

I leaned forward and felt her dry, wrinkled cheek against mine. She smelled good, of the perfume she had always used.

"Have you eaten?" Dad asked.

"We've just had a bite, but I can heat something up for you, that's no problem. Are you hungry?"

"I think we are, aren't we?" Dad said, looking at me with a wry smile.

"I am at any rate," I said.

In my inner ear I heard how that must have sounded to them.

"At any wate."

We took our jackets off in the hall, I put my boots neatly at the bottom of the open wardrobe, hung my jacket on one of the ancient, chipped golden clothes hangers, Grandma stood by the stairs watching us with that impatience in her body she had always exhibited. One hand passed over her cheek. Her head twisted to one side. Her weight shifted from one foot to the other. Apparently unaffected by these minor adjustments she kept talking to Dad. Asked whether there was as much snow higher up. Whether Mom had left. When she would be back next. Mm, right, she said each time he said anything. Right.

"And what about you, Karl Ove," she said, focusing on me. "When do you start school again?"

"In two days."

"That'll be nice, won't it."

"Yes, it will."

Dad snatched a glance at himself in the mirror. His face was calm, but there was a visible shadow of displeasure in his eyes, they seemed cold and apathetic. He took a step toward Grandma, who turned to climb the stairs, lightly and nimbly. Dad followed, heavy-limbed, and I brought up the rear, eyes fixed on the thick, black hair at the back of his neck.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Grandad said as we entered the kitchen. He was sitting on a chair by the table, leaning back with legs apart, black suspenders over a white shirt buttoned up to the neck. Over his face hung a lock of hair that he pushed back into place with his hand. From his mouth hung an unlit cigarette.

"How were the roads?" he asked. "Icy?"

"They weren't so bad," Dad said. "Worse on New Year's Eve. And there was no traffic to speak of either."

"Sit yourselves down," Grandma said.

"No, then there's no room for you," Dad said.

"I'll stand," she said. "I have to heat your food up anyway. I sit all day, I do, you know. Come on, sit down!"

Grandad held a lighter to his cigarette and lit up. Puffed a few times, blew smoke into the room.

Grandma switched on the burners, drummed her fingers on the counter and whistled softly, as was her wont.

In a way Dad was too big to sit at the kitchen table, I thought. Not physically, there was plenty of room for him, it was more that he looked out of place. There was something about him, or whatever he radiated, that distanced itself from this table.

He took out a cigarette and lit it.

Would he have fit better in the living room? If we had been eating in there?

Yes, he would. That would have been better.

"So it's 1985," I said to break the silence that had already lasted seconds.

"Yes, s'pose it is, my boy," Grandma said.

"What have you done with your brother?" Grandad said. "Is he back in Bergen?"

"No, he's still in Arendal," I said.

"Ah yes," Grandad said. "He's become a real Arendal boy, he has."

"Yes, he doesn't come by here so often any more," Grandma said. "We had such fun when he was small."

She looked at me.

"But you come though."

"What is it he's studying now?" Grandad asked.

"Isn't it political science?" Dad wondered, looking at me.

"No, he's just started media studies," I said.

"Don't you know what your own son's studying?" Grandad smiled.

"Yes, I do. I know very well," Dad said. He stubbed out his half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray and turned to Grandma. "I think it'll be ready now, Mother. It doesn't have to be scalding hot. It must be hot enough by now, don't you think?"

"Probably," Grandma said, and fetched two plates from a cupboard, placed them before us, took cutlery from a drawer and put it beside the plates.

"I'll do it this way today," she said, picking up Dad's plate and filling it with potatoes, creamed peas, rissoles, and gravy.

"That looks good," Dad said as she put his plate down in front of him and took mine.

The only two people I knew who ate as fast as me were Yngve and Dad. Our plates had hardly been put in front of us before they were picked clean. Dad leaned back and lit another cigarette, Grandma poured a cup of coffee and handed it to him, I got up and went into the living room, looked across the town with all its glittering lights, the gray, almost black, snow piled up against the walls of the warehouses along the quay. The harbor lights rippled across the shiny, pitch-black surface of the water.

For a moment I was filled with the sensation of white snow against black water. The way the whiteness erases all the detail around a lake or a river in the forest so that the difference between land and water is absolute, and the water lies there as a deeply alien entity, a black hole in the world.

I turned. The second living room was two steps higher than the one I was in and separated by a sliding door. The door was half-open and I went up, not for any particular reason, I was simply restless. This was the fancy room, they used it only for special occasions, we had never been allowed in there alone.

A piano stood adjacent to one wall, above it hung two paintings with Old Testament motifs. On the piano were three graduation photographs of the sons. Dad, Erling, and Gunnar. It was always strange to see Dad without a beard. He was smiling with the black graduation cap perched jauntily at the back of his head. His eyes shone with pleasure.

In the middle of the floor there were two sofas, one on either side of a table. In the corner at the very back of the room, which was dominated by two black leather sofas and an antique rose-painted corner cabinet, there was a white fireplace.

"Karl Ove?" Dad shouted from the kitchen.

I quickly took the four paces to the everyday living room and answered.

"Are we going?"

"Yes."

When I entered the kitchen he was already on his feet.

"Take care," I said. "Bye."

"You take care," Grandad said. As always, Grandma came down with us.

"Oh, I almost forgot," Dad said when we were in the hall putting on our coats and scarves. "I've got something for you."

He went out, opened and closed the car door, and then returned carrying a parcel which he passed to her.

"Many happy returns, Mother," he said.

"Oh, you shouldn't have!" Grandma said. "Goodness me. You shouldn't buy presents for me, dear!"

"Yes, I should," Dad said. "Come on. Open it!"

I didn't know where to look. There was something intimate about all this, which I had not witnessed before and had no idea existed.

Grandma stood with a tablecloth in her hand.

"My, how beautiful!" she exclaimed.

"I thought it would match the wallpaper upstairs," Dad said. "Can you see that?"

"Lovely," Grandma said.

"Well," Dad said in a tone that precluded any further embellishments, "we'll be off now."

We got into the car, Dad started the engine, and a cascade of light struck the garage door. Grandma waved goodbye from the steps as we reversed down the little slope. As always, she closed the door behind her when we were turning, and by the time we drove onto the main road she was gone.

In the next days I occasionally thought about the little episode in the hall, and my feeling was the same every time: I had seen something I shouldn't have seen. But it passed quickly; I wasn't exactly concerned with Dad and Grandma, so much else was happening during those weeks. In the first lesson of the new school year Siv handed out an invitation to everyone, she was going to have a class party the following Saturday, and this was good news, a class party was something I was entitled to attend, where no one could accuse me of trying to gate-crash, and where familiarity with the others could be extended into the wider world, which in class enabled me to come quite close to behaving in ways consistent with the person I really was. In short, I would be able to drink, dance, laugh, and perhaps pin someone against a wall somewhere. On the other hand, class parties had lower status precisely for that reason, it wasn't the kind of party you were invited to because of who you were but rather where you were, in this case class 1B. However, I didn't allow that to sour my pleasure. A party was not just a party, even if it was that too. The problem of acquiring alcohol was the same as before New Year's Eve, and I considered whether to call Tom again, but decided it was best to risk it myself. I may have been only sixteen but I looked older, and if I acted normally no one would even think of refusing me. If they did, it would be embarrassing, but that was all and I would still be able to ask Tom to organize it. So, on the Wednesday I went to the supermarket, put twelve lagers in my cart, with bread and tomatoes as alibis, queued up, put them on the conveyor belt, handed the checkout-girl the money, she took it without so much as a glance at me, and I hurried excitedly home with a clinking plastic bag in each hand.

When I came home from school on Friday afternoon, Dad had been in the flat. There was a message on the table.

Karl Ove,
I am at a seminar all this weekend. Coming home Sunday night. There are some fresh shrimp in the fridge and there's a loaf in the bread basket. Enjoy yourself!
Dad

On top there was a five-hundred-krone note.

Oh, this was just perfect!

Shrimp was what I loved most. I ate them in front of the television that evening, afterward I went for a walk through town, playing my Walkman, first "Lust for Life" by Iggy Pop and then one of the later Roxy Music albums, something to do with the distance between the inside and the outside worlds arose then, something that I liked so much; when I saw all the drunken faces of people who had gathered by the bars it was as if they existed in a different dimension from mine, the same applied to the cars driving by, to the drivers getting in and out of their cars at the gas stations, to the shop assistants standing behind counters with their weary smiles and mechanical movements, and to men out walking their dogs.

The next morning I dropped by my grandparents', ate fresh rolls with them, then went to town, bought three records and a big bag of sweets, a few music magazines and a paperback, Jean Genet, *Journal du Voleur*. Had two beers while watching a televised English soccer match, one more while showering and changing, another while smoking the last cigarette before going out.

I had arranged to meet Bassen at the Østerveien intersection at seven o'clock. He stood there smiling as I lumbered up with the bag of beer in my hand. He had all his in a backpack, and the second I saw that I felt like smacking my forehead. Of course! That was the way to do it.

We walked along Kuholmsveien, past my grandparents' place, up the hill and into the residential district around the stadium, where Siv's house was.

After searching for a few minutes we found the right number and rang the doorbell. Siv opened and let out a loud squeal.

Even before I awoke I knew that something good had happened. It was like a hand stretching down to me where I lay at the bottom of consciousness, watching one image after another rushing past me. A hand I grabbed and let lift me slowly, I came closer and closer to myself until I thrust open my eyes.

Where was I?

Oh, yes, the downstairs living room in the flat. I was lying on the sofa, fully clothed.

I sat up, supported my throbbing head in my hands.

My shirt smelled of perfume.

A heavy, exotic fragrance.

I had been making out with Monica. We had danced, we had drifted to the side, stood under a staircase, I had kissed her. She had kissed me.

But that's not what it was!

I got up and went into the kitchen, poured water into a glass and gulped it down.

No, it wasn't that.

Something fantastic had happened, a light had been lit, but it wasn't Monica. There was something else.

But what?

All the alcohol had created an imbalance in my body. But it knew what I needed to redress the balance. Hamburger, fries, hot dog. Lots of Coke. That's what I needed. And I needed it now.

I went into the hall, glanced at myself in the mirror while running a hand through my hair. I didn't look too bad, only slightly bloodshot eyes; I could definitely show my face like this.

I laced my boots, grabbed my jacket and put it on.

But what was it?

A button?

With *Smile* on it?

Yes, that was it!

That was the good thing!

We had been chatting for a long time. She had laughed and been so happy. She hadn't had anything to drink. But I had, so I could be where she was, in the lighthearted, happy zone. Then we danced.

Oh, we had danced to Frankie Goes to Hollywood. "The Power of Love."

The POWER of LO-OVE!

But Hanne, Hanne.

Feeling her so close to me. Standing nearly as close and talking. Her laughter. Her green eyes. Her small nose.

Just before we left, on the way out, she had pinned the button on me.

That was what had happened. It wasn't much, but the little there had been was fantastic.

I buttoned up my jacket and left. Low clouds hung over the town, a cold wind swept through the streets and onto the sea. Everything was gray and white, cold and inhospitable. But inside me the sun was shining. I heard *The POWER of LO-OVE*! again and again as I walked along the river towards the snack bar.

What had happened?

Hanne was Hanne, she hadn't changed, she was the same person she had been in the classroom all autumn and winter. I liked her but had not felt anything special for her. Till now! And then this!

It was as though I had been struck by lightning. At regular intervals happiness surged along my nerve channels. My heart trembled, my soul glowed. Suddenly I couldn't wait for Monday, I couldn't wait for school to begin.

Should I call?

Should I invite her out?

Without thinking, I ordered a cheeseburger with bacon and fries, and a large Coke. She was going out with someone, she had told me that, someone in the third class at Vågsbygd Gymnas. They had been together a long time. But the way she had looked at me, the closeness that had sprung up out of the blue, that could not be insignificant, could it? It had to mean something. There was an interest there, a desire in her for me. There had to be.

On Monday, on Monday, then I would see her again.

But what the hell was I to do until then?

That was almost *one whole* day!

She smiled when she saw me. I smiled too.

"You haven't taken off the button!" she said.

"No," I said. "I think about you whenever I see it."

She looked down. Fidgeted with a button on her jacket.

"You were pretty drunk," she said, peering up at me again.

"I suppose I was," I said. "I don't remember that much to be honest."

"You don't remember?"

"No, I do, I do! I remember Frankie Goes to Hollywood, for example . . ."

Down the corridor came Tønnesen, the young geography teacher with a beard and Mandal dialect, who was our class teacher.

"Well, you two, did you have a good weekend?" he asked, opening the door we were standing outside.

"We had a class party." Hanne smiled.

What a smile.

"Oh? And I wasn't invited?" he said, not expecting an answer to this remark because he didn't look at her, just strode through the room to the desk at the end where he deposited his small pile of books.

I was unable to concentrate on what was happening in the lesson. I was only thinking about Hanne, even though she was sitting in the same room I was. Or was it thinking? . . . It was more as if I were full to the brim with emotions which did not leave any space for thought. And so it remained for the whole of the winter and spring. I was in love, and it was not one of those trivial crushes, it was one of the *grands amours*, the ones you may experience only three, or perhaps four, times in a lifetime. This was the first, and since everything about it was new, perhaps the greatest. Everything in me was centered on Hanne. Every morning I awoke and looked forward to going to school, where she would be. If she wasn't there, if she was ill or out of town, all meaning immediately drained out of everything, the rest of the day was just a question of endurance. For what? What was I waiting for while I was waiting? Not hot embraces and deep kisses at any rate, for a relationship in that sense simply did not exist. No, what I was waiting and lived for was the hand that lightly caressed my shoulder, it was the smile that lit up her face whenever she saw me or I said something funny, it was the embrace when we met as friends after school. The few seconds there, when I put my arms around her and felt her cheek against mine, the scent of her, the shampoo she used, its faint apple fragrance. She was attracted to me, I knew that, but she had such strict limits around her and what she felt she could do that there was never a question of us becoming a couple. To be honest, I was not sure that she was actually attracted to me, it might simply have been that she was flattered by all the attention she was receiving, and found it entertaining. Nevertheless, I had hopes, when I got home to my flat I interpreted everything she said and did in the course of a school day, and that either sent me into the deepest vale of misery or up onto the highest peak of elation – there was nothing in between.

At school I started passing notes to her. Little remarks, little greetings, little messages I had often as not composed the night before. As soon as she sent an answer I read it and wrote a reply, which immediately returned and I carefully monitored her reactions as she read it. If she failed to continue a topic I had started, everything went black for me. If she responded, my insides quivered and jingled as though I were a bell. Later the slips of paper were replaced by a notebook that shuttled between us, not too frequently, I didn't want her to get sick of it, but it must have been two or three times a day. I often asked her if she wanted to go to the cinema or a café with me, to which she answered each time, *you know that I can't*.

We had discussions in the breaks, a bit of politics, mostly religion, she was a Christian, I was fervently anti-Christian, and she passed on my arguments to the young leader of her congregation, and returned with his answer the next time. Her boyfriend was a member of the same congregation, and if I did not threaten their relationship directly I was at least a contrast to her other life. In any event, the space for our brief meetings during breaks, which did not even take place every day, was cautiously and imperceptibly expanded to encompass life outside school. We were friends, schoolmates, wasn't it only natural that we should have a cup of coffee in a café after school now and then? Wasn't it only natural that we should walk together to the bus now and then?

I lived for this. The quick glances, the tiny smiles, the light touches. And oh, her laughter! When I made her laugh!

I lived for it. But I wanted more, much, much more. I wanted to see her all the time, be with her all the time, to be invited to her house, to meet her parents, go out with her friends, go on holiday with her, take her home . . .

You know that I can't.

The cinema, that had associations with relationships and love, but there were other arrangements that did not, and it was to one of them I invited Hanne to one day in early February; it was a meeting for young political activists somewhere in the town center. I had seen a notice at school, and one morning I wrote to her and asked whether she wanted to go. After reading the note she glanced over, without a smile. Wrote something. Sent the notebook, I opened and read it. *Yes!* it said.

Yes! I thought.

Yes! Yes! Yes!

I was sitting on the sofa waiting when she knocked on the door at around six.

"Hi!" I said. "Do you want to come in while I put my togs on?"

"Sure," she said.

Her cheeks were red from the cold. She was wearing a white wooly hat pulled down to her eyes and a large white scarf wrapped around her neck.

"So this is where you live!" she said.

"Yes," I answered, opening the door to the living room.

"That's the living room. Then the kitchen's over there. And there's a bedroom upstairs. That's actually my grandfather's office. There," I said, nodding to the door on the other side.

"Isn't it lonely living on your own here?"

"No," I said. "Not at all. I like being alone. And I'm up in Tveit a lot of the time."

I put on my jacket, still adorned with the *Smile* button, a scarf, and boots.

"Just have to go to the bathroom, and we'll be off," I said. Closed the bathroom door behind me. Heard her singing to herself in a low voice. The walls were thin in this house, perhaps she was trying to drown out what was going on here, perhaps she just wanted to sing.

I put the toilet lid up and tugged out the frankfurter.

All at once I realized it would be impossible to pee while she was outside. The walls were thin, the hall so small. She would even be able to hear that I hadn't done anything.

Oh hell.

I squeezed as hard as I could.

Not a drop.

She was singing and walking back and forth.

What must she be thinking?

After thirty seconds I gave up, turned on the tap, and let the water run for a few moments, so that at least something had happened in here, then turned it off, opened the door and went out, to meet her embarrassed, downcast eyes.

"Let's be off then," I said.

The streets were dark, and the wind was blowing, as it did so often in Kristiansand in winter. We didn't say much on the way. Talked a bit about school, the people who went there, Bassen, Molle, Siv, Tone, Anne. For some reason she started talking about her father, he was so fantastic. He wasn't a Christian, she said. That surprised me. Had she become one on her own initiative? She said I would have liked her father. Would have? I wondered. Mm, I mumbled. He sounds nice. Laconic. What does laconic mean? she asked, her green eyes looking at me. Every time she did that I almost fell apart. I could smash all the windows around us, knock all the pedestrians to the ground and jump up and down on them until all signs of life were extinguished, so much energy did her eyes fill me with. I could also grab her around the waist and waltz down the street, throw flowers at everyone we met and sing at the top of my voice. Laconic? I said. It's hard to describe. A bit dry and matter-of-fact, perhaps exaggeratedly matter-of-fact, I said. Sort of understated. But here it is, isn't it?

A venue in Dronningens gate, it had said. Yes, this was it, the posters were on the door.

We went in.

The meeting room was on the first floor, chairs, a speaker's platform at the top end, an overhead projector next to it. A handful of young people, maybe ten, maybe twelve.

Beneath the window there was a large thermos, beside it a small bowl of cookies and a tall stack of plastic cups.

"Would you like some coffee?" I asked.

She shook her head and smiled.

"A cookie maybe?"

I poured myself some coffee, took a couple of cookies, and went back to her. We sat down in one of the rows at the very rear.

Five or six more people drifted in, and the meeting started. It was under the auspices of the AUF, the Young Socialists, a kind of recruitment drive. Anyway, the AUF policies were presented, and then there was some discussion of youth politics in general, why it was important to be committed, how much you could actually achieve, and as a little bonus, what you yourself could get out of it.

Had Hanne not been sitting beside me, one leg crossed over the other, so close that inside I was ablaze, I would have got up and left. Beforehand, I had imagined a more traditional arrangement, a packed hall, cigarette smoke, witty speakers, gales of laughter sweeping through the room, a kind of a tub-thumping Agnar Mykle–type event, with the same Mykle-like significance, young men and women who were keen and eager, who burned inside for socialism, this magical fifties word, but not this, boring boys in boring sweaters and hideous trousers talking to a small collection of boys and girls like themselves about boring and uninspiring things.

Who cares about politics when there are flames licking at your insides?

Who cares about politics if you are burning with desire for life? With desire for the living?

Not me at any rate.

After the three talks there was to be be a short interval and then a workshop and group discussions, we were informed. When the interval came I asked Hanne if we should go, sure, she said, and so we were out in the cold, dark night again. Inside, she had hung her jacket on the back of her chair, and the sweater that was revealed, thick and woolen, bulged in a way that had made me gulp a few times, she was so close to me, there was so little that separated us.

I said what I thought about politics on the way back. She said I had an opinion about everything, how did I have the time to learn about it all? As for herself, she hardly knew what she thought about anything, she said. I said I hardly knew anything either. But you're an anarchist, aren't you! she said. Where did you get that idea from? I barely know what an anarchist is. But you're a Christian, I said. How did that come about? Your parents aren't Christians. And your sister isn't either. Just you. And you don't have any doubts. Yes, she said, you're right there. But you seem to do a lot of brooding. You should live more. I'm doing my best, I said.

We stopped outside the flat.

"Where do you catch the bus?" I asked.

"Up there," she said, nodding up the road.

"Shall I go with you?" I offered.

She shook her head.

"I'll go on my own. I've got my Walkman with me."

"Okay," I said.

"Thanks for this evening," she said.

"Nothing much to thank me for," I answered.

She smiled, stretched up on her toes and kissed me on the mouth. I pulled her to me, tightly, she returned the embrace, then tore herself away. We briefly looked into each other's eyes, and she went.

That night I couldn't sit still, I walked around the flat, to and fro in my room, up and down the stairs, in and out of the downstairs rooms. I felt as if I were bigger than the world, as if I had everything inside me, and that now there was nothing left to strive for. Humanity was small, history was small, the Earth was small, yes, even the universe, which they said was endless, was small. I was bigger than everything. It was a fantastic feeling, but it left me restless because the most important thing in it was the longing, for what was going to be, not for what I did or had done.

How to burn up all that was inside me now?

I forced myself to go to bed, forced myself to lie without moving, not to move a muscle, however long it took before sleep came. Strangely enough, it came after only a few minutes, it snuck up on me like a hunter stalking an unsuspecting prey, and I would not have felt the shot, had it not been for a sudden twitch in one foot, which alerted me to my thoughts, which were in another world, something about standing on the deck of a boat while an enormous whale dived into the depths close by, which I saw despite the impossible position. It was the beginning of a dream, I realized, the arm of the dream, which dragged my ego in, where it transformed into its surroundings, for that was what happened when I twitched, I was a dream, the dream was me.

I closed my eyes again.

Don't move, don't move, don't move . . .

The next day was Saturday and a morning training session with the senior team.

Many people could not understand why I was playing with them. I was no good, after all. There were at least six, perhaps even seven or eight players in the junior team who were better than me. Nevertheless, only I and one other player, Bjørn, had been promoted to the senior team that winter.

I understood why.

The senior team had a new coach, he wanted to see all the juniors, so we each had a week at their training sessions. That meant three opportunities to showcase your abilities. All that autumn I had run a lot and was in such good shape that I had been selected to represent the school in the 1500 meters even though I had never done any track or field events before. So when it was my turn to train with the seniors and I presented myself on the snow-covered shale field near Kjøyta, I knew I had to run. It was my only chance. I ran and ran. In every sprint up the field I came first. I gave everything I had every time. When we started to play it was the same, I ran and ran, ran for everything, all the time, I ran like someone possessed, and after three sessions of that I knew it had gone well, and when the announcement came that I was promoted I was not surprised. But the others in the junior team were. Whenever I failed to control the ball, whenever I made a bad pass, they let me know, what the hell are you doing with the seniors? Why did they pick you?

I knew why, it was because I ran.

You just had to run.

After practice, when the others laughed at my studded belt in the changing room as usual, I got Tom to drive me up to Sannes. He dropped me off at the mailboxes, did a U-turn, and went back down while I walked up to the house. The sun was low in the sky, it was clear and blue, the snow sparkled all around me.

I hadn't given prior notice that I was coming, I didn't even know if Dad was at home.

I tentatively pressed the door. It was open.

Music streamed out of the living room. He was playing it loud, the whole house was full of it. It was Arja Saijonmaa singing the Swedish version of "Gracias a la vida."

"Hello?" I said.

The music was so loud he probably couldn't hear me, I thought, and took off my shoes and coat.

I didn't want to burst in on him, so I shouted "Hello!" again in the corridor outside the living room. No answer.

I went into the living room.

He was sitting on the sofa with his eyes closed, his head moving back and forth in time with the music. His cheeks were wet with tears.

I noiselessly retraced my steps, into the hall, where I snatched my coat and shoes and hurried out before there was a break in the music.

I ran all the way to the bus stop with my bag on my back. Fortunately a bus arrived just a few minutes later. During the four or five minutes it took to go to Solsletta I debated with myself whether to jump off and see Jan Vidar or go all the way to town. But the answer was in fact self-evident, I didn't want to be alone, I wanted to be with someone, talk to someone, think about something else, and at Jan Vidar's, with all the kindness his parents always showed me, I would be able to do that.

He wasn't at home, he had gone to Kjevik with his father, but they would be back soon, his mother said, wouldn't I like to sit in the living room and wait?

Yes, I would. And that is where I was sitting, with the newspaper spread out in front of me and a cup of coffee and a sandwich on the table, when Jan Vidar and his father arrived an hour later.

As evening approached I went back to the house, he wasn't there, and I didn't want to be either. Not only was it dirty and messy, which somehow the sunlight must have masked since it hadn't struck me earlier in the day, but the waterpipes were frozen, I discovered. And must have been frozen for quite a while; at all events, there was already a system with buckets and snow in place. There were some buckets in the toilet with snow that had melted to slush which he must have used to flush the toilet. And there was a bucket of slush by the stove which I presumed he melted in saucepans and used for cooking.

No, I did not want to be there. To lie in bed in the empty room in the empty house in the forest, surrounded by clutter and without any water?

He would have to sort that out by himself.

Where was he, anyway?

I shrugged, even though I was all alone, put on my coat and walked to the bus, through a landscape that lay as if hypnotized beneath the moonlight.

After the kiss outside my flat, Hanne withdrew somewhat, she would not necessarily respond to my notes at once now, nor would we automatically sit together chatting during the breaks. However, there was no logic, no system; one day, out of the blue, she agreed to one of my suggestions, yes, she could go with me to the cinema that night, we were to meet at ten to seven in the foyer.

When she came in through the door, looking for me, I had a taste of what it would be like to be in a relationship with her. Then all the days would be like this one.

"Hi," she said. "Have you been waiting long?"

I shook my head. I knew the situation was finely poised and I would have to tone down anything that might suggest to her that what we were doing was the sort of activity only couples indulged in. At all costs she must not regret being here with me. Must not look around uneasily to check if anyone we knew was nearby. No arm around her shoulders, no hand in hers.

The film was French and being shown in the smallest auditorium. It was my idea. *Betty Blue* it was called, Yngve had seen it and was wildly enthusiastic, now it was running in town and obviously I had to see it, it wasn't often we had quality films here, normally everything was American.

We sat down, took off our jackets, leaned back. There was something a little strained about her, wasn't there? As if she didn't really want to be here.

My palms were sweaty. All the strength in my body seemed to dissolve, to disperse and vanish inside me, I no longer had any energy.

The film began.

A man and a woman were screwing.

Oh no. No, no, no.

I didn't dare to look at Hanne, but guessed she felt the same, didn't dare to look at me, I gripped the arms of the chairs tight, longing for the scene to end.

But it didn't. The couple was screwing on the screen without let-up.

Jesus Christ.

Shit, shit, shit.

I was thinking about that for the rest of the film, and the fact that Hanne was presumably also thinking about it. When the film was over I just wanted to go home.

It was also the natural thing to do. Hanne's bus went from the bus station; I had to go in the opposite direction.

"Did you like it?" I asked, stopping outside the cinema.

"Ye-es," Hanne said. "It was good."

"Yes, it was," I said. "French, anyway!"

We had both taken French as our optional subject.

"Did you understand any of what they were saying, without reading the subtitles, I mean?" I asked.

"A tiny bit," she said.

Silence.

"Well, I should be getting home, I think. Thank you for coming this evening!" I said.

"See you tomorrow," she replied. "Bye."

I turned around to look at her, to see if she had turned around, but she hadn't.

I loved her. There was nothing between us, she didn't want to be my girlfriend, but I loved her. I didn't think of anything else. Even when I was playing soccer, the only place where I was completely spared from invasive thoughts, where it was all about being physically present, even there she appeared. Hanne should have been here to see me, I thought, that would have surprised her. Whenever something good happened, whenever one of my comments hit the mark and made people laugh, I thought, Hanne should have seen that. She should have seen Mefisto, our cat. Our house, the atmosphere there. Mom, she should have sat down for a chat with her. The river by the house, she should have seen that. And my records! She should have heard them, every single one. But our relationship was not going in this direction, she wasn't the one who wanted to enter my world, I was the one who wanted to enter hers. Sometimes I thought it would never happen, sometimes I thought one blast of wind and everything would change. I saw her all the time, not in a scrutinizing or probing way, that wasn't how it was, no, it was a glimpse here, a glimpse there, that was enough. Hope lay in the next time I would see her.

In the midst of this spiritual storm spring arrived.

Few things are harder to visualize than that a cold, snow-bound landscape, so marrow chillingly quiet and lifeless, will, within mere months, be green and lush and warm, quivering with all manner of life, from birds warbling and flying through the trees to swarms of insects hanging in scattered clusters in the air. Nothing in the winter landscape presages the scent of sun-warmed heather and moss, trees bursting with sap and thawed lakes ready for spring and summer, nothing presages the feeling of freedom that can come over you when the only white that can be seen is the clouds gliding across the blue sky above the blue water of the rivers gently flowing down to the sea, the perfect, smooth, cool surface, broken now and then by rocks, rapids, and bathing bodies. It is not there, it does not exist, everything is white and still, and if the silence is broken it is by a cold wind or a lone crow caw-cawing. But it is coming . . . it is coming . . . One evening in March the snow turns to rain, and the piles of snow collapse. One morning in April there are buds on the trees, and there is a trace of green in the yellow grass. Daffodils appear, white and blue anemones too. Then the warm air stands like a pillar among the trees on the slopes. On sunny inclines buds have burst, here and there cherry trees are in blossom. If you are sixteen years old all of this makes an impression, all of this leaves its mark, for this is the first spring you know is spring, with all your senses you know this is spring, and it is the last, for all coming springs pale in comparison with your first. If, moreover, you are in love, well, then . . . then it is merely a question of holding on. Holding onto all the happiness, all the beauty, all the future that resides in everything. I walked home from school, I noticed a snowdrift that had melted over the tarmac, it was as if it had been stabbed in the heart. I saw boxes of fruit under an awning outside a shop, not far away a crow hops off, I turned my head to the sky, it was so beautiful. I walked through the residential area, a rain shower burst, tears filled my eyes. At the same time I was doing all the things I had always done, going to school, playing soccer, hanging out with Jan Vidar, reading books, listening to records, meeting Dad now and then, a couple of times by chance, such as when I met him in the supermarket and he seemed embarrassed to be seen there, or else it was the artificiality of the situation he reacted to, the fact that we were both pushing shopping carts and completely unaware of each other's presence, afterward we each went our separate ways, or the day I was on my way to the house and he came driving down with a colleague in the passenger seat, who I saw was completely gray though still young, but as a rule we had planned it, either he popped by the flat and we ate at my grandparents', or up at the house where, for whatever reason, he avoided me as much as possible. He had relinquished his grip on me, so it seemed, though not entirely, he could still bite my head off, such as on the day I had both ears pierced, when we ran into each other in the hall, he said I looked like an idiot, that he couldn't understand why I wanted to look like an idiot and that he was ashamed to be my father.

Early one afternoon in March I heard a car parking outside my flat. I went down and peered out the window, it was Dad, he had a bag in his hand. He seemed cheery. I hurried up to my room, didn't want to be a busybody with my face glued to the glass. I heard him clattering around in the kitchen downstairs, put on a Doors cassette, which Jan Vidar had lent me, I had wanted to listen to it after reading *Beatles* by Lars Saabye Christensen. Fetched the pile of newspaper cuttings about the Treholt spy case, which I had collected as I was sure it would come up in the exams, and was reading them when I heard his footsteps on the stairs.

I glanced up at the door as he entered. He was holding what looked like a shopping list in his hand.

"Could you nip down to the shop for me?" he said.

"Okay," I replied.

"What's that you're reading?" he asked.

"Nothing special," I said. "Just some newspaper cuttings for Norwegian."

I got up. The rays from the sun flooded the floor. The window was open, outside there was the sound of birdsong, birds were twittering on the branches of the old apple tree a few meters away. Dad handed me the shopping list.

"Mom and I have decided to separate," he said.

"What?" I said.

"Yes. But it won't affect you. You won't notice any difference. Besides, you're not a child anymore and in two years you'll be moving to a place of your own."

"Yes, that's true," I said.

"Okay?" Dad asked.

"Okay," I said.

"I forgot to write potatoes. And perhaps we should have a dessert? Oh, by the way, here's the money."

He handed me a five-hundred-krone note, I stuffed it in my pocket and went down to the street, along the river, and into the supermarket. I wandered between the shelves, filling the shopping basket. Nothing of what Dad had said managed to emerge above this. They were going to separate, fine, well, let them. It might have been different if I had been younger, eight or nine, I thought, then it would have meant something, but now it was of no significance, I had my own life.

I gave him the groceries, he made lunch, we ate without saying much.

Then he left.

I was pleased he did. Hanne was going to sing in a church that evening, and she had asked whether I wanted to go and watch, of course I did. Her boyfriend would be there, so I didn't make my presence known, but when I saw her standing there, so beautiful and so pure, she was mine, no one else's feelings could hold a candle to those I cherished. Outside, the tarmac was covered with grime, the remaining snow lay in dips and hollows and up shadowy slopes on both sides of the road. She sang, I was happy.

On the way home I jumped off at the bus station and walked the last part through town, although that did nothing to diminish my restlessness, my feelings were so varied and so intense that I couldn't really deal with them. After arriving home I lay on my bed and cried. There was no despair in the tears, no sorrow, no anger, only happiness.

The next day we were alone in the classroom, the others had left, we both lingered, she perhaps because she wanted to hear what I thought of the concert. I told her that her singing had been fantastic, she was fantastic. She lit up as she stood packing her satchel. Then Nils came in. I felt ill at ease, his presence cast a shadow over us. We were together in French class, and he was different from the other boys in the first class, he hung out with people who were a lot older than himself in the town's pubs, he was independent in his opinions and his life as a whole. He laughed a lot, made fun of everyone, me included. I always felt small when he did that, I didn't know where to look or what to say. Now he started talking to Hanne. It was as if he were circling her, he looked into her eyes, laughed, drew closer, was standing very close to her now. I would not have expected anything else of him, that was not what upset me, it was the way Hanne reacted. She didn't reject him, laugh off his advances. Even though I was there she opened herself to him. Laughed with him, met his gaze, even parted her knees at the desk where she was sitting, when he went right up to her. It was as if he had cast a spell over her. For a moment he stood there staring into her eyes, the moment was tense and full of disquiet, then he laughed his malicious laugh and backed away a few steps, fired a disarming remark, raised a hand in salute to me and was gone. Wild with jealousy, I looked at Hanne, she had gone back to packing her bag, though not as if nothing had happened, she was enclosed inside herself now, in quite a different way.

What had gone on? Hanne, blond, beautiful, playful, happy, always with a bemused, often also naïve, question on her lips, what had she changed into? What was it that I had witnessed? A dark, deep, perhaps also passionate side, was that her? She had responded, it was only a glimpse, but nonetheless. Then, at that moment, I was nobody. I was crushed. I, with all the notes I had sent her, all the discussions I'd had with her, all my simple hopes and childish desires, I was nothing, a shout on the playground, a rock in scree, the hooting of a car horn.

Could I do this to her? Could I have this effect on her?

Could I have this effect on *anyone*?

No.

For Hanne, I was a nobody and would remain so.

For me, she was everything.

I attempted to make light of what I had seen, also in my attitude to her, by continuing just as before, pretending that things were fine. But they were not, I knew that, I was never in any doubt. The only hope I had was that she shouldn't know. But what actually was this world I was living in? What actually were these dreams I believed in?

Two days later, when the Easter holiday started, Mom came home.

Dad had implied that the divorce was done and dusted. But when Mom came home, I could see that was not the way she saw things. She drove straight up to the house, where Dad was waiting for her, and they were there for two days while I wandered around town trying to kill time.

On Friday she parked her car outside my flat. I spotted her from the window. She had a large bruise around one eye. I opened the door.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "But that's not what happened. I fell. I fainted, I do that once in a while, you see, and this time I hit the edge of the table upstairs. The glass table."

"I don't believe you," I said.

"It's true," she said. "I fainted. There's no more to it than that."

I stepped back. She came into the hall.

"Are you divorced now?" I asked.

She put her suitcase down on the floor, hung her light-colored coat on the hook.

"Yes, we are," she said.

"Are you sorry?"

"Sorry?"

She looked at me with genuine surprise, as if the thought had never struck her as a possibility.

"I don't know," she said. "Sad maybe. And you? How will you be?"

"Fine," I said. "So long as I don't have to live with Dad."

"We talked about that too. But first I need a cup of coffee."

I followed her into the kitchen, watched while she put the water on to boil, sat on a chair, bag in hand, rummaged for her pack of cigarettes, she had started smoking Barclay in Bergen, evidently, took one out and lit up.

She looked at me.

"I'm moving up to the house. We two will live there. And then Dad can live here. I assume I'll have to buy him out, don't know quite how I'll manage that, but don't worry, I'll find a way."

"Mhm," I mumbled.

"And you?" she asked. "How are you? It's really good to see you, you know."

"Same here," I said. "I haven't seen you since Christmas. And so many things have happened."

"Have they?"

She got up to fetch an ashtray from the cupboard, took the packet of coffee, and placed it on the counter as the water began to hiss. It sounded a bit like the sea as you get close.

"Yes," I said.

"Good things by the look of it?" she smiled.

"Yes," I said. "I'm in love. Hook, line, and sinker."

"Lovely. Anyone I know?"

"Who would you know? No, someone from the class. That bit is perhaps not very smart, but that's how it is. It's not exactly something you can plan, is it."

"No," she agreed. "What's her name?"

"Hanne."

"Hanne," she said, looking at me with a faint smile. "When do I get to meet her?"

"That's the big question. We're not going out together. She has someone else."

"It's not so easy then."

"No."

She sighed.

"No, it isn't always easy. But you look good. You look happy."

"I've never been so happy. Never."

For some insane reason tears welled up in my eyes when I said that. It wasn't just that my eyes glazed over, which often happened when I said something that moved me, no, tears were coursing down my cheeks.

I smiled.

"They're really tears of happiness," I said. And then I let out a sob and had to turn away. Fortunately the water was boiling by then and I could take it off the stove, add coffee, press down on the lid, bang the pot on the burner a few times and pour two cups.

As I put them on the table I was fine again.

* * *

Six months later, one evening toward the end of July, I got off the last bus at the stop by the waterfall. Over my shoulder I was carrying a seaman's bag, I had been to Denmark for a soccer training camp, and after that, without going home first, to a class party in the skerries. I was happy. It was a few minutes past ten thirty, what darkness there was had fallen and lay like a grayish veil across the countryside. The waterfall roared beneath me. I walked uphill and along the road bordered with curbstones. Below, the meadow sloped toward a row of deciduous trees growing by the river bank. Above was the old farm with the tumbledown barn gaping open from the road. The lights were off in the main farmhouse. I walked around the bend to the next house, the guy who lived there was sitting in the living room with the TV on. A truck was rumbling along on the other side of the river. The sound reached me after a time lag; I didn't hear the change of gears as it sped up the small incline until it was at the top. Above the treetops, against the pale sky, I saw two bats, and I was reminded of the badger I often bumped into on my way home from the last bus. It used to come down the road beside the path of the stream as I was climbing. For safety's sake I always held a stone in each hand. Sometimes I encountered it on the road too, when it would stop and look at me before scuttling back with its distinctive jog-trot.

I stopped, threw down my bag, put one foot on the curb and lit a cigarette. I didn't want to go home right away, I wanted to drag the time out for a few moments. Mom, with whom I had been living all spring and half the summer, was in Sørbøvåg now. She still had not bought out my father and he had stuck to his rights and would be living there until school started again, together with his new girlfriend, Unni.

Over the forest came a large plane, it banked slowly, straightened up, and a second later passed overhead. The lights on the wingtips were flashing and the undercarriage was being lowered. I followed the plane until it was out of sight, and all that remained was the roar, though weaker and weaker, until it too was gone, just before it landed in Kjevik. I liked planes, always had. Even after living for three years under a flight path I still looked up with pleasure.

The river glinted in the summer darkness. The smoke from my cigarette did not rise, it drifted sideways and lay flat in the air. Not a breath of wind. And now the roar of the plane was gone, there was not a sound. Yes, there was, from the bats which soared and plummeted wherever their roaming took them.

I stuck out my tongue and stubbed out my cigarette on it, threw the butt down the slope, slung the bag over my shoulder, and continued on my way. The lights were on in the house where William lived. Above the approaching bend the tops of the deciduous trees were so close together that the sky was not visible. A few frogs or toads were croaking down in the marshlike area between the road and the river. Then I glimpsed movement at the bottom of the hill. It was the badger. It hadn't seen me and was trotting across the tarmac. I headed for the other side of the road to allow it a free passage, but it looked up and stopped. How elegant it was with its black-and-white striped chic snout. Its coat was gray, its eyes yellow and sly. I completed my maneuver, stepped over the curb and stood on the slope below. The badger hissed, but continued to look at me. It was clearly assessing the situation because the other times we had met it had turned at once and run back. Now it resumed its jog-trot and to my great delight disappeared up the hill. It was only then, as I stepped back onto the road, that I heard the faint sounds of music that must have been there the whole time.

Was it coming from our house?

I hurried down the last part of the hill and looked up the slope where the house stood, all lights ablaze. Yes, that was where the music was coming from. Presumably through the open living room door, I thought, and realized there was a party going on up there because a number of dark, mysterious figures were gliding around the lawn in the grayish light of the summer night. Usually I would have followed the stream to the west of the house, but with the party up there, and the place full of strangers, I didn't want to crash in from the forest, and accordingly followed the road all the way around.

There were cars all the way along the drive, parked half on the grass, and beside the barn and in the yard as well. I stopped at the top of the hill to collect my thoughts. A man in a white shirt walked across the yard without seeing me. There was a buzz of voices in the garden behind the house. At the kitchen table, which I could see through the window, were two women and a man, each with a glass of wine in front of them, they were laughing and drinking.

I took a deep breath and walked toward the front door. A long table had been set up in the garden close to the forest. It was covered with a white cloth that shimmered in the heavy darkness beneath the treetops. Six or seven people were sitting at the table, among them Dad. He looked straight at me. When I met his gaze he got up and waved. I unhitched the bag, put it beside the doorstep and went over to him. I had never seen him like this before. He was wearing a baggy white shirt with embroidery around the V-neck, blue jeans, and light-brown leather shoes. His face, tanned dark from the sun, had a radiant aura. His eyes shone.

"So, there you are, Karl Ove," he said, resting his hand on my shoulder.

"We thought you would have been here earlier. We're having a party, as you can see. But you can join us for a while, can't you? Sit yourself down!"

I did as he said and sat down at the table, with my back to the house. The only person I had seen before was Unni. She too was wearing a white shirt or blouse or whatever it was.

"Hi, Unni," I said.

She sent me a warm smile.

"So this is Karl Ove, my youngest son," Dad said, sitting down on the opposite side of the table, next to Unni. I nodded to the other five.

"And this, Karl Ove, is Bodil," he said, "my cousin."

I had never heard of any cousin called Bodil and studied her, probably in a rather quizzical way because she smiled at me and said:

"Your father and I were together a lot when we were children."

"And teenagers," Dad said. He lit a cigarette, inhaled, blew the smoke out with a contented expression on his face. "And then we have Reidar, Ellen, Martha, Erling, and Åge. Colleagues of mine, all of them."

"Hi," I said.

The table was covered with glasses, bottles, dishes, and plates. Two large bowls piled with shrimp shells left no doubt as to what they had been eating. The colleague my father had mentioned last, Åge, a man of around forty, with large, thinly framed glasses was observing me while sipping a glass of beer. Putting it down, he said:

"I gather you've been at a training camp?"

I nodded.

"In Denmark," I said.

"Where in Denmark?" he asked.

"Nykøbing," I said.

"Nykøbing, on Mors?" he queried.

"Yes," I said. "I think so. It was an island in the Limfjord."

He laughed and looked around.

"That's where Aksel Sandemose came from!" he declared. And then he looked straight at me again. "Do you know the name of the law he devised, inspired by the town you visited?"

What was this? Were we at school or what?

"Yes," I said, looking down. I didn't want to articulate the word; I didn't want to tell him.

"Which is?" he insisted.

As I raised my eyes to meet his, they were as defiant as they were embarrassed.

"Jante," I said.

"You got it!" he said.

"Did you have a good time there?" Dad asked.

"Yes, I did," I said. "Great fields. Great town."

Nykøbing: I had walked back to the school where we were lodged, after spending the whole evening and night out with a girl I had met, she had been crazy about me. The four others from the team who had been with me had gone back earlier, it was just me and her, and as I walked home, drunker than usual, I had stopped outside one of the houses in the town. All the detail was gone, I couldn't remember leaving her, couldn't remember going to the house, but once there, standing by this door, it was as if I came to myself again. I took the lit cigarette out of my mouth, opened the letter box, and dropped it on the hall floor inside. Then everything went fuzzy again, but somehow I must have found my way to the school, got in, and gone to bed, to be woken for breakfast and training three hours later. When we were sitting under one of the enormous trees around the training area chatting, I suddenly remembered the cigarette I had thrown in through the door. I got up, chilled deep into my soul, booted a ball up the field and began to give chase. What if it had started to burn? What if people had died in the fire? What did that make me?

I had succeeded in repressing it for several days, but now, sitting at the long table in the garden on my first evening home, fear reared up again.

"Which team do you play for, Karl Ove?" one of the others asked.

"Tveit," I said.

"Which division are you in?"

"I play for the juniors," I said. "But the seniors are in the fifth division."

"Not exactly IK Start then," he said. From his dialect I deduced that he came from Vennesla, so it was easy to come back with a retort.

"No, more like Vindbjart," I said. Vindbjart from Vennesla. Second Division, group three.

They laughed at that. I looked down. It felt as if I had already attracted too much attention. But when, immediately afterward, I let my gaze wander to Dad, he was smiling at me.

Yes, his eyes were shining.

"Wouldn't you like a beer, Karl Ove?" he said.

I nodded.

"Certainly would," I replied.

He scanned the table.

"Looks as if we've run out here," he said. "But there's a crate in the kitchen. You can take one from there."

I got up. As I made for the door two people came out. A man and a woman, entwined. She was wearing a white summer dress. Her bare arms and legs were tanned. Her breasts heavy, stomach and hips ample. Her eyes, in the somehow sated face, were gentle. He, wearing a light blue shirt and white trousers, had a slight paunch, but was otherwise slim. Even though he was smiling and his inebriated eyes seemed to be floating, it was the stiffness of his expression that I noticed. All the movement had gone, just the vestiges remained, like a dried-up riverbed.

"Hi!" she said. "Are you the son?"

"Yes," I said. "Hello."

"I work with your father," she said.

"Nice," I said, and luckily did not have to say anything more, for they were already on their way. As I went into the hall the bathroom door opened. A small, chubby, dark-haired woman with glasses stepped out. She barely glanced at me, cast her eyes down, and walked past me into the house. Discreetly I sniffed her perfume before following her. Fresh, floral. In the kitchen were the three people I had seen through the window when I arrived. The man, also around forty, was whispering something in the ear of the woman to his right. She smiled, but it was a polite smile. The other woman was rummaging through a bag she had on her lap. She looked up at me as she placed an unopened packet of cigarettes on the table.

"Hello," I said. "Just come for a beer."

There were two full crates stacked against the wall by the door. I grabbed a bottle from the top one.

"Anyone got an opener?" I asked.

The man straightened up, patted his thighs.

"I've got a lighter," he said. "Here."

He made to throw it underarm, at first slowly, so I could prepare myself to catch it, then, with a jerk, the lighter came flying through the air. It hit the door frame and clunked to the floor. But for that I would not have known how to resolve the situation because I didn't want any condescension because I let him open the bottle for me, but now he had taken the initiative and failed, so the situation was different.

"I can't open it with a lighter," I said. "Perhaps you could do it for me?"

I picked up the lighter and handed it to him with the bottle. He had round glasses, and the fact that half of his scalp was hairless, while the hair on the other half rose too high, like a wave at the edge of an endless beach on which it would never break, lent him a somewhat desperate appearance. That, at any rate, was the effect he had on me. The tips of his fingers, now tightening around the lighter, were hairy. From his wrist hung a watch on a silver chain.

The beer cap came off with a dull pop.

"There we are," he said, passing me the bottle. I thanked him and went into the living room, where four or five people were dancing, and out into the garden. A little gathering of people stood in front of the flagpole, each with glass in hand, looking across the river valley as they chatted.

The beer was fantastic. I had drunk every evening in Denmark, and all the previous evening and night, so it would take a lot for me to get drunk now. And I didn't want that either. If I got drunk I would slip into their world, in a sense, allow it to swallow me up whole and no longer be able to see the difference, I might even begin to get a taste for the women in it. That was the last thing I wanted.

I surveyed the landscape. Looked at the river flowing in a gentle curve around the grass-covered headland where the soccer goals were, and between the tall deciduous trees growing along the bank, which were now black against the dark-gray, shiny surface of the water. The hills that rose on the other side and then undulated down toward the sea were also black. The lights from the clusters of houses lying between the river and the ridge shone out strong and bright, while the stars in the sky – those close to the land grayish, those higher up a bluish hue – were barely visible.

The group by the flagpole were laughing at something. They were only a few meters from me, but their faces were still indistinct. The man with the slight paunch emerged from around the corner of the house, he appeared to glide. The confirmation photograph of me had been taken there, in front of the flagpole, between Mom and Dad. I took another swig and went toward the far end of the garden where no one else seemed to have found their way. I sat there with legs crossed, by the birch. The music was more distant, the voices and laughter too, and the movements from my vantage point even less distinct. Like apparitions, they floated in the darkness around the illuminated house. I thought of Hanne. It was as if she had a place inside me. As if she existed as a real location where I would always be. That I could go there whenever I wanted felt like an act of mercy. We had sat talking on a rock by the sea at a class party the previous night. Nothing happened, that was all there was. The rock, Hanne, the bay with the low islets, the sea. We had danced, played games, gone down the steps from the quay, and swum in the dark. It had been wonderful. And the wonder of it was indelible, it had stayed with me all of the next day, and it was in me now. I was immortal. I got up, aware of my own power in every cell of my body. I was wearing a gray T-shirt, calf-length military green trousers, and white Adidas basketball shoes, that was all, but it was enough. I was not strong, but I was slim, supple, and as handsome as a god.

Could I give her a call?

She had said she would be home this evening.

But it had to be close to twelve by now. And although she didn't mind being woken up, the rest of the family would probably take a different view.

What if the house had burned down? What if someone had been burned to death?

Oh, shit, shit, shit.

I started to walk across the lawn as I tried to push the thought to the back of my mind, ran my eyes along the hedge, over the house, the roof, to the big lilac bushes at the end of the lawn whose heavy pink blossoms you could smell right down by the road, took the last swig from the bottle as I walked, saw a couple of flushed women's faces, they were sitting on the steps by the door with their knees together and cigarettes between their fingertips, I recognized them from the table and gave a faint smile as I passed, on through the door into the living room, then the kitchen, which was empty now, took another bottle, went upstairs and into my room where I sat down in the chair under the window, leaned back, and closed my eyes.

Mm.

The speakers in the living room were directly beneath me, and sound traveled so easily in this house that I heard every note loud and clear.

What were they playing?

Agnetha Fältskog. The hit from last summer. What was it again?

There was something undignified about the clothes Dad was wearing tonight. The white shirt or blouse or whatever the hell it was. He had always, as far as I could remember, dressed simply, appropriately, a touch conservatively. His wardrobe consisted of shirts, suits, jackets, many in tweed, polyester trousers, corduroy, cotton, lambswool or wool sweaters. More a senior master of the old variety than a smock-clad schoolteacher of the new breed, but not old-fashioned, that wasn't where the difference lay. The dividing line was between soft and hard, between those who try to break down the distance and those who try to maintain it. It was a question of values. When he suddenly started wearing arty embroidered blouses, or shirts with frills, as I had seen him wearing earlier this summer, or shapeless leather shoes in which a Sami would have been happy, an enormous contradiction arose between the person he was, the person I knew him to be, and the person he presented himself as. For myself, I was on the side of the soft ones, I was against war and authority, hierarchies, and all forms of hardness, I didn't want to do any sucking up at school, I wanted my intellect to develop more organically; politically I was way out on the left, the unequal distribution of the world's resources enraged me, I wanted everyone to have a share of life's pleasures, and thus capitalism and plutocracy were the enemy. I thought all people were of equal value and that a person's inner qualities were always worth more than their outer appearance. I was, in other words, for depth and against superficiality, for good and against evil, for the soft and against the hard. So shouldn't I have been pleased then, that my father had joined the ranks of the soft? No, for I despised the way the soft expressed themselves, the round glasses, corduroy trousers, foot-formed shoes, knitted sweaters, that is, because along with my political ideals I had others, bound up with music, which in a very different way had to do with looking good, cool, which in turn was related to the times in which we were living, it was what had to be expressed, but not the top ten chart aspect, not the pastel colors and hair gel, for that was about commercialism, superficiality, and entertainment; no, the music that had to be expressed was the innovative but tradition-conscious, deeply felt but smart, intelligent but simple, showy but genuine kind that did not address itself to everyone, that did not sell well, yet expressed a generation's, my generation's, experiences. Oh, the new. I was on the side of the new. And Ian McCulloch of Echo & the Bunnymen, he was the ideal in this respect, him above all. Coats, military jackets, sneakers, dark sunglasses. It was miles away from my father's embroidered blouse and Sami shoes. On the other hand, this could not be what it was about because Dad belonged to a different generation, and the thought that this generation should start dressing like Ian McCulloch, start listening to British indie music, take any interest in what was happening on the American scene, discover REM's or Green on Red's debut album and perhaps eventually include a bootlace tie in their wardrobe was the stuff of a nightmare. What was more important was that the embroidered blouse and the Sami shoes were not him. And that he had slipped into this, entered this formless, uncertain, almost feminine world, as though he had lost a grip on himself. Even the hard tone in his voice had gone.

I opened my eyes and turned to look through the window at the table on the edge of the forest. Only four people were there now. Dad, Unni, the person she had called Bodil, and one more. At the back of the lilac bush, out of sight from them, but not from me, a man was peeing while staring across to the river.

Dad raised his head and directed his gaze up at the window. My heart beat faster, but I did not move, for if in fact he had seen me, which was not at all certain, it would be like admitting that I was spying. Instead I waited for a few moments, until I was sure that he had noticed that I had seen him watching, if he had seen that is, then withdrew and sat at my desk.

It was no good spying on Dad, he always noticed, he saw everything, had always seen everything.

I swigged some beer. A cigarette would have been good now. He had never seen me smoking, and perhaps it would become an issue if he did. On the other hand, had he not just told me to help myself to beer?

The desk, my property for as long as I could remember, orange like the bed and the cupboard doors, had been in my old room, was, apart from a rack of cassettes, completely clear. I had cleaned everything up at the end of the school year and had hardly been here, except to sleep. I put down the bottle and whirled the rack around a few times while reading the titles written in my own childish capitals on the spines. BOWIE – HUNKY DORY. LED ZEPPELIN – I. TALKING HEADS – 77. THE CHAMELEONS – SCRIPT OF THE BRIDGE. THE THE – SOUL MINING. THE STRANGLERS – RATTUS NORVEGICUS. THE POLICE – OUTLANDOS D'AMOUR. TALKING HEADS – REMAIN IN LIGHT. BOWIE –

SCARY MONSTERS (And super creeps). ENO BYRNE – MY LIFE IN THE BUSH OF GHOSTS. U2 – OCTOBER. THE BEATLES – RUBBER SOUL. SIMPLE MINDS – NEW GOLD DREAM.

I got to my feet, grabbed the guitar leaning against the small Roland Cube amplifier and strummed some chords, put it back, looked out over the garden again. They were still there, under the darkness of the treetops, which the two kerosene lamps did not dispel, but did soften, in that their faces took on the color of the light. Giving them dark, coppery complexions.

Bodil, she must be the daughter of Dad's father's second brother, whom I had never met. For some reason he had been banished from the family, long ago. I heard about him by chance for the first time a couple of years ago, there was a wedding in the family, and Mom mentioned that he was also there, and that he made a passionate speech. He was a lay preacher in the Pentecostal Church in town. A mechanic. Everything about him was different from his two brothers, even the name. When they, after consultation with their imposing mother, and upon entering the academic world and university, had decided to change their name from the standard Pedersen to the rather less standard Knausgaard, he had refused. Perhaps that is what caused the break?

I went out of the room and downstairs. As I came into the hall, Dad was in the room with the wardrobes, the light was off and he was staring at me.

"Is that where you are?" he said. "Wouldn't you like to join us?"

"Yes," I said. "Of course. I've just been having a look around."

"It's a great party," he said.

He twisted his neck and patted some hair into place. He had always had that mannerism, but there was something about his shirt and those trousers, which were so profoundly alien to him, that suddenly made it seem effeminate. As though this quirk had detected the conservative, reserved manner in which he had always dressed, and neutralized it.

"Everything alright with you, Karl Ove?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "Fine. I'll come out and join you."

A gust of wind stirred the air as I emerged. The leaves on the forest edge trembled, almost reluctantly, as if waking from a deep sleep.

Or was it just that he was drunk, I thought. Because I wasn't used to that either. My father had never been a drinker. The first time I saw him in an inebriated state was one evening only two months before when I visited him and Unni in the flat in Elvegaten, and was served fondue, another thing which he would never have considered remotely possible in his own home on a Friday night. They had been drinking before I arrived, and although he was kindness itself, it was threatening nonetheless; not directly, of course, because, sitting there, I didn't fear him, but indirectly because I could no longer read him. It was as if all the knowledge I had acquired about him through my childhood, and which enabled me to prepare for any eventuality, was, in one fell swoop, invalid. So what was valid?

As I turned and walked toward the table I caught Unni's eye, she smiled and I returned the smile. Another gust of wind, stronger this time. The leaves on the tall bushes by the barn steps rustled. The lightest branches of the trees above the table swayed up and down.

"How are you doing?" Unni asked as I went over to them.

"Fine," I said. "But I'm a bit tired. Think I'll crash soon."

"Will you be able to sleep in this racket?"

"Oh, that won't bother me!"

"Your father spoke so warmly about you this evening," Bodil said, leaning across the table. I didn't know what to say, so I just gave a cautious smile.

"Isn't that right, Unni?"

Unni nodded. She had long, completely gray hair although she was only in her early thirties. Dad had been the supervisor during her teacher training. She was wearing flared green slacks and a similar smocklike affair to the one Dad had on. A necklace of wooden beads hung around her neck.

"We read one of your essays this spring," she said. "You didn't know perhaps? I hope you don't mind that I was allowed to see it. He was so proud of you."

Impossible. What the hell was she doing reading one of my essays?

But I was also flattered, that went without saying.

"You're like your grandfather, Karl Ove," Bodil said.

"My grandfather?"

"Yes. Same shape of head. Same mouth."

"And you're Dad's cousin, right?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "You'll have to come and see us one day. We live in Kristiansand too, you know!"

I didn't know. Before tonight I didn't even know she existed. I should have said that. But I didn't. Instead I said that was nice, and asked what she did, and after a while if she had any children. That was what she was talking about when Dad returned. He sat down and looked at her, straining to tune into the topic of conversation, but then he leaned back, one foot resting on his knee, and lit a cigarette.

I got up.

"Are you going to leave now that I've come?" he asked.

"No. Just going to get something," I said. Opened my bag by the doorstep, took out the cigarettes, put one in my mouth on the way back, paused for a second to light up, so that I could already be smoking when I sat down. Dad said nothing. I could see that he had considered saying something, for a twinge of disapproval appeared around his mouth, but after a brief glare it was gone, as though he had told himself he was no longer like that.

That at least was what I thought.

"*Skål*," Dad said, raising his glass of red wine to us. Then he looked at Bodil, and added: "*Skål* to Helene."

"*Skål* to Helene," Bodil said.

They drank, looking into each other's eyes.

Who the hell was Helene?

"Haven't you got anything to toast with, Karl Ove?" Dad asked.

I shook my head.

"Take that glass," he said. "It's clean. Isn't it, Unni?"

She nodded. He passed me the bottle of white wine and poured. We said skål again.

"Who's Helene?" I asked, looking at them.

"Helene was my sister," Bodil said. "She's dead now."

"Helene was. . . well, we were very close when I was growing up. We were together all the time," Dad said. "Right up to our teenage years. Then she fell ill."

I took another sip. The couple from earlier appeared from behind the house, the buxom woman in the white dress and the man with the slight paunch. Two other men followed, one of whom I recognized as the man from the kitchen.

"So this is where you are," said the man with the paunch. "We were wondering. You're not taking very good care of your guests, I have to say." He patted my father's shoulder. "It's you we want to see, now that we've come all this way."

"That's my sister," Bodil whispered to me. "Elisabeth. And her husband, Frank. They live down in Ryen, you know, by the river. He's an estate agent."

Had these people my father knew always been around us?

They sat down at the table and things immediately livened up. And what, when I came, had been faces devoid of meaning or substance and which, consequently, I had only regarded in terms of age and type, more or less as if they had been animals, a bestiary of forty-year-olds, with all that that entailed, lifeless eyes, stiff lips, pendulous breasts and quivering paunches, wrinkles and folds, I now saw to be individuals, for I was related to them, the blood that was in their veins was in mine, and who they were suddenly became important.

"We were talking about Helene," Dad said.

"Helene, yes," the man called Frank said. "I never met her. But I've heard a lot about her. It was a great shame."

"I sat at her deathbed," Dad said.

I gaped. What was all this?

"I adored her."

"She was the most beautiful girl you could ever imagine," Bodil said to me, still in a whisper.

"And then she died," Dad said. "Ohh."

Was he crying?

Yes, he was crying. He was sitting there with his elbows on the table and his hands folded in front of his chest as the tears ran down his cheeks.

“And that was in the spring. It was spring when she died. Everything in flower. Ohh. Ohh.”

Frank lowered his eyes and twirled the glass between his fingers. Unni placed her hand on Dad’s arm. Bodil looked at them.

“You were so close to her,” she said. “You were the most precious thing she had.”

“Ohh. Ohh,” my father cried, closing his eyes and covering his face with his hands.

A gust of wind blew across the yard. The overhanging flaps of the table cloth fluttered. A napkin went flying across the lawn. The foliage above us swished. I lifted my glass and drank, shuddered as the acidic taste hit my palate, and once again recognized that clear, pure sensation that arose with approaching intoxication, and the desire to pursue it that always followed.

Part 2

Having sat for some months in a basement room in Åkeshov, one of Stockholm's many satellite towns, writing what I hoped would be my second novel, with the Metro a few meters from the window, such that every afternoon after darkness fell I saw the train cars passing through the woods like a row of illuminated rooms, at the end of 2003 I finally found an office in the center of Stockholm. It was owned by one of Linda's friends, and it was perfect. In fact it was a studio, with a kitchenette, a small shower and a sofa bed in addition to a desk and bookshelves. I moved my things, that is, a pile of books and the computer between Christmas and the new year, and started work there on the first weekday of the new year. My novel was actually finished, a strange hundred-and-thirty-page affair, a short tale about a father and his two sons who were out fishing for crabs one summer's night, which led into a long essay about angels, which in turn led into a story about one of the sons, now an adult, and some days he spent on an island where he lived alone and wrote and self-harmed.

The publishing house had said they would publish it, and I was tempted, but also enormously unsure, not least after having had Erik Thure read it. He called me late one evening, both his mood and choice of words peculiar, as though he had had a few drinks so as to be able to say what he had to say, which was simple, it's no good, it isn't a novel. You have to tell a story, Karl Ove! he said several times. You have to tell a story! I knew he was right and that was what I started doing on this, my first day of work in 2004, as I sat at my new desk looking at the blank screen. After grafting for half an hour I leaned back and glanced at the poster behind the desk, it was from a Peter Greenaway exhibition I had been to in Barcelona with Tonje many years ago, some time in my former life. It showed four pictures: one of what I had long thought of as a cherub peeing, one of a bird's wing, one of a 1920s pilot, and one of a corpse's hand. Then I looked out the window. The sky above the hospital on the other side of the road was cloudless and blue. The low sun glistened on the panes, signs, railings, car hoods. The frozen breath rising from passersby on the pavement made them look as if they were on fire. All tightly wrapped up in warm clothes. Hats, scarves, mittens, thick jackets. Hurried movements, set faces. My eyes wandered across the flooring. It was parquet and relatively new, the reddish-brown tone at odds with the flat's otherwise fin-de-siècle style. I noticed that the knots and grain, perhaps two meters from the chair where I was sitting, formed an image of Christ wearing a crown of thorns.

This was not something I reacted to, I merely registered it, for images like this are found in all buildings, created by irregularities in the floors, walls, doors, and moldings – here a damp patch in a ceiling looks like a dog running, there a worn-through coat of paint on a doorstep looks like a snow-covered valley with a mountain range in the distance above which clouds appear to be gushing forth – but it must have set something going in me because when I got up ten minutes later and went over to the kettle and filled it with water I suddenly remembered something that had happened one evening a long time ago, deep in my childhood, when I had seen a similar image on the water in a news item about a missing fishing vessel. In the second it took to fill the pot, I saw our living room before me, the teak television cabinet, the shimmer of isolated snowflakes against the darkening hillside outside the window, the sea on the screen, the face that appeared in it. With the images came the atmosphere from that time, of spring, of the housing estate, of the seventies, of family life as it was then. And with the atmosphere, an almost uncontrollable longing.

At that moment the telephone rang. It startled me. Surely no one had my number here.

It rang five times before giving up. The hiss of the kettle boiling grew louder and I thought as so often before that it sounded as if something was approaching.

I unscrewed the lid of the coffee tin, put two spoonfuls in my cup, and poured in the water, which rose up the sides, black and steaming, then I got dressed. Before going out I stood in such a way that I could see the face in the wooden flooring. And it really was Christ. The face half-averted, as though in pain, eyes downcast, the crown of thorns on his head.

The remarkable thing was not that the face should be visible here, nor that I had once seen a face in the sea in the mid-seventies, the remarkable thing was that I had forgotten it and now remembered. Apart from one or two isolated events that Yngve and I had talked about so often they had almost assumed biblical proportions, I remembered hardly anything from my childhood. That is, I remembered hardly any of the events in it. But I did remember the rooms where they took place. I could remember all the places I had been, all the rooms I had been in. Just not what happened there.

I went into the street with the cup in my hand. A slight feeling of unease arose within me at seeing it out here, the cup belonged indoors, not outdoors; outdoors, there was something naked and exposed about it, and as I crossed the street I decided to buy a coffee at the 7-Eleven the following morning, and use their cup, made of cardboard, designed for outdoor use, from then on. There were a couple of benches outside the nearby hospital, and I walked up to them, ensconced myself on the ice-covered slats, lit a cigarette, and glanced down the street. The coffee was already lukewarm. The thermometer outside the kitchen window at home had shown minus twenty that morning, and even though the sun was shining it could not be much warmer now. Minus fifteen, perhaps.

I took the mobile phone from my pocket to see if anyone had called. Well, not anyone: we were expecting a child in a week's time, so I was prepared for Linda to call at any moment and say things were on the move.

At the intersection by the top of the gentle incline the traffic lights began to tick. Soon after, the street below was free of cars. Two middle-aged women came out of the entrance below me and lit up. Wearing white hospital coats, they squeezed their arms against their sides and took small, stabbing steps to keep warm. To me they looked like some strange kind of duck. Then the ticking stopped, and the next moment cars shot out of the hilltop shadow like a pack of baying hounds into the sunlit street below. The studded tires lashed the tarmac. I put the mobile back in my pocket, wrapped my hands around the cup. The steam from the coffee rose slowly and mingled with the breath from my mouth. On the school playground that lay squashed between two blocks of flats twenty meters up from my office the shouts of children suddenly fell quiet, it was only now that I noticed. The bell had rung. The sounds here were new and unfamiliar to me, the same was true of the rhythm in which they surfaced, but I would soon get used to them, to such an extent that they would fade into the background again. You know too little and it doesn't exist. You know too much and it doesn't exist. Writing is drawing the essence of what we know out of the shadows. That is what writing is about. Not what happens there, not what actions are played out there, but the *there* itself. There, that is writing's location and aim. But how to get there?

This was the question I asked myself, sitting in a suburb of Stockholm drinking coffee, my muscles contracting with the cold and the cigarette smoke dissolving into the vast mass of air above me.

The shouts from the school playground came at specific intervals and were one of the many rhythms that traversed the district everyday, from the time the traffic began to get heavy in the morning until, as if emerging on the other side, it began to lighten in late afternoon. The workmen gathering in cafés and bakeries for breakfast at half past six, with their protective boots and strong, grimy hands, their folding rulers tucked into trouser pockets and their constantly ringing mobile phones. The less easily identifiable men and women who filled the streets in the following hour, whose soft well-dressed exteriors said no more about them than that they spent their days in some office, and could equally well have been lawyers as TV journalists or architects, could equally well have been advertising copy writers as clerks in an insurance company. The nurses and orderlies the buses disgorged in front of the hospital, mostly middle-aged, mostly women, with the occasional young man, in groups that increased in size as eight o'clock approached, then decreased until in the end there was only a pensioner with a wheelie bag alighting onto the pavement during the quiet mornings when mothers and fathers began to appear with their strollers and the street traffic was dominated by vans, trucks, pickups, buses, and taxis.

At this time, with the sun flashing on the windows on the opposite side of the street from the office, and with footsteps no longer, or at least seldom, echoing down the stairwell outside, groups of nursery children barely taller than sheep walked past, all wearing identical high visibility jackets, often serious-faced, as if spellbound by the adventurous nature of the enterprise, while the seriousness of the nannies, who towered like shepherds above them, felt instead to be verging on boredom. It was also during this period that the noise of all the work going on in the vicinity had enough space around it to come to the fore in one's consciousness, whether it be a Stockholm Parks and Gardens employee blasting leaves from the lawns or pruning a tree, the Highways Department scraping a layer of tarmac from the street or a landlord totally renovating a block of flats nearby. Then a wave of white-collar workers and business people surged into the streets and filled all the restaurants to the rafters: it was lunchtime. When the wave, equally suddenly, retreated, it left a void which resembled that of the morning, yet had a character of its own, because though the pattern was repeated it was in reverse order: the scattered schoolchildren who passed my window now were on their way home and there was something unrestrained and boisterous about them, whereas when they had walked past on their way to school in the morning they still bore the silent imprint of sleep and the innate wariness we feel toward things that have not yet begun. The sun was shining now on the wall just inside the window, in the corridor the first clomping footsteps could be heard from the stairwell outside, and at the bus stop by the main hospital entrance the crowd of waiting passengers was bigger every time I looked out. More cars were in the street now, the number of pedestrians along the pavement leading to the high-rises was growing. This mounting activity culminated at about five o'clock, after that the area was quiet until the nightlife started at about ten, with crowds of raucous young men and shrill young women, and again at about three when it was over. At around six the buses started operating again, the traffic picked up, people streamed from gateways and stairways, a new day had begun.

So strictly regulated and demarcated was life here that it could be understood both geometrically and biologically. It was hard to believe that this could be related to the teeming, wild, and chaotic conditions of other species, such as the excessive agglomerations of tadpoles or fish spawn or insect eggs where life seemed to swarm up from an inexhaustible well. But it was. Chaos and unpredictability represent both the conditions of life and its decline, one impossible without the other, and even though almost all our efforts are directed toward keeping decline at bay, it does not take more than one brief moment of resignation to be thrust into its light, and not, as now, in shadow. Chaos is a kind of gravity, and the rhythm you can sense in history, of the rise and fall of civilizations, is perhaps caused by this. It is remarkable that the extremes resemble each other, in one sense at any rate, for in both immense chaos and a strictly regulated, demarcated world the individual is nothing, life is everything. In the same way that the heart does not care which life it beats for, the city does not care who fulfills its various functions. When everyone who moves around the city today is dead, in a hundred and fifty years, say, the sound of people's comings and goings, following the same old patterns, will still ring out. The only new thing will be the faces of those who perform these functions, although not that new because they will resemble us.

I threw the cigarette end on the ground and drank the last drop of the coffee, already cold.

I saw life; I thought about death.

I got up, rubbed my hands on my thighs a few times, and walked down to the intersection. The passing cars left tails of swirling snow behind them. A huge articulated truck came down the hill with its chains clanking, it braked and just managed to shudder to a halt before the crosswalk as the lights changed to red. I always had a bad conscience whenever vehicles had to stop because of me, a kind of imbalance arose, I felt as though I owed them something. The bigger the vehicle, the worse the guilt. I tried to catch the driver's eye as I crossed so that I could nod to restore the balance. But his eyes were following his hand, which he had raised to take something down from inside the cab, perhaps a map because the truck was Polish. He didn't see me, but that didn't matter, in which case braking couldn't have bothered him to any great extent.

I stopped at the front entrance, tapped in the code and opened the door, found my key while taking the few steps up to the first floor where my office was situated. The elevator droned and I unlocked the door as quickly as I could, darted in, and closed it behind me.

The sudden heat made the skin on my hands and face tingle. Outside, one of the numerous ambulances drove past with siren wailing. I put on some water for another cup of coffee and while I was waiting for it to boil, I skimmed through what I had written so far. The dust hovering in the broad, angled shafts of light anxiously followed every tiny current in the air. The neighbor in the adjacent flat had begun to play piano. The kettle hissed. What I had written was not good. It wasn't bad but it wasn't good either. I went to the cupboard, unscrewed the lid of the coffee tin, put two spoonfuls of coffee in the cup, and poured the water, which rose up the sides, black and steaming.

The telephone rang.

I put the cup down on the desk and let the phone ring twice before I answered.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hi, it's me."

"Hi."

"I was just wondering how things were going. Are you managing okay down there?"

She sounded happy.

"I don't know. I've only been here a few hours," I said.

Silence.

"Are you coming home soon?"

"You don't need to hassle me," I said. "I'll come when I come."

She didn't answer.

"Shall I buy something on the way?" I asked at length.

"No, I've done the shopping."

"Okay. See you then."

"Good. Bye. Hold on. Cocoa."

"Cocoa," I said. "Anything else?"

"No, that's all."

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye."

After putting down the receiver I remained in the chair for a long while, sunk in something that was not thoughts, or feelings, more a kind of atmosphere, the way an empty room can have an atmosphere. When I absentmindedly raised the cup to my lips I drank a mouthful, the coffee was lukewarm. I nudged the mouse to remove the screen saver and check the time. Six minutes to three. Then I read the text I'd written again, cut and pasted it into my jottings file. I'd been working on a novel for five years, and so whatever I wrote could not be lackluster. And this was not radiant enough. Yet the solution lay in the existing text, I knew that, there was something in it I was after. It felt as if everything I wanted was there, but in a form that was too compressed. The germ of an idea that had set the text in motion was particularly important, namely that the action took place in the 1880s while all the characters and tangibles were from the 1980s. For several years I had tried to write about my father, but had gotten nowhere, probably because the subject was too close to my life, and thus not so easy to force into another form, which of course is a prerequisite for literature. That is its sole law: everything has to submit to form. If any of literature's other elements are stronger than form, such as style, plot, theme, if any of these overtake form, the result suffers. That is why writers with a strong style often write bad books. That is also why writers with strong themes so often write bad books. Strong themes and styles have to be broken down before literature can come into being. It is this breaking down that is called "writing." Writing is more about destroying than creating. No one knew that better than Rimbaud. The remarkable thing about him was not that he arrived at this insight at such a disturbingly young age but that he applied it to life as well. For Rimbaud everything was about freedom, in writing as in life, and it was because freedom was paramount that he could put writing behind him, or perhaps even had to put writing behind him, because it too became a curb on him that had to be destroyed. Freedom is destruction plus movement. Another writer to realize this was Aksel Sandemose. His tragedy was that he was only able to perform the latter part in literature, not in life. He destroyed, and never moved on from what he had destroyed. Rimbaud went to Africa.

A sudden subconscious impulse made me look up, and I met the gaze of a woman. She was sitting in a bus opposite the window. Night had begun to fall and the sole source of light in the room was the desk lamp, which must have attracted attention from outside as it would a moth. When she realized that I had seen her she averted her gaze. I got up and went over to the window, loosened the blinds, and lowered them as the bus moved off. It was time to go home. I had said "soon" and that was an hour ago.

She had been in such a cheery mood when she rang.

A pang of unhappiness went through me. How could I possibly have met her anxiety and hope with annoyance?

I stood stock-still in the middle of the floor, as if the pain radiating from my body might disappear of its own accord. But it didn't. It had to be removed with action. I would have to make amends. The very thought was a help, not just through its promise of reconciliation, but also through the practical follow-up it demanded, for how could I make amends? I switched off the computer, slid it into my bag, rinsed the cup and placed it in the sink, pulled out the loose electrical cable, turned off the light, and donned hat and coat in the moonlight filtering through the cracks in the blinds, all the time picturing her in my mind's eye in the large flat.

The cold stung my face as I stepped into the street. I pulled the hood of my parka over my hat, bent my head to shield my eyes from the tiny snow particles whirling through the air, and started to walk. On good days I would take Tegnérgatan down to Drottninggatan which I followed to the Hötorg area, from where I walked up the steep hill to St. Johannes' Church and down again to Regeringsgatan, where our flat was. This route was full of shops, shopping malls, cafés, restaurants, and cinemas and was always packed. The streets there teemed with people of all types. In the brightly lit shop windows there was the most varied assortment of goods; inside, escalators circled like wheels inside enormous, mysterious machinery, elevators glided up and down, TV screens showed beautiful people moving like apparitions, in front of hundreds of tills, lines formed, dwindled and reformed, dwindled and reformed in patterns as unpredictable as the clouds in the sky above the city's rooftops. On good days I loved this, the stream of people, with their more or less attractive faces, whose eyes expressed a certain state of mind, could wash through me as I watched them. On less good days, however, the same scenario had the opposite effect, and if possible I would choose a different route, one more off the beaten track. As a rule it was along Rådmansgatan, then down Holländergatan to Tegnérgatan where I crossed Sveavägen and followed Döbelnsgatan up to St. Johannes' Church. This route was dominated by private houses, most people you met were types who hurried through the streets alone, and the few shops and restaurants that existed were not especially select. Driving schools with windows veiled in exhaust fumes, secondhand shops with boxes of comics and LPs outside, laundries, a hairdresser's, a Chinese restaurant, a couple of seedy pubs.

This was such a day. With head bent to avoid the gusting snow I walked through the streets, which between the towering walls and snow-covered roofs of apartment buildings, resembled narrow valleys, occasionally I peered in through the windows I passed: the deserted reception area of a small hotel, the yellow fish swimming around against the green background of the fish tank; large advertisements for a firm that produced signs, brochures, stickers, cardboard stands; the three black hairdressers tending to their three black customers in the African hair salon, one of whom craned around to see two kids sitting on the stairs at the back of the shop and laughing, and then jerked his head back with barely concealed impatience.

On the other side of the street was a park called Observatorielunden. The trees appeared to grow from the top of a steep mound there, and since a dim light spread from the row of buildings beneath, it looked as though it were the crowns of the trees that bestowed the darkness. So dense was the canopy that the lights at the top of the observatory, built some time in the 1700s, in the city's heyday, were not visible. A café was there now, and the first time I went it struck me how much closer to our times the eighteenth century seemed here in Sweden than in Norway, perhaps especially in the countryside where a Norwegian farmhouse from, let's say 1720, is really ancient while all the splendid buildings in Stockholm from the same period give the impression of being almost contemporary. I recalled my maternal grandmother's sister Borghild – who lived in a little house above the very farm from which the family originated – sitting on the veranda and telling us that houses had been there from the sixteenth century right through to the 1960s, when they had been demolished to make way for more modern constructions. This sensational revelation contrasted with the everyday experience of coming across a building from that era here. Perhaps this was all about closeness to the family, and hence to me? That the past in Jølster was relevant to me in quite a different way from Stockholm's past? That must be it, I thought, and closed my eyes briefly to rid myself of the feeling that I was an idiot, which this train of thought had produced, since it was so obviously based on an illusion. I had no history, and so I made myself one, much as a Nazi party might in a satellite suburb.

I continued down the street, rounded the corner and came into Holländergatan. With its deserted sidewalks and two lifeless rows of snowed-in cars, squeezed between two of the city's most important streets, Sveavägen and Drottninggatan, it had to be the backstreet to end all backstreets. I shifted the bag into my left hand while grabbing my hat with my right and shaking off the snow that had accumulated on it, ducking at the same time to avoid hitting my head on the scaffolding that had been erected over the sidewalk. High above, tarpaulins thrashed in the wind. As I emerged from the tunnel-like structure a man stepped in front of me. He did this in such a way that I was forced to stop.

"Cross over to the other sidewalk," he said. "There's a fire here. For all I know, there may be something explosive inside."

He put a mobile phone to his ear, then lowered it.

"I'm serious," he said. "Cross over to the other side."

"Where's the fire?" I asked.

"There," he said, pointing to a window ten meters away. The top part was open and smoke was seeping out. I crossed into the street so that I could see better while at least to some degree heeding his strong appeal for me to keep my distance. The room inside was illuminated by two floodlights and full of equipment and cables. Paint buckets, toolboxes, drills, rolls of insulation, two stepladders. Amid all this the smoke curled slowly, groping its way.

"Have you called the fire department?" I asked.

He nodded.

"They're coming."

Again he raised his mobile to his ear, only to lower it again the next moment.

I could see the smoke forming new patterns inside and gradually filling the room while the man paced frenetically to and fro on the other side of the street.

"I can't see any flames," I said. "Can you?"

"It's a smoldering fire," he said.

I stood there for a few minutes but as I was cold and nothing appeared to be happening I continued homeward. By the traffic lights in Sveavägen I heard the sirens of the first fire engines which then came into view at the top of the hill. All around me heads turned. The sirens' promise of speed stood in strange contrast to the way the large vehicles slowly crept down the hill. At that moment the lights went green and I crossed over to the supermarket.

That night I couldn't sleep. Usually I fell asleep within minutes, regardless of how tumultuous the day had been, or how unsettling the prospects of the new day, and apart from a period of sleepwalking, I always slept soundly till morning. But that night I already knew as I laid my head on the pillow and closed my eyes that sleep was not going to come. Wide awake, I lay listening to the sounds of the city rising and falling in sync with the human activity outside, and to those emanating from the flats above and below us, which died away bit by bit until only the gurgling of the air-conditioning remained, as my mind darted back and forth. Linda was asleep beside me. I knew that the child she bore inside also influenced her dreams, which were worryingly often about water: enormous waves crashing down on distant beaches she was walking along; the flat flooding with water sometimes completely filling it, either trickling down walls or rising from sinks and toilets; lakes in new places in town, such as under the railway station where her child might be in a left-luggage locker she couldn't reach, or simply disappeared from her side while she had her hands full of bags. She also had dreams in which the child she gave birth to had an adult face, or it turned out there wasn't a child at all and all that flowed from her during the birth was water.

My dreams, what were they like?

Not once had I dreamed about the baby! Now and then that would give me a bad conscience since, if you regarded the currents in those parts of your conscious mind without volition as more indicative of the truth than those controlled by volition, which I suppose I did, it became so obvious that the significance of expecting a baby was nothing special for me. On the other hand, nothing was. After the age of twenty I had hardly ever dreamed about anything that had a bearing on my life. It was as though in dreams I had not grown up, I was still a child surrounded by the same people and places I had been surrounded by in childhood. And even though the events that occurred there were new every night, the feeling they left me with was always the same. The constant feeling of humiliation. Often it could take several hours after waking before that feeling had left my body. Moreover, when conscious, I hardly remembered anything from my childhood, and the little I did remember no longer stirred anything in me, which of course created a kind of symmetry between past and present, in a strange system whereby night and dreams were connected with memory, day and consciousness with oblivion.

Only a few years ago it had been different. Until I moved to Stockholm I had felt there was a continuity to my life, as if it stretched unbroken from childhood up to the present, held together by new connections, in a complex and ingenious pattern in which every phenomenon I saw was capable of evoking a memory which unleashed small landslides of feeling in me, some with a known source, others without. The people I encountered came from towns I had been to, they knew other people I had met, it was a network, and it was a tight mesh. But when I moved to Stockholm this flaring up of memories became rarer and rarer, and one day it ceased altogether. That is, I could still remember; what happened was that the memories no longer stirred anything in me. No longing, no wish to return, nothing. Just the memory, and a barely perceptible hint of an aversion to anything that was connected with it.

This thought made me open my eyes. I lay quite still looking at the rice lamp hanging like a miniature moon from the ceiling in the darkness above the bedstead. This really was not anything to regret. For nostalgia is not only shameless, it is also treacherous. What does anyone in their twenties really get out of a longing for their childhood years? For their own youth? It's like an illness.

I turned and looked at Linda. She was lying on her side, facing me. Her belly was so big it was becoming hard to associate it with the rest of her body even though it too had swollen. Only yesterday she had been standing in front of the mirror laughing at the thickness of her thighs.

The baby was lying with its head resting in the pelvis, and would lie like that through to the birth. In the maternity unit they had said it was quite normal for a baby not to move for long periods. Its heart was beating, and soon, when it felt the time was ripe it would, in cooperation with the body that it had outgrown, start the birth itself.

I got up carefully and went into the kitchen for a glass of water. Outside the entrance to Nalen concert hall there were several groups of older people standing around and chatting. Once a month dance nights were arranged for them, and they came in droves, men and women between the ages of sixty and eighty, all in their finest clothes, and when I saw them lining up, excited and happy, it made my soul ache. One person in particular had made quite an impression on me. Wearing a pale yellow suit, white tennis shoes, and a straw hat, he first appeared, a bit unsteady on his feet, at the intersection by David Bagares gate one evening in September, but it wasn't so much the clothes that made him stand out from the others, it was more the presence he radiated, for while I perceived the others to be part of a collective, older men out to have a good time with their wives, so alike that the individual left your mind the second your gaze shifted, he was alone here, even when he was outside chatting with others. But the most conspicuous thing about him was the willpower he demonstrated, which in this company was unique. When he strode into the crowded foyer it struck me that he was searching for something, and that he would not find it there, or anywhere else. Time had passed him by, and with it, the world.

Outside, a taxi pulled onto the curb. The nearest group closed their umbrellas and good-humoredly shook the snow off them before getting in. Farther down the street a police car drove up. The blue light was on, but not the siren, and the silence lent the scene a sense of the ominous. After that, another followed. They both slowed as they passed and when I heard them stop outside I put the glass of water down on the kitchen counter and went to the window in the bedroom. The police cars were parked one behind the other by US VIDEO. The first was a standard police car, the second a van. The rear door was being opened as I arrived. Six police officers ran to the shop front and disappeared into the building, two remained in front of the patrol car waiting. A man in his fifties walking past did not so much as cast a glance at the police. I sensed that he had been planning to go in, but had gotten cold feet when he saw the police outside. All day long a regular stream of men went in and out of the door to US VIDEO, and having lived here for close to a year, in nine cases out of ten I could pick out who was about to go in and who would walk by. They invariably had the same body language. They walked along as they normally did, and when they opened the door it was with a movement intended to appear as a natural extension of their last. So intent were they on not looking around that this was what you noticed. Their attempts to appear normal radiated from them. Not only when they entered but also when they reemerged. The door opened and without pausing they seemed to glide out onto the pavement and into this gait that was supposed to give the impression that they were merely continuing a walk started a couple of blocks away. They were men of all ages, from sixteen to seventy or so, and they came from all layers of society. Some seemed to go there as if this was their sole errand, others on their way home from work or early in the morning after a night out. I had not been there myself, but I knew very well what it was like: the long staircase down, the deep, murky basement room with the counter where you paid, the row of black booths with TV monitors, the multitude of films to choose from, all according to your sexual preferences, the black, synthetic leather chairs, the rolls of toilet paper on the adjacent bench.

August Strindberg once claimed in his profound, deranged seriousness that the stars in the sky were peepholes in a wall. Occasionally I was reminded of that when observing the endless stream of souls descending the stairs to masturbate in the darkness of the cellar booths as they watched the illuminated screens. The world around them was closed off, and one of the few ways they could look out was through these boxes. They never told anyone what they saw, it belonged to the unmentionable; it was incompatible with everything a normal life entailed, and most of those who went there were normal men. But it was not the case that the unmentionable was reserved for the world above, it also applied down below, at any rate if one were to judge from their behavior, where no one spoke, no one looked at the others, the solipsistic paths they all trod, from the stairs, to shelves of films, to counter, to booth, and back to the stairs. The fact that there was something essentially laughable about this, this row of men sitting with their pants round their knees, each in his own booth, grunting and groaning and pulling at their penises while watching films of women having intercourse with horses or dogs, or men with lots of other men, could not have escaped their attention, but neither could they acknowledge it, since true laughter and true desire are incompatible, and it was desire that had driven them here. But why here? All the films you could see in US VIDEO were also available on the net, and could therefore be viewed in absolute isolation without the risk of being seen by others. So there must have been something in the unmentionable situation itself that they sought. Either the lowness, the vileness, or the squalidness of it, or the closed-off-ness. I had no idea, this was foreign territory for me, but I couldn't help thinking about it, for every time I gazed in that direction someone was going down to the cellar.

It was not unusual for the police to show up, but they generally appeared as a result of the demonstrations that were regularly staged outside. They left the place itself alone, to the enormous disgruntlement of the demonstrators. All they could do was stand there with their banners, shout slogans, and boo every time someone went in or came out, under the watchful eye of the police who stood shoulder to shoulder with shields, helmets and batons, keeping them under surveillance.

"What's that?" Linda asked from behind me.

I turned and looked at her.

"Are you awake?"

"More or less," she said.

"I can't get to sleep," I said. "And there are police cars outside. Go back to sleep."

She closed her eyes. Down on the street, the door opened. Two policemen came into view. Behind them were two more. They were holding a man between them, so tight that his feet were off the ground. It looked brutal, but presumably it was necessary because the man's trousers were around his knees. When they came out they let go of him and he fell onto all fours. Two more officers came out. The man got to his feet and pulled up his trousers. One of the officers cuffed his hands behind his back, another escorted him into the car. As the other policemen began to get in, two of the shop employees came onto the street. They stood with their hands in their pockets watching the vehicles starting up, driving down the street, and disappearing from view as their hair slowly went white with the falling snow.

I padded into the living room. The light from the streetlamps hanging from cables above the street shone dimly against the walls and floor. I watched TV for a while. I kept thinking it might worry Linda if she woke up and came in. Any irregularities or any suggestion of excess could remind her of the manic periods her father went through when she was growing up. I switched it off, took one of the art books from the shelf above the sofa instead, and sat flicking through it. It was a book about Constable I had just bought. Mostly oil sketches, studies of clouds, countryside, sea.

I didn't need to do any more than let my eyes skim over them before I was moved to tears. So great was the impression some of the pictures made on me. Others left me cold. That was my only parameter with art, the feelings it aroused. The feeling of inexhaustibility. The feeling of beauty. The feeling of presence. All compressed into such acute moments that sometimes they could be difficult to endure. And quite inexplicable. For if I studied the picture that made the greatest impression, an oil sketch of a cloud formation from September 6, 1822, there was nothing there that could explain the strength of my feelings. At the top, a patch of blue sky. Beneath, whitish mist. Then the rolling clouds. White where the sunlight struck them, pale-green in the least shadowy parts, deep-green and almost black where they were at their densest and the sun was farthest away. Blue, white, turquoise, greenish-black. That was all. The text describing the picture said Constable had painted it in Hampstead at noon, and that a certain Mr. Wilcox had doubted the accuracy of the date as there was another sketch made on the same day between twelve o'clock and one that showed quite a different, more rain-laden sky, an argument which was rendered invalid by London weather reports for this day, as they could easily have described the cloud cover in both pictures.

I had studied history of art and was used to describing and analyzing art. But what I never wrote about, and this is all that matters, was the experience of it. Not just because I couldn't, but also because the feelings the pictures evoked in me went against everything I had learned about what art was and what it was for. So I kept it to myself. I wandered around the Nationalgalleri in Stockholm or the Nasjonalgalleri in Oslo or the National Gallery in London and looked. There was a kind of freedom about this. I didn't need to justify my feelings, there was no one to whom I had to answer and no case to answer. Freedom, but not peace, for even though the pictures were supposed to be idylls, such as Claude's archaic landscapes, I was always unsettled when I left them because what they possessed, the core of their being, was inexhaustibility and what that wrought in me was a kind of desire. I can't explain it any better than that. A desire to be inside the inexhaustibility. That is how I felt this night as well. I sat leafing through the Constable book for almost an hour. I kept flicking back to the picture of the greenish clouds, every time it called forth the same emotions in me. It was as if two different forms of reflection rose and fell in my consciousness, one with its thoughts and reasoning, the other with its feelings and impressions, which, even though they were juxtaposed, excluded each other's insights. It was a fantastic picture, it filled me with all the feelings that fantastic pictures do, but when I had to explain why, what constituted the "fantastic," I was at a loss to do so. The picture made my insides tremble, but for what? The picture filled me with longing, but for what? There were plenty of clouds around. There were plenty of colors around. There were enough particular historical moments. There were also plenty of combinations of all three. Contemporary art, in other words, the art which in principle ought to be of relevance to me, did not consider the feelings a work of art generated as valuable. Feelings were of inferior value, or perhaps even an undesirable by-product, a kind of waste product, or at best, malleable material, open to manipulation. Naturalistic depictions of reality had no value either, but were viewed as naïve and a stage of development that had been superseded long ago. There was not much meaning left in that. But the moment I focused my gaze on the painting again all my reasoning vanished in the surge of energy and beauty that arose in me. *Yes, yes, yes,* I heard. *That's where it is. That's where I have to go.* But what was it I had said yes to? Where was it I had to go?

It was four o'clock. So it was still night. I couldn't go to my office at night. But at half past four, surely that was morning?

I got up and went into the kitchen, put a plate of meatballs and spaghetti in the microwave, because I hadn't eaten since lunch the day before, went into the bathroom and showered, mostly to pass the minutes it took for the food to heat, dressed, found myself a knife and fork, poured a glass of water, fetched the plate, sat down to eat.

In the streets outside everything was still. The hour before five was the only time of day this city slept. In my earlier life, during the twelve years I had lived in Bergen I used to stay up at night as often as I could. I never reflected on this, it was just something I liked and did. It had started as a student ideal, grounded in a notion that in some way night was associated with freedom. Not in itself but as a response to the nine-to-four reality which I, and a couple of others, regarded as middle-class and conformist. We wanted to be free, we stayed up at night. Continuing with this had less to do with freedom than a growing need to be alone. This, I understood now, I shared with my father. In the house where we lived he had a whole studio apartment to himself and he spent more or less every evening there. The night was his.

I rinsed the plate under the tap, put it in the dishwasher and went into the bedroom. Linda opened her eyes when I stopped by the bed.

"You're such a light sleeper," I said.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Half past four."

"Have you been up all night?"

I nodded.

"I think I'll head for the office. Is that all right?"

She pulled herself half up.

"*Now?*"

"I can't sleep anyway," I said. "I might just as well spend the time working."

"Love . . ." she said. "Come and lie down."

"Don't you hear what I'm saying?" I said.

"But I don't want to be alone here," she said. "Can't you go to the office in the early morning?"

"It's early morning now," I said.

"It's not, it's the middle of the night," she said. "And, in fact, I could give birth at any moment. It could happen in an hour, you know that."

"Bye," I said, closing the door after me. In the hall I put on my coat and hat, grabbed the bag with my computer and left. Cold air rose from the snow-covered pavement. At the end of the street a snowplow was on its way. The weighty metal blade thundered over the tarmac. She always wanted to hold me back. Why was it so important for me to be there when she was asleep and didn't notice my presence anyway?

The sky hung over the rooftops, black and heavy. But it had stopped snowing. I began to walk. The snowplow passed me with engine roaring, chains clattering, blade scraping. A mini-inferno of noise. I turned to go up David Bagares gate, deserted and still, toward Malmskillnadsgatan, where your eyes were drawn to the restaurant initials KGB. Outside the entrance to the old people's home, I stopped. It was true what she had said. The birth could start at any moment. And she didn't like being alone. So what was I doing here? What was I going to do in the office at half past four in the morning? Write? Do today what I had not succeeded in doing for the last five years?

What an idiot I was. It was our child she was expecting, my child, she shouldn't have to go through that alone.

I headed back. Putting down my bag and removing my coat, I heard her voice from the bedroom.

"Is that you, Karl Ove?"

"Yes," I said and went in to see her. She gave me a quizzical look.

"You're right," I said. "I wasn't thinking. Sorry I just took off that way."

"It's me who should apologize," she said. "Of course you have to go to work!"

"I'll do it later," I said.

"But I don't want to hold you back," she said. "I'll be fine here. I promise. Just go. I'll call you if there is anything."

"No," I said, lying down beside her.

"But Karl Ove . . ." She smiled.

I liked her saying my name, I always had.

"Now you're saying what I said while I'm saying what you said. But I know you *really* mean the opposite."

"This is getting too complicated for me," I said. "Hadn't we better just go to sleep? Then we'll have breakfast together before I go."

"Okay," she said, snuggling up to me. She was as hot as an oven. I ran my hand through her hair and kissed her lightly on the mouth. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back.

"What did you say?" I asked.

She didn't answer, just took my hand and placed it on her stomach.

"There," she said. "Did you feel it?"

The skin suddenly bulged beneath my palm.

"Oooh," I said, lifting it up to see. Whatever was pressing up against the stomach, making it bulge, whether a knee, a foot, an elbow or a hand, was now shifting. It was like watching something move under the surface of otherwise tranquil water. Then it was gone again.

"She's impatient," Linda said. "I can feel it."

"Was that a foot?"

"Mm."

"It's as if she was testing to see if she could get out that way," I said.

Linda smiled.

"Did it hurt?"

She shook her head.

"I can feel it, but it doesn't hurt. It's just weird."

"I can believe that."

I snuggled up to her and placed my hand on her stomach again. The mailbox in the hall banged. A truck drove past outside, it must have been big, the windows vibrated. I closed my eyes. As all the thoughts and images of consciousness began to move in directions over which I had no control, and I seemed to be lying there watching them, like a kind of lazy sheepdog of the mind, I knew sleep was around the corner. It was just a question of lowering myself into its dark vaults.

I was woken by Linda clattering about in the kitchen. The clock on the mantelpiece said five to eleven. Shit. The workday was gone.

I dressed and went into the kitchen. Steam was hissing from the little coffeepot on the stove. The table was set with food and juice. Two slices of toast lay on a plate. Two more jumped up in the toaster beside them.

"Did you sleep well?" Linda asked.

"Like a log," I said and sat down. I spread butter over the toast, it melted at once and filled the tiny pores on the surface. Linda took the pot and switched off the burner. Her bulging stomach made it look as if she were constantly leaning back, and if she did something with her hands she seemed to be doing it on the other side of an invisible wall.

The sky outside was gray. But there must have still been some snow on the roofs because the room was lighter than usual.

She poured coffee into the two cups she had set out and placed one in front of me. Her face was swollen.

"Are you feeling worse?"

She nodded.

"I'm all blocked up. And I've got a bit of a temperature."

She sat down heavily, poured milk into her coffee.

"Typical," she said. "I have to get sick now of all times. When I need my energy most."

"The birth may hold off," I said. "Your body won't make a move until it's completely ready."

She glared at me. I swallowed the last morsel and poured juice in my glass. If there was one thing I had learned over recent months it was that everything you heard about pregnant women's fluctuating and unpredictable moods was true.

"Don't you understand that this is a disaster?" she said.

I met her gaze. Took a swig of juice.

"Yes, yes, of course," I said. "But it'll be alright. Everything will be alright."

"Of course it will," she said. "But that's not what this is about. This is about my not wanting to be sick and feeble when I have to give birth."

"I understand that," I said. "But you won't be. We're still a few days away."

We ate in silence.

Then she looked at me again. She had fantastic eyes. They were grayish-green, and occasionally, most often when she was tired, she squinted. The photograph in the poetry collection she had published showed her squinting, and the vulnerability it revealed that the self-confidence in her facial expression countered, but did not override, had once utterly hypnotized me.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm just nervous."

"You don't need to be," I said. "You're as well prepared as it's possible to be."

And she really was. She had devoted herself fully to the task at hand; she had read piles of books, bought a kind of meditation cassette she listened to every night, on which a voice mesmerically repeated that pain was not dangerous, that pain was good, that pain was not dangerous, that pain was good, and we had gone to a class together and been shown around the maternity ward where the birth was scheduled to take place. She had prepared herself for every session with the midwife by writing down questions in advance, and she noted down with the same conscientiousness all the curves and measurements she got from her in a diary. She had, furthermore, sent a sheet of her preferences to the maternity ward, as requested, on which she said she was nervous and needed a lot of encouragement, but at the same time she was strong and wanted to give birth without any anesthetics.

This cut me to the quick. I had of course been to the maternity ward, and even though they had tried to create a homey atmosphere, with sofas, carpets, pictures on the walls and CD players in the room where the birth would take place, as well as a TV room and a kitchen where you could cook your own food, and where you had your own room with an en suite after the birth, there was no denying another woman had given birth in the same room shortly before, and even though it had been washed immediately afterward, the bed linen changed and fresh towels put out, this had happened so infinitely many times that a faint metallic smell of blood and intestines hung in the air nonetheless. In the nice, cool room that was to be ours for twenty-four hours after the birth another couple with a newborn had been lying in the same bed. What for us was new and life-changing, was an endless cycle for those employed at the hospital. The midwives always had responsibility for several births happening at the same time, they were forever going in and out of a number of rooms where a variety of women were howling and screaming, yelling and groaning, all according to whichever phase of the birth they were in, and this went on continually, day and night, year in, year out, so if there was one thing they could not do, it was take care of someone with the intensity of expectations that Linda's letter expressed.

She looked out the window, and I followed her gaze. On the roof of the opposite building, perhaps ten meters from us, was a man with a rope around his waist shoveling snow.

"They're crazy in this country," I said.

"Don't you do that in Norway?"

"No, are you out of your mind?"

The year before I arrived here a boy had been killed by a lump of ice falling from a roof. Since then all roofs were cleared of snow from almost the moment it fell, with dire consequences; when mild weather came virtually all pavements were cordoned off with red-and-white tape for a week. Chaos everywhere.

"But all the fear keeps employment levels high," I said, before devouring the slice of bread, getting up and drinking the last gulp of coffee. "I'm off now."

"Okay," Linda said. "Feel like renting some films on the way back?"

I put the cup down and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Of course. Anything?"

"Yes, you choose."

I brushed my teeth. As I went into the hall to get ready, Linda followed me.

"What are you going to do today?" I asked, taking the coat from the cupboard with one hand while winding the scarf round my neck with the other.

"Don't know," she said. "Go for a walk in the park maybe. Have a bath."

"You okay?" I said.

"Yes, I'm fine."

I stooped to tie my shoes as she, with one arm supporting her back, towered above me.

"Okay," I said, pulling my hat on and grabbing the computer bag. "I'm off."

"Okay," she said.

"Call me if there is anything."

"I will."

We kissed, and I closed the door behind me. The elevator was on its way up, and I caught a brief glimpse of the neighbor from the floor above as she glided past with her face lowered in front of the mirror. She was a lawyer, usually wore black trousers or black, knee-length skirts, gave a curt greeting, always with a pinched mouth and radiating hostility, at least to me. Periodically her brother stayed with her, a lean, dark-eyed, restless and rough-looking but attractive man whom one of Linda's friends had noticed and with whom she had fallen in love, they were having a relationship of sorts which appeared to be based on him despising her as much as she worshipped him. The fact that he lived in the same house as her friend seemed to bother him, he had a hunted look in his eyes when we stopped and exchanged a few words, but even though I assumed that had something to do with my knowing more about him than he knew about me, there may have been other reasons – that he was a typical drug addict, for example. I knew nothing about that, I had no knowledge of such worlds, in this respect I really was as credulous as Geir – my only real friend in Stockholm – always claimed when he compared me to the deceived figure in Caravaggio's *Card Players*.

Downstairs in the hall, I decided to smoke a cigarette before proceeding on my way, walked along the corridor past the laundry room and out into the backyard where I put my computer down, leaned against the wall, and peered up at the sky. There was a ventilation duct directly above me, which filled the air close to the house with the smell of warm, freshly washed clothes. From the laundry room you could hear the faint whine of a spin cycle, so strangely angry compared with the slow, gray clouds drifting through the air far above. Here and there the blue sky behind them was visible, as if the day was a surface they scudded across.

I walked to the fence separating the innermost part of the yard from the nursery at the rear, now deserted, as the children were indoors eating at this time of day, rested my elbows on it and smoked while looking up at the two towers rising from Kungsgatan. Built in a kind of new baroque style, and testimony to the 1920s, they filled me with longing, as so often before. At night the towers were floodlit, and while in the daylight you could clearly distinguish the various details and see how different the materials in the wall were from the materials in the windows and the gilt statues and the verdigris copper surfaces, the artificial light bound them together. Perhaps it was the light itself that did this, or perhaps it was a result of the combination of the light and the surroundings; whatever the cause, it was as if the statues "talked" at night. Not that they came to life, they were as lifeless as before, it was more that the lifeless expression was changed, and in a way intensified. During the day there was nothing; at night this nothing found expression.

Or else it was because the day was filled with so much else to dissipate the concentration. The traffic in the streets, people on the sidewalks and on steps and in windows, helicopters flying across the sky like dragonflies, children who could come running out at any moment and crawl in the mud or snow, ride tricycles, shoot down the gigantic slide in the middle of the playground, climb the bridge of the fully equipped "ship" beside it, play in the sandpit, play in the small "house," throw balls or just scamper around, screaming and shouting, filling the yard with a cacophony like a cliff of nesting birds from morning to early afternoon, only interrupted, as now, by the peace of mealtimes. Then it was nearly impossible to be outdoors, not because of the noise, which I seldom noticed, but because the children had a tendency to flock around me. The few times I had tried that autumn they had started climbing up the low fence that divided the yard into two, and hung off it, four or five of them, and asked me about all sorts of things, or else they would amuse themselves by crossing the forbidden line and rushing past me laughing their heads off. The boy who was the pushiest was also the one who was usually picked up last. Whenever I walked home that way it was not unusual for me to see him messing around in the sandpit on his own, or with some other unfortunate, if he wasn't hanging off the fence by the exit, that is. Then I usually greeted him. If no one else was around with two fingers to my brow, I may even have raised my "hat." Not so much for his sake, because he sent me a fierce look every time, but for my own.

Sometimes I mused that if all soft feelings could be scraped off like cartilage around the sinews of an injured athlete's knee, what a liberation that would be. No more sentimentality, sympathy, empathy . . .

A scream rent the air.

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAhhhh.

It startled me. Even though this scream was heard often, I never got used to it. The flats in the building it came from, on the opposite side of the nursery, were part of an old people's home. I visualized someone lying in their bed, not moving, completely out of touch with the outside world, for the screams could be heard late at night, early in the morning, or during the day. Another man smoked on a balcony with death-rattle coughing fits that could last several minutes. Apart from that, the old people's home was self-enclosed. Walking to my office, sometimes I happened to see caregivers in the windows on the other side of the building, they had a kind of recreation room there, and occasionally I saw some residents in the street, sometimes with police officers accompanying them home, a couple of times wandering around alone. Generally, though, I didn't give the place a thought.

What a piercing scream.

All the curtains were drawn, including those behind the balcony door, which was ajar and from where the sound came. I watched for a while. Then

I turned and headed for the door. Through the laundry room windows I saw the neighbor who lived in the flat below me folding a white sheet. I took my computer bag and went down the narrow grotto-like corridor, where the garbage cans stood, unlocked the metal gate, and came out onto the street, hurried off in the direction of KGB and the steps down to Tunnelgatan.

Twenty minutes later I was in my office. I hung my coat and scarf on the hook, put my shoes on the mat, made a cup of coffee, connected my computer and sat drinking coffee and looking at the title page until the screen saver kicked in and filled the screen with a myriad of bright dots.

The America of the Soul. That was the title. And virtually everything in the room pointed to it, or to what it aroused in me. The reproduction of William Blake's famous, underwater-like Newton picture hanging on the wall behind me, the two framed drawings from Churchill's eighteenth-century expedition next to it, purchased in London at some point, one of a dead whale, the other of a dissected beetle, both drawings showing several stages. A night mood by Peder Balke on the end wall, the green and the black in it. The Greenaway poster. The map of Mars I had found in an old *National Geographic* magazine. Beside it the two black-and-white photographs taken by Thomas Wågström; one of a gleaming child's dress, the other of a black lake beneath the surface of which you can discern the eyes of an otter. The little green metal dolphin and the little green metal helmet I had bought on Crete and which now stood on the desk. And the books: Paracelsus, Basileios, Lucretius, Thomas Browne, Olof Rudbeck, Augustin, Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Seba, Werner Heisenberg, Raymond Russell, and the Bible, of course, and works about national romanticism and about curiosity cabinets, Atlantis, Albrecht Dürer and Max Ernst, the Baroque and Gothic periods, nuclear physics and weapons of mass destruction, about forests and science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This wasn't about knowledge but about the aura knowledge exuded, the places it came from, which were almost all outside the world we lived in now, yet were still within the ambivalent space where all historical objects and ideas reside.

In recent years the feeling that the world was small and that I grasped everything in it had grown stronger and stronger in me, despite my common sense telling me that actually the reverse was true: the world was boundless and unfathomable, the number of events infinite, the present time an open door that stood flapping in the wind of history. But that is not how it felt. It felt as if the world were known, fully explored and charted, that it could no longer move in unpredicted directions, that nothing new or surprising could happen. I understood myself, I understood my surroundings, I understood society around me, and if any phenomenon should appear mysterious I knew how to deal with it.

Understanding must not be confused with knowledge for I knew next to nothing – but should there be, for example, skirmishes in the borderlands of an ex-Soviet republic somewhere in Asia, whose towns I had never heard of, with inhabitants alien in everything from dress and language to everyday life and religion, and it turned out that this conflict had deep historical roots that went back to events that took place a thousand years ago, my total ignorance and lack of knowledge would not prevent me from understanding what happened, for the mind has the capacity to deal with the most alien of thoughts. This applied to everything. If I saw an insect I hadn't come across, I knew that someone must have seen it before and categorized it. If I saw a shiny object in the sky I knew that it was either a rare meteorological phenomenon or a plane of some kind, perhaps a weather balloon, and if it was important it would be in the newspaper the following day. If I had forgotten something that happened in my childhood it was probably due to repression; if I became really furious about something it was probably due to projection, and the fact that I always tried to please people I met had something to do with my father and my relationship with him. There is no one who does not understand their own world. Someone who understands very little, a child, for example, simply moves in a more restricted world than someone who understands a lot. However, an insight into the limits of understanding has always been part of understanding a lot: the recognition that the world outside, all those things we don't understand, not only exists but is also always greater than the world inside. From time to time I thought that what had happened, at least to me, was that the children's world, where everything was known, and where with regard to the things that were not known, you leaned on others, those who had knowledge and ability, that this children's world had never actually ceased to exist, it had just expanded over all these years. When I, as a nineteen-year-old, was confronted with the contention that the world is linguistically structured I rejected it with what I called sound common sense, for it was obviously meaningless, the pen I held, was that supposed to be language? The window gleaming in the sun? The yard beneath me with students crossing it dressed in their autumn clothes? The lecturer's ears, his hands? The faint smell of earth and leaves on the clothes of the woman who had just come in the door and was now sitting next to me? The sound of pneumatic drills used by the road workers who had set up their tent on the other side of St. Johannes' Church, the regular drone of the transformer? The rumble from the town below – was that supposed to be a linguistic rumble? My cough, is it a linguistic cough? No, that was a ridiculous idea. The world was the world, which I touched and leaned on, breathed and spat in, ate and drank, bled, and vomited. It was only many years later that I began to view this differently. In a book I read about art and anatomy Nietzsche was quoted as saying that "physics too is an interpretation of the world and an arrangement of the world, and not an explanation of the world," and that "we have measured the value of the world with categories *that refer to a purely fabricated world.*"

A fabricated world?

Yes, the world as a superstructure, the world as a spirit, weightless and abstract, of the same material with which thoughts are woven, and through which therefore they can move unhindered. A world that after three hundred years of natural science is left without mysteries. Everything is explained, everything is understood, everything lies within humanity's horizons of comprehension, from the biggest, the universe, whose oldest observable light, the farthest boundary of the cosmos, dates from its birth fifteen billion years ago, to the smallest, the protons and neutrons and mesons of the atom.

Even the phenomena that kill us we know about and understand, such as the bacteria and viruses that invade our bodies, attack our cells, and cause them to grow or die. For a long time it was only nature and its laws that were made abstract and transparent in this way, but now, in our iconoclastic times, this not only applies to nature's laws but also to its places and people. The whole of the physical world has been elevated to this sphere, everything has been incorporated into the immense imaginary realm from South American rain forests and the islands of the Pacific Ocean to the North African deserts and Eastern Europe's tired, gray towns. Our minds are flooded with images of places we have never been, yet still know, people we have never met, yet still know and in accordance with which we, to a considerable extent, live our lives. The feeling this gives that the world is small, tightly enclosed around itself, without openings to anywhere else, is almost incestuous, and although I knew this to be deeply untrue, since actually we know nothing about anything, still I could not escape it. The longing I always felt, which some days was so great it could hardly be controlled, had its source here. It was partly to relieve this feeling that I wrote, I wanted to open the world by writing, for myself, at the same time this is also what made me fail. The feeling that the future does not exist, that it is only more of the same, means that all utopias are meaningless. Literature has always been related to utopia, so when the utopia loses meaning, so does literature. What I was trying to do, and perhaps what all writers try to do – what on earth do I know? – was to combat fiction with fiction. What I ought to do was affirm what existed, affirm the state of things as they are, in other words, revel in the world outside instead of searching for a way out, for in that way I would undoubtedly have a better life, but I couldn't do it, I couldn't, something had congealed inside me, a conviction was rooted inside me, and although it was essentialist, that is, outmoded and, furthermore, romantic, I could not get past it, for the simple reason that it had not only been thought but also experienced, in these sudden states of clearsightedness that everyone must know, where for a few seconds you catch sight of another world from the one you were in only a moment earlier, where the world seems to step forward and show itself for a brief glimpse before reverting and leaving everything as before . . .

The last time I experienced this was on the commuter train between Stockholm and Gnesta a few months earlier. The scene outside the window was a sea of white, the sky was gray and damp, we were going through an industrial area, empty railway cars, gas tanks, factories, everything was white and gray, and the sun was setting in the west, the red rays fading into the mist, and the train in which I was traveling was not one of the rickety, old, run-down units that usually serviced this route, but brand-new, polished and shiny, the seat was new, it smelled new, the doors in front of me opened and closed without friction, and I wasn't thinking about anything in particular, just staring at the burning red ball in the sky and the pleasure that suffused me was so sharp and came with such intensity that it was indistinguishable from pain. What I experienced seemed to me to be of enormous significance. Enormous significance. When the moment had passed the feeling of significance did not diminish, but all of a sudden it became hard to place: exactly *what* was significant? And why? A train, an industrial area, sun, mist?

I recognized the feeling, it was akin to the one some works of art evoke in me. Rembrandt's portrait of himself as an old man in London's National Gallery was such a picture, Turner's picture of the sunset over the sea off a port of antiquity at the same museum, Caravaggio's picture of Christ in Gethsemane. Vermeer evoked the same, a few of Claude's paintings, some of Ruisdael's and the other Dutch landscape painters, some of J.C. Dahl's, almost all of Hertervig's . . . But none of Rubens's paintings, none of Manet's, none of the English or French eighteenth-century painters, with the exception of Chardin, not Whistler, nor Michelangelo, and only one by Leonardo da Vinci. The experience did not favor any particular epoch, nor any particular painter, since it could apply to a single work by a painter and leave everything else the painter did to one side. Nor did it have anything to do with what is usually termed quality; I could stand unmoved in front of fifteen paintings by Monet, and feel the warmth spread through my body in front of a Finnish impressionist of whom few outside Finland had heard.

I didn't know what it was about these pictures that made such a great impression on me. However, it was striking that they were all painted before the 1900s, within the artistic paradigm that always retained some reference to visible reality. Thus, there was always a certain objectivity to them, by which I mean a distance between reality and the portrayal of reality, and it was doubtless in this interlying space where it "happened," where it appeared, whatever it was I saw, when the world seemed to step forward from the world. When you didn't just see the incomprehensible in it but came very close to it. Something that didn't speak, and that no words could grasp, consequently forever out of our reach, yet within it, for not only did it surround us, we were ourselves part of it, we were ourselves of it.

The fact that things other and mysterious were relevant to us had led my thoughts to angels, those mystical creatures who not only were linked to the divine but also to humanness, and therefore expressed the duality of the nature of otherness better than any other figure. At the same time there was something deeply dissatisfying about both the paintings and angels, since they both belonged to the past in such a fundamental way, that part of the past we have put behind us, that is, which no longer fit in, into this world we had created where the great, the divine, the solemn, the holy, the beautiful, and the true were no longer valid entities but quite the contrary, dubious or even laughable. This meant that the great beyond, which until the Age of Enlightenment had been the Divine, brought to us through the Revelation, and which in Romanticism was nature, where the concept of Revelation was expressed as the sublime, no longer found expression. In art, that which was beyond was synonymous with society, or the human masses, which fully encompassed its concepts of validity. As far as Norwegian art is concerned, the break came with Munch; it was in his paintings that, for the first time, man took up all the space. Whereas man was subordinate to the Divine through to the Age of Enlightenment, and to the landscape he was depicted in during Romanticism – the mountains are vast and intense, the sea is vast and intense, even the trees are vast and intense while humans, without exception, are small – the situation is reversed with Munch. It is as if humans swallow up everything, make everything theirs. The mountains, the sea, the trees, and the forests, everything is colored by humanness. Not human actions and external life, but human feelings and inner life. And once man had taken over, there seemed not to be a way back, as indeed there was no way back for Christianity as it began to spread like wildfire across Europe in the first centuries of our era. Man is gestalted by Munch, his inner life is given an outer form, the world is shaken up, and what was left after the door had been opened was the world as a gestalt: with painters after Munch it is the colors themselves, the forms themselves, not what they represent, that carry the emotion. Here we are in a world of images where the expression itself is everything, which of course means that there is no longer any dynamism between the outer and the inner, just a division. In the modernist era the division between art and the world was close to absolute, or put another way, art was a world of its own. What was taken up in this world was of course a question of individual taste, and soon this taste became the very core of art, which thus could and, to a certain degree in order to survive, had to admit objects from the real world. The situation we have arrived at now whereby the props of art no longer have any significance, all the emphasis is placed on what the art expresses, in other words, not what it is but what it thinks, what ideas it carries, such that the last remnants of objectivity, the final remnants of something outside the human world have been abandoned. Art has come to be an unmade bed, a couple of photocopiers in a room, a motorbike in an attic. And art has come to be a spectator of itself, the way it reacts, what newspapers write about it; the artist is a performer. That is how it is. Art does not know a beyond, science does not know a beyond, religion does not know a beyond, not anymore. Our world is enclosed around itself, enclosed around us, and there is no way out of it. Those in this situation who call for more intellectual depth, more spirituality, have understood nothing, for the problem is that the intellect has taken over everything. *Everything* has become intellect, even our bodies, they aren't bodies anymore, but ideas of bodies, something that is situated in our own heaven of images and conceptions within us and above us, where an increasingly large part of our lives is lived. The limits of that which cannot speak to us – the unfathomable –

no longer exist. We understand everything, and we do so because we have turned everything into ourselves. Nowadays, as one might expect, all those who have occupied themselves with the neutral, the negative, the nonhuman in art, have turned to language, that is where the incomprehensible and the otherness have been sought, as if they were to be found on the margins of human expression, on the fringes of what we understand, and of course, actually, that is logical: where else would it be found in a world that no longer acknowledges that there is a beyond?

It is in this light we have to see the strangely ambiguous role death has assumed. On the one hand, it is all around us, we are inundated by news of deaths, pictures of dead people; for death, in that respect, there are no limits, it is massive, ubiquitous, inexhaustible. But this is death as an idea, death without a body, death as thought and image, death as an intellectual concept. This death is the same as the word "death," the bodiless entity referred to when a dead person's name is used. For while the person is alive the name refers to the body, to where it resides, to what it does; the name becomes detached from the body when it dies and remains with the living, who, when they use the name, always mean the person he was, never the person he is now, a body which lies rotting somewhere. This aspect of death, that which belongs to the body and is concrete, physical and material, this death is hidden with such great care that it borders on a frenzy, and it works, just listen to how people who have been involuntary witnesses to fatal accidents or murders tend to express themselves. They always say the same, *it was absolutely unreal*, even though what they mean is the opposite. It was so real. But we no longer live in that reality. For us everything has been turned on its head, for us the real is unreal, the unreal real. And death, death is the last great beyond. That is why it has to be kept hidden. Because death might be beyond the term and beyond life, but it is not beyond the world.

I was almost thirty years old when I saw a dead body for the first time. It was the summer of 1998, a July afternoon, in a chapel in Kristiansand. My father had died. He was laid out on a table in the middle of the room, the sky was overcast, the light in the room dull, outside the window a lawn mower was slowly circling around a lawn. I was there with my brother. The funeral director had left the room so that we could be alone with the deceased, at whom we were staring from a distance of some meters. The eyes and mouth were closed, the upper body dressed in a white shirt, the lower half in black trousers. The idea that I could scrutinize this face unhindered for the first time was almost unbearable. It felt like an act of violation. At the same time I sensed a hunger, an insatiability that demanded I keep looking at him, at this dead body that a few days earlier had been my father. I was familiar with the facial features, I had grown up with this face, and although I hadn't seen it as often over recent years hardly a night had passed without my dreaming about it. I was familiar with the features, but not the expression they had assumed. The dark, yellowy complexion, along with the lost elasticity of the skin, made his face seem as if it had been carved out of wood. The woodenness forbade any feelings of intimacy. I was no longer looking at a person but something that resembled a person. He had been taken from us, and what he had been still existed in me, it lay like a veil of life over death.

Yngve walked slowly to the other side of the table. I didn't look at him, just registered the movement as I raised my head and looked outside. The gardener who was riding the lawn mower kept turning in his seat to check if he was following the line of the previous cut. The short blades of grass the bag didn't catch whirled through the air above him. Some must have gotten stuck to the underside of the machine because it regularly left behind damp clumps of compressed grass, darker than the lawn from which they came. On the gravel path behind him there was a small cortège of three persons, all with bowed heads, one in a red cloak, resplendent against the green grass and gray sky. Behind them cars streamed past toward the town center.

Then the roar of the lawn-mower engine reverberated against the chapel wall. The expectation the sudden noise created, that it would make Dad open his eyes, was so strong that I involuntarily recoiled.

Yngve glanced across at me with a little smile on his lips. Did I believe the dead could wake? Did I believe wood could become human again?

It was a terrible moment. But when it was over and he, despite all the noise and commotion, remained inert, I understood that he did not exist. The feeling of freedom that rose in my breast then was as difficult to control as the earlier waves of grief, and it found the same outlet, a sob that, quite against my will, escaped the very next moment.

I met Yngve's glance and smiled. He came over and stood next to me. His presence totally reassured me. I was so glad he was there, and I had to fight not to destroy everything by losing control again. I had to think about something else, I had to let my attention find neutral ground.

Someone was cleaning up next door. The sounds were low and disrupted the atmosphere in our room, they were alien, in the same way that sounds of reality that break into the dreams of someone asleep are alien.

I looked down at Dad. The fingers, which had been interlaced and placed over his stomach, the yellow patch of nicotine along his forefinger, a discoloring, the way a carpet is discolored. The disproportionately deep wrinkles in the skin over the knuckles, which now looked carved, not created. Then the face. It was not at rest, for even though it was peaceful and calm, it was not vacant, there were still traces of what I could only describe as determination. It struck me that I had always tried to interpret the expression on his face, that I had never been able to look at it without trying to read it at the same time.

But now it was closed.

I turned to Yngve.

"Shall we go?" he said.

I nodded.

The funeral director was waiting for us in the anteroom. I left the door open behind me. Even though I knew it was irrational, I didn't want Dad lying there on his own.

After shaking hands with the funeral director and exchanging a few words about what was going to happen in the days before the funeral, we went out to the parking lot and lit up, Yngve leaning against the car, me sitting on the edge of a wall. There was rain in the air. The trees in the copse behind the cemetery bowed under the pressure of the gathering wind. For a moment the rustling of leaves drowned the traffic noise at the other end of the lowland. Then they were quiet again.

"Well, that was strange," Yngve said.

"Yes," I said. "But I'm glad we did it."

"Me too. I had to see it to believe it."

"Do you believe it now?"

He smiled. "Don't you?"

Instead of returning the smile, which I had intended to do, I began to cry again. Pressed my hand against my face, bowed my head. Sob after sob shook through me. Once it had abated, I glanced up at him and laughed.

"This is like when we were small," I said. "I cry and you watch."

"Are you sure . . . ?" he asked, searching my eyes. "Are you sure you can manage the rest on your own?"

"Of course," I said. "It's not a problem."

"I can call and say I'm staying."

"No, go home. We'll do what we arranged."

"Okay. I'll be off now."

He threw down his cigarette and took the car key from his pocket. I got to my feet and went closer, but not so close that any handshaking or hugging could take place. He unlocked the door, got in, looked up at me as he twisted the ignition key and the engine started.

"So I'll see you soon," he said.

"Bye. Drive carefully. Say hello to everyone!"

He closed the door, backed out, stopped, buckled his seat belt, put the car in gear, and drove slowly toward the main road. I started to follow. Then his taillights lit up, and he reversed.

"Maybe you should take this," he said, passing a hand through the rolled-down window. It was the brown envelope the funeral director had given us.

"No point in me taking it all the way to Stavanger," he said. "Would make more sense for it to be here. Okay?"

“Okay,” I answered.

“See you,” he said. The window slid up, and the music, which had been blaring across the parking lot seconds ago, now seemed to be coming from under water. I didn’t move until his car had turned onto the main road and was lost from view. It was a childhood instinct; disaster would strike if I moved. Then I put the envelope in my inside jacket pocket and set off for town.

Three days earlier, at around two in the afternoon, Yngve had called me. At once I could hear from his voice that something had happened, and my first thought had been that my father was dead.

“Hi,” he said. “It’s me. Something has happened. Yes . . .”

“Yes?” I prompted. I was in the hall, standing with one hand against the wall, the other holding the receiver.

“Dad’s died.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Gunnar just called. Grandma found him in a chair this morning.”

“What did he die of?”

“I don’t know. Probably heart.”

There were no windows in the hall, and the main lamp was switched off, so what dim light there was came from the kitchen at one end and the open bedroom door at the other. The face in the mirror that met me was dark and watching me from somewhere faraway.

“What do we do now? I mean, from a practical point of view?”

“Gunnar’s expecting us to organize everything. So we have to get ourselves down there. As fast as possible, basically.”

“Alright,” I said. “I was on my way to Borghild’s funeral, was just about to leave in fact. So my suitcase is packed. I can leave now. Shall we meet there?”

“Fine,” Yngve said. “I’ll drive down tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” I said. “Let me just think for a second.”

“Why don’t you fly over so we can go together?”

“Good idea. I’ll do that. I’ll give you a call when I know which plane I’ll be on, okay?”

"Okay, see you."

After hanging up I went to the kitchen and filled the kettle, took a tea bag from the cupboard, put it in a clean cup, leaned over the counter and looked up the cul-de-sac outside the house, visible only as patches of gray between the green shrubs that formed a dense clump from the end of the small garden to the road. On the other side were some enormous, towering deciduous trees, beneath which a little dark alley led to the main road on which Haukeland Hospital was situated. All I could think was that I couldn't think about what I should be thinking about. That I didn't feel what I should be feeling. Dad's dead, I thought, this is a big, big event, it should overwhelm me, but it isn't doing that, for here I am, staring at the kettle, feeling annoyed that it hasn't boiled yet. Here I am, looking out and thinking how lucky we were to get this flat, which I do every time I see the garden, because our elderly landlady looks after it, and not that Dad's dead, even though that is the only thing that actually has any meaning. I must be in shock, I thought, pouring water into the cup although it hadn't boiled yet. The kettle, a shiny deluxe model we had been given by Yngve as a wedding present. The cup, a yellow Höganes model, I couldn't remember who had given it to us, only that it had been at the top of Tonje's wedding list. I tugged at the tea bag string a few times, threw it in the sink, where it landed with a smack, and went into the dining room carrying the cup. Thank goodness no one else was at home!

I paced up and down for minutes, trying to invest the fact that Dad was dead with some meaning, but failed. There was no meaning. I understood it, I accepted it, and it was not meaningless in the sense that a life had been snatched away that might well not have been snatched away, but it was in the sense that it was one fact among many, and it did not occupy the position in my consciousness that it should have.

I wandered around the room, cup of tea in hand, the weather outside was gray and mild, the gently sloping countryside was full of rooftops and abundant green hedges. We had only lived there for a few weeks, we came from Volda where Tonje had been studying radio journalism and I had written a novel that was due to come out in two months. It was the first real home we had had; the flat in Volda didn't count, it was temporary, but this was permanent, or represented something permanent, our home. The walls still smelled of paint. Oxblood red in the dining room, on advice from Tonje's mother, who was an artist but who spent most of her time doing interior design and cooking, both at a high level – her house looked the way houses did in interior decor magazines, and the food she served was always meticulously prepared and exquisite – and eggshell white in the living room, as well as in the other rooms. But this was nothing like an interior decor magazine here, too much furniture, and too many posters and bookshelves, were a testimony to the student existence we had just left behind. We lived on student loans while I wrote the novel, for officially I was studying literary science as my main subject up to Christmas when my money ran out, and I had to ask for an advance from the publishing house, which had lasted me until just recently. Dad's death came therefore as manna from heaven, because he had money, surely he must have had money. The three brothers had sold the house on Elvegata and shared the proceeds between them less than two years ago. Surely he couldn't have squandered it in that short time.

My father is dead, and I am thinking about the money that will bring me.

So what?

I think what I think, I can't help thinking what I think, can I?

I put the cup down on the table, opened the slender door, and went onto the balcony, supporting myself stiffly on the balustrade and gazing around as I drew the warm summer air, so full of the smells of plants and cars and town, into my lungs. A moment later I was back in the living room casting my eyes around. Should I eat something? Drink? Go out and do some shopping?

I drifted into the hall, peeped into the bedroom, at the broad unmade bed, behind it the bathroom door. I could do that, I thought, have a shower, good idea, after all soon I would have to set off.

Clothes off, water on, steaming hot, over my head, down my body.

Should I beat off?

No, for Christ's sake, Dad's dead.

Dead, dead, Dad was dead.

Dead, dead, Dad was dead.

Having a shower did nothing for me either, so I turned it off and dried myself with a large towel, rubbed a bit of deodorant under my armpits, dressed and went into the kitchen to see what time it was, drying my hair with a smaller towel.

Half past two.

Tonje would be home in an hour.

I couldn't bear the thought of unloading all this onto her as she came in the door, so I went into the corridor, threw the towel through the open bedroom door, picked up the telephone receiver and keyed in her number. She answered at once.

"Tonje?"

"Hi, Tonje, it's me," I said. "Everything all right?"

"Yes, actually I'm editing at the moment, just popped into the office to get something. I'll be home when I've finished."

"Great," I said.

"What are you up to?" she asked.

"Well, nothing," I said. "But Yngve called. Dad died."

"What? He's died?"

"Yes."

"Oh, you poor thing! Oh, Karl Ove . . ."

"I'm fine," I said. "It wasn't exactly unexpected. But I'll be going there this evening anyway. First to Yngve's place, and then we'll drive to Kristiansand together early tomorrow."

"Do you want me to come with you? I can do that."

"No, no, no. You have to work! You stay here, and then come to the funeral."

"Oh, you poor thing," she repeated. "I can get someone else to do the editing. Then I can come right away. When are you leaving?"

"There's no hurry," I said. "I'll be leaving in a few hours. And being alone for a while is not such a bad thing."

"Sure?"

"Yeah. I'm sure. In fact, I don't feel anything. But we've been through this plenty of times already. If he keeps this up, he'll be dead soon. So, I've been prepared for it."

"Okay," Tonje said. "I'll finish what I'm doing and hurry home. Take care of yourself. I love you."

"I love you too," I said.

After putting down the phone I thought about Mom. She would have to be informed of course. I lifted the receiver again and dialed Yngve's number. He had already called her.

I was dressed and waiting in the living room when I heard Tonje at the door. She skipped into the room like a fresh summer breeze. I got up. Her movements were flustered, her eyes compassionate, and she hugged me, said she wanted to be with me, but I was right, it was best that she stayed here, and then I called for a taxi and stood on the step outside the front door waiting the five minutes it took to come. We're a married couple, I thought, we are husband and wife, my wife is standing outside the house, waving me off, I thought, and smiled. So where did this image's unreal surface come from? Were we playing husband and wife, weren't we really a couple?

"What are you smiling at?"

"Nothing," I said. "A stray thought."

I squeezed her hand.

"Here it is," she said.

I looked down the row of houses. Black and beetle-like, the taxi was crawling up the slope; beetle-like, it stopped and hesitated at the intersection before gingerly scrabbling to the right where the street had the same name as ours.

"Shall I run after it?" Tonje asked.

"No, why? I can do that just as well as you."

I took the suitcase and climbed the steps to the road. Tonje followed.

"I'm going to walk to the intersection," I said. "I'll catch it there. But I'll call this evening. Okay?"

We kissed, and as I looked back from the intersection, with the taxi reversing down the hill, she waved.

"Knausgaard?" the driver inquired as I opened the door and looked in.

"That's right," I said. "Flesland airport."

"Hop in, and I'll take your suitcase."

I clambered onto the rear seat and leaned back. Taxis, I loved taxis. Not the ones I came home drunk in, but the ones I caught to airports or railway stations. Was there anything better than sitting in the rear seat of a taxi and being driven through towns and suburbs before a long journey?

"Tricky street, this one," the driver said, getting in. "It forks. I've heard about it, but this is my first time here. After twenty years. Strange."

"Mm," I said.

"I think I've been everywhere now. I think this must be the last street."

He smiled at me in the mirror.

"Are you going on holiday?"

"No," I said. "Not exactly. My father died today. I have to sort out the funeral. In Kristiansand."

That put an end to the small talk. I sat motionless, staring at the houses along the way, not thinking of anything in particular, just staring. Minde, Fantoft, Hop. Gas stations, car showrooms, supermarkets, detached houses, forest, lake, housing project. Approaching the final stretch of road I could see the control tower, and I took my bank card from an inside pocket and leaned forward to see the taximeter. Three hundred and twenty kroner. It had not been such a great idea to catch a taxi, the airport bus was a tenth of the price, and if there was one thing I didn't have enough of right now, it was money.

"Could I have a receipt for three hundred and fifty?" I said, handing him my bank card.

"Course you can," he said, grabbing it from my hand. Swiped it and the machine chuntered out a receipt. He placed it on a pad with a pen and passed it back, I signed, he tore off another receipt, and gave it to me.

"Thank you very much," he said.

"Thank you," I said. "I'll take the case."

Even though the suitcase was heavy I carried it by the handle as I walked into the departure hall. I detested the tiny wheels, first of all because they were feminine, thus not worthy of a man, a man should carry, not roll, secondly because they suggested easy options, shortcuts, savings, rationality, which I despised and opposed wherever I could, even where it was of the most trivial significance. Why should you live in a world without feeling its weight? Were we just images? And what were we actually saving energy for with these energy-saving devices?

I put my case down on the floor of the small concourse and looked up at the departures board. There was a plane to Stavanger at five o'clock, which I could easily make. But there was also one at six. Since I loved sitting in airports, perhaps even more than I loved sitting in taxis, I opted for the latter.

I turned around and scanned the check-in desks. Apart from the three farthest ones – where the lines seemed chaotic and stretched back a long distance, and I could see from the passengers' apparel, which without exception was light, and the amount of luggage, which was immense, and the mood, which was as cheery as it can be after a few glasses, that they were taking a charter flight to southern Europe – there was not a lot happening. I bought a ticket, checked in, and ambled over to the phones on the other side to ring Yngve. He picked up at once.

"Hi, Karl Ove here," I said. "Plane goes at a quarter past six. So I'll be in Sola by a quarter to seven. Are you going to come and get me or what?"

"I can do that, no problem."

"Have you heard any more?"

"No . . . I rang Gunnar and told him we were coming. He didn't know any more. I thought we could set off early and drop by the undertaker's before it closes. It's Saturday tomorrow."

"Okay," I said. "Sounds good. See you then."

"Yeah, see you."

I hung up and went upstairs to the café, bought a cup of coffee and a newspaper, located a table with a view of the concourse, hung my jacket over the back of the chair while surveying the room to see if there was anyone I knew, and sat down.

Thoughts of my father surfaced at regular intervals, as they had ever since

Yngve called, but unconnected with emotions, always as a stark statement. That was probably because I had been prepared. Ever since the spring when he had left my mother, his life had been going in only one direction. We didn't realize that then, but at some point he had crossed a line and from then on we knew anything could befall him, even the worst. Or the best, according to how you viewed things. I had long wished him dead, but from the very second I realized his life could soon be over I began to hope for it. When there was news on TV of fatal accidents in the district where he lived, whether they were fires or car accidents, corpses found in the forest or at sea, my immediate feeling was one of hope: perhaps it is Dad. However, it was never him, he coped, he survived.

Until now, I thought, observing the crowds circulating in the concourse below. In twenty-five years a third of them would be dead, in fifty years two-thirds, in a hundred all of them. And what would they leave behind, what had their lives been worth? Gaping jaws, empty eye sockets, somewhere beneath the earth.

Perhaps the Day of Judgment really would come? All these bones and skulls that had been buried for the thousands of years that man had lived on earth would gather themselves up with a rattle, and stand grinning into the sun, and God, the almighty, the all-powerful, would, with a wall of angels above and below Him, judge them from his heavenly throne. Above the earth, so green and so beautiful, trumpets would sound, and from all the fields and valleys, all the beaches and plains, all the seas and lakes, the dead would rise and go to the Lord their God, be raised to His level, judged and cast into the flames of hell, judged and elevated into the divine light. Also those walking around here, with their roller suitcases and tax-free bags, their wallets and bank cards, their perfumed armpits and their dark glasses, their dyed hair and their walking frames, would be awakened, impossible to discern any difference between them and those who died in the Middle Ages or in the Stone Age, they were the dead, and the dead are the dead, and the dead would be judged on the Last Day.

From the back of the concourse, where the luggage carousels were, came a group of perhaps twenty Japanese. I placed my smoldering cigarette in the ashtray and took a sip of coffee as I watched their progress. The foreignness of them, which resided not in their clothes or appearance but their behavior, was compelling, and to live in Japan, surrounded by all this foreignness, all the things one saw but did not understand, whose meaning one might intuit without ever being sure, was a dream I had long held. To sit in a Japanese house, furnished in simple, Spartan fashion, with sliding doors and paper partitions, created for a neatness that was alien to me and my northern European impetuosness, would be fantastic. To sit there and write a novel and see how the surroundings slowly and imperceptibly shaped the writing, for the way we think is of course as closely associated with the specific surroundings of which we form part as the people with whom we speak and the books we read. Japan, but also Argentina, where familiar European features were lent quite a different hue, shifted to quite a different place, and the USA, one of the small towns in Maine, for example, with landscape so like Norway's southern coast, what might have sprung off the page there?

I put down my cup and resumed smoking, swiveled in my chair, and looked over at the gate where there were already quite a number of passengers, even though it was only a few minutes to five.

But now it was Bergen's turn.

A chill wind blew through me.

Dad is dead.

For the first time since Yngve had called I could see him in my mind's eye. Not the man he had been in recent years, but the man he was when I was growing up, when, in winter, we went fishing with him, off the island of Tromøya, with the wind howling round our ears and the spray high in the air from the huge, gray breakers that smashed against the rocks below us, and he stood there, rod in hand, reeling in, laughing in our direction. Thick black hair, a black beard, slightly asymmetrical face, covered with small drops of water. Blue oilskins, green rubber boots.

That was the image.

Typical that I would conjure up one of the times when he was good. That my subconscious would select a situation where I had warm feelings for him. It was an attempt at manipulation, obviously intended to smooth the path for irrational sentimentality, which, once the floodgates were open, would brim up without constraint and take possession of me. That was how the subconscious worked, it clearly saw itself as a kind of corrective force on thoughts and desires, and undermined everything that might be considered antagonistic to the prevailing common sense. But Dad had got what was coming to him, it was good that he was dead, anything in me that said otherwise was lying. And that went not only for the man he had been when I was growing up, but also the man he became when in midlife he broke off all the old connections and started afresh. Because he had changed, also in his attitude to me, but it didn't help, I didn't want to know anything about what he became either. In the spring when he left he had started drinking and that went on right through the summer, that was what they did, Unni and Dad, they sat in the sun drinking, wonderful long drunken days, and when school started the drinking continued, but just in the afternoons and evenings, and on weekends. They moved to northern Norway and both worked in a school there, and that was where we got the first inkling of the state he was in, because we flew there once to visit him, Yngve, his girlfriend, and I. Dad picked us up, he was pale and his hands were shaking, he hardly said a word, and when we got to his flat he knocked back three beers in quick succession in the kitchen, then seemed to come to life, stopped shaking, became aware of us, started talking, and went on drinking. Over these few days, it was a winter holiday, he drank nonstop, kept emphasizing that he was on holiday, you can allow yourself one then, especially up here, where it was so dark all winter. Unni was pregnant at the time, so now he drank alone. In the spring he worked as an external examiner at a school in the Kristiansand district and had invited Yngve, his girlfriend, and me to lunch at the Hotel Caledonien, but when we arrived at the reception where we were supposed to meet, he wasn't there, we waited for half an hour, then asked the receptionist, he was in his room, we went upstairs, knocked on the door, no one answered, he must have been asleep, we knocked harder and called his name, but no reaction, and we left none the wiser. Two days later the Hotel Caledonien burned to the ground, twelve people died, I drove down with Bassen in the lunch break, I was in the second class at gymnas then, and watched the firemen extinguishing the fire. If my father had been there, he would have been one of the victims, no question given the state he was in, I said to Bassen, but still neither I nor Yngve understood what was happening to him, we had no experience with alcoholics, there were none in the family, and even though we understood he was drinking, for soon we had experienced a lot of boozy nights culminating in tears, arguments, and jealousy, with every scrap of dignity cast to the four winds, but not for long, the next morning it was back in place, he always did his job properly, and he was proud of that, didn't we understand that he couldn't stop, and maybe he didn't want to. This was his life now, this was what he did, even though he had just had a child. He took a hair of the dog some mornings when he had to work, but was never drunk at school, a few beers during the course of the day had no effect, look at the Danes, they drink at lunch, and they're managing pretty well in Denmark, aren't they?

In the winter they went south and complained to the travel guides, I saw this in a letter I happened to find when I was staying with them once, there had been a legal case, Dad had collapsed and been taken to the hospital by ambulance, he had had violent chest pains and had sued the travel company because he claimed his medical treatment had brought on the heart attack, to which the company responded rather drily that it had not been a heart attack, but a collapse caused by alcohol and pills.

Eventually they left northern Norway and moved back to Sørland where Dad, now fat and bloated, with an enormous gut, drank nonstop. Staying sober enough for a few hours to be able to pick us up by car was now out of the question. They split up, Dad moved to a town in Østland where he had a new job, which he lost some months later, and then there was nothing left – no marriage, no job, and barely a child, because although Unni wanted them to spend time together, and in fact allowed him to do so, which did not work out very well, visiting rights were eventually withdrawn, not that that affected him much. Nevertheless he was furious, presumably because it was his right, and he held firm to his rights at every opportunity now. Terrible things happened, and all Dad had left was his flat in Østland, where he hung out drinking, when he wasn't in the pubs in town, hanging out there drinking. He was as fat as a barrel, and even though his skin was still tanned, it had a kind of matte tone, there was a matte membrane covering him, and with all the hair on his face and head and his messy clothes he looked like some kind of wild man as he charged around in search of a drink. Once he went missing for several weeks, and it was as if he had vanished into the bowels of the earth. Gunnar called Yngve and said he'd reported Dad missing to the police. He reappeared in a hospital somewhere in Østland, bedridden, unable to walk. The paralysis, however, was not permanent, he struggled to his feet again, and after a few weeks spent in a detox clinic he carried on where he had left off.

During this phase I had no contact with him. But he visited his mother more and more often, and stayed longer and longer each time. In the end, he moved in with her and erected a barricade. He stowed what belongings he had in the garage, got rid of the home-help Gunnar had organized for Grandma, who was no longer capable of looking after herself, and locked the door. He remained inside with her until the day he died. Gunnar had called Yngve on one occasion and told him how the land lay. Told him, among other things, how he had once gone over and found Dad lying on the living room floor. He had broken his leg, but instead of asking Grandma to phone for an ambulance to take him to the hospital, he had instructed her not to say a word to anyone, not even Gunnar, so she didn't, and he lay there surrounded by plates of leftovers, bottles of beer and spirits that she had brought him from his abundant stockpile. Gunnar didn't know how long he had been lying there, perhaps a day, perhaps two. The sole interpretation of his telephone call to Yngve was that he felt we should intervene and remove our father from the house, because he would die there, and we did discuss this, but decided not to do anything, he would have to plow his own furrow, live his own life, die his own death.

Now he had.

I got up and went to the counter for some more coffee. A man wearing a dark, elegant suit, with a silk scarf around his neck and dandruff on his shoulders, was pouring coffee as I arrived. He set the white cup, full to the brim with black coffee, on the red tray, and looked at me quizzically as he lifted the pot.

"I'll help myself, thank you," I said.

"As you wish," he said, replacing the pot on one of the two hotplates. I guessed he was an academic of some kind. The waitress, a substantial woman in her fifties, a Bergensian for certain, I had seen that face all over town in the years I had lived there, on buses and in the streets, behind bars and in shops, with that same short dyed hair and the square glasses that only women of that age can admire, stretched out her hand as I raised my cup.

"Top off?"

"Five kroner," she said in a broad Bergen accent. I placed a five-krone coin in her hand and went back to my table. My mouth was dry and my heart was beating fast, as if I were excited, but I was not, on the contrary, I felt calm and sluggish as I sat staring at the small plane hanging from the enormous glass roof beneath which the light shimmered as if from a reflection, and glanced at the departures board where the clock showed a quarter past five, and then down at the people lined up, walking across the concourse floor, sitting and reading newspapers, standing and chatting. It was summer, clothes were vibrant, bodies tanned, the mood light, as always wherever people gather to travel. Sitting like this, as I sometimes did, I could experience colors as bright, lines as sharp, and faces as incredibly distinct. They were laden with meaning. Without that meaning, which is what I was experiencing now, they were distant and somehow hazy, impossible to grasp, like shadows without the darkness of shadows.

I twisted around and glanced toward the gate. A crowd of passengers, who must have just arrived, were making their way along the tunnel-like jet bridge from the plane. The departure lounge door opened, and with jackets folded over their arms, and bags of all descriptions hanging against their thighs, the passengers came in, looked up for the baggage claim sign, turned right and disappeared from sight.

Two boys walked past me carrying paper cups of Coke. One had some fluff over his top lip and on his chin, and must have been about fifteen. The other was smaller, and his face was hairless, although that did not necessarily mean he was younger. The taller of the two had big lips which stayed open, and, in combination with the vacant eyes, made him look stupid. The smaller boy had more alert eyes but the way a twelve-year-old is alert. He said something, both laughed, and as they came to the table he must have repeated it, for the others sitting there laughed too.

I was surprised by how small they were, and it was impossible to imagine that I had been that small when I was fourteen or fifteen. But I must have been.

I pushed away my coffee cup, got up, folded my jacket over my arm, grabbed my suitcase, and walked to the gate, sat down by the counter, where a uniformed woman and man each stood working at a computer screen. I leaned back and closed my eyes for a few seconds. Dad's face appeared again. It was as though it had been lying in wait. A garden in the mist, the grass slightly muddy and trampled, a ladder up a tree, Dad's face turns to me. He is holding the ladder with both hands, he is wearing high boots and a thick knitted sweater. Two white tubs beside him in the field, a bucket hanging from a hook on the top rung.

I opened my eyes. I couldn't remember ever experiencing this, it was not a memory, but if it was not a memory, what was it?

Oh, no, he was dead.

I took a deep breath and got up. A short line had developed by the counter, here passengers interpreted everything the staff did, as soon as there was any evidence to suggest that departure was imminent, they were there, physically.

Dead.

I took my place behind the last person in the queue, a broad-shouldered man half a head shorter than me. There was hair growing on the nape of his neck and in his ears. He smelled of aftershave. A woman joined the line behind me. I craned my neck to catch a glimpse, and saw her face, which with its neatly applied lipstick, rouge, eyeliner, and powder, looked more like a mask than a human physiognomy. But she did smell good.

The cleaning staff scurried up the bridge from the plane. The uniformed woman talked into a telephone. After putting it down she picked up a small microphone and announced that the plane was ready for boarding. I opened the outside pocket of my bag and took out the ticket. My heart beat faster again, as though it was on a trip of its own. It was unbearable standing there. But I had to. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, bent my head forward to see the runway through the window. One of the small vehicles towing the baggage carts drove past. A man in overalls with ear protectors walked across, he was holding those things like ping-pong rackets used to direct planes into position. The line began to inch forward. My heart was beating rapidly. My palms were sweaty. I yearned for a seat, yearned to be high in the air and looking down. The squat fellow in front of me was handed the stub from his ticket. I passed mine to the uniformed woman. For some reason she looked me straight in the eye as she took it. She was attractive in a severe way with regular features, nose perhaps a bit pointed, mouth narrow. Her eyes were bright and blue, the dark circle around the iris unusually distinct. I returned the gaze for a brief moment, then lowered it. She smiled.

"Have a good flight," she said.

"Thank you," I replied and followed the others down the tunnel-like gangway into the plane, where a middle-aged stewardess nodded a welcome to the new arrivals, moved down the aisle, as far as the last row of seats. Up went my bag and coat into the overhead compartment, down I flopped into the cramped seat, on with the belt, out with my feet, back I leaned.

That's the way.

Meta-thoughts, that I was sitting on the plane on my way to bury my father while thinking that I was sitting on the plane on my way to bury my father, increased. Everything I saw, faces, bodies ambling through the cabin, stowing their baggage here, sitting down, stowing their baggage there, sitting down, was followed by a reflective shadow that could not desist from telling me that I was seeing this now while aware that I was seeing this, and so on ad absurdum, and the presence of this thought-shadow, or perhaps better, thought-mirror, also implied a criticism, that I did not feel more than I did.

Dad was dead, I thought – and an image of him flashed up before me, as though I needed an illustration of the word "Dad" – and I, sitting in a plane on my way to bury him, am reacting coldly to it, I think, as I watch two ten-year-old girls taking a seat in one row and what must have been their mother and father taking a seat on the other side of the aisle to them, I think that I think that I think. Events were racing through me at great speed, nothing that made any sense. I started to feel nauseous. A woman put her case in the overhead compartment above me, took off her coat and put it in, met my gaze, smiled automatically, and sat down beside me. She was around forty, had a gentle face, warm eyes, black hair, was short, a bit chubby, but not fat. She was wearing a kind of suit, that is, pants and jacket of the same color and design, what did women call them? An outfit? And a white blouse. I faced the front, but my attention was not on what I saw there, it was on what I saw through the corner of my eye, that was where "I" was, I thought, looking at her. She must have been holding a pair of glasses which I hadn't noticed because now she perched them on the tip of her nose and opened a book.

There seemed to be something of the bank teller about her. Not the gentleness, though, nor the whiteness. Her thighs, which seemed to spread outward in the fabric when pressed down against the seat, how white would they be in the dark late one night in a hotel room somewhere?

I tried to swallow, but my mouth was so dry that the little saliva I could muster was not enough to cover the distance to my throat. Another passenger stopped by our row, a middle-aged man, sallow, stern and thin, dressed in a gray suit, he occupied the aisle seat without a sideways glance at either her or me. *Boarding completed*, a voice said in the intercom. I leaned forward to look at the sky above the airport. To the west the bank of cloud had split open, and a strip of low forest was lit up by the sun, a shiny, almost glistening green. The engines were started. The window vibrated faintly. The woman beside me had marked her page with a finger and was staring ahead.

Dad had always had a fear of flying. They were the only times in my childhood that I could recall him drinking. As a rule, he avoided flying, we traveled by car if we were going anywhere, regardless of how far it was, but sometimes he had to, and then it was a case of knocking back whatever alcoholic drinks were available at the airport café. There were several other things he avoided as well, but which I had never considered, had never seen, because what a person does always overshadows what he does not do, and what Dad didn't do was not so conspicuous, also because there was nothing at all neurotic about him. But he never went to the barber's; he always cut his own hair. He never traveled by bus. He hardly ever did his shopping at the local shop, but always at the large supermarkets outside town. All these were scenarios where he might have come into contact with people, or have been seen by them, and even though he was a teacher by profession and so stood in front of a class every day, occasionally summoned parents to meetings, and also spoke to his colleagues in the staff room every day, he still consistently avoided these social situations. What was it they had in common? That he might be assimilated into a community with no more than chance as its basis? That he might be seen in a way over which he had no control? That he felt vulnerable sitting on the bus, in the barber's chair, by the supermarket till? That was all quite possible. But when I was there I didn't notice. It was only many, many years later that it struck me I had never seen Dad on a bus. And that he had never taken part in any of the social events that sprang up around Yngve's and my activities. Once he attended an end-of-term show, sat close to the wall to see the play we had rehearsed, in which I performed the main role, but unfortunately I had not studied it hard enough, after the previous year's success I was suffering from child hubris, I didn't need to learn all the lines, everything would be fine, I had thought, but standing there, affected I suppose by my father's presence, I could barely remember a line, and our teacher prompted me all the way through a long play about a town of which I was supposed to be the mayor. In the car on the way home he said he had never been so embarrassed in his life and he would never attend any of my end-of-term shows again. That was a promise he kept. Nor did he go to any of the countless soccer matches I played in as I was growing up, he was never one of the parents who drove to away games, never one of the parents who watched home matches, and I didn't react to that either, I didn't even consider it unusual, for that was the way he was, my father, and many other fathers like him, this was the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties, when being a father had a different and, at least on a practical level, a less comprehensive significance than today.

No, that's not true, he did watch me once.

It was during the winter, when I was in the ninth class. He drove me to the shale pitch in Kjevik, he was going onto Kristiansand, we had a practice match against some team from up country. We sat in the car, as silent as ever, him with one hand on the steering wheel, the other resting on the door, I with both mine in my lap. Then I had a sudden inspiration and asked him if he wanted to see the match. No, he couldn't, he had to get to Kristiansand, didn't he. Well, I hadn't expected him to say yes, I said. There was no disappointment in my comment, no sense that I really wanted him to see this match, which was of no importance anyway, it was merely a statement, I really hadn't believed he would want to. When the second half was nearing the end I spotted his car by the sideline, behind the tall piles of snow. Could vaguely make out his dark figure behind the windshield. With only a few minutes left of the match I received a perfectly weighted pass from Harald on the wing, all I had to do was stick out my foot, which I did, but it was my left foot, I didn't have much feel with that one, the ball skidded off, and the shot missed. In the car on the way home he commented on it. You didn't jump on your chance, he said. You had a great chance there. I didn't think you'd mess that up. Oh well, I said. But we won anyway. What was the score? 2–1, I said, glancing at him, because I wanted him to ask who had scored the two goals. Which, mercifully, he did. Did you score? he asked. Yes, I said. Both of them.

With my forehead resting against the window, the plane stationary at the end of the runway, revving its engines in earnest now, I began to cry. The tears came from nowhere, I knew that as they ran down, this is idiotic, I thought, it's sentimental, it's stupid. But it didn't help, I found myself caught in soft, vague, boundless emotions, and couldn't extricate myself until a few minutes later when the plane took off and, with a roar, started to climb. Then, my mind clear again at last, I lowered my head to my T-shirt and wiped my eyes with a corner I held between thumb and index finger, and sat for a long time peering out, until I could no longer feel my neighbor's eyes on me. I leaned back in my seat and closed my eyes. But it was not over. I sensed that it had only just begun.

No sooner had the plane straightened after the ascent than it lowered its nose and started the approach. The stewardesses raced up and down the aisle with their trolleys, trying to serve everyone tea and coffee. The scenery beneath, first just isolated tableaux visible through rare openings in the cloud cover, was rugged and beautiful with its green islands and blue sea, its steep rock faces and snowy white plains, but gradually it was erased or toned down, as the clouds vanished, until the flat Rogaland terrain was all you could see. My insides were in turmoil. Memories I didn't know I had flowed through me, whirling and chaotic, as I tried to extricate myself, because I didn't want to sit there crying, constantly analyzing everything, with little actual success though. I saw him in my mind's eye, when we went skiing together once, in Hove, gliding in and out of the trees, and in every clearing we could see the sea, gray and heavy and vast, and smell it too, the aroma of salt and seaweed that seemed to lie pressed up against the aroma of snow and spruce, Dad ten meters in front of me, perhaps twenty, because despite the fact that his equipment was new, from the Rottefella bindings to the Splitkein skis to the blue anorak, he couldn't ski, he staggered forward almost like a senile old man, with no balance, no flow, no pace, and if there was one thing I did not want it was to be associated with that figure, which was why I always hung back, with my head full of notions about myself and my style, which, what did I know, would perhaps take me far one day. I was embarrassed by him. At that time I had no idea that he had bought all this skiing equipment and driven us to the far side of Tromøya in an attempt to get close to me, but now, sitting there with closed eyes and pretending to sleep while the announcement to fasten seat belts and straighten seat backs was broadcast over the speakers, the thought of it threatened to send me into another bout of crying, and when yet again I leaned forward and propped my head against the side of the aircraft to hide, it was half-hearted, since my fellow passengers must already have known from takeoff that they had ended up next to a young man in tears. My throat ached, and I had no control, everything flowed through me, I was wide open, but not to the outside world, I could hardly see it anymore, but to the inside world, where emotions had taken over. The only thing I could do to salvage the last scraps of dignity was to stop myself from making noise. Not a sob, not a sigh, not a moan, not a groan. Just tears in full flow, and a face distorted into a grimace every time the thought that Dad was dead reached a new climax.

Aah.

Aah.

Then, all of a sudden, everything cleared, it was as though all the emotion and the haze that had filled me for the last fifteen minutes had retreated, like the tide, and the immense distance I gained as a result caused me to burst into laughter.

Ha ha ha, I heard myself chuckle.

I held up my forearm and rubbed my eyes with it. The thought that the woman beside me had seen me sitting there with my face distorted in constant lachrymose grimaces, and was now listening to me in gales of laughter, brought on another fit.

Ha ha ha. Ha ha ha.

I looked at her. She didn't look away; her gaze was fixed on the page of the book in front of her. Directly behind us two of the stewardesses sat down on the fold-up seats and buckled their seat belts around their waists. Outside the window, it was sunny and green. The shadow following us on the field came closer and closer, like a fish being reeled in, until it was under the fuselage the moment the wheels hit the tarmac and it stayed there attached during the braking and taxiing.

Around me people were starting to get up. I took a deep breath. The sense that I had cleared my mind was strong. I wasn't happy, but I was relieved, as always when a heavy burden was unexpectedly removed. The woman beside me, who had closed her book and now allowed me a chance to see what she was reading, got up with it in her hand and stood on tiptoe to reach the overhead compartment. *The Woman and the Ape* by Peter Høeg was what was engaging her. I had read it once. Good idea, poor execution. Would I, under normal circumstances, have initiated a conversation with her about the book? When it would be so easy to do, as now? No, I wouldn't, but I would have sat thinking I ought to. Had I ever initiated a conversation with a stranger?

No, never.

And there was no evidence to suggest I ever would.

I leaned forward to look out the window, down onto the dusty tarmac, which I had once done twenty years ago with the bizarre but clear intention of remembering what I saw, forever. On board an airplane like now, in Sola airport like now, but on my way to Bergen then, and from there to my grandparents in Sørbøvåg. Every time I traveled by plane I recalled this memory I had imposed upon myself. For a long time it opened the novel I had just finished writing, which now lay in the case in the hold beneath me, in the form of a six-hundred-page manuscript I had to proofread within a week.

That at least was one good thing.

I was also looking forward to meeting Yngve. After he had moved from Bergen, first to Balestrand, where he met Kari Anne, with whom he had a child, and then to Stavanger, where another child was born, our relationship had changed, he was no longer someone I could go and see when I had nothing to do, go to a café or a concert with, but someone I visited now and then for days at a stretch, with all that implied for family life. I liked it though, I had always liked staying the night with other families, having your own room with a freshly made bed, full of unfamiliar objects, with a towel and washcloth nicely laid out, and from there straight into the heart of family life, despite there always being, no matter whom I visited, an uncomfortable side, because even though people always try to keep any existing tensions in the background whenever guests are present, the tensions are still noticeable, and you can never know if it is your presence that has caused them or whether they are just there and indeed your presence is helping to suppress them. A third possibility is, of course, that all these tensions were just tensions that lived their own lives in my head.

The aisle was less crowded now, and I stood up, retrieved my bag and jacket, and made my way forward, from the cabin into the corridor to the arrivals hall, which was small but self-contained with its jumble of gates, kiosks, and cafés, travelers rushing to and fro, standing, sitting, eating, reading. I would immediately recognize Yngve in any crowd, and I didn't need his face to identify him, the back of his head or a shoulder was enough, perhaps not even that, you have a kind of receptivity to those with whom you have grown up and to whom you have been close during the period when your personality is being shaped or asserting itself, you receive them directly, without thought as a filter. Almost everything you know about your brother you know from intuition. I never knew what Yngve was thinking, seldom had an inkling as to why he did the things he did, didn't seem to share so many of his opinions, but I could make a reasonable guess, in these respects he was as unknown as everyone else. But I knew his body language, I knew his gestures, I knew his aroma, I was aware of all the nuances of his voice, and, not least, I knew where he came from. I could put none of this into words, and it was seldom articulated in thought, but it meant everything. So I didn't need to scan the tables in the pizzeria, didn't need to search the faces of those sitting by the gates or those crossing the hall, for as soon as I stepped into the concourse I knew where he was. My eyes were drawn there, to the front of the mock-old, mock-Irish pub where indeed he was, arms crossed, wearing greenish, but not military, pants, a white T-shirt with a picture of Sonic Youth's *Goo*, a light-blue denim jacket and a pair of dark-brown Puma shoes. He hadn't seen me yet. I looked at his face, which I knew better than anything. The high cheekbones he had inherited from Dad, and the slightly awry mouth, but the shape of his face was different, and around his eyes he was more like Mom and me.

He turned his head and met my gaze. I was about to smile, but at that moment my lips twisted, and with a pressure it was impossible to resist, the emotions from earlier rose again. They released in a sob, and I began to cry.

Half-raised my arm to my face, took it back down, a new wave came, my face puckered once again. I will never forget the look on Yngve's face. He watched me in disbelief. There was no judgment in it, it was more like him watching something he could not understand, and had not expected, and for which therefore he was completely unprepared.

"Hi," I said through tears.

"Hi," he said. "I've got the car below. Shall we go?"

I nodded and followed him down the stairs, through the entrance hall, and into the parking lot. Whether it was the special sharpness of Vestland air, which is always present irrespective of the temperature, and which was particularly noticeable as we first walked into the shade proffered by a large roof, that cleared my head or the immense feeling of space the surrounding landscape opened, I cannot say, but at any rate I was out of it again by the time we reached his car, and Yngve, now wearing sunglasses, bent forward and inserted the key in the lock on the driver's side.

"Is this all the luggage you've got?" he said, motioning toward my bag.

"Oh shit," I said. "Wait here. I'll run over and get it."

Yngve and Kari Anne lived in Storhaug, a suburb slightly outside Stavanger town center, in an end-of-terrace house with a road on the other side and a forest behind that stretched down to the fjord a few hundred meters away. There was also a collection of allotments close by, and behind that lived, in another estate, Asbjørn, an old friend of Yngve's with whom he had just started up a graphic design business. Their office was in the loft, it was already fitted out with the equipment they had bought, which they were currently learning to use. Neither of them had had any training in this branch, apart from Media Studies at Bergen University, nor did they have any contacts of any significance in the industry. But now they sat there, each behind powerful Macs, working on the few commissions they had. A poster for the Hundvåg Festival, a few folders and leaflets, that was all for the time being. They had put all their eggs in one basket, and for Yngve's part I could understand it; after finishing his studies he had worked as a cultural consultant on

Balestrand District Council for a few years, and the world was not exactly his oyster. But it was a risk, all they had to offer was their taste, which, however, was well-grounded, and had become quite sophisticated, developed as it had been through twenty years of dealing with a variety of pop cultures, from films and record sleeves through to clothes, music, magazines and photo albums, from the obscure to the most commercial, always ready to distinguish between what was good from what was not, whether past or present. Once we went to Asbjørn's, I remember, we had been drinking for three days, when Yngve played the Pixies to us, a then-new, unknown American band, and Asbjørn lay on the sofa convulsed with laughter because what we were listening to was so good. That's so good! he shouted over the loud music. Ha ha ha! That's so good! When I went to Bergen as a nineteen-year-old, he and Yngve were in my studio on one of the first days, and neither my John Lennon picture, which I had hung above the desk, nor the poster of a cornfield with the small patch of grass glowing with such miraculous intensity in the foreground, nor the poster of *The Mission* starring Jeremy Irons found any favor in their eyes. No chance. The Lennon picture was a reminder of my last year at gymnas, when with three others I had discussed literature and politics, listened to music, watched films and drunk wine, extolled the inner life and distanced myself from all things external, and that was why the apostle of impassioned sincerity, Lennon, was hanging on my wall, even though I had always, right from childhood, preferred McCartney's saccharine sweetness. But here the Beatles were *not* an icon, not under *any* circumstances, and it was not long before the Lennon picture came down. But their sureness of taste did not apply only to pop culture; it was Asbjørn who first recommended Thomas Bernhard, he had read *Concrete* in Gyldendal's Vita series, which appeared ten years before all the literati in Norway began to allude to him, while I, I remember, was unable to understand Asbjørn's fascination with this Austrian, and it was only ten years later, together with the rest of literary Norway, that I discovered his greatness. Asbjørn had a nose, that was his great talent, I had never met anyone with such sureness of taste as him, but what use was it, apart from being the hub student life revolved around?

The essence of a nose is judgment, to judge you have to stand outside, and that is not where creativity takes place. Yngve was much more inside, he played guitar in a band, wrote his own songs, and listened to music from there; moreover, he also had an analytical, academic side that Asbjørn did not have, or use, to such an extent. Graphic design was in many ways perfect for them.

My novel had been accepted at more or less the same time that they had started their business, and there was never going to be any other option than their designing the cover and getting a foot in the doorway to the world of publishing. Naturally, the publishing house didn't see things like that. The editor, Geir Gulliksen, said that he would get in touch with a design agency and asked if I had any thoughts about the cover. I said I would like my brother to do it.

"Your brother? Is he a graphic designer?"

"Well, he's just started. He's set up a business with an old friend in Stavanger. They're good. I can vouch for them."

"This is how we'll do it," Geir Gulliksen said. "They make a proposal and we'll look at it. If it's good, okay, then there's no problem."

And that was what happened. I went down to see them in June, I had a book about space travel from the 1950s, it had belonged to Dad, and was full of drawings in the optimistic, futuristic style of the fifties. I also had an idea about a creamy color I had seen on the cover of Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*. Furthermore, Yngve had managed to lay his hands on a couple of pictures of zeppelins which I believed would suit the book. Then they sat in their new office chairs in the loft, with the sun baking down, putting together a proposal while I sat in the armchair behind, watching. In the evenings we drank beer and watched the World Cup. I was happy and optimistic; the feeling that one era had finished and a new one was starting was strong in me. Tonje had completed her studies and had a job at the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation in Hordaland, I was making my debut as a novelist, we had just moved into our first real flat, in Bergen, the town where we had first met. Yngve and Asbjørn, on whose coattails I had hung throughout my student days, had set up on their own, and their first real job was my book cover. Everything was brimming with possibilities, everything pointed forward, and it must have been the first time in my life I had experienced that.

The yield from these days was good, we had six or seven wonderful covers, I was satisfied, but they wanted to try something else, and Asbjørn brought over a bag of American photographic magazines, which we scoured. He showed me some pictures by Jock Sturges, they were quite exceptional, I had never seen anything like them, and we selected one, of a long-limbed girl, twelve years old perhaps, or thirteen, standing naked with her back to us and looking across a lake. It was beautiful but also charged, pure but also threatening, and possessed an almost iconic quality. In another magazine there was an advertisement where the writing was white in two blue strips, or boxes; they decided to snatch the idea, but do it in red, and half an hour later Yngve had the cover ready. The publishers were given five different proposals, but were in little doubt, the Sturges one was the best, and the book due to come out in a few months' time bore the young girl on the cover. It was asking for trouble, Sturges was a controversial photographer, his house had been turned upside down by FBI agents, I had read, and searching for his name on the net I found some of the links always led to child pornography sites. Yet I had not seen any photographer reproduce the rich world of childhood in such an impressive way, Sally Mann included. So I was happy about that. Also that it was Yngve and Asbjørn who had done it.

In the car on the way from Sola on this strange Friday evening we did not say much. Chatted a little about the practical details of what awaited us, the funeral itself, of which neither Yngve nor I had had any previous experience. The low sun made the passing rooftops glow. The sky was high here, the countryside flat and green, and all the space gave me a sense of wasteland that not even the largest gathering of people would succeed in filling. Small by comparison were the people I saw, standing outside a shelter and waiting for the bus to town, cycling along the road, heads bowed over the handlebars, sitting on a tractor and driving across a field, leaving the gas station shop with a hot dog in one hand and a bottle of Coke in the other. The town was deserted as well, the streets were empty, the day was over and the evening had not yet begun.

Yngve played Björk on the car stereo. Outside the windows, the number of shops and office blocks dwindled, apartment buildings increased. Small gardens, hedges, fruit trees, children on bikes, children skipping.

"I don't know why I started crying back there," I said. "But something touched me when I saw you. I suddenly understood that he was dead."

"Yes . . . ," Yngve said. "I'm not sure it's sunk in for me yet."

He shifted down as we rounded the bend and ascended the last hill. There was a play area to the right; two girls were sitting on a bench with what looked like cards in their hands. A bit farther up, on the other side of the road, I saw the garden in front of Yngve's house. No one was there, but the sliding door to the living room was open.

"Here we are," Yngve said, driving slowly into the open garage.

"I'll leave the suitcase here," I said. "We're off tomorrow anyway."

The front door opened, and Kari Anne came out with Torje in her arms. Ylva stood beside her, holding her leg, watching me as I closed the car door and walked over to them. Kari Anne offered her cheek and put an arm around me, I gave her a hug, ruffled Ylva's hair.

"Sorry to hear about your father," she said. "My condolences."

"Thank you," I said. "But it didn't exactly come as a surprise."

Yngve slammed the trunk and walked over with a shopping bag in each hand. He must have done some shopping on the way to the airport.

"Shall we go in?" Kari Anne said.

I nodded and followed her into the living room.

"Mmm, that smells good," I said.

"It's what I always make," she said. "Spaghetti with ham and broccoli."

With Torje still hanging from one arm, she moved a cooking pot to the side of the stove with her other hand, switched it off, bent down and took a colander from the cupboard as Yngve came in, placed the bags on the floor and began to put things away. Ylva, who apart from a diaper was quite naked, stood motionless in the middle of the room, looking back and forth between us. Then she ran off to a doll's bed beside a bookshelf, lifted up a doll, and came over to me holding it at arm's length.

"What a nice doll you've got," I said, kneeling in front of her. "Can I see her?"

She held the doll to her chest with a determined expression on her face, and half-turned.

"Show Karl Ove your doll now," Kari Anne said.

I straightened up.

"I'm going out for a smoke, if that's okay," I said.

"I'll join you," Yngve said. "Just have to finish this first."

I went through the veranda door, closed it, and sat down on one of the three white plastic chairs on the flagstones. There were toys scattered across the whole lawn. At the far end, by the hedge, there was a round plastic pool filled with water and littered with grass and insects. Two golf clubs leaned against the leeward wall, next to a couple of badminton rackets and a soccer ball. I took my cigarettes from my inside pocket and lit one, leaned back. The sun had disappeared behind a cloud, and the bright green, gleaming grass and leaves were suddenly grayish and matte, drained of life. The uninterrupted sounds of a manual lawn mower being trundled back and forth reached me from the neighbor's garden. The clatter of plates and cutlery from inside the kitchen.

I loved being here.

At home in our flat everything was us, there was no distance; if I was troubled, the flat was also troubled. But here there was distance, here the surroundings had nothing to do with me and mine, and they could shield me from whatever was troublesome.

The door opened behind me. It was Yngve. He was holding a cup of coffee in one hand.

"Tonje sends her love," I said.

"Thanks," he said. "How is she?"

"Fine," I said. "She started work on Monday. She had an item on the news on Wednesday. Fatal accident."

"You said," he said, sitting down.

What was that? Was he grumpy?

We sat for a while without speaking. In the sky above the blocks of flats to the left of us, a helicopter flew past. The distant whump of the rotor blades was muffled. The two girls from the play area came walking up the road. Someone from one of the gardens farther away shouted a name. *Bjørnar*, it sounded like.

Yngve took out a cigarette and lit up.

"Have you taken up golf?" I said.

He nodded.

"You should give it a try. You're bound to be good. You're tall and you've played soccer and you've got that killer instinct. Feel like having a few whacks? I've got some practice balls lying around somewhere."

"Now? I don't think so."

"It was a joke, Karl Ove," he said.

"Me playing golf or trying it now?"

"Trying it now."

The neighbor, who was standing just behind the hedge separating the two gardens, stopped, straightened up and ran his hand across his bare, sweaty skull. On the veranda sat a woman dressed in a white T-shirt and shorts, reading a magazine.

"Do you know how Grandma is?" I said.

"No, I don't," he said. "But she was the one who found him. So you can imagine she probably isn't feeling too good."

"In the living room, right?"

"Yes," he said, stubbing out his cigarette in the ashtray and getting up. "Well, shall we go in and have a bite to eat?"

The next morning I was woken by Ylva standing at the bottom of the stairs in the hall and howling. I half-propped myself up in bed and raised the blinds so that I could see what time it was. Half past five. I sighed and sank back down. My room was full of packing cases, clothes, and various other things that had not yet found their place in the house. An ironing board stood by one wall, piled with neatly stacked clothes, next to it an Asian-looking screen, folded and leaning against the wall. Beyond the door I could hear Yngve's and Kari Anne's voices, soon afterward their footfalls on the old wooden staircase. The radio being switched on downstairs. We had decided to set off at around seven, then we would be in Kristiansand at about eleven, but there was nothing to stop us going earlier, I supposed, swung my feet onto the floor, put on my trousers and T-shirt, leaned forward and ran a hand through my hair while inspecting myself in the wall mirror. No traces of yesterday's emotional outbursts visible; I just looked tired. So, back to where I was. Because yesterday had not left any traces internally either. Feelings are like water, they always adapt to their surroundings. Not even the worst grief leaves traces; when it feels so overwhelming and lasts for such a long time, it is not because the feelings have set, they can't do that, they stand still, the way water in a forest mere stands still.

Fuck, I thought. This was one of my mental tics. Fuck, ferk, fuckeroo was another. They flashed into my consciousness at odd intervals, they were impossible to stop, but why should I stop them, they didn't do anyone any harm. You couldn't see from my face that I was thinking them. Shit a brick, I thought, and opened the door. I saw straight into their bedroom, and looked down, things existed that I did not want to know, pulled the little wooden gate aside and went downstairs into the kitchen. Ylva was sitting on her Tripp Trapp chair with a slice of bread in her hand and a glass of milk in front of her, Yngve was standing by the stove and frying eggs while Kari Anne shuttled back and forth between the table and cupboards, setting the table. The coffee machine light was on. The last drops from the filter were on their way into the pot. The extractor hood hummed, the eggs bubbled and spat in the pan, the radio blared out the traffic news jingle.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning," said Kari Anne.

"Hello," said Yngve.

"Karl Ove," said Ylva, pointing to the chair opposite her.

"Shall I sit there?" I asked.

She nodded, sweeping head movements, and I pulled the chair out and sat down. Of her parents, she looked more like Yngve, she had his nose and eyes, and oddly many of his expressions also appeared in them. Her body had not yet outgrown the baby fat stage, there was something soft and rounded about all her limbs and parts, so that when she frowned and her eyes assumed Yngve's knowing air, it was hard not to smile. It didn't make her older but him younger: suddenly you saw that one of his typical expressions was not associated with experience, maturity, or worldly wisdom, but must have lived its life unchanged and independent of his face right from the time it was forming at the beginning of the 1960s.

Yngve slipped the spatula under the eggs and transferred them, one by one, onto a broad dish, put it on the table, beside the bread basket, fetched the pot of coffee, and filled the three cups. I generally drank tea at breakfast and had since I was fourteen, but I didn't have the heart to point this out, instead I took a slice of bread and flipped an egg on top with the spatula Yngve had rested against the dish.

I scoured the table for salt. But there was none to be found.

"Any salt?" I asked.

"Here," Kari Anne said, handing it to me across the table.

"Thank you," I said, flipping open the little plastic cap and watching the tiny grains sink into the yellow yolk, barely puncturing the surface, as the butter melted and seeped into the bread.

"Where's Torje?" I said.

"He's upstairs asleep," said Kari Anne.

I bit a chunk off the bread. The fried egg-white was crispy underneath, large brownish-black pieces crunched between palate and tongue as I chewed.

"Does he still sleep a lot?" I said.

"Well . . . sixteen hours a day possibly? I don't know. What would you say?" She turned to Yngve.

"No idea," he said.

I bit into the yolk and it ran, yellow and lukewarm, into my mouth. Took a swig of coffee.

"He was so frightened when Norway scored," I said.

Kari Anne smiled. We had seen the second of Norway's World Cup games here, and Torje had been sleeping in a cradle at the other end of the room. Whence a high-pitched howl arose, after our cheering to celebrate the goal had subsided.

"Shame about the Italy game by the way," Yngve said. "Have we actually talked about it?"

"No," I said. "But they knew what they were doing. You just had to give Norway the ball and everything broke down."

"They must have been on their knees after the Brazil game," Yngve said.

"I was too," I said. "Penalties are just too painful. I could hardly watch."

I had seen the match in Molde, with Tonje's father. As soon as it was over I called Yngve. We were both close to tears. Behind our choked voices lay an entire childhood supporting a national soccer team that had not had a sniff of success. Afterward I had gone down to the town center with Tonje, it had been full of cars honking their horns and people waving flags. Strangers were hugging, the sounds of shouting and singing came from all corners, people were running around with flushed faces, Norway had beaten Brazil in a decisive World Cup match, and no one knew how far this team could go. The whole way maybe?

Ylva slid down from her chair and held my hand.

"Come on," she said.

"Karl Ove has to eat first," Yngve said. "Afterward, Ylva!"

"No, don't worry," I said, joining her. She dragged me over to the sofa, took a book from the table and sat down. Her short legs didn't even reach to the edge.

"Shall I read?" I said.

She nodded. I sat beside her and opened the book. It was about a caterpillar that ate everything in sight. After I had finished reading she crawled forward and grabbed another book from the table. This one was about a mouse called Fredrik who, unlike other mice, didn't gather food in the summer but preferred to sit around dreaming. They said he was lazy, but when winter came and everything was cold and white, he was the one who gave their lives color and light. That was what he had been gathering, and that was what they needed now, color and light.

Ylva sat next to me perfectly still, looking at the pages with intense concentration, occasionally pointing to things and asking what they were called. It was wonderful sitting with her, but also a bit boring. I wanted to be out on the veranda, alone with a cigarette and a cup of coffee.

On the last page Fredrik was a blushing hero and savior.

"That was uplifting. Wonderful!" I said to Yngve and Kari Anne after finishing the book.

"We had it when we were boys," Yngve said. "Don't you remember?"

"Vaguely," I lied. "Is it actually the same book?"

"No, Mom's got it."

Ylva was on her way to the pile of books again. I got up and fetched my cup of coffee from the kitchen table.

"Have you had enough?" Kari Anne said, on her way to the dishwasher with her plate.

"Yes, thanks," I said. "A nice breakfast."

I looked at Yngve.

"When shall we make tracks?"

"I'll have to shower first," he said. "And do some packing. Half an hour maybe?"

"Okay," I said. Ylva had accepted that Book Hour was over for today and had gone into the hall, where she sat putting on my shoes. I opened the sliding door to the veranda and went out. The weather was mild and overcast. The seats were covered with fine droplets of dew which I wiped away with my hand before sitting down. Normally I would not have been up so early, my mornings tended to start at around eleven, twelve or one, and everything that my senses were breathing in now reminded me of summer mornings in my childhood when I used to cycle to a gardening job at half past six. The sky was mostly hazy, the road I took empty and gray, the air rushing toward me chilly, and it was almost inconceivable that the heat in the field where later we would be squatting would be baking, or that we would shoot off on bikes to Lake Gjerstad during the lunch break for a dip before work resumed.

I sipped the coffee and lit a cigarette. I can't say that I enjoyed the taste of the coffee or the feeling of smoke descending into my lungs, I could barely distinguish the two, the point was to do it, it was a routine, and as with all routines, protocol was everything.

How I had hated the smell of smoke when I was a child! Journeys at the back of a boiling car with two parents puffing away at the front. The smoke that filtered from the kitchen through the crack in my bedroom door in the morning, before I had gotten used to it, when it filled my sleeping nostrils and I twitched, the unpleasantness of it, as it had been every day until I started to smoke myself and became immune to the odor.

The exception was the period when Dad had smoked a pipe.

When would that have been?

All the bother of knocking out all the old black tobacco, cleaning the pipe with the flexible white cleaners, tamping in fresh tobacco and sitting there puffing it into life, matchstick in the bowl, puff, another matchstick, puff, puff, and then lean back, cross one leg over the other and smoke. Oddly enough, I associated this with his outdoor phase. Knitted sweaters, anorak, boots, beard, pipe. Long walks inland to pick berries for the winter, sporadic trips to the mountains looking for cloudberries, the berry of all berries, but more often than not into the forest off the roads, with the car left at the edge, everyone with a berry picker in one hand, bucket in the other, combing the countryside for blueberries or lingonberries. Rests in lay-bys beside rivers or on clifftops with a view. Sometimes by a rock face along a river, sometimes on a log inside a pine forest. Slamming on the brakes when there were raspberry bushes by the roadside. Out with the buckets, for this was Norway in the 1970s, families stood on the roadside picking raspberries on weekends, with large, square, plastic cooler bags containing provisions in the trunk. It was also around this time that he used to go fishing, to the far side of the island on his own after school, or with us on the weekend, fishing for the big cod in the waters around here in the winter: 1974 to 1975. Even though neither of my parents had anything to do with the sixty-eighters, after all they had had children when they were twenty and since then had worked, and even though the ideology was alien to my father, he was not untouched by the spirit of the time, it was alive in him as well, and when you saw him sitting there with pipe in hand, bearded and if not long-haired, at least thick-haired, in a knitted sweater and a pair of flared jeans, his bright eyes smiling at you, you could have taken him for one of the softie fathers beginning to emerge and assert themselves at that time, those who were not averse to pushing strollers, changing diapers, sitting on the floor and playing with children. However, nothing could be farther from the truth. The only thing he had in common with them was the pipe.

Oh, Dad, have you died on me now?

From the open window on the floor above came the sound of crying. I craned my neck. Kari Anne was in the kitchen, emptying the dishwasher, two glasses on the table, she ran across the floor to the staircase. Ylva, who was pushing a little cart with a doll inside, trundled in the same direction. Seconds later I heard Kari Anne's consoling voice through the window, and the crying abated. I got up, opened the door, and went in. Ylva was standing by the gate in front of the stairs looking up. The plumbing in the wall gurgled.

"Do you want to sit on my shoulders?" I asked.

"Yes," she said.

I squatted down and lifted her onto my shoulders, held her small legs tight with my hands and ran back and forth between the living room and the kitchen a few times, whinnying like a horse. She laughed, and whenever I stopped and bent forward as if I were going to throw her off she screamed. After a couple of minutes I'd had enough, but continued for another two as a matter of form, before crouching down and unsaddling her.

"More!" she said.

"Another time," I said, looking out of the window, down to the road where a bus pulled in and stopped to let on a meager group of commuters from the flats.

"Now," she said.

I looked at her and smiled.

"Okay. One more time then," I said. Up she went again, back and forth again, halt and pretend to throw her off, whinny. Fortunately, Yngve came down just afterward, so stopping seemed natural enough.

"Are you ready?" he said.

His hair was wet, and his cheeks smooth after a shave. In his hand he was holding the old blue-and-red Adidas bag he had had at school.

"Yup," I said.

"Is Kari Anne upstairs?"

"Yes, Torje woke up."

"I'll just have a smoke and then we can go," Yngve said. "Will you keep an eye on Ylva?"

I nodded. By a stroke of good fortune she seemed to have found something to occupy herself with, so I was able to collapse on the sofa and flick through one of the music magazines there. But I wasn't up to absorbing record reviews and interviews with bands, so I put it down and instead took his guitar from the stand by the sofa, in front of the amplifier and boxes of LPs. It was a black Fender Telecaster, relatively new, while the tube amplifier was an old Music Man. In addition, he had a Hagström guitar, but that was in his office. I strummed a few chords without thinking, it was the opening of Bowie's "Space Oddity" and I started to sing to myself quietly. I no longer had a guitar, after all these years I hadn't managed much more than the very basic skills it would take a somewhat talented fourteen-year-old a month to master. But the drum set, which I had paid a pretty krone for five years ago, that at least was in the loft, and now we were back in Bergen perhaps it could be used again.

In this house you really ought to be able to play Pippi Longstocking, I thought.

I put the guitar back and grabbed the pop magazine again as Kari Anne came downstairs with Torje in her arms. He was hanging there and grinning from ear to ear. I got up and went over to them, leaned forward and said *booh* to him, an unusual and unnatural action for me, I immediately felt stupid, but that clearly didn't bother Torje, who hiccupped with laughter, and looked at me expectantly when he stopped laughing, he wanted me to do it again.

"Booh!" I said.

"Eeha eeha eeha!" he said.

Not all rituals involve ceremonies, not all rituals are rigidly demarcated, there are those that take shape in the midst of everyday life, and are recognizable by the weight and charge they give the otherwise normal event. As I stepped out of the house that morning and followed Yngve to the car, for a moment it was as if I was entering a larger story than my own. The sons leaving home to bury their father, this was the story I suddenly found myself in, as I stopped by the passenger door while Yngve unlocked the trunk and stowed his bag, and Kari Anne, Ylva, and Torje stood watching us from the front door. The sky was grayish-white and mild, the estate quiet. The slam of the trunk lid, which reverberated against the house wall on the other side, sounded almost obtrusively clear and sharp. Yngve opened the door and got in, leaned across and unlocked my side. I waved to Kari Anne and the children before squeezing into the seat and closing the door. They waved back. Yngve started the engine, hung his arm across the back of my seat and reversed, up to the right. Then he too waved, and we set off down the road. I leaned back.

"Are you tired?" Yngve asked. "Just sleep if you want."

"Sure?"

"Of ourse. So long as I can play some music."

I nodded and closed my eyes. Heard him press the CD player button, hunt for a CD on the narrow shelf under the dashboard. The low hum of the car. Then the disc being slipped in, and straight afterward, a folksy mandolin intro.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Sixteen Horsepower," he said. "Do you like it?"

"Sounds good," I said, closing my eyes again. The sensation of the great story had gone. We were not two sons, we were Yngve and Karl Ove; we were not going home but to Kristiansand; this was not a father we were burying, it was Dad.

I wasn't tired, and didn't manage to fall asleep, but it was pleasant sitting with my eyes closed, mostly because it was undemanding. When we were growing up, I chatted all the time with Yngve and we never had any secrets, but at some juncture, perhaps as early as when I was at upper secondary, this changed: from then on I was immensely conscious of who he was and who I was when we were talking, all spontaneity vanished, every statement I made was either planned in advance or analyzed retrospectively, mostly both, apart from when I was drinking, then I regained the old freedom. With the exception of Tonje and my mother, that was how I behaved with everyone, I couldn't sit and chat with people anymore, my awareness of the situation was too acute, and that put me outside it. Whether it was the same for Yngve I didn't know, but I didn't think so, it didn't seem so when I saw him with others. Whether he knew that was how I felt, I didn't know, but something told me he did. Often it felt to me as if I were false, or deceitful, since I never played with an open deck, I was always calculating and evaluating. This didn't bother me any more, it had become my life, but right now, at the outset of a long car journey, now that Dad was dead, I experienced a yearning to escape from myself or at least the part that guarded me so assiduously.

Shit a brick.

I straightened up and flicked through his CDs. Massive Attack, Portishead, Blur, Leftfield, Bowie, Supergrass, Mercury Rev, Queen.

Queen?

He had liked them ever since he was small, had always stayed true to them, and was ready to defend them at the drop of a hat. I remembered him sitting in his room copying one of Brian May's solos note for note on his new guitar, a black imitation Les Paul, bought with his confirmation money, and the Queen fan club magazine he got through the mail. He was still waiting for the world to come to its senses and accord to Queen what Queen was rightfully due.

I smiled.

When Freddie Mercury died, the revelation that shocked was not the fact that he was gay but that he was an Indian.

Who could have imagined that?

Buildings were few and far between now. The traffic in the oncoming roadway had increased for a while, as rush hour approached, but was beginning to die down as we emerged into the unpopulated area between towns.

We passed huge, yellow cornfields, vast expanses of strawberries, patches of green pastureland, newly plowed fields of dark brown, almost black soil. Occasional copses, villages, some river or other, some lake or other. Then the terrain totally changed character and became almost mountainous with green, treeless, uncultivated upland. Yngve drove into a gas station, filled up, poked his head in and asked if I wanted anything, I shook my head, but on his return he passed me a bottle of Coke and a Bounty bar.

"Feel like a smoke?" he said.

I nodded and clambered out. We walked to a bench at the end of the parking lot. Behind it flowed a little stream, with a bridge farther on. A motorbike roared by, then a juggernaut, then one more.

"What did Mom actually say?" I said.

"Not much," Yngve said. "She needs time to think things through. But she was sad. Probably thinking about us mostly, I would imagine."

"Borghild's being buried today," I said.

"Yes," he said.

A juggernaut drove into the gas station from the west, parked with a sigh at the other end, a middle-aged man jumped down from the cab and held his windblown, flapping hair in place as he walked to the entrance.

"Last time I saw Dad he talked about setting up as a truck driver," I said with a smile.

"Oh," Yngve said. "When was that?"

"Winter, um, year and a half ago. When I was in Kristiansand, writing."

I unscrewed the bottle top and took a swig.

"When did you last see him?" I said, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand.

Yngve stared across the flatland on the other side of the road and took a couple of drags from the dying cigarette.

"Must have been at Egil's confirmation. May last year. But you were there too, weren't you?"

"Shit, I was," I said. "That was the last time. Or was it?" Now I wasn't so sure.

Yngve lowered his foot from the bench seat, replaced the top on the bottle and set off for the car as the truck driver came out of the door with a newspaper under his arm and a hot dog in his hand. I chucked the smoking cigarette onto the tarmac and followed. By the time I reached the car the engine was already running.

"Right," Yngve said. "Two hours to go, give or take. We can eat when we get there, can't we?"

"Okay," I said.

"Anything you'd like to hear?"

He halted at the junction, glanced a few times back and forth, then we were on the main road again, and he accelerated.

"No," I said. "You decide."

He chose Supergrass. The music I had bought in Barcelona, where I had accompanied Tonje while she went to some European local radio seminar. We had seen them live there, and since then I had played them nonstop, along with a couple of other CDs, while writing the novel. The mood of that year suddenly overwhelmed me. So it had already become a memory, I marveled. So it had already become "the time in Volda when I wrote around the clock while Tonje was left to twiddle her thumbs."

Never again, she had said afterward, the first evening we sat in the new flat in Bergen, the next day we were going to Turkey on holiday. I'll leave you.

"In fact I did see him once after that," Yngve said. "Last summer when I was in Kristiansand with Bendik and Atle. He was sitting on the bench outside the kiosk by Rundingen, as we drove past. He looked like a bit of a rascal, Bendik said when he saw him. And of course he was right."

"Poor Dad," I said.

Yngve looked at me.

"If there is anyone you shouldn't feel sorry for, it's him," he said.

"I know. But you know what I mean."

He didn't answer. The silence which in the first few seconds was charged, drifted into mere silence. I surveyed the scenery, which was sparse and windblown here so close to the sea. A red barn or two, a white farmhouse or two, a tractor or two with a forage harvester in a field. An old car without wheels in a yard, a yellow plastic ball blown under a hedge, some sheep grazing on a slope, a train slowly trundling past on the raised railway track a few hundred meters beyond the road.

I had always suspected we had different relationships with Dad. The differences were not enormous, but perhaps significant. What did I know? For a while Dad had tried to get closer to me, I remembered that well, it was the year Mom had done a continuing education course in Oslo and had her practical in Modum, and we lived at home with him. It was as though he had given up on Yngve, who was fourteen, but still nourished a hope that he could reach me. At any rate, I had to sit in the kitchen every afternoon and keep him company while he made the meal. I sat on the chair, he stood by the stove frying something or other while asking me all sorts of questions. What the teacher had had to say, what we had learned in the English lesson, what I was going to do after the meal, whether I knew which teams were on the pools coupon for this weekend. I gave terse answers and writhed in the chair. It was also the winter he took me skiing. Yngve could do what he liked, so long as he said where he was going and was back by half past nine, and I envied him for that. The period stretched beyond the year Mom was away, however, because the autumn afterward Dad took me fishing in the morning before school, we used to get up at six, it was as dark outside as at the bottom of a well, and cold, particularly on the sea. I was frozen and wanted to go home, but I was with Dad, there was no point in whining, there was no point in saying anything, you had to tough it out. Two hours later we were back, just in time for me to catch the school bus. I hated this, I was always cold, the sea was freezing of course, and it was my job to grab the trawl floats and pull up the first lengths of net while he maneuvred the boat, and if I missed the floats he gave me an earful, more often than not I ended up trying to grab the damn things with tears in my eyes, as he powered back and forth, glaring at me with those wild eyes of his in the autumn darkness off Tromøya. But I know he did this for my sake, and he had never done it for Yngve.

On the other hand, I also know that the first four years of Yngve's life – when they were living in Thereses gate in Oslo, and Dad was studying at the university and working as a night watchman, and Mom was doing a nursing degree while Yngve was in kindergarten – were good, perhaps even happy. I know that Dad was happy, and loved Yngve. When I was born we moved to Tromøya, at first into an old, former military, house in Hove, in the forest by the sea, then to the house on the estate in Tybakken, and the only thing I was told about that time was that I fell down the stairs and hyperventilated so much that I fainted, and Mom ran with me in her arms to the neighbor's house to call the hospital, as my face was going bluer and bluer, and I had screamed so much that in the end my father had dumped me in the bathtub and showered me with ice cold water to make me stop. Mom, who told me about the incident, had shielded us, and had given him an ultimatum: one more time and she would leave him. It didn't happen again, and she stayed.

Dad's attempts at closeness did not mean that he didn't hit me or yell at me in a rage or concoct the most ingenious ways of punishing me, but it did mean that my image of him was not clear-cut, which perhaps it was to a greater degree for Yngve. He hated Dad with a greater intensity, and that was simpler. I had no idea what relationship Yngve had with him above and beyond that. The notion of having children one day was not without its complications for me, and when Yngve told me that Kari Anne was pregnant it had been impossible to imagine what kind of father Yngve would make, whether what Dad had handed down to us was in our bone marrow or whether it would be possible to break free, maybe even without a problem. Yngve became a kind of test case for me: if all went well it would also go well for me. And it did go well, there was nothing of Dad in Yngve regarding his attitude to children, everything was very different and seemed to be integrated into the rest of his life. He never rejected them, he always had time for them whenever they went to him or he was needed, and he never tried to get close to them, by which I mean he didn't make them compensate for something in himself, or in his life. He handled such incidents as Ylva's kicking, wriggling, howling, and not wanting to get dressed with ease. He had been at home with her for six months, and the closeness they shared was still apparent. Yngve and Dad were the only models I had.

The countryside around us changed again. Now we were driving through forest. Sørland forests with mountain crags here and there among the trees, hills covered with spruce and oaks, aspen and birch, sporadic dark moorland, sudden meadows, flatland with densely growing pine trees. When I was a boy I used to imagine the sea rising and filling the forests so that the hilltops became islets you could sail between and on which you could bathe. Of all my childhood fantasies this was the one that captivated me most; the thought that everything was covered by water had me spellbound, the thought that you could *swim* where now you were walking, *swim* over bus shelters and roofs, perhaps dive down and glide through a door, up a staircase, into a living room. Or just through a forest, with its slopes, cliffs, cairns, and ancient trees. At a certain point in childhood my most exciting game was building dams in streams, watching the water swell and cover the marsh, the roots, the grass, the rocks, the beaten earth path beside the stream. It was hypnotic. Not to mention the cellar we found in an unfinished house filled with shiny, black water we sailed on in two styrofoam boxes, when we were around five years old. Hypnotic. The same applied to winter when we skated along frozen streams in which grass, sticks, twigs, and small plants stood upright in the translucent ice beneath us.

What had been the great attraction? And what had happened to it?

Another fantasy I had at that time was that there were two enormous saw blades sticking out from the side of the car, chopping off everything as we drove past. Trees and streetlamps, houses and outhouses, but also people and animals. If someone was waiting for a bus they would be sliced through the middle, their top half falling like a felled tree, leaving feet and waist standing and the wound bleeding.

I could still identify with that feeling.

"Down there is Søgne," Yngve said. "A place I've often heard about but have never been. Have you?"

I shook my head.

"Some of the girls at school came from there. But I've never been."

It wasn't far to go now.

Soon the countryside began to merge into shapes I vaguely recognized, it became more and more familiar until what I saw through the window coalesced with the images I had in my mind's eye. It felt as if we were driving into a memory. As if what we were moving through was just a kind of backdrop for my youth. Entering the suburbs, Vågsbygd, where Hanne had lived, the Hennig Olsen factory, Falconbridge Nikel Works, dark and grimy, surrounded by the dead mountains, and then to the right, Kristiansand harbor, the bus station, the ferry terminal, Hotel Caledonien, the silos on the island of Odderøya. To the left, the part of town where Dad's uncle had lived until recently, before dementia had taken him to an old folks' home somewhere.

"Shall we eat first?" Yngve said. "Or go straight to the undertaker's?"

"May as well jump right in," I said. "Do you know where it is?"

"Elvegata. Don't remember the number."

"Then we'll have to find the road from the top. Do you know where it starts?"

"No. But just drive. It'll turn up."

We stopped at the traffic lights, Yngve bent over the wheel looking in all directions. The lights changed to green, he put the car into gear and slowly followed a small truck with a filthy, gray tarpaulin over the back, still peering to the sides, the truck picked up speed, and when he noticed the gap opening he straightened and accelerated.

"It was down there," he said, nodding to the right. "We'll have to go through the tunnel now."

"That doesn't matter," I said. "We just come in from the other side."

But it did matter. When we emerged from the tunnel and were on the bridge, the studio where I lived was on my right, I saw it from the road, and only a few meters beyond, on the other side of the river, hidden from us, was Grandma's house where Dad had died the day before.

He was still here in this town, in some cellar somewhere, being handled by strangers, as we sat there in a car on our way to the undertaker's. He had grown up in the streets we saw around us, and had been walking them until a few days ago. At the same time my memories of the streets were aroused, for over there was the gymnas, there was the neighborhood I walked through every morning and afternoon, so in love it hurt, there was the house where I had been so often alone.

I cried, but it was nothing serious, just a few tears down my cheeks. Yngve didn't notice until he looked at me. I dismissed them with a wave and was pleased my voice carried as I said: "Take a left there."

We drove down to Torridalsveien, past the two shale soccer fields where I had trained so hard with the seniors the winter I turned sixteen, past Kjøita and up to the intersection by Østerveien, which we followed over the bridge, then again we bore right, onto Elvegata.

"What number was it?" I said.

Yngve scanned the house numbers as we drove slowly past.

"There it is," he said. "Now we'll have to find somewhere to park."

A black sign with gold lettering hung from the wooden façade on the left. Gunnar had given Yngve the undertaker's name. It was the company they had used when Grandad died, and for all I knew, it was the one the family had always used. I had been in Africa at the time, on a two-month visit to Tonje's mother, and hadn't been told about Grandad until after his funeral. Dad had assumed responsibility for informing me. He never did. But at the funeral he said he had spoken to me and that I had told him I couldn't come. I would have liked to attend that funeral, and even though it would have been difficult from a practical point of view it would not necessarily have been impossible, and even if it had turned out to be impossible, I would have liked to have been informed of his death when it happened and not three weeks later, when he was already in the ground. I was furious. But what could I do?

Yngve drove down a little side street and pulled up to the curb. We unbuckled our seat belts at precisely the same moment and opened the door at precisely the same moment, and looked at each other with a smile. The air outside was mild but more sultry than in Stavanger, the sky a touch darker. Yngve went to the parking meter, and I lit a cigarette. I hadn't been to my maternal grandmother's funeral either. I had been in Florence with Yngve at the time. We had caught the train down and stayed at some random *pensione*, and since this was before mobile phones were the norm it had been impossible to locate us. It was Asbjørn who told us what had happened, on the evening we arrived home, he sat with us drinking the alcohol we had brought back. So, the only funeral I had attended was my maternal grandfather's. I had helped to carry the coffin, it was a fine funeral, the cemetery was on a hill overlooking the fjord, the sun was shining, I cried when my mother spoke in the church and, after it was all over and he was in the ground, and when she tarried by the open grave. She stood there alone, head bowed, the grass was green, the fjord far below blue and glassy smooth, the mountain opposite massive, towering and dark, and the earth in the grave shiny black and glistening.

Afterward we had meat broth. Fifty people, guzzling and slurping, there is nothing better for sentimentality than salted meat, or hot soup, for emotional outbursts. Magne, Jon Olav's father, spoke, but cried so much it was hard to understand what he was saying. Jon Olav made an attempt at a speech in church, but had to give up, he had been so close to his grandfather, and was unable to say a single word.

I took a few steps with stiff legs, looked up the street, which was almost deserted, apart from at the end, where it met the town's shopping street and from this distance seemed almost black with people. The smoke stung my lungs, as it always did when I hadn't smoked for a while. A car stopped about fifty meters farther up, and a man alighted. He bent forward and waved to those who had dropped him off. He had dark, curly hair and a bald patch, was probably around the fifty mark, wore light-brown velvet pants and a smart black jacket, narrow, square glasses. I turned away so he couldn't see my face as he approached, because I had recognized him, it was my Norwegian teacher from the first class at upper secondary, what was his name again? Fjell? Berg? Who cares, I thought, and turned around after he had passed. He had been enthusiastic and warm, but there had also been a sharpness about him, it didn't surface often, but when it did I had considered it evil. He raised the bag he was holding to check his wristwatch, sped up, and shot round the corner.

"I've got to have one, too," Yngve said, joining me.

"The man who just went past, that was my old teacher," I said.

"Oh yeah?" Yngve said, lighting a cigarette. "Didn't he recognize you, or what?"

"I don't know. I hid my face."

I flicked the butt away and ransacked my pocket for some chewing gum. Seemed to remember there was some lying loose there. And there was.

"Only got the one," I said. "Would have given you some otherwise."

"Sure you would've," he said.

Tears were close, I could feel, and I took a few deep breaths while opening my eyes wide as if to clear them. On a doorstep opposite sat an alcoholic I hadn't noticed. His head was resting against the wall and he appeared to be asleep. The skin on his face was dark and leathery and covered with cuts. His hair so greasy it had taken on a rasta style. Thick winter jacket, even though the temperature was at least twenty degrees, and a bag of junk next to him. Three gulls stood on the ridge of the roof above him. As I focused on them, one lifted its head back and screamed.

"Well," Yngve said. "Shall we take the plunge then?"

I nodded.

He flicked his cigarette end away, and we set off.

"Have we got an appointment by the way?" I said.

"No, that's what we haven't got," he said. "But there can't be such a rush, can there?"

"I'm sure we'll be fine," I said.

Between some trees I saw a fleeting glimpse of the river, and as we rounded the corner, all the signs, shop windows and cars in Dronningens gate. Gray tarmac, gray buildings, gray sky.

Yngve opened the door to the undertaker's and went in. I followed, closed the door behind me, and was met with a kind of waiting room, a sofa, a few chairs and a table along one wall, a counter along the other. The counter was unmanned, and Yngve went over to peer into the room behind, knocked softly on the glass with a knuckle while I remained in the middle of the room.

A door in the side wall was ajar, I saw a figure in a black suit passing in the room behind. He looked young, younger than me.

A woman with blond hair and wide hips, closer to fifty, came out and sat behind the counter. Yngve said something to her, I didn't hear what, just the sound of his voice.

He turned.

"Someone will be here soon," he said. "We've got to wait five minutes."

"It feels like going to the dentist," I said as we took a seat and looked around the room.

"If it were, he'd be drilling into our souls," Yngve said.

I smiled. Remembered the chewing gum, which I took out of my mouth and hid in my hand while hunting for somewhere to dispose of it. Nowhere. I tore off a corner from the newspaper on the table, wrapped it around the gum, and put the package in my pocket.

Yngve drummed his fingers on the armrest.

Well, in fact, I had been to another funeral. How could I have forgotten? It had been for a young boy, the mood in the church was hysterical, there was crying, there was howling, there was shouting and moaning and sobbing, but also laughter and giggles, and it went in waves, one shout had been enough to trigger an avalanche of further emotional outbursts, there had been a storm in there, and it had all been unleashed by the white coffin at the altar in which Kjetil lay. He had died in a car, fallen asleep at the wheel early one morning, driven off the road and into a fence, an iron pole had impaled his head. He was eighteen years old, the kind of boy everyone liked, a boy who was always in a good mood and did not represent a threat to anyone. When we left school at sixteen he opted for the same branch as Jan Vidar and that was why he had been up so early, his job at the bakery started at four in the morning. Listening to news of the accident on the radio, I thought it had been Jan Vidar and was relieved when I discovered it wasn't, but I was also sorry, if not quite as sorry as the girls in our old class, they let their feelings go completely, and I know that because together with Jan Vidar I visited everyone in the days after the death to collect names and money for a class wreath. I was not entirely at ease with this role, it felt as if I were drawing on a relationship with Kjetil to which I had no right, so I kept a low profile, occupied as little space as I could, walking around the village with Jan Vidar, who radiated grief, anger, and bad conscience.

I remember Kjetil well, I can picture him at will, hear his voice in my inner ear, although only one specific incident from the four years I knew him has stayed with me, and that is an extremely insignificant one: someone was playing Madness's "Our House" on the stereo in the school bus, and Kjetil, who was next to me, was laughing at how fast the vocalist sang. I have forgotten everything else. But in the cellar I still have a book I borrowed from him, *The A–Z of the Driving Test*. His name is on the title page written in the childish style almost everyone of our generation has. I should have returned it, but to whom? The book would have been the last thing his parents would have wanted to see.

The school he and Jan Vidar attended was only a block away from where I was waiting with Yngve now. Apart from several weeks two years before, I had hardly been to Kristiansand since that time. One year in northern Norway, six months in Iceland, close to six months in England, one year in Volda, nine years in Bergen. And except for Bassen, whom I still met sporadically, I no longer had any contact with anyone from my time here. My oldest friend was Espen Stueland whom I had met in the literary science department at Bergen University ten years before. It had not been a conscious choice, it was just the way it had come about. For me Kristiansand had vanished off the face of the earth. Intellectually, I was aware that almost everyone I knew from that era still lived and had their lives here, but not emotionally, as the time in Kristiansand had stopped for me that summer I left school and headed off for good.

The fly that had been buzzing around in the window ever since we came in suddenly set a course for the center of the room. I watched it circle around a few times under the ceiling, settle on the yellow wall, take off again and glide in a small arc around us to land on the armrest where Yngve was now drumming his fingers. Its front legs went back and forth, crossed, as if brushing something off, then it moved forward and did a little jump through the air, its wings whirring, and down onto Yngve's hand, he, of course, lifted it at once, causing the fly to set off again and it flew back and forth before us, almost in irritation. Eventually, it settled back on the window, where it wandered up and down, confused.

"Actually we haven't talked about what sort of funeral he should have," Yngve said. "Have you given it any thought?"

"You mean whether it should be in a church or not?"

"For example."

"No, I haven't given it any thought. Do we have to decide that now?"

"We don't. But soon we'll have to."

I caught a glimpse of the young man in the suit as he passed by the half-open door again. It struck me that bodies might be stored here. Perhaps this was where they received them for preparation. Where else would they do it?

As though someone inside had sensed the direction of my thoughts, the door was closed. And as though the door movements were coordinated as part of some secret system, the one opposite us opened at the same moment. A portly man, who might have been in his mid-sixties, stepped out, impeccably dressed in a dark suit and white shirt, and looked at us.

"Knausgaard?" he queried.

We nodded and rose to our feet. He said his name and shook our hands in turn.

"Come with me," he said.

We followed him to a relatively large office with windows looking onto the street. He ushered us to two chairs in front of a desk. The chairs were of dark wood with black, leather upholstered seats. The desk he sat behind was deep, and it too was dark. A letter tray, the kind with several tiers, was on his left, beside it a telephone, otherwise the desk was empty.

Well, not quite, for on our side, right on the edge was a box of Kleenex. Practical of course, but how cynical it seemed! Seeing it, you visualized all the bereaved relatives who had come here and wept in the course of the day and you realized that your grief was not unique, not even exceptional, and ultimately not particularly precious. The box of Kleenex was a sign that here weeping and death had undergone inflation.

He looked at us.

"How can I help you?" he said.

The suntanned dewlap beneath his chin hung over his white shirt collar. His hair was gray and neatly combed. A dark shadow hovered above his cheeks and chin. The black tie did not hang, it lay, along the curve of his bloated stomach. He was fat, but also erect, there was nothing flabby about him, punctilious was probably the word, and thus also confident and safe. I liked him.

"Our father died yesterday," Yngve said. "We were wondering, well, if you might take care of the practical details. The funeral and so on."

"Yes," the funeral director said. "Then I'll start by filling in a form."

He pulled out a drawer from the desk and took out a document.

"We used you when our grandfather died. And have had only good experiences," Yngve said.

"I remember that," the director said. "He was an accountant, wasn't he? I knew him well."

He reached for a pen lying beside the telephone, raised his head and looked at us.

"But now I need some information from you," he said. "What's your father's name?"

I said his name. It felt strange. Not because he was dead, but because I hadn't said it for so many years.

Yngve glanced at me.

"Well . . . ," he said cautiously. "He did change his name a few years ago."

"Ah, I'd forgotten that," I said. "Of course."

The idiotic name he had chosen.

What an idiot he had been.

I looked down and blinked a few times.

"Have you got his National Insurance number?" the director said.

"No, not all of it," Yngve said. "Sorry. But he was born on April 17, 1944. We can find out the other numbers later if we have to."

"That's fine. Address?"

Yngve gave Grandma's address. Then glanced at me.

"Mm, I'm not sure that's his official address. He died at his mother's house. That's where he was living."

"We'll sort that out. And then I need your names as well. And a telephone number where I can reach you."

"Karl Ove Knausgaard," I said.

"And Yngve Knausgaard," Yngve said, and gave him his mobile number. After noting that, he put down the pen and looked at us again.

"Have you had an opportunity to think about the funeral? When it would be appropriate to hold it and what form you would like it to take?"

"No," Yngve said. "We haven't. But I suppose it's normal to hold the funeral a week after the death?"

"That is the norm, yes. So would next Friday be a suitable date?"

"Ye-es," Yngve said. "What do you think?"

"Friday's fine," I said.

"Well, let's say that for the time being. As far as the practical details are concerned, we can meet again, can't we? And in that case, if the funeral is to be on Friday, we would have to meet early next week. Perhaps no later than Monday. Does that work for you?"

"Yes," Yngve said. "Could it be early?"

"Certainly. Shall we say nine o'clock?"

"Nine's good."

The funeral director jotted this in his book. Once he had finished he stood up.

"We'll make the arrangements now. If you have any worries, do by all means give me a call. Any time at all. I go to my cabin in the afternoons and stay there all weekend, but I take my mobile phone with me, so all you need to do is call. Don't be shy. We'll meet again on Monday."

He proffered his hand and we both shook it before leaving the room, and he closed the door behind us with a brief nod and a smile.

Back out on the street, as we walked toward our car, something had changed. What I saw, what we were surrounded by, was no longer in focus, it had been pushed into the background, as though a zone had been installed around me from which all meaning had been drained. The world had vanished, that was the feeling I had, but I didn't care because Dad was dead. While in my mind the undertaker's office in all its detail was very vivid and clear, the town around it was fuzzy and gray, I walked through it because I had no choice. I wasn't thinking differently, inside my mind I was unchanged, the only difference was that now I demanded more room and hence I was excluding external reality. I couldn't explain it in any other way.

Yngve unlocked the car door. I noticed a white band wrapped around the roof rack, it was glossy and resembled the sort of ribbon you tie around presents, but surely it couldn't be?

He opened the door for me, and I got inside.

"That went well, didn't it," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Shall we drive to Grandma's then?"

"Let's," I said.

He indicated and moved into the traffic, took the first left, then another left, onto Dronningens gate, and soon we saw our grandparents' house from the bridge, yellow and imposing above the small marina and harbor basin. Up Kuholmsveien and into the alley that was so narrow you had to drive downhill a little way, then reverse into the footpath before you could drive up to and park by the front steps. I had seen my father perform the operation perhaps a hundred times in my childhood, and the fact that Yngve was doing exactly the same now moved my tears to the very edge of my consciousness, only a mental wrench prevented them from falling again.

Two large seagulls took off from the steps as we drove up the gentle slope. The space in front of the garage door was covered with sacks and garbage bags, that was what had been entertaining the gulls. They had pulled out all sorts of discarded plastic and strewn it around in their search for food.

Yngve switched off the engine but did not move. I too remained where I was. The garden was completely overgrown. The grass was knee-high, like a meadow, grayish-yellow in color, flattened in some places by the rain. It had spread everywhere, covering all the beds, I wouldn't have been able to see the flowers had I not known where they were, now only scattered glimpses of color allowed you to guess. A rusty wheelbarrow lay on its side by the hedge, looking as if it had grown into the wilderness. The ground under the trees was brown with rotten pears and plums. Dandelions abounded and in some places stripling trees had sprung up. It was as if we had parked by a clearing in the forest and not in front of a detached house in the middle of Kristiansand.

I leaned forward and looked up at the house. The bargeboards were rotten and the paint was peeling in various places, but the decay was not as obvious there.

Some drops of rain struck the windshield. A few more drummed lightly on the roof and hood.

"Gunnar isn't here anyway," Yngve said, undoing his seat belt. "But I suppose he'll be down eventually."

"He must be at work," I said.

"Figures for rainfall might go up in the holiday month, but that doesn't attract accountants back to work," Yngve commented drily. He withdrew the car key, put the bunch in his jacket pocket, opened the door, and got out.

I would have preferred to stay put, but of course that was not possible, so I followed suit, closed the door, and looked up at the kitchen window on the second floor where Grandma's gaze had always met us whenever we came.

No one home today.

"Hope it's open now that we're here," Yngve said, climbing the six steps that once had been painted dark red but were now just gray. The two gulls had settled on the roof of the neighbor's house and were carefully monitoring our movements.

Yngve pressed down the handle and pushed in the door.

"Oh Christ," he said.

I clambered up the stairs, and as I followed him through the doorway into the vestibule I had to turn away. The smell inside was unbearable. It stank of mold and piss.

Yngve stood in the hall surveying the scene. The blue wall-to-wall carpet was covered with dark stains. The open built-in wardrobe was full of loose bottles and bags of them. Clothes had been tossed all over the place. More bottles, clothes hangers, shoes, unopened letters, advertising brochures, and plastic bags were strewn across the floor.

But the worst was the stench.

What the hell could reek like that?

"He's destroyed everything," Yngve said, slowly shaking his head.

"What is that godawful stench?" I said. "Is something rotting?"

"Come on," he said, moving towards the stairs. "Grandma's waiting for us."

Empty bottles were strewn halfway up the staircase, five, six, maybe, but the closer we got to the second floor landing the more there were. Even the landing outside the door was almost totally covered with bottles and bags of bottles and every step of the staircase that continued up to the third floor, where my grandparents' bedroom had been, was full, apart from a few centimeters in the middle to put your feet. Most were plastic 1.5 liter bottles and vodka bottles, but there were a few wine bottles as well.

Yngve opened the door and we went into the living room. There were bottles on top of the piano and bags full of them below. The kitchen door was open. That was always where she sat, as indeed she was doing today, by the table, eyes downcast and a smoking cigarette in her hand.

"Hello," Yngve said.

She looked up. At first there was no sign of recognition in her eyes, but then they lit up.

"So it *was* you boys! I thought I heard someone coming through the door."

I swallowed. Her eyes seemed to have sunk into the cavities; her nose protruded and looked like a beak in the lean face. Her skin was white, shrunken, and wrinkled.

"We came as soon as we heard what had happened," Yngve said.

"Oh, yes, it was terrible," Grandma said. "But now you're here. That's good at least."

The dress she was wearing was discolored with stains and hung off her scrawny body. The top part of her bosom the dress was supposed to cover revealed ribs shining through her skin. Her shoulder blades and hips stuck out. Her arms were no more than skin and bone. Blood vessels ran across the backs of her hands like thin, dark blue cables.

She stank of urine.

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked.

"Yes, please," Yngve said. "That wouldn't be a bad idea. But we can put it on. Where's the coffeepot?"

"Damned if I know," Grandma said, casting around.

"It's there," I said, pointing to the table. There was a note beside it, I craned my head to read what it said.

BOYS COMING AT TWELVE. I'LL BE DOWN AROUND ONE. GUNNAR.

Yngve took the coffeepot and went to empty the grains in the sink, where there were piles of filthy plates and glasses. The whole length of the counter was covered with plastic trays, mostly from microwave meals, many still containing leftovers. Between them bottles, mostly the same 1.5 liter ones, some with dregs at the bottom, some half-full, some unopened, but bottles of spirits too, the cheapest Vinmonopolet vodka, a couple of half-liter bottles of Upper Ten whisky. Everywhere there were dried coffee dregs, crumbs, shriveled food remains. Yngve pushed one of the piles of packaging away, lifted some of the plates out of the sink, and put them on the counter before cleaning the coffeepot and filling it with fresh water.

Grandma was sitting as she had when we entered, eyes fixed on the table, the cigarette, now extinguished, in her hand.

"Where do you keep the coffee?" Yngve said. "In the cupboard?"

She looked up.

"What?" she said.

"Where do you keep the coffee?" Yngve repeated.

"I don't know where he put it," she said.

He? Was that Dad?

I turned and went into the living room. For as long as I could remember, it had only been used on church holidays and special occasions. Now Dad's huge TV was in the middle of the floor and two of the large leather chairs had been dragged in front of it. A little table swimming with bottles, glasses, pouches of tobacco, and overflowing ashtrays stood between them. I walked past and examined the rest of the room.

In front of the three-piece suite by the wall lay some articles of clothing. I could see two pairs of trousers and a jacket, some underpants and socks. The smell was awful. There were also overturned bottles, tobacco pouches, dry bread rolls, and other rubbish. I slouched past. There was excrement on the sofa, smeared and in lumps. I bent down over the clothes. They were also covered with excrement. The varnish on the floor had been eaten away, leaving large, irregular stains.

By urine?

I felt an urge to smash something. Lift the table and sling it at the window. Tear down the shelf. But I felt so weak I could barely get there. I rested my forehead against the window and looked down into the garden. The paint had almost peeled completely off the overturned garden furniture, which seemed to be growing out of the soil.

"Karl Ove?" Yngve said from the doorway.

I turned and went back.

"It's fucking disgusting in there," I said in a low voice so that she couldn't hear.

He nodded.

"Let's sit with her for a bit," he said.

"Okay."

I went in, pulled out the chair on the opposite side of the table from her, and sat down. A ticking sound filled the kitchen, coming from a thermostat-style device that was intended to switch off the burners on the stove automatically. Yngve sat at the end and took his cigarettes from his jacket, which for some reason he had not taken off. I had my jacket on as well, I discovered.

I didn't want to smoke, it felt dirty, yet I needed to and rummaged for my cigarettes. The fact that we had joined Grandma seemed to give her a boost. Her eyes lit up once again.

"Did you drive all the way from Bergen today?" she said.

"From Stavanger," Yngve said. "That's where I live now."

"But I live in Bergen," I said.

Behind us the coffeepot crackled on the stove.

"Oh?" she said.

Silence.

"Would you like some coffee, boys?" she asked suddenly.

I met Yngve's glance.

"I've put some on," Yngve said. "It'll be ready soon."

"Oh yes, so you have," Grandma said. She looked down at her hand, and with a start, as if it were only now she had discovered she was holding a cigarette, she grabbed a lighter and lit up.

"Did you drive here all the way from Bergen today then?" she said, puffing on her cigarette a few times before looking at us.

"From Stavanger," Yngve said. "It only took four hours."

"Yes, they're good roads now," she said.

Then she sighed.

"Oh dear. Life's a pitch, as the old woman said. She couldn't pronounce her *b*'s."

She chuckled. Yngve smiled.

"It would be nice to have something with the coffee," he said. "We've got some chocolate in the car. I'll get it."

I felt like telling him not to go, but of course I couldn't. When he had gone I got up, left the barely smoked cigarette on the edge of the ashtray and went to the stove, pressed the pot down harder so that it would boil quicker.

Grandma had sunk into herself again, stared down at the table. She sat bowed in the chair, shoulders slumped, rocking back and forth.

What could she be thinking?

Nothing. There was nothing in her mind. Couldn't be. It was just cold and dark inside.

I let go of the coffeepot and looked around for the coffee tin. Not on the counter beside the fridge, not on the opposite counter either, beside the sink. In a cupboard perhaps? Or not. Yngve had found it, hadn't he? Where did he put it?

There, for Christ's sake. He had put it on the stove's hood where the old spice jars were. I took it down, and pushed the coffeepot aside even though the water hadn't boiled yet, opened the lid and sprinkled in a few spoonfuls of coffee. It was dry and seemed stale.

Glancing up, I saw that Grandma was watching me.

"Where's Yngve?" she asked. "He hasn't left, has he?"

"No," I said. "He just went down to the car."

"Oh," she said.

I took a fork from the drawer and stirred the mixture in the coffeepot, banged it on the burner a few times.

"It'll brew for a bit and then it's done," I said.

"He was sitting in the chair when I got up in the morning," Grandma said. "He was sitting quite still. I tried to wake him. But I couldn't. His face was white."

I felt nauseous.

I heard Yngve's footsteps on the stairs, and I opened the cupboard to look for glasses, but there weren't any. I couldn't bring myself to think about using the ones in the sink, so I leaned forward and was drinking from the tap when Yngve arrived.

He had taken off his jacket. He was holding two Bounty bars and a packet of Camel cigarettes. Sat down and tore the paper off one bar.

"Would you like a piece?" he asked Grandma.

She scrutinized the chocolate.

"No, thank you," she said. "You eat it."

"I don't feel like it," I said. "But the coffee's ready anyway."

I put the pot on the table, opened the cupboard door again and took out three cups. I knew that Grandma took sugar lumps, and opened the long cupboard on the other wall where the food was. Two half loaves of bread, blue with mold, three spaghetti TV dinners that should have been in the freezer, bottles of spirits, the same cheap brand.

Never mind, I thought, and sat down again, lifted the pot of coffee, and poured. It hadn't brewed properly, from the spout came a light-brown stream, full of tiny coffee grains. I removed the lid and poured it back.

"It's good you're here," Grandma said.

I started to cry. I took a deep breath, carefully though, and laid my head in my hands, rubbed from side to side, as though I were tired, not as though I were crying. But Grandma didn't notice anything anyway; again she seemed to have disappeared inside herself. This time it lasted perhaps five minutes. Yngve and I said nothing, drank coffee, staring into space.

"Oh dear," she said then. "Life's a pitch, as the old woman said. She couldn't pronounce her *b*'s."

She grabbed the red rolling machine, opened the pouch of tobacco, Petterøe's Menthol, pressed the tobacco into the gap, inserted an empty casing into the small tube at the end, clicked the lid into place, and pushed it through hard.

"Think we ought to get the bags," Yngve said, and looked at Grandma. "Where can we sleep?"

"The big bedroom downstairs is empty," she said. "You can sleep there."

We got up.

"We'll just go down to the car then," Yngve said.

"Will you?" she said.

I stopped by the door and turned to him.

"Have you seen inside?" I said.

He nodded.

On the way downstairs a huge surge of tears overcame me. This time there was no question of trying to hide it. My whole chest trembled and shook, I couldn't draw breath, deep sobs rolled through me, and my face contorted, I was completely out of control.

"Oooooooh," I said. "Oooooooh."

I sensed Yngve behind me and forced myself to continue down the stairs, through the hall, out to the car, and into the narrow lawn between the house and the neighbor's fence. I raised my head and gazed up at the sky, tried to take deep, regular breaths, and after a few attempts the trembling eased.

When I returned Yngve was standing behind the open car trunk. My suitcase was on the ground beside him. I grabbed the handle and carried it up the steps, deposited it in the hall and turned to Yngve, who was right behind me with a backpack on and a bag in his hand. After being in the fresh air the stench indoors seemed stronger. I breathed through my mouth.

"Are we supposed to sleep in there?" I said, motioning to the door of the bedroom my grandparents had used for the last few decades.

"We'd better check it out," Yngve said.

I opened the door and peeped in. The room was ravaged, clothes, shoes, belts, bags, hairbrushes, curlers, and cosmetics were everywhere, on the bed, on the floor, on the dressing tables and covered with dust and dust balls, but it had not been defiled in the way the upstairs living room was.

"What do you think?" I said.

"I don't know," he said. "Where do you think he slept?"

He opened the adjacent door, to what once had been Erling's room, and went in. I followed.

The floor was littered with garbage and clothes. There was a table that looked as if it had been smashed to pieces lying under the window. Papers and unopened letters stacked in heaps. Something that might have been vomit had dried as an uneven yellowish-red patch on the floor, just under the bed. The clothes were stained with feces and dark patches that must have been old blood. One of the garments was black with excrement on the inside. Everything stank of pee.

Yngve stepped over to the window and opened it.

"Looks as if drug addicts have been living here," I said. "Place looks like a damn junkie's."

"It does," Yngve said.

Strangely enough, the dressing table by the wall between the bed and the door had not been touched. There were photographs of Dad and Erling wearing black graduation caps. Without his beard Dad bore a striking resemblance to Yngve. Same mouth, same setting round the eyes.

"What the hell shall we do?" I said.

Yngve didn't answer, just studied the room.

"We'd better clean it up," he said.

I nodded and left the room. Opened the door to the laundry room, which was in a wing parallel to the staircase, next to the garage. Inhaling the air inside, I began to cough. In the middle of the floor was a pile of clothes as tall as I was, it almost reached the ceiling. That was where the rotting smell must have come from. I switched on the light. Towels, sheets, tablecloths, trousers, sweaters, dresses, underwear, they had thrown it all in here. The lowest layers were not only mildewed, they were decomposing. I squatted down and prodded with my finger. It was soft and sticky.

"Yngve!" I called.

He came and stood in the doorway.

"Look at this," I said. "This is where the stench is coming from."

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. I stood up.

"We'd better go out," I said. "So she doesn't think we're prying."

When she came down we were standing in front of the bags in the middle of the floor.

"Is it alright for you in there?" she said, opening the door and peering in. "We'll have to clear up a bit and it'll be fine."

"We were thinking about the room in the loft," Yngve said. "What would you say to that?"

"I suppose it's a possibility," she said. "But I haven't been up there for a long time."

"We'll go up and have a look," Yngve said.

The loft room, which had been my grandparents' bedroom once upon a time but which for as long as we could remember had been reserved for guests, was the only one in the house he hadn't touched. Everything in it was as before. There was dust on the floor, and the duvets had a slightly stale odor, but it was no worse than what you find in a mountain cabin you haven't entered since the previous summer, and after the nightmare downstairs this was a relief. We unloaded our bags on the floor, I hung my suit on a cupboard door and Yngve stood with his arms propped against the window frame, looking out at the town.

"We can start by getting rid of all the bottles, can't we," he said. "To a supermarket for the deposit. That way we can get out a little."

"Right," I said.

After going down to the kitchen we heard the sound of a car in the drive. It was Gunnar. We stood waiting for him to come up.

"There you are!" he said with a smile. "Long time, no see, eh!"

His face was suntanned, hair blond, body sinewy and strong. He wore well.

"It's good to have the boys here, I imagine," he said to Grandma. Then he turned to us again.

"It's terrible, what happened here," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"I suppose you've had a look around? So you've seen what he got up to . . ."

"Yes," Yngve said.

Gunnar shook his head, jaws clenched.

"I don't know what to say," he said. "But he was your father. I'm sorry that things went as they did for him. But you probably knew which way the wind was blowing."

"We're going to clean the whole house," I said. "We'll deal with everything from now on."

"That's good. I got rid of the worst in the kitchen early this morning and threw out some trash, but there's quite a bit left, of course."

There was a flicker of a smile.

"I've got a trailer outside," he continued. "Could you move your car, Yngve? Then we can put it on the lawn beside the garage. We can't have the furniture here, can we? And all the clothes and everything. We'll drive it over to the dump. Isn't that the best idea?"

"Yep," I said.

"The boys and Tove are at the cabin. I just dropped by to say hello. And to leave the trailer. But I'll be back tomorrow morning. Then we can take it from there. It's terrible. But that's life. You two will manage."

"Course we will," Yngve said. "You parked behind me, didn't you? So you'll have to pull out first."

Grandma had watched us for the first few seconds when Gunnar arrived, and smiled at him, but then she went back inside her shell, and sat staring ahead as if she were all alone.

Yngve started down the stairs. I was thinking I ought to stay with her.

"You'll have to come with us as well, Karl Ove," Gunnar said. "We have to push it up the slope and it's pretty heavy."

I followed him down.

"Has she said anything?" he asked.

"Grandma?" I said.

"Yes. About what happened?"

"Hardly anything. Just that she found him in the chair."

"With her it was always your father," he said. "She's in shock now."

"What can we do?" I asked.

"What is there to do? Time will help. But as soon as the funeral is over she should go into a home. You can see for yourselves the state she's in. She needs professional care. As soon as the funeral's over she has to go."

He turned and placed his foot on the step, squinted up at the bright sky. Yngve was already in the car.

Gunnar addressed me again.

"We'd arranged some home-help for her, you know, they turned up every day and took care of her. Then your father came and sent them packing. Closed the door and locked himself in with her. Even I wasn't allowed in. But Mother called once, he had broken his leg and was lying on the living-room floor. He'd crapped his pants. Can you imagine? He'd been lying on the floor drinking. And she had served him. 'This is no good,' I told him before the ambulance arrived. 'This is beneath your dignity. Now you pull yourself together.' And do you know what your father said? 'Are you going to push me even deeper into the shit, Gunnar? Is that why you've come, to push me even deeper into the shit?"

Gunnar shook his head.

"That's my mother, you know, sitting up there now. Whom we've been trying to help all these years. He destroyed everything. This house, her, himself. Everything. Everything."

He quickly laid his hand on my shoulder.

"But I know you're good kids."

I cried, and he looked away.

"Well, now we'd better get the trailer in position," he said and went down to the car, slowly reversed downhill to the left, hooted his horn when the way was clear, and Yngve reversed. Then Gunnar drove forward, got out of the car, and unhooked the trailer. I joined them, grabbed the bar, and began to pull it up the hill while Yngve and Gunnar pushed.

"It'll be fine here," Gunnar said, after we had maneuvred it a fair way into the garden, and I dropped the end on the ground.

Grandma was watching us from the first-floor window.

While we collected the bottles, put them in plastic bags, and carried them down to the car, she sat in the kitchen. She watched as I poured beer and spirits from the half-full bottles down the sink, but said nothing. Perhaps she was relieved they were going, perhaps she wasn't really assimilating anything. The car was full, and Yngve went upstairs to tell her we were going to the shop. She got to her feet and joined us in the hall, we assumed she wanted to see us off, but when she came out, she walked straight down the steps to the car, put her fingers on the door handle, opened the door, and was about to get in.

"Grandma?" Yngve said.

She stopped.

"We were thinking of going alone. Someone has to be here to keep an eye on the house. It's best if you stay, I think."

"Do you think so?" she said, stepping back.

"Yes," Yngve said.

"Alright then," she said. "I'll stay here."

Yngve reversed down the drive, and Grandma went back indoors.

"What a nightmare," I said.

Yngve stared past me, then signaled left and slowly nosed out.

"She's clearly in shock," I said. "I wonder whether I should phone Tonje's father and sound him out. I'm sure he could prescribe something to sedate her."

"She's already taking medicine," Yngve said. "There's a whole trayful on the kitchen shelf."

He stared past me once again, this time up Kuholmsveien as three cars came down. Then he looked at me.

"But you can tell Tonje's father anyway. Then he can decide."

"I'll call when we get back," I said.

The last car, one of those ugly new bubbles, drove past. Raindrops landed on the windshield, and I remembered the previous rain which had started, then had second thoughts and left it at that.

This time it continued. When Yngve signaled to pull out and drove down the slope, he had the windshield wipers on.

Summer rain.

Oh, the raindrops that fall on the dry, hot tarmac, and then evaporate, or are absorbed by the dust, yet still perform their part of the job, for when the next drops fall the tarmac is cooler, the dust damper, and so dark patches spread, and join, and the tarmac is wet and black. Oh, the hot summer air that is suddenly cooled, making the rain that falls on your face warmer than your face itself, and you lean back to enjoy the feeling it gives you. The leaves on the trees that quiver at the light touch, the faint, almost imperceptible drumming of the rain falling at all levels: on the scarred rock face by the road and the blades of grass in the ditch below, the roof tiles on the other side and the saddle of the bike locked to the fence, the hammock in the garden beyond and the road signs, the curbside gutter and the hoods and roofs of the parked cars.

We stopped at the lights, the rain had just gotten heavier, the drops that were falling now were large, heavy, and profuse. The whole area around the Rundingen intersection had been changed in the course of seconds. The dark sky made all the lights clearer while the rain that fell, and which was even bouncing off the tarmac, blurred them. Cars had their windshield wipers on, pedestrians ran for cover with newspapers spread above their heads or hoods flipped up, unless they had an umbrella with them and could continue as though nothing had happened.

The lights changed, and we headed down towards the bridge, past the old music shop, which had been shut for ages, where Jan Vidar and I had gone on our fixed route every Saturday morning, visiting all the music shops in town, and across Lund Bridge. That was where my first childhood memory originated. I had been walking over the bridge with Grandma, and there I had seen a very old man with a white beard and white hair, he walked with a stick and his back was bowed. I stopped to watch him, Grandma dragged me on. In my father's office there had been a poster up on the wall, and once when I was there with Dad and a neighbor, Ola Jan, who taught at the same school as Dad, Roligheden School, he taught Norwegian too, I pointed to the poster and said I had seen the man in the picture. For it was the selfsame gray-haired, gray-bearded and bowed man. I didn't find it at all surprising that he was on a poster in my father's office, I was four years old and nothing in the world was incomprehensible, everything was connected with everything else. But Dad and Ola Jan laughed. They laughed, and said it was impossible. That's Ibsen, they said. He died nearly a hundred years ago. But I was sure it was the same man, and I said so. They shook their heads, and now Dad was not laughing when I pointed to Ibsen and said I had seen him, he shooed me out.

The water under the bridge was gray and full of rings from the rain lashing the surface. There was also a tinge of green in it though, as always where the water from the Otra met the sea. How often had I stood there watching the currents? Sometimes it flooded forth like a river, eddying round and forming small whirlpools. Sometimes it formed white froth around the pillars.

Now, however, it is calm. Two fishing boats, both with tarpaulin covers open, chugged toward the mouth of the fjord. Two rusty hulks were moored to the quay on the other side, and behind them there was a gleaming white yacht.

Yngve stopped at the lights, which immediately changed to green, and we bore left by the small shopping center with the rooftop parking lot. Up the ramplike, traffic light–regulated concrete driveway, and onto the roof, where fortunately, for this was a national holiday Saturday, there was a space free at the back.

We got out, I leaned my head back and allowed the warm rain to wash my face. Yngve opened the trunk, and we grabbed as many bags as we could carry and took the elevator down to the supermarket on the ground floor. We had decided there was no point trying to get a deposit on the spirits bottles, we would drop them off at the dump, so our load consisted mainly of plastic bottles, and they were not heavy, just awkward.

"You start while I go and get more," Yngve said when we reached the bottle machine.

I nodded. Put bottle after bottle on the conveyor belt, crumpled the bags as they became empty, and placed them in the garbage bin located there for that purpose. I didn't care if anyone saw me and was taken aback by the large number of beer bottles. I was indifferent to everything. The zone that had come into existence when we first left the undertaker's, and that seemed to make everything around me dead, or meaningless, had grown in size and strength. I barely noticed the shop, bathed in its own strong light, with all its glittering, colorful products. I might just as well have been in a swamp somewhere. As a rule I was always aware of how I looked, of how others might think of what they saw, sometimes I was elated and proud, at others downcast and full of self-hatred, but never indifferent, it had never happened that the eyes that saw me meant nothing at all, or that the surroundings I was in were as if expunged. But such was my state now, I was numb, and the numbness prevailed over everything else. The world lay like a shadow around me.

Yngve returned with more bags.

"Shall I take over for a bit?" he said.

"No, I'm fine," I said. "But you could go and do some shopping. Whatever happens we need detergent, rubber gloves, and garbage bags. And at least something to eat."

"There's another load in the car. I'll get that first," he said.

"Okay," I said.

When the last bottle had been delivered and I had been given a receipt, I joined Yngve, who was standing in front of the household detergents section. We took Jif for the bathroom, Jif for the kitchen, Ajax all-purpose cleaner, Ajax window cleaner, Klorin disinfectant, Mr. Muscle for extra difficult stains, an oven cleaner, a special chemical product for sofas, steel wool, sponges, kitchen cloths, floor rags, two buckets and a broom from this aisle, some fresh rissoles from the meat counter, potatoes, and a cauliflower from the vegetable section. Apart from that, things to put on bread, milk, coffee, fruit, a tray of yogurts, and a few packets of biscuits. While we were walking around I was already dying to fill the kitchen with all these new, fresh, shiny, untouched goods.

When we emerged onto the roof it had stopped raining. A pool had formed around the rear wheels of the car, by a slight dip in the concrete. Up here, the air was fresh, it smelled of sea and sky, not of town.

"What do you think happened?" I said when we were on our way down through the dark parking lot. "She says she found him in the chair. Did he just fall asleep?"

"Probably," Yngve said.

"His heart stopped?"

"Yes."

"Mm, perhaps not so surprising the way he must have been living."

"No."

Nothing was said for the rest of the journey to the house. We hauled the shopping bags up to the kitchen, and Grandma, who had been watching us from the window as we arrived, asked where we had been.

"Shopping," Yngve said. "And now we need a bite to eat!"

He started unpacking the groceries. I took a pair of yellow gloves and a roll of trash bags, and went down to the ground floor. The first thing to go would be the mountain of moldy clothes in the washroom. I blew into the gloves, eased them on, and started stuffing clothes into the bags, while breathing through my mouth. Gradually as the bags filled I dragged them out and piled them in front of the two green drums by the garage door. I had almost cleared the whole lot – only the sheets stuck together at the bottom were left – when Yngve shouted that the food was ready.

He had cleared the mass from the counter, and on the table, also cleared, there was a dish of fried rissoles, a bowl of potatoes, one of cauliflower, and a little jug of gravy. The table had been set with Grandma's ancient Sunday best service, which must have spent the last few years in the dining room cupboard, unused.

Grandma didn't want anything. Yngve put half a rissole, a potato, and a small floret of cauliflower on her plate, nevertheless, and managed to persuade her to try some. I was as hungry as a wolf and ate four rissoles.

"Did you put any cream in the gravy?" I said.

"Uh-huh. And some brown goat's cheese."

"That's good," I said. "That's exactly what I needed right now."

After eating, Yngve and I went onto the veranda and had a smoke and a cup of coffee. He reminded me to call Tonje's father, which I had completely forgotten. Or perhaps repressed, this was not a call I was looking forward to making. But I had to, so I went up to the bedroom, fetched my address book from my case and dialed his number from the telephone in the dining room while Yngve cleared the kitchen table.

"Hello, this is Karl Ove," I said when he answered. "I was wondering if you could help me with a medical matter. I don't know if Tonje mentioned it, but my father died yesterday . . ."

"Yes, she did, she called me," he said. "I was sorry to hear that, Karl Ove."

"Mm," I said. "Well, anyway, I'm down in Kristiansand at the moment. In fact, it was my grandmother who found him. She's over eighty, and she seems to be in shock. She hardly speaks, all she does is sit. And I was wondering if there were any sedatives or anything that could help. In fact, she's taking some medication already that probably includes some kind of sedative, but I was thinking . . . Yes, that's it. She's in a bad way."

"Do you know what the medication is?"

"I'm afraid not," I said. "But I can try to find out. Just a moment."

I put the receiver down on the table and went into the kitchen, to the shelf where her medication tray was. Beneath it, I seemed to remember having seen some yellow and some white bits of paper, presumably prescriptions.

Yes, here, but only one.

"Have you seen the packaging?" I asked Yngve. "The boxes? I'm on the phone with Tonje's father."

"There are some in the cupboard next to you," Yngve said.

"What are you looking for?" Grandma asked from her chair.

I didn't want to patronize her, and I had been aware of her eyes on my back while I was rummaging, but at the same time I couldn't take any notice of that.

"I'm talking to a doctor on the telephone," I said to her, as though that was supposed to explain everything. Strangely enough, it seemed to calm her, and I left with the prescription and the packets semiconcealed in my hands.

"Hello?" I said.

"I'm still here," he said.

"I've just found some of the boxes," I said and read out the names on them.

"Aha," he said. "She's already taking a sedative, but I can prescribe one more for you, that won't be a problem. As soon as we hang up I'll phone it through. Is there a pharmacy nearby?"

"Yes, there's one in Lund. It's a suburb."

"I'll care of it. Thanks a lot."

I cradled the phone and went back to the veranda, looked across to the mouth of the fjord where the sky was still overcast but the clouds had a quite different, lighter hue. Tonje's father was a good person and a lovely man. He would never do anything offensive or go too far in any direction, he was respectable and decent, though not stiff or formal, on the contrary, he was often fired up with enthusiasm, a kind of boyishness, and if he didn't go too far it was not because he didn't want to or couldn't, it was because it wasn't in his repertoire, it was simply impossible for him, I had reflected, and I liked him for that, there was something in it, in decent behavior, that I had always sought, and whenever I found it I always liked being close to it, although at the same time I also realized that I liked it and him so much because he reminded me of my father. When I got married at the age of twenty-five it was because I wanted a middle-class, stable, settled existence. That side of me, of course, was counteracted by the fact that we didn't live that kind of life, the middle-class, stable, routine-anchored lifestyle, quite the opposite, and the fact that no one married so young anymore, and therefore it was, if not radical, then at least original.

This being my thinking, and also because I loved her, I had fallen on bended knee one evening, alone on the terrace outside Maputo in Mozambique, beneath a coal-black sky, with the air full of the sound of chirruping grasshoppers and distant drums from one of the villages a few kilometers away, and asked her if she would marry me. She said something I didn't understand. It certainly wasn't yes. What did you say? I queried. Are you asking me to marry you? she said. Are you really? Is that what you're asking? Yes, I said. Yes, she said. I want to marry you. We embraced, both of us with tears in our eyes, and right at that moment the sky rumbled, a deep, powerful clap of thunder, it rippled and Tonje shivered, and then the torrents fell. We laughed, Tonje ran inside for her camera, and when she came out she put one arm around me and took a photo with the other hand outstretched.

We were two children.

Through the window I saw Yngve going into the living room. He walked towards the two chairs, stared at them, moved on and was lost from view.

Even outside there were bottles lying around, some had been blown against the picket fence, others had got stuck under the two faded, rusty garden seats that must have been there since the spring, at the very least.

Yngve reappeared, I couldn't see his facial expression, just his shadow as it passed through the living room and disappeared into the kitchen.

I went down the steps into the garden. There were no houses below, the hillside was too steep, but at the bottom lay the marina, and outside it the relatively small harbor basin. On the eastern side, however, the garden bordered another property. It was as well-tended as this one had once been, and the neatness and control that manifested itself in the trimmed hedges, the manicured grass, and the gaily colored flower beds, made the garden here seem sickly. I stood there for some minutes in tears, then walked around to the front of the house and continued my work in the cellar. When the last item of clothing had been carried out, I sprinkled the Klorin over the floor, using half of the bottle, and then I scrubbed it with the broom before hosing it all down the drain. Then I emptied the rest of the green soap all over it, and scrubbed it again, this time with a cloth. After hosing it down again I supposed that would have to do and went back up to the kitchen. Yngve was washing the inside of a cupboard. The dishwasher was running. The counter was cleared and scrubbed.

"I'm having a break," I said. "Want to join me?"

"Yes, I'll finish this first," Yngve said. "Perhaps you could put some coffee on?"

I did so. Then I suddenly remembered Grandma's prescription. That could not wait.

"I'll just run down to the pharmacy," I said. "Is there anything you want, maybe from the newsstand?"

"No," he said. "Actually, yes, a Coke."

I buttoned up my jacket as I emerged onto the steps. The pile of garbage bags in front of the beautiful wooden 1950s garage door glistened black in the gray summer light. The dark-brown trailer stood with the bar resting on the ground, as if humbled, I thought, a servant who bowed as I appeared. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and walked down the drive, along the pavement to the main road, where the rain had now completely dried up. On the overhanging cliff opposite, however, its many surfaces were still wet and the tufts of grass growing there shone with an intense green against all the dark colors, so very different from when it was dry and dusty, when there were fewer contrasts between colors and everything under the sky seemed indifferent, resistant, open, vast and empty. How many such open, empty days had there been when I used to walk around here? Seeing the black windows in houses, seeing the wind whistling through the countryside, the sun that lit it up, all the blindness and deadness in it? Oh, and this was the time you adored in the town, this was the time you regarded as the best, when the town really came alive. Blue sky, boiling hot sun, dusty streets. A car with a blaring stereo and an open roof, two young men at the front dressed only in trunks, with sunglasses, they are heading for the beach . . . An old woman with a dog, clothed from head to toe, her sunglasses are large, the dog strains at the leash, wanting to sniff a fence. A plane with a long banner behind, there is a match at the stadium the following day. Everything is open, everything is empty, the world is dead, and in the evening restaurants are filled with suntanned, happy men and women wearing brightly colored clothes.

I hated this town.

After a hundred meters down Kuholmsveien I reached the intersection, the pharmacy was a hundred meters away, in the middle of the small suburban center. Behind it was a grass slope, on top of which stood some fifties or sixties blocks of flats. On the other side of the road, quite a way up the slope, were the Elevine Assembly Rooms. Perhaps we should use them for the gathering after the funeral?

The thought that he was not only dead for me, but also for his mother and his brothers, his uncles and aunts, made me weep again. I wasn't concerned about this happening on a sidewalk with people walking past all the time, I hardly saw them; however, I wiped away the tears anyway, mostly for practical reasons, to be able to see where I was going, as a thought suddenly struck me: we shouldn't hold the wake in the Elevine Rooms but in my grandparents' house, which he had ruined.

The thought excited me.

We should clean every damned centimeter of every damned room, throw out everything he had ruined, recover everything that had been left and use it, restore the entire house, and then gather everyone there. He might have ruined everything, but we would restore it. We were decent people. Yngve would say it wasn't possible, and there was no point, but I could insist. I had as much right as he to decide what the funeral would be like. Of course it was possible. All we had to was clean. Clean, clean, clean.

There wasn't a line at the pharmacy, and after I had shown my ID, the white-clad assistant went between the shelves and found the tablets, printed out a label and stuck it on, slipped them in a bag, and referred me to the cash register on the other side to pay.

A vague feeling of some good here, maybe only caused by the slightly cooler air against my skin, made me pause on the steps outside.

Gray, gray sky; gray, gray town.

Glistening car bodies. Bright windows. Wires running from lamp post to lamp post.

No. There was nothing here.

Slowly I began to walk toward the newsstand.

Dad had talked about suicide several times, but always as a generality, as a conversation topic. He thought suicide statistics lied, and that many, perhaps nearly all, car accidents with a single occupant were camouflaged suicides. He mentioned it more than once, that it was common for people to drive a car into the side of a mountain or an oncoming truck to avoid the disgrace of a blatant suicide. It was at this time he and Unni had moved to Sørland after having lived in northern Norway for such a long time, and they were still together. Dad's skin was close to black from all the sun he had absorbed, and he was as fat as a barrel. He lay on a sunbed in the garden behind the house and drank, he sat on the veranda in front of the house and drank, and in the evenings he would be drunk and drifting, he stood in the kitchen in no more than his shorts, frying chops, that was all I ever saw him eat, no potatoes, no vegetables, just blackened chops. During one such evening he said that Jens Bjørneboe, the Kristiansand author, had hung himself by the feet, that was how he had committed suicide, hanging upside down from the rafters. The impossibility of this procedure – for how could he have managed that on his own in the house in Veierland? – never struck either him or me. The most considerate method would be, he said, to go to a hotel, write a letter to the hospital saying where you could be found, and then drink spirits and take pills, lie down on the bed, and go to sleep. It was incredible that I had never interpreted this topic of conversation as anything except conversation, I thought now, as I approached the newsstand behind the bus stop, but that was how it had been. He had imprinted his image of himself in me so firmly that I never saw anything else, even when the person he became diverged so widely from the person he had been, both in terms of physiognomy and character, that any similarities were barely visible any longer, it was always the person he had been with whom I engaged.

I climbed the wooden steps and opened the door to the newsstand, which was empty except for the assistant, took a newspaper from the stand by the till, slid open the glass door of the freezer compartment, took out a Coke, and placed both on the counter.

"*Dagbladet* and a Coke," the assistant said, lifting them for the bar code scanner. "Was there anything else?"

He didn't make eye contact when he said that, he must have seen me crying as I came in.

"No," I said. "That's all."

I pulled a creased note from my pocket and examined it. Fifty kroner. I smoothed it before passing it to him.

"Thank you," he said. He had thick, blond hair on his arms, wore a white Adidas T-shirt, blue jogging pants, probably Adidas as well, and did not look like someone who worked in a newsstand, more like a friend who had taken over for a few minutes. I grabbed my things and turned to leave as two ten-year-old boys came in with their money poised in their hands. Their bikes were thrown carelessly against the steps outside. A stretch of cars in both lanes began to move. I had to call Mom this evening. And Tonje. I walked along the sidewalk, crossed at the narrow pedestrian crossing down from the newsstand and was back in Kuholmsveien. Of course the funeral should be held there. In . . . six days. By then everything ought to be ready. By that time we should have put an advertisement in the newspaper, planned the funeral, invited guests, restored the house, come to terms with the worst aspects of the garden and organized the catering. If we got up early and went to bed late, and did nothing else, it should be feasible. It was just a question of getting Yngve on board. And Gunnar, of course. He might not have much of a say in the funeral, but he did as far as the house was concerned. But, hell, it should be fine. He would understand the reasons.

When I went into the kitchen Yngve was cleaning the stove with steel wool. Grandma was sitting in the chair. There was a splash of what would have to be pee on the floor below it.

"Here's your Coke," I said. "I'll put it on the table."

"Fine," he said.

"What have you got in that bag?" Grandma said, eyeing the paper bag from the pharmacy.

"It's for you," I said. "My father-in-law's a doctor and when I described what had happened here he prescribed you some sedatives. I don't think it's a bad idea. After all you've been through."

I took the square cardboard box from the bag, opened it, and removed the plastic container.

"What does it say?" Grandma said.

"One tablet to be taken once morning and night," I said. "Do you want one now?"

"Yes, if the doctor said so," Grandma said. I passed her the container, and she opened it and shook out a tablet. She looked around the table.

"I'll get you some water," I said.

"No need," she said, placing the tablet on her tongue, raising the cup of cold coffee to her mouth, jerking back and swallowing.

"Ugh," she said.

I put the newspaper on the table and glanced at Yngve, who had resumed scouring.

"It's good you're here, boys," Grandma said. "But don't you want to take a break, Yngve? You don't have to kill yourself working."

"That might not be such a bad idea," Yngve said, and removed the gloves, hung them over the oven handle, wiped his fingers over his T-shirt a few times, and sat down.

"I wonder if I should start on the downstairs bathroom," I said.

"It might be better to stick to the same floor," Yngve said. "Then we'll have some company along the way."

I inferred he didn't want to be alone with Grandma, and nodded.

"I'll take the living room then," I said.

"What hard workers you are," Grandma said. "It's not necessary, you know."

Why did she say that? Was she ashamed of the way the house looked and the fact that she had not managed to keep it in order? Or was it that she didn't want us to leave her alone?

"A bit of cleaning doesn't do any harm," I said.

"No, I suppose it doesn't," she said. Then she glanced at Yngve.

"Have you contacted the undertaker's yet?"

A chill went down my spine.

Had she been so clear-headed the whole time?

Yngve nodded.

"We dropped by this morning. Everything's in hand."

"That's good." She sat quite still, immersed in herself, for a moment, then continued.

"I didn't know if he was dead or not when I saw him. I was on my way to bed, I said good night, and he didn't answer. He was sitting in the chair in there, as he always did. And then he was dead. His face was white."

I met Yngve's eyes.

"You were going to *bed*?" he said.

"Yes, we'd been watching TV all evening," she said. "And he didn't move when I got up to go downstairs."

"Was it dark outside? Do you remember?" Yngve asked.

"Yes, I think so," she said.

I was close to retching.

"But when you called Gunnar," Yngve said, "that was in the morning, wasn't it? Can you remember?"

"It might have been in the morning," she said. "Now that you say so. Yes, it was. I went upstairs and there he was, in the chair. In there."

She got to her feet and left the kitchen. We followed. She stopped halfway into the living room and pointed to the chair in front of the television.

"That's where he was sitting," she said. "That's where he died."

She covered her face with her hands for an instant. Then she walked quickly back to the kitchen.

Nothing could bridge this. It was impossible to deal with. I could fill the bucket with water and start washing, and I could clean the whole damned house, but it would not help an iota, of course it wouldn't, nor would the idea that we should reclaim the house and hold the funeral here, there was nothing I could do that would help, there was nowhere I could escape to, nothing that could protect me from this.

"We need to talk," Yngve said. "Shall we go onto the veranda?" I nodded and followed him down into the second living room and onto the veranda. There was not a breath of air. The sky was as gray as before but a touch lighter above the town. The sound of a car in a low gear rose from the narrow alley below the house. Yngve stood with both hands around the railing staring out to the fjord. I sat down on the faded sun-lounger, got up the next moment, collected some bottles and put them by the wall, cast around for a bag but couldn't see one.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Yngve asked at length and straightened up.

"I think so," I said.

"Grandma is the only person to have seen him," he said. "She's the only witness. Gunnar didn't see him. She called him in the morning, and he called an ambulance. But he didn't see him."

"No," I said.

"For all we know he might have been alive. How would Grandma know? She finds him on the sofa, he doesn't answer when she speaks to him, she calls Gunnar, and then the ambulance arrives, the house is full of doctors and medical staff, they carry him out on a stretcher and are gone, and that's that. But suppose he wasn't dead? Suppose he was only dead drunk? Or was in some kind of coma?"

"Yes," I said. "When we turned up she said she'd found him in the morning. Now she said she found him in the evening. And that's it."

"And she's going senile. She keeps asking the same questions. How much did she understand when the place was full of paramedics?

"And then there's the medication she's taking," I said.

"Right."

"We have to know," I said. "I mean for certain."

"Oh, shit, what if he was alive," Yngve said.

I was filled with a horror I hadn't felt since I was small. I paced to and fro alongside the railing, stopped and glanced through the window to see if Grandma was there, turned to Yngve, who once again was staring into the horizon, his hands clasped around the railing. Oh, fuck. The logic was as clear as crystal. The only person to see Dad was Grandma, her testimony was the only one we had, and with her being in that confused, devastated state, there was no reason to believe it was accurate. By the time Gunnar appeared it was all over, the ambulance had taken him away, and after that no one spoke to the hospital or the staff who had been here. And they didn't know anything at the undertaker's. Just over twenty-four hours had passed since she found him. He could have been in a hospital during that time.

"Shall we call Gunnar?" I said.

Yngve turned to me.

"He doesn't know any more than we do."

"We'll have to talk to Grandma again," I said. "And then perhaps give the funeral director a call. I suppose he must be able to find out."

"I was thinking the same," Yngve said.

"Will you call?"

"Yes, I'll do that."

We went in. A sudden gust of wind blew the curtains hanging in front of the door into the living room. I closed the door and followed Yngve up into the dining room and kitchen. Down below, the front door slammed. I met Yngve's look. What was going on?

"Who could that be?" Grandma asked.

Was it Dad?

Was he returning?

I was as frightened as I had ever been.

Footfalls sounded on the stairs.

It was Dad, I knew it.

Oh, shit, shit, shit, here he is.

I turned and went into the living room, to the veranda door, ready to step out, run across the lawn and flee the town, never to return.

I forced myself to stand still. Heard the sound of footsteps twisting as they reached the bend in the stairs. Up the last steps, into the living room.

He would be incandescent with fury. What the hell were we doing, messing around with his things like this, coming here and bursting into his life?

I stepped back and watched Gunnar walk past into the kitchen.

Gunnar, of course.

"You two have done quite a bit, I can see," he said from the kitchen.

I joined them. I didn't feel stupid, more relieved, for if Gunnar was here when Dad came it would be easier for us.

They were sitting around the table.

"I thought I could take a load to the dump this afternoon," Gunnar said. "It's on the way to the cabin. Then I'll come back with the trailer tomorrow morning and give you a hand. I think what's in front of the garage will probably be close to a full load."

"So do I," Yngve said.

"We can fill a couple more bags," Gunnar said. "With clothes from his room and whatever else."

He got up.

"Let's get cracking then. Won't take long."

In the living room he stopped and looked around.

"We can take these clothes while we're at it, can't we? That'll save you having to look at this while you're here . . . disgusting . . ."

"I can take them," I said. "Better use gloves, I suppose."

I put on the yellow gloves as I went in and dropped everything on the sofa into a black garbage bag. Closed my eyes as my hands held the dried shit.

"Take the cushions as well," Gunnar said. "And the rug. It doesn't look too good."

I did as he said, carried the load downstairs to the front of the house where I hurled it into the trailer. Yngve brought up the rear, and we threw in the bags that had been left there. Gunnar's car was parked on the other side, that was why we hadn't heard the engine. As soon as the trailer was full, he and Gunnar repeated the shunting forwards and backwards until Gunnar's car was backed up and all we had to do was attach the trailer to the tow bar. After he had driven off and Yngve was parked by the garage again, I sat down on the doorstep. Yngve leaned against the door frame. His brow was shiny with sweat.

"I was sure that was Dad coming up the stairs," he said after a while.

"Me too," I said.

A magpie flew down from the roof on the other side of the garden and glided toward us. It flapped its wings a couple of times and the sound, somehow leatherlike, was unreal.

"He's probably dead," Yngve said. "He is. But we have to be sure. I'll call."

"Damned if I know what to think," I said. "We have only Grandma's word for it. And with all the booze and mess there's been in the house he might well have been no more than dead drunk. In fact, that could easily have been the case. That would be typical, wouldn't it. He comes back while we're nosing through his things. And what she said about . . . how come she didn't find him until the morning? What about the evening? How is it possible to be mixed up about this?"

Yngve looked at me.

"Perhaps he died in the evening. But she thought he was just sleeping. Then she found him in the morning. That's a possibility. This might be tormenting her so much she can't admit it. So she made up the business about him dying in the morning."

"Yes," I said. "That's possible."

"But it doesn't change the main point," Yngve said. "I'll go upstairs and call."

"I'll come with you," I said, and followed him upstairs. While he searched his wallet for the funeral director's business card, I closed the door to the kitchen, where Grandma was sitting, as quietly as possible, and went back down to the second living room. Yngve dialed. I barely had the strength to listen to the conversation, but couldn't resist, either.

"Hello, this is Yngve Knausgaard speaking. We came to see you earlier today, if you remember . . . yes, exactly. Mm, we were wondering . . . well, if you knew where he was. The circumstances have been a bit hazy, you see . . . The only person present when he was taken away was our grandmother. And she's very old and not always compos mentis. So we simply don't know for certain what happened. Would you be able to make a few inquiries for us? . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes. Very good. Thank you . . . Thank you very much. Yes . . . Goodbye."

Yngve looked down at me as he replaced the receiver.

"He was at his cabin. But he's going to make a few calls, and he'll find out. He'll call back later."

"Good," I said.

I went into the kitchen and filled a bucket with hot water, poured in some green soap, found a cloth, went into the living room and stood for a while not quite knowing where to begin. There was no point starting on the floor until we had thrown out the furniture that had to be thrown out, and then in the days to come there would still be some to-ing and fro-ing. Cleaning the window and door frames, doors, sills, bookshelves, chairs and tables was too little and too fiddly, I wanted something that would make a difference. The bathroom and toilet downstairs were best, where every centimeter had to be scrubbed. It was also the logical next step as I had already done the laundry room in the cellar and it was opposite the bathroom. And I could be alone there.

A movement to my left caused me to turn my head. An enormous seagull was standing outside the window and staring in. It banged its beak against the glass, twice. Waited.

"Seen this?" I called to Yngve in the kitchen. "There's a huge seagull here knocking on the glass with its beak."

I heard Grandma getting up.

"We'll have to find it some food," she said.

I went to the doorway. Yngve was emptying the wall cupboards; he had piled up the glasses and plates on the counter beneath. Grandma was standing beside him.

"Have you two seen the seagull?" I said.

"Film or play?" Yngve said.

He smiled.

"He usually comes here," Grandma said. "He wants some food. There. He can have that."

She put the rissole on a small dish, stood over it, bowed and lean, a lock of black hair hanging over her eyes, and quickly cut up the meat that was half-covered with dried gravy.

I followed her into the living room.

"Does it usually come here?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "Almost every day. And has been doing for more than a year now. I always give him something, you know. He's understood that. So he comes here."

"Are you sure it's the same one?"

"Of course I am. I recognize him. And he recognizes me."

When she opened the veranda door the gull hopped onto the floor and went to the dish she put out, completely fearless. I stood in the doorway and watched it grab the bits with its beak and throw its head back when it had a good hold. Grandma stood close by, looking across the town.

"Told you," she said.

The telephone rang. I stepped back to make sure it was Yngve who answered. The conversation was brief. As he hung up Grandma walked past and the seagull hopped onto the railing where it waited a few seconds before spreading its large wings and launching itself. A couple of flaps and it was high above the lawn. I watched it glide down to the harbor. Yngve stopped behind me. I closed the door and faced him.

"He's dead, no question," he said. "He's in the hospital cellar. We can see him on Monday afternoon if we wish. And I've got the telephone number of the doctor who was here."

"Seeing is believing," I said.

"Well, we will now," he said.

Ten minutes later I put a bucket of steaming water, a bottle of Klorin and a bottle of Jif down on the floor by the bath. I shook the garbage bag open, then started clearing everything from the bathroom. First of all, the stuff on the floor: dried-up bits of old soap, sticky shampoo bottles, empty toilet paper rolls, the brown-stained toilet brush, medical packaging – silver paper and plastic, a few loose pills, a sock or two, the odd hair curler. After finishing this, I emptied everything from the wall cupboard, apart from two expensive-looking bottles of perfume. Blades, safety razors, hairpins, several bars of soap, old, desiccated creams and ointments, a hair net, aftershave, deodorants, eyeliners, lipstick, some small cracked powder puffs, not sure what they were used for, but it must have been something to do with make-up, and hair, both short, curly ones and longer, straighter ones, nail scissors, Band-Aids, dental floss, and combs. Once the cupboard was empty, a yellow-brown, thickish residue was left on the shelf that I decided to wash last of all. The wall tiles beside the toilet seat, on which the toilet paper holder was fixed, were covered with light brown stains and the floor beneath was sticky, and these seemed to me to be most in need of attention, so I squirted a line of Jif over the tiles and began to scrub them, methodically, from the ceiling right down to the floor. First, the right-hand wall, then the mirror wall, then the bathtub wall and then finally around the door. I rubbed every single tile clean; it must have taken me an hour and a half. Every so often it went through my mind that this was where my grandfather had collapsed, one autumn night six years ago, and he had called Grandma, who had called for an ambulance and sat here holding his hand until it came. It was the first time it had struck me that everything had been as it always was, right up until that moment. He had been suffering massive internal bleeding over a long period, it transpired when he was in the hospital. Only a few more days and he would have died, there was almost no blood left in him. He must have known something was wrong, but had been reluctant to go to the doctor with it. Then he collapsed on the bathroom floor, close to death, and although they caught him in time at the hospital, and initially he was saved, he was so weakened that he gradually wasted away and, eventually, died.

When I was a boy I had been afraid of this downstairs bathroom. The cistern, which must have been from the 1950s, the type with a metal lever and a small black ball on the side, always got stuck and kept flushing long after anyone had used it, and the noise, issuing from the darkness of the floor no one used, empty, with its clean, blue wall-to-wall carpeting, its wardrobe with neatly hung coats and jackets, its shelf for my grandparents' hats and another for their shoes, which in my imagination represented beings, everything did then, and its yawning staircase to the floor above, always frightened me to such a degree that I had to use all my powers of persuasion to defy my fears and enter the bathroom. I knew no one was there, I knew the flushing water was only flushing water, that the coats were only coats, shoes only shoes, stairs only stairs, but I suppose the certainty only magnified the terror, because I didn't want to be alone with all of it, that was what frightened me, a feeling which the dead non-beings intensified. I could still recognize that way of perceiving the world. The toilet seat looked like a being, and the sink, and the bath, and the garbage bag, that greedy, black stomach on the floor.

This particular evening, however, my unease with it rose again because my grandfather had collapsed here and because Dad had died upstairs in the living room yesterday, so the deadness of these non-beings combined with the deadness of the two of them, of my father and his father.

So how could I keep this feeling at arm's length?

Oh, all I had to do was clean. Scour and scrub and rub and wipe. See how each tile became clean and shiny. Imagine that all that had been destroyed here would be restored. All. Everything. And that I would never, never ever ever, end up where he had ended up.

After I had washed the walls and floor, I poured the water down the toilet, pulled off the yellow gloves and turned them inside out and hung them over the rim of the empty red bucket while making a mental note that I had to buy a toilet brush as soon as possible. Unless there was one in the other bathroom, that is. I looked. Yes, there was. I would have to use that for now, whatever its state, and then buy another one on Monday. On my way across the floor to the stairs I stopped. The door to Grandma's room was ajar, and for some reason I went over, opened it, and peeped in.

Oh no.

There were no sheets on her bed, she slept directly on the hard, piss-permeated mattress. There was a kind of commode beside her bed with a bucket underneath. Clothes were strewn everywhere. A row of withered plants in the window. The stench of ammonia stung my nostrils.

What a pile of shit this was. Shit, shit, shit, fuck, cunt.

I left the door as I had found it, and trudged slowly up the stairs to the first floor. In places the banister was almost black with dirt. I put my hand on it and could feel it was sticky. On the landing I heard the sounds of the TV. When I entered the living room, Grandma was watching it from the chair in the middle. The TV2 news was on. So the time must have been somewhere between half past six and seven.

How could she sit there next to the chair in which he had died?

My stomach contracted, the tears that flowed seemed to have erupted and my grimaces, which I was unable to control, were light years from any vomiting reflex, and this sensation of disequilibrium and asymmetry overwhelmed me and created panic, it was as if I were being torn apart. If I had been able to, I would have fallen to my knees, clasped my hands and cried to God, shouted, but I couldn't, there was no mercy in this, the worst had already happened, it was over.

When I went into the kitchen it was empty. All the cupboards were washed, and although there was a lot left to do – the walls, the floor, the drawers, the table, and the chairs – the kitchen seemed airier. On the counter there was a 1.5 liter plastic bottle of beer. Tiny droplets of condensation covered the label. Beside it was a slab of brown cheese with a slicer on top, a yellow cheese and a packet of margarine with a butter knife angled into it, the shaft resting against the edge. The chopping board had been pulled out, on it there was a whole grain loaf, half out of its red-and-white paper bag. In front, a bread knife, a crust, crumbs.

I took a plastic bag from the lowest drawer, emptied the two ashtrays on the table into it, tied it up, and dropped it into the half-full, black garbage bag in the corner, found a cloth, cleaned the tobacco and crumbs off the table, placed the tobacco pouches and her roller machine on the box of cigarette tubes at one end of the table, under the windowsill, opened the window and put it on the latch. Then I went to look for Yngve. He was sitting on the veranda, as I had thought. He had a glass of beer in one hand, a cigarette in the other.

"Want some?" he said as I went out. "There's a bottle in the kitchen."

"No, thanks," I said. "Not after what's happened here. I'll never drink beer from plastic bottles again."

He looked at me and smiled.

"You're so sensitive," he said. "The bottle was unopened. It was in the fridge. It isn't as if he'd been drinking from it."

I lit a cigarette and leaned back against the railings.

"What shall we do about the garden?" I asked.

Yngve shrugged.

"We can't sort out everything here."

"I want to," I said.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Now was the moment to tell him about my idea. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. I knew that Yngve would come up with counterarguments and in the disagreement that would ensue there were things I did not want to see or experience. Oh, they were trivial, but had my life ever consisted of anything else? When we were children I admired Yngve, the way that younger brothers admire their older brothers, there was no one I would rather receive acknowledgment from, and although he was a bit too old for our paths to cross when we were out, we stuck together when we were at home. Not on an equal footing, of course, it was generally his wishes that held sway, but still we were close. Also because we faced a common foe, Dad, that is.

I couldn't remember that many specific incidents from our childhood, but the few that stood out were eloquent. I recalled laughing until our sides split at little things, such as the time we went camping in England in 1976, an unusually hot summer, and one evening we were walking up a hill near the campsite, and a car passed us, and Yngve said that the two people in it were kissing, which I heard as "pissing," and we were doubled up with laughter for several minutes, laughter which would reignite at the slightest cause for the rest of the evening.

If there is anything I miss from my childhood it has to be that, laughing uncontrollably with my brother over some tiny stupidity. The time we played soccer for an entire evening on the field by the tent on that same trip, with two English boys, Yngve with his Leeds cap, me with my Liverpool cap, the sun going down over the countryside, the darkness growing around us, the low voices from the tents nearby, me unable to understand a word they said, Yngve proud to be able to translate. The swimming pool we went to one morning before setting off, where I, a nonswimmer, still managed to paddle to the deep end by holding onto a plastic ball, which suddenly slipped from my grasp, me sinking in a pool with no one else around, Yngve calling for help, a young man running over and dragging me to the surface, my first thought, after regurgitating a little chlorinated water, was that Mom and Dad must not find out about what had happened. The days from which these incidents are drawn were countless, the bonds they created between us indestructible. The fact that he could be more malicious to me than anyone else changed nothing, it was part and parcel of it, and in the context we lived, the hatred I felt for him was no more than a brook is to an ocean, a lamp to the night. He knew exactly what to say to make me so furious that I completely lost control. He sat there, utterly calm with that teasing smile of his, poking fun at me until anger had me in its grip and I could no longer see clearly, I literally saw red and no longer knew what I was doing. I could throw the cup I was holding at him, with all my strength, or a slice of bread, if that was in my hand, or an orange, if I didn't attack him with fists flying, blinded by tears and red-eyed fury while he stayed in control and held my wrists and said *there, there, little baby, are you angry now, poor little* . . . He also knew about all the things that frightened me, so when Mom was on night duty and Dad was at a council meeting and there was a repeat showing of *Stowaway*, a sci-fi film, which was usually on late at night so that people like me wouldn't be watching, it was the easiest thing in the world for him to switch off all the lights in the house, lock the front door, turn to me and say *I am not Yngve. I am a stowaway* while I screamed with terror and begged him to say he was Yngve, *say it, say it, you are Yngve, I know you are, Yngve, Yngve, you're not a stowaway, you're Yngve* . . . He also knew I was frightened of the sound the pipes made when you turned on the hot water, a shrill screech that quickly changed to knocking, impossible for me to cope with, I had to take to my heels, so we had a deal whereby he wouldn't pull the plug after washing in the morning but leave the water in the sink for me. Accordingly, every morning for perhaps six months I washed my face and hands in Yngve's dirty water.

When he was seventeen and left home our relationship changed, of course. Without our daily contact, my image of him, and his life, grew, especially the one he had in Bergen, where eventually he went to study. I wanted to live the way he did.

During my first autumn at gymnas I visited him at the Alrek Hall of Residence, where he had a room. Getting off the airport bus in the city center, I headed straight for a kiosk and bought a packet of Prince cigarettes and a lighter. I had never smoked before, but had long planned that I would, and alone in Bergen I had imagined an opportunity would present itself. So there I was, beneath the green spire of St. Johannes' Church, with Bergen's main square in front of me, Torgallmenningen, packed with people, cars, and gleaming glass. The sky was blue, my backpack was beside me on the tarmac, a cigarette in the corner of my mouth, and as I lit it with the yellow lighter cupped in my hand against the wind, I had a strong, almost overwhelming, sense of freedom. I was alone, I could do what I wanted, all of life lay open at my feet. I spluttered, of course the smoke burned my throat, but I managed tolerably well, the feeling of freedom did not diminish, and after finishing the cigarette I put the red-and-white packet in my jacket pocket, slung the backpack on my back, and went to meet Yngve. At the Cathedral School in Kristiansand nothing was mine, but Yngve was mine, what was his was mine too, so I was not only happy but also proud when, a few hours later, I was on my knees in his room, where the sunlight fell through the pollution-matt windows, flicking through the record collection in the three wine cases by the wall. We went out that night, with three girls he knew, and I borrowed his deodorant, Old Spice, and his hair gel, and before we left, standing in front of the hall mirror, he folded up the sleeves of the black-and-white checked shirt I was wearing, which was like the one The Edge in U2 wore in many pictures, and adjusted the lapels of the suit jacket. We met the girls in one of their flats, they found it very funny that I was only sixteen, and thought I should be holding hands with one of them as we walked past the doorman, which I also did the first time I had been to a place where you had to be eighteen to gain admittance. The following day we went to Café Opera and Café Galleri, where we met Mom as well. She was living with her Aunt Johanna in Søndre Skogveien, whose flat Yngve took over later, and that was where I visited him when I was next in Bergen. Once, the year after, I went with a tape recorder to interview the American band Wall of Voodoo who were playing at a club, Hulen, that night. I didn't have an appointment, I went in during the sound check with my press card, and we stood by the stage entrance waiting for them, I was wearing a white shirt and a black boot-lace tie with a large shiny eagle, black pants, and boots. But when the band appeared, suddenly I didn't have the nerve to speak to them, they looked intimidating, a gang of thirty-year-old dopeheads from Los Angeles, and it was Yngve who saved the day. *Hey, mister!* he called, and the bass player turned and came over, and Yngve said, *This is my little brother, he has come all the way from Kristiansand, down south, to do an interview with Wall of Voodoo. Is that okay with you?*

Nice tie! said the bass player, whom I immediately followed into the band's room. He was dressed all in black, had huge tattoos on his arms, long, black hair and cowboy boots, and was extremely friendly; he gave me a beer and answered in great detail all the school newspaper-type questions I had written down. Another time in Bergen, I interviewed Blaine Reininger, who had just left Tuxedomoon, on one of the soft leather sofas at Café Galleri. I never entertained a moment's doubt that this was where I would move, to this metropolis with all its cafés, concert venues, and record shops, after I finished school.

After the Wall of Voodoo gig we sat in Hulen and decided to start up a band when I came: Yngve's friend Pål could play bass, Yngve guitar, and I could play drums. We would find a singer eventually. Yngve would write the music, I would write the words, and one day, we told each other that night, we would play here, at Hulen. Going to Bergen, then, for me was like stepping into the future. I left my current life and spent some days in my next life before having to return. In Kristiansand I was alone and had to fight for everything; in Bergen I was with Yngve and whatever he had, also belonged to me. Not only clubs and cafés, shops and parks, reading rooms and auditoria, but also all of his friends who not only knew who I was when I met them but what I was doing, I had my own music program on local radio and reviewed records and concerts in *Fædrelandsvennen*, and after these meetings Yngve always told me what had been said about me, it was usually girls who had something to say, that I was good-looking or mature for my age and so on, but boys did too, one comment particularly stuck in my mind, Arvid's, that I looked like the young man in Visconti's *Death in Venice*. I was someone for them, and that was thanks to Yngve. He took me with him to Vindilhytta, a cabin where all his friends gathered every New Year's Eve, and one summer when I was selling cassettes on the street in Arendal and financially flush, we went out almost every night, and on one of the nights, I can remember, Yngve was surprised but also proud that I could drink five bottles of wine and still more or less behave. The summer ended with me getting together with the sister of Yngve's girlfriend. Yngve took loads of photos of me with his Nikon SLR, all in black and white, all dreadfully posey, and once we went together to a photographer's, the idea was to give each of our grandparents a photo of us for Christmas, and we did do that, but the photo also turned up in the photographer's display case in the foyer of the Kristiansand Cinema, where anyone who wished could see us posing in our eighties clothes complete with eighties hairstyles. Yngve in a light-blue shirt with leather bracelets around one wrist, long hair down his neck, short on top, me with my black-and-white plaid shirt, my black jacket with rolled-up sleeves, my nail belt and my black trousers, with hair longer at the back and even shorter on top than Yngve's, and with a cross hanging from one ear. I went to the cinema a lot in those days, mostly with Jan Vidar or some others from Tveit, and when I saw the photograph exhibited there, in the illuminated display case, I could never quite associate it with me, that is, with the life I was living in Kristiansand, which had a certain external, objective quality to it, in the sense that it was tied to particular places, such as school, the sports hall, the town center, and to particular people, my friends, classmates, teammates, while the photograph was connected in quite a different way with something intimate and hidden, first and foremost the core family, but also the person I would become once I got away from here. If Yngve ever talked about me to his friends I never mentioned him to mine.

It was confusing and annoying that this internal space should be exhibited for external appraisal. But apart from a couple of isolated comments no one gave it a second thought, since I was not someone to be given a second thought.

When at last I left school in 1987, for some reason, I didn't move to Bergen after all, instead I went to a little village on an island in northern Norway, where I worked as a teacher for a year. The plan was that I would write my novel in the evenings, and with the money I saved travel in Europe for a year; I bought a book which described all sorts of possible and impossible short-term jobs in European countries and that was what I had imagined, traveling from town to town, country to country, working a bit, writing a bit, and living a free and independent life, but then I was accepted by the new Academy of Creative Writing in Hordaland for some work I had done that year and, immensely flattered at this acceptance, I changed all my plans and headed, nineteen years old, for Bergen where, despite all my dreams and notions of an itinerant life in the world outside, I stayed for the next nine years.

And it started well. The sun was shining as I alighted from the airport bus in the fish market, and Yngve, who was working as a receptionist at Hotel Orion on weekends and over the holidays, was in a good mood when I entered the reception area. He had to work another half an hour and then we could buy some shrimp and beer and celebrate the beginning of my new life. We sat on the steps in front of his flat drinking beer with music by the Undertones belting out to us from the stereo in the sitting room. By the time night fell we were already a bit drunk, we ordered a taxi and went to Ola's, one of Yngve's friends, had a bit more to drink, then went on to Café Opera where we remained until closing time at a table to which a stream of people kept coming. This is my little brother, Karl Ove, Yngve said again and again, he's moved to Bergen to study at the Academy of Creative Writing. He's going to be a writer. Yngve had organized a studio for me in Sandviken – the girl who lived there was going to South America for a year – but until it became free I would be sleeping on a sofa at his place. Where he told me off for minor transgressions, as he always had on the few occasions we had lived together for more than a few days, right from his Alrek days when I got into hot water for slicing the cheese too thickly or not putting records back where I had found them, and it was the same level of reprimand this time: I didn't dry the floor well enough after I had showered, I dropped crumbs on the floor while eating, I wasn't careful enough with the stylus when putting on a record, until, standing by his car and being told how I had banged the car door too hard the last time I got in, I suddenly had had enough. Furious, I shouted that he should stop telling me what to do. And he did, after that he never corrected me again. But the balance in the relationship stayed the same, it was his world I had stepped into, and in it I was, and would remain, the younger brother. Life at the academy was complicated, and I didn't make any friends there, partly because everyone was older than me, partly because I simply could not find anything in common with them, so that meant I was frequently running after Yngve's heels, calling him up and asking if he had anything happening over the weekend, and of course he invariably did, could I tag along? I could. And after wandering around town for a whole Sunday or lying in bed at home reading, the temptation to drop by in the evening, even if I told myself I shouldn't, that I had to make my own life, was too great for me to resist, so often I wound up on the sofa in front of his television.

Eventually he moved into a collective, and for me that was bad news because then my dependence on him became so visible; hardly a day passed without my appearing at their door, and when he wasn't at home I sat in their living room, either dutifully entertained by one of the collective's members, or alone, leafing through a music magazine or a newspaper, like a poster child of a failed human being. I needed Yngve, but Yngve didn't need me. That was how it was. I might be able to chat with one of his friends when he was present, there was a framework, but on my own? Go up to one of them on my own? That would just seem weird and forced and obtrusive, that was not on. And in fact my behavior was not very good, to put it mildly, I was getting drunk too often, and I did not flinch from harassing someone if I got the idea into my head. Usually something to do with their appearance or silly, small mannerisms that I might have observed.

The novel I wrote while studying at the academy was turned down, I started at the university, I studied literary science half-heartedly, couldn't write any longer, and all that was left of my writing career was the desire. That was strong, but how many people at university did not nurture the same desires? We played at Hulen with our band, Kafkatrakterne, we played at Garage, some of our songs were played on the radio, we had a couple of fine reviews in music papers, and that was good; however, I knew all the while that the sole reason I was there was because I was Yngve's brother, I was a terrible drummer. When I was twenty-four I had a flash of insight: that this was in fact my life, this is exactly what it looked like and presumably always would. That one's studies, this fabled and much-talked about period in a life, on which one always looked back with pleasure, were for me no more than a series of dismal, lonely, and imperfect days. That I had not seen this before was due to the constant hope I carried around inside me, all the ridiculous dreams with which a twenty-year-old can be burdened, about women and love, about friends and happiness, about hidden talents and sudden breakthroughs. But when I was twenty-four I saw life as it was. And it was okay, I had my small pleasures too, it wasn't that, and I could endure any amount of loneliness and humiliation, I was a bottomless pit, just bring it on, there were days when I could think, I receive, I am a well, I am the well of the failed, the wretched, the pitiful, the pathetic, the embarrassing, the cheerless, and the ignominious. Come on! Piss on me! Shit on me too if you want! I receive! I endure! I am endurance itself! I have never been in any doubt that this is what girls I have tried my luck with have seen in my eyes. Too much desire, too little hope. Meanwhile Yngve, who had had his friends all this time, his studies, his work, and his band, not to mention his girlfriends, got everything he wanted.

What did he have that I did not? How come he was always lucky while the girls I spoke to seemed either horrified or scornful? Whatever the reason, I stayed close to him. The only good friend I had during these years was Espen, who started at the academy the year after me, and whom I met through the literature course – he asked me to look at some poems he had written. I knew nothing about poetry, but I looked at them, gave him some baloney he didn't see through, and then little by little we became friends. Espen was the type who read Beckett at school, listened to jazz, and played chess, who had long hair and a somewhat nervous and anxious disposition. He was closed to gatherings of more than two people, but intellectually open, and he made his debut with a collection of poems a year after we had met, not without some jealousy from my side. Yngve and Espen represented two sides of my life, and of course they did not get along.

Espen probably didn't know this himself, since I always pretended to know most things, but he pulled me up into the world of advanced literature, where you wrote essays about a line of Dante, where nothing could be made complex enough, where art dealt with the supreme, not in a high-flown sense because it was the modernist canon with which we were engaged, but in the sense of the ungraspable, which was best illustrated by Blanchot's description of Orpheus's gaze, the night of the night, the negation of the negation, which of course was in some way above the trivial and in many ways wretched lives we lived, but what I learned was that also our ludicrously inconsequential lives, in which we could not attain anything of what we wanted, nothing, in which everything was beyond our abilities and power, had a part in this world, and thus also in the supreme, for books existed, you only had to read them, no one but myself could exclude me from them. You just had to reach up.

Modernist literature with all its vast apparatus was an instrument, a form of perception, and once absorbed, the insights it brought could be rejected without its essence being lost, even the form endured, and it could then be applied to your own life, your own fascinations, which could then suddenly appear in a completely new and significant light. Espen took that path, and I followed him, like a brainless puppy, it was true, but I did follow him. I leafed through Adorno, read some pages of Benjamin, sat bowed over Blanchot for a few days, had a look at Derrida and Foucault, had a go at Kristeva, Lacan, Deleuze, while poems by Ekelöf, Björling, Pound, Mallarmé, Rilke, Trakl, Ashbery, Mandelstam, Lunden, Thomsen, and Hauge floated around, on which I never spent more than a few minutes, I read them as prose, like a book by MacLean or Bagley, and learned nothing, understood nothing, but just having contact with them, having their books in the bookcase, led to a shifting of consciousness, just knowing they existed was an enrichment, and if they didn't furnish me with insights I became all the richer for intuitions and feelings.

Now this wasn't really anything to beat the drums with in an exam or during a discussion, but that wasn't what I, the king of approximation, was after. I was after enrichment. And what enriched me while reading Adorno, for example, lay not in what I read but in the perception of myself while I was reading. I was someone who read Adorno! And in this heavy, intricate, detailed, precise language whose aim was to elevate thought ever higher, and where every period was set like a mountaineer's cleat, there was something else, this particular approach to the mood of reality, the shadow of these sentences that could evoke in me a vague desire to use the language with this particular mood on something real, on something living. Not on an argument, but on a lynx, for example, or on a blackbird or a cement mixer. For it was not the case that language cloaked reality in its moods, but vice versa, reality arose from them.

I didn't articulate that for myself, it didn't exist as in thought, barely even as inklings, more as a kind of hazy lure. I kept this entire side of me hidden from Yngve, first of all because he wasn't interested, and didn't believe in it either, he had taken Media Studies, and was in full agreement with the tenet of his subject that objective quality did not exist, that all judgments were relative, and that of course what was popular was just as good as what was not popular, but soon this difference, and whatever I held back, was charged with much more for me, it began to be about us as people, about the distance between Yngve and me actually being large, and I didn't want that, I didn't want that for anything in the world, and I systematically played it down. If I suffered a defeat, if I failed at something, if I had misunderstood something vital, I never hesitated to tell him, for anything that could drag me down in his eyes was good, while on those occasions I achieved something of significance, I often opted not to tell him.

In itself, this was perhaps not a serious matter, but when the consciousness of it reared its head, it became worse because I thought about it when we were together, and I no longer behaved in a natural, spontaneous manner, no longer chatted away as I had always done with him but started brooding, calculating, and reflecting. It was the same with Espen, except in reverse, I toned down the easygoing, entertainment-focused lifestyle. At the same time I had a girlfriend with whom I had never been in love, not really, which of course she must have known herself. We had been together for four years. So there I was, playing roles, pretending this and pretending that. And as if that were not enough, I was working at an institution for the mentally impaired as well, and not content with fawning on the other staff there, who were trained nurses, I was also joining them at their parties, which were held in the part of town that students shunned, the down-homey bars with pianists and singalongs, to tune into their opinions and attitudes and perceptions. The few I had of my own I repudiated or kept to myself. There was consequently something furtive and dubious about my character, nothing of the solid, pure traits which I encountered in some people during this period, people whom I therefore admired. Yngve was too close for me to be able to judge in this way, for thoughts, whatever good one can say about them, have a great weakness, namely, that they are dependent on a certain distance for effect. Everything inside that distance is subject to emotions. It was because of my emotions that I was starting to hold things back. He wasn't allowed to make mistakes. My mother could, and I wasn't bothered, my father and my friends could, and of course I could, I didn't give a shit, but Yngve was not allowed to fail, he was not allowed to make a fool of himself, he was not allowed to show weakness. When, however, he did, and I was watching, shame-filled, the shame on his behalf still was not the crux; the crux was that he mustn't notice, he mustn't find out that I harbored such emotions, and the evasive looks in such circumstances, emerged to conceal feelings rather than show them, must have been conspicuous, albeit not easy to interpret. If he said something stupid or glib it did not change my attitude to him, I didn't judge him differently for that reason, so what went on inside me was based exclusively on the possibility that *he* might believe I was ashamed of him.

Such as the time we were sitting in Garage late one night discussing the journal we had long been planning to launch. We were surrounded by people who could write and take photographs, who were all as au fait with the Liverpool team of the 1982–83 season as they were with the members of the Frankfurt school, with English groups as Norwegian writers, with German expressionist films as American TV series. Starting a news-oriented magazine that took this broad range of interests seriously – soccer, music, literature, film, philosophy, and art – had long seemed a good idea. That night we were with Ingar Myking, who was the editor of the student newspaper *Studvest*, and Hans Mjelva, who aside from singing in our band, had been Ingar's predecessor. When Yngve started talking about the magazine I suddenly heard what he was saying with Ingar's and Hans's ears. It sounded flat and unsubtle, and I looked down at the table. Yngve glanced at me several times as he was speaking. Should I say what I was thinking, correct him, in other words? Or should I turn a blind eye, deny myself, and support what he was saying? Then Ingar and Hans would believe I stood where he did on this. I didn't want that either. So I opted for a compromise and said nothing, in an attempt to let the silence affirm Yngve and the assessment of his opinions, which is what I assumed Ingar and Hans were doing.

I was often this cowardly, I didn't want to upset anyone, and held back what I thought, but this time the circumstances were heightened both because it concerned Yngve, who I wanted to keep above me, where he belonged, and because there was some vanity involved, that is, listeners, and I couldn't talk my way out of that.

Most of what Yngve and I did together was on his terms, and most of what I did alone, such as reading and writing, I kept to myself. But every now and then these two worlds met, it was inevitable, for Yngve was also keen on literature although he wasn't interested in the same things as I was. When I had to interview the writer Kjartan Flogstad for a student magazine, for example, Yngve suggested we do it together, and I agreed without a murmur. Flogstad, with his mixture of down-to-earth talk and intellectualism, his theories about all things high and low, his undogmatic and independent, almost aristocratic, left-wing views, and, not least, his wordplay, was Yngve's favorite author. Yngve was himself infamous for his wordplay and corny puns, and his core intellectual claim was the notion that a work of art's value was created in the receiver, and not in itself, and that authentic artistic expression was just as much a question of form as inauthentic artistic expression. For me Flogstad was the great Norwegian writer. The interview with him had been arranged by the tiny Nynorsk student newspaper TAL, for whom I had previously interviewed the poet Olav H. Hauge and the prose writer Karin Moe. I did the Hauge interview with Espen, and Ingve's friend Asbjorn, who took the photos, so it was only natural for Yngve to be in on this one. The interview with Hauge had gone well, after a terrible start it must be said, because I hadn't told him there would be three of us, so as our car swung into his drive he had been expecting one person and refused to let us into his house. *They came in force*, he said in the doorway in sculpted West Coast dialect, and I suddenly felt like a happy, frivolous, stupid, overeager, impulsive, red-cheeked Eastern Norwegian. Hauge was a permanent resident of the intellectual planet, he didn't budge for anything, I was a tourist, and had brought my friends along to examine the phenomenon more closely. That was my feeling, and judging by his severe, almost hostile, expression, apparently also his. But, in the end, he said *Well, you'd better come in*, and lumbered into the living room ahead of us, where we put down our bags and photographic equipment. Asbjorn removed his camera and lifted it to the light, Espen and I took out our notes, Hauge sat on a bench by the wall inspecting the floor. *Perhaps you could stand by that window*, Asbjorn said, *the light's good there. Then we can take a few pictures.* Hauge looked up at him, with his gray bangs hanging over his forehead. *You're not taking any goddamn pictures here,* he said. *All right,* said Asbjørn. *My apologies.* He withdrew to the side and discreetly placed his camera in its bag. Espen was sitting beside me flicking through some notes and holding a pen in one hand. I knew him, and it was clear that it was hardly likely to be concentration that was impelling him to read them through now. An eternity passed without anyone saying anything. Espen looked at me. Then looked at Hauge. *I have a question,* he said. *Would it be all right if I asked you?* Hauge nodded, and pushed back his drooping curls with a movement that was surprisingly light and feminine compared with his otherwise masculine impassivity and silence. Espen started on his question, he read from his notepad, it was long and intricate and contained a brief analysis of a poem. When he had finished, Hauge said, without looking up, that he wasn't going to talk about his poems.

I had read Espen's questions, which all focused closely on Hauge's poems, and if Hauge was not of a mind to talk about his poems, they were all useless. The ensuing silence was protracted. Now Espen was as dark and brooding as Hauge. They were poets, I thought, that is how they are. Compared to their heavy gloom I felt like a lightweight, a dilettante with no understanding of anything, just drifting across the surface, watching soccer, who recognized the names of a few philosophers and liked pop music of the simplest variety. One of the songs I had written for our band, which was the closest I got to poetry, was called "Du duver så deilig" (You Sway so Sweetly). I had to step into the breach because it was obvious that Espen was not going to say any more in the course of this interview, so I began to ask questions about the municipality of Jølster where my mother lived, because the artist Astrup came from there, and Hauge had been interested in him, he had even written a poem about him. There was obviously an elective affinity between them. But he didn't want to speak about this. Instead he talked about a trip he'd made ages ago, some time in the sixties, or so it sounded, and all the names he mentioned, while contemplating the floor, he mentioned in a confidential way as if everyone knew them. We had never heard of them, and this all seemed, if not cryptic, then at least to have no special meaning other than a private one. I asked a question about translation, Asbjørn another, they were answered in the same way, in immensely casual tones, as though he were simply sitting there and talking to himself. Or to the floor, rather. As an interview it was a disaster. But then, after perhaps an hour of this procedure, another car turned into the drive. It was NRK Hordaland, local Radio & TV, they wanted Hauge to read a few poems. They started, but they had forgotten a cable, and had to return for it, and when they resumed, Hauge changed, he was suddenly friendly with us, made jokes and smiled, now it was us against NRK, and the ice was broken, for when NRK had finished recording and had gone on their way his friendliness continued, he was present in quite a different way, and open. His wife came in with a freshly made apple pie for us, and after we had eaten he showed us around the house, took us up to the library on the first floor where he also worked, I saw a notebook on the desk with "Diary" written on the cover, and there he pulled books off the shelves and talked about them, among others one by Julia Kristeva, I remember, because I thought, *you definitely haven't read that one*, Hauge had never been to university, and if you have, you definitely didn't understand it, and then, as we went downstairs, he said something enormously charged and meaningful about death, the tone was resigned and laconic, but not without irony, and I thought I will have to remember this, this is important, I'll have to remember this for the rest of my life, but by the time we were in the car on our way home along the Hardanger fjord I had forgotten. He was walking a few steps behind me, Espen and Asbjørn were already out, it was photo time. While Hauge sat on the stone bench with legs crossed, gazing into the distance, and Asbjørn was taking shots from several angles, crouching one second, standing the next, Espen and I were smoking a few meters away. It was a wonderful autumn day, cold and bright; as we drove inland from Bergen in the morning, frozen mist was lying over the fjord. The trees on the mountainsides were displaying red and yellow leaves, the fjord below was like a millpond, the waterfalls immense and white. I was happy, the interview was over, and it had gone well, but I was also agitated, something about Hauge filled me with unease. Something that would not rest, and I was unsure of the source. He was an old man, wore old man's clothes, a flannel shirt and old man's trousers, slippers and a hat, and had an old man's gait, yet there was nothing old mannish about him, such as there was with my grandfather or my father's uncle, Alf; on the contrary, when he suddenly opened up to us and wanted to show us things, it was in a kind of artless, childlike way, infinitely friendly, but also infinitely vulnerable, the way a boy without friends might behave when someone showed some interest in him, one might imagine, unthinkable in the case of my grandfather or Alf, it must have been at least sixty years since they had opened up to anyone like that, if indeed they ever had. But no, Hauge hadn't really opened himself to us, it was more as if it had been his natural self which his rejection had been protecting when we arrived. I saw something I didn't want to see because the person showing us was unaware of how it looked. He was more than eighty years old, but nothing in him had died or calcified, which actually makes life far too painful to live, that's what I think now. At the time it just made me uneasy.

"Can we do some by the apple trees as well?" Asbjørn said.

Hauge nodded, got up, and followed Asbjørn to the trees. I bent down and stubbed out my cigarette on the ground, cast around for a place to put it as I straightened up, I couldn't just flick it onto his drive, but couldn't see anywhere suitable so put it in my pocket.

Surrounded by mountains on all sides, it felt as if we were standing in an enormous vault. There was still a warm, gentle waft to the air, as there often is in autumnal Vestland.

"Do you think we can ask him if he would read some poems for us?" Espen said.

"If you dare," I said, and noticed that Asbjørn was smiling. If Hauge was a poet for Espen, he was a legend for Asbjørn, and now he was standing there photographing him with permission to take all the time he needed. Once we had finished we went into the living room to fetch our things. I took out the book I had bought in a shop on the way, Hauge's collected poems, and asked him if he would write a line for my mother in it.

"What's her name?" he said.

"Sissel," I said.

"Anything else?"

"Hatløy. Sissel Hatløy."

"*To Sissel Hatløy with best wishes from Olav H. Hauge*," he wrote, and passed it back.

"Thank you," I said.

He escorted us to the door as we left. Espen had his back to him, getting the book ready, then suddenly turned with a face shining with embarrassment and hope.

"Would you mind reading us a poem?"

"Not at all," Hauge said. "Which one would you like to hear?"

"Perhaps the one about the cat?" Esben said. "On the drive? That would be fitting, ha ha ha."

"Let me see," Hauge said. "There it is."

And he read.

The cat is sitting
out front
when you come.
Talk a bit with the cat.
He is the most sensitive one here.

Everyone was smiling, even Hauge.

"That was a short poem," he said. "Would you like to hear another one?"

"We'd love to!" Espen said.

He thumbed through, then began to read.

TIME TO GATHER IN

These mild days of sun in September.
Time to gather in. There are still tufts
of cranberries in the wood, the rose hips redden

along the stone dykes, nuts fall at a touch,
and clumps of blackberries gleam in thickets,
thrushes poke about for the last red currants
and the wasp sucks away at the sweet plums.
In the evenings I set my ladder aside and hang
up my basket in the shed. Meager glaciers
already have a thin covering of new snow.
Lying in bed, I hear the throb of the brisling fishers
on their way out. All night, I know, they'll glide
with staring searchlights up and down the fjord.

Standing there on the drive and looking down at the ground while he read, I was thinking that this is a great and privileged moment, but not even this thought had time to settle, for the moment occupied by the poem, which its originator read in its place of origin, was so much greater than us, it belonged to infinity, and how could we, so young and no brighter than three sparrows, receive it? We could not, and at any rate, I squirmed as he read. It was almost more than I could endure. A joke would have been apposite, at least to lend the everyday life in which we were trapped some kind of form. Oh, the beauty of it, how to deal with it? How to meet it?

Hauge raised his hand in salute as we departed, and he had already gone into the house by the time Asbjørn started the car and was on the road. I felt the way you do after a whole day in the summer sun, worn out and sluggish, despite the fact that all you have done is lie on a rock somewhere with your eyes closed. Asbjørn stopped by a café to pick up his girlfriend, Kari, who had been waiting there while we interviewed Hauge. After we had discussed what had happened for a few minutes, the car went quiet, we sat in silence peering out of the windows, at the shadows lengthening, the colors deepening, the wind coming off the fjord and tousling the hair of those outdoors, the newspaper pennants outside the kiosks flapping, children on their bicycles, those eternal village children on their bicycles. I began to write up the interview from the recording as soon as I came home because I knew from experience that the resistance to the voices and questions and all that had happened would increase quickly over time, so if I did it there and then while I was still relatively close to it, my doubts and the shame would be manageable. The problem I realized at once was that all the good exchanges had taken place beyond the range of the tape recorder. The solution was to write it as it had been, to present everything, our first impressions, the mumbling introvert he had been, the sudden change, the apple pie, the library. Espen wrote an introduction to Hauge's authorship, and several small analytical passages in between, which contrasted well with what else had gone on. From the editor of TAL, the philosophy student, disciple of Professor Georg Johannesen, and Nynorsk speaker, Hans Marius Hansteen, we heard that Hauge had enjoyed it, he had told Johannesen that it was one of the best interviews he had experienced, although it probably wasn't, we were only twenty years old, and as far as Hauge's evaluations of others were concerned, courtesy always triumphed over veracity, but what he liked, and what prompted his wife to ask us for more copies for their friends and acquaintances, was, I reflected after reading his diaries, that it may have given him a picture of himself that was not mere flattery. Of course Hauge was well aware of his hostile, old-man aspects, but people held him in such high esteem that this was always overlooked, a matter which, hidden deep behind layers of politeness and decency, and with him being the truth-loving person he was, he cannot always have appreciated.

Six months later it was Kjartan Fløgstad's turn. He had read the interview with Hauge, and would be happy to be interviewed by TAL, he said when I called him. If I had been on my own I would, out of sheer nervousness and respect, have read all his books, neatly jotted down enough questions for a conversation lasting several hours and recorded everything, for even though my questions might have been foolish his answers would not have been, and if I had them taped, his tone would carry the interview, however deficient my contribution. But, with Yngve along, I was not nervous in the same way, I leaned on him, I didn't read all the books, jotted down less carefully worded questions, I also took account of the relationship between Yngve and myself, I didn't want to be seen as a corrective presence, I didn't want him to think I could do this better than he, and when we went to Oslo to meet Fløgstad – it was a gray spring day, the end of March or beginning of April, outside a café in Bjølsen – I was less prepared than I had ever been, before or since, and on top of everything Yngve and I had decided that we wouldn't use either a Dictaphone or a tape recorder or take notes at the interview, that would make it stiff and formal, we had figured, we wanted it to be more like a conversation, impressionistic, something that developed on the spot. My memory was nothing to brag about, but Yngve was like an elephant, he never forgot a thing, and if we wrote down what had been said straight after the interview, we could fill in each other's gaps and together complete the whole picture, or so we thought. Fløgstad led us politely into the café, which was of the dark, beer-dispensing variety, we sat down at a round table, hung our jackets over the backs of the chairs, took out our question sheets, and when we said that we were going to run the interview without notes or a tape recorder, Fløgstad said that commanded respect. Once, he added, he had been interviewed by the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* by a journalist who hadn't taken any notes, and the report had been impeccable, something he found very impressive. As the interview progressed I was as focused on what Yngve said as on Fløgstad's reactions, not only how he answered, the tone of his voice and body language but also the content of the conversation. My own questions addressed what was going on around the table as much as what went on in Fløgstad's books, in the sense that they tended to complement or compensate for something in the situation. The interview took an hour, and after we had shaken hands and thanked him for his willingness to talk to us, and he had set off for what we assumed was where he lived, we were excited and happy, because it had gone well, hadn't it? We had been talking to Fløgstad! We were so excited that neither of us was in the mood to sit down and write a report about what had been said, we could do that the following day, now it was Saturday, the weekly soccer pools match would soon be on TV, we could watch it in a bar, and then go out, we weren't in Oslo that often after all . . . the train went the next day, so there wasn't any time to write anything down then, and when we arrived in Bergen we went to our own places. And if we had already waited three days, we could wait three more, couldn't we? And three more, and three more? When, at last, we did sit down to write, we could not remember much. We had the questions of course, they were a great help, and we had a vague idea of what he had answered, partly based on what we actually remembered, partly on what we thought he would have answered. It was my responsibility to write the report, I was the one who had been given the commission and did this sort of work, and after I had cooked up a few pages I realized this would not do, it was too vague, too imprecise, so I suggested to Yngve that we should phone Fløgstad and ask him whether we could ask a few supplementary questions over the phone. We sat down at a table in Yngve's flat in Blekebakken and scrawled down some new questions. My heart was thumping as I dialed Fløgstad's number, and the situation was not improved when his reserved voice answered at the other end. But I managed to explain what I wanted and he agreed to give us another half an hour, although I could detect from his voice that he was beginning to put two and two together. While I asked the questions and he answered, Yngve was sitting in the adjacent room with the headphones, like a secret agent, writing down everything that was said. With that, we had it in the bag. Between all the inaccuracies and vagueness, I inserted the new sentences, which were genuine in quite a different way and also gave a touch of authenticity to the rest. After I added a general introduction to Fløgstad's work, as well as more factual or analytical insertions, it didn't look too bad. In fact, it looked quite good. Fløgstad had asked to read the interview before it went to press, so I sent it to him with a few friendly words. I had no idea whether he insisted on reading all such reports in advance or just ours, as we had been foolhardy enough to do the interview without taking notes, but since I had managed to pull it off in the end I didn't much care. I admit, I did have a vague sense of unease about the imprecise parts, but I dismissed it, to my knowledge there was no requirement for interviews to be recorded verbatim. So when Fløgstad's letter fluttered into my mailbox some days later and I held it in my hands, I was blissfully unsuspecting, although my palms were sweaty and my heart was pounding. Spring had come, the sun warmed, I was wearing sneakers, a T-shirt, and jeans and was on my way to the music conservatory where a pal of my cousin's, Jon Olav, was going to give me drum lessons. It might have been wiser to leave the letter unopened because time was tight, but curiosity got the better of me, and, ambling toward the bus, I opened it. Held the printout of the interview. It was covered with red marks and red comments in the margin. "I never said this," I saw, "Imprecise," I saw, "No, no, no," I saw, "???," I saw. "Where did you get that from?" I saw. Almost every sentence had been commented on in this way. I stood stock-still, reading. I could feel myself falling. I plummeted into the darkness. He had attached a short note, I read it as quickly as I could, in feverish haste, as if the humiliation would be over when the last word had been read. "I think it's best this never appears in print," it concluded. "Best wishes, Kjartan Fløgstad." When I set off, dragging my feet, looking at his red marks again and again as I walked, my insides were in turmoil. Hot with shame, on the verge of tears, I stuffed the letter in my back pocket and waited by the bus which had arrived at that moment, boarded, and sat in a window seat at the rear. The shame burned through me as the bus went at a snail's pace towards Haukeland, and the same thoughts churned around my brain. I wasn't good enough, I was not a writer and never would be. What had made us happy, talking to Fløgstad, was now just laughable and painful. On arriving home I called Yngve, who to my surprise took it all quite lightly. That's a pity, he said. Are you sure you can't shuffle it around a bit and send him a new version? Once the worst despair was past, I read the comments and the accompanying note again and saw that Fløgstsad had commented on my comments, for example, the epithet "Cortazar-like." Surely he wasn't allowed to do that. To meddle with my opinions of his books? My evaulations? I wrote this in a letter to him, agreeing that the interview did have inaccuracies in a few places, as he had pointed out, but he had in fact said some of it, I knew this because I had taken notes during the telephone interview, and what was more he had raised objections to my – the journalist's – comments, and that was going beyond his remit. If he wanted, I could use his corrections and suggestions as a basis, perhaps do another interview, and then send him a revised version? A polite but firm letter came some days later, in which he conceded that some of his comments had related to my interpretations, but that did not change the main thrust, which was that the interview should not appear in print. After I had shaken off the humiliation, it took about six months, a period in which I could not see Fløgstad's face, his books or articles without feeling profound shame, I turned the episode into an anecdote for general merriment. Yngve didn't like the fact that it was at our expense, he didn't see anything comical in being humiliated, or to be more accurate, he didn't see any humiliation. Our questions had been good, the conversation with Fløgstad meaningful, that was what he wanted to take from the experience.

My life in Bergen was more or less becalmed for four years, nothing happened, I wanted to write, but couldn't, and that was about it. Yngve was collecting points from his university courses and living the life he wanted, at least that was how it looked from the outside, but at some stage that too stagnated, he was never going to finish his dissertation, he wasn't working very hard at it, perhaps because he was living off past achievements, perhaps because there was so much else going on in his life. After his dissertation, which dealt with the film star system, was finally delivered he was briefly unemployed while I was working on student radio, as alternative military service, and slowly moving into a different milieu from his, not to mention meeting Tonje with whom I got together that winter, head over heels in love. My life had taken a radical new turn, although I hardly understood it myself, I was stuck in the image I had developed during the first years in Bergen when Yngve suddenly left town, he had been offered a job as cultural consultant on Balestrand Council, that may not have been precisely what he had had in mind, but there was no one above him in the administration, so in practice he was the cultural head, and there was a jazz festival in Balestrand, which he would be in charge of and soon his friend Arvid followed him, he too was employed by the council. He met Kari Anne, whom he knew superficially from Bergen, she was working as a teacher there, they got together and had a child, Ylva, and moved to Stavanger a year later where Yngve plunged headfirst into an unfamiliar profession for him, graphic design. I was pleased he did that, but was also uneasy: a poster for the Hundvåg Days and a flyer for a local festival, was that enough?

We never touched, we didn't even shake hands when we met, and we rarely looked each other in the eye.

All of this existed inside me as we stood there on the veranda outside Grandma's house on this mild summer evening in 1998, I had my back to the garden, he was in a deckchair by the wall. It was impossible to determine from his expression whether he was thinking about what I had just said, that I would take charge of all this, also the garden, or whether he was indifferent.

I turned and stubbed out my cigarette against the underside of the wrought-iron fence. Flakes of ash and sparks showered down on the concrete.

"Are there any ashtrays out here?" I said.

"Not that I know of," he said. "Use a bottle."

I did as he said and flicked the butt down the neck of a green Heineken bottle. If I suggested that we should hold the funeral here, which I was pretty certain he would say was impossible, the difference between us, which I did not want to be visible, would become obvious. He would be the realistic, practical person; I would be the idealistic, emotion-driven one. Dad was father to both of us, but not in the same way, and my wanting to use the funeral as a kind of resurrection could, along with my tendency to cry all the time whereas Yngve had not yet shed a tear, be interpreted as evidence that my relationship was more heartfelt and, I suspected, as a covert criticism of Yngve's attitude. I did not perceive it as such, I did fear the possibility that it might be understood in that light, though. At the same time the proposal would cause a clash of wills. Over a bagatelle, it was true, but in this situation I did not want there to be *anything* between us.

A thin wisp of smoke rose from the bottle by the wall. So the cigarette could not have been completely extinguished. I looked around for something to put over the top. The plate Grandma had used to feed the seagull perhaps? There were still two scraps of rissole on it, and some thick gravy, but that would have to do, I thought, balancing it carefully.

"What *are* you doing?" Yngve said, looking at me.

"Making a little sculpture," I said. "It's called *Beer and Rissole in the Garden*. Or *Des boulettes et de la bière dans le jardin*."

I straightened up and took a step back.

"The pièce de résistance is the smoke spiraling up," I said. "In a way, this makes it environmentally interactive. It's not your everyday sculpture. And the leftovers represent decay, of course. That, too, is interactive, a process, something in flux. Or flux itself. A counterpoint to stasis. And the beer bottle is empty, it no longer has any function, for what is a container that does not contain anything? It is nothing. But nothing has a form, don't you see? The form is what I'm trying to emphasize here."

"Aha," he said.

I took another cigarette from the packet on the fence, although I didn't feel like one, and lit up.

"Yngve," I said.

"Yes?" he said.

"I've been thinking about something. Quite a lot, in fact. About whether we should hold the wake here. In this house. We can get the house into shape in a week, if we get going. I have this sense that he ruined everything here, and we're not obliged to put up with that. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Of course," Yngve said. "But do you think we can do it? I have to go back to Stavanger on Monday night. And I can't make it back before Thursday. Wednesday at a pinch, but probably Thursday."

"That's alright," I said. "Are you with me on this?"

"Yep. The question, however, is how Gunnar will take the news."

"It's none of his business. He's our father."

We finished smoking without a word. Beneath us the evening had begun to soften the landscape; its sharp edges, which also included human activity, were gradually being toned down. A few small boats were on their way into the bay, and I thought of the smells on board: plastic, salt, gasoline; they made up such an important part of my childhood. A passenger plane flew in over the town so low that I could see Braathen's SAFE logo. It vanished from sight leaving behind a low rumble. In the garden some birds were twittering under cover of the leaves of an apple tree.

Yngve drained his glass and got to his feet.

"One more shift," he said. "And we can call it a day."

He looked at me.

"Have you made any progress downstairs?"

"I've done all the laundry area, and the bathroom walls."

"Great," he said.

I followed him in. Hearing the loud but muffled sounds of the television, I remembered that Grandma was indoors. I couldn't do anything for her, no one could, but I thought that it might be a tiny relief for her to see us, and to be reminded that we were there, so I went over and stood beside her chair.

"Anything you need?" I said.

She glanced up at me.

"Ah, it's you," she said. "Where's Yngve?"

"He's in the kitchen."

"Mm," she said, returning her gaze to the television. Her vivacity had not gone, but it had changed with her scrawny figure, or was apparent in a different way, tied to her movements, not to her personality as before. Before, she had been lively, cheerful, sociable, never short of a response, often with a wink, to clarify when she was being ironical. Now there was a somberness inside her. Her soul was somber. I could see that; it struck you straightaway. But had the somberness always been there? Had she always been filled with it?

Her arms were stretched along the seat rests, with her hands gripping the ends as if she were traveling at breakneck speed.

"I'm going down to clean the bathroom," I said.

She turned her head to me.

"Ah, it's you," she said.

"Yes," I answered. "I'm going down to clean the bathroom. Is there anything you need?"

"No, thank you, Karl Ove," she said.

"Okay," I said, about to go.

"You don't happen to take a little dram in the evening, do you?" she asked. "You and Yngve?"

Did she imagine that we drank as well? It wasn't just Dad who ruined his life but also his sons?

"No. Absolutely not."

Grandma didn't appear to want to say anything else, and I went downstairs to the cellar floor, which still stank to high heaven, even though the source of the stench had been removed, rinsed the red bucket, filled it with fresh, scalding hot water and started to wash the bathroom. First the mirror, on which the yellow-brown coating was proving stubborn to shift, and only came off when I used a knife, which I ran upstairs to fetch from the kitchen, and a coarse scouring pad, next it was the sink's turn, then the bathtub, then the windowsill above, then the narrow, rectangular, frosted window, then the toilet bowl, then the door, the sill, and the frame, and finally I scrubbed the floor, poured the dark gray water down the drain and carried the bag of garbage onto the steps where I stood for a few minutes gazing into the murky summer dusk, which was not really dark, more like defective light.

The rise and fall of loud voices on the main road beyond, probably a group of people out on the town, reminded me that it was a Saturday night.

Why had she asked if we drank? Was it just Dad's fate that had prompted her, or was there something else underlying it?

I thought of my graduation celebrations, ten years ago, of how drunk I had been in the procession, my grandparents standing in the crowds along the route and shouting to me, their strained expressions when they realized the state I was in. I had started drinking seriously that Easter at the soccer training camp in Switzerland, and just continued through the spring, there was always an occasion, always a gathering, there were always others who wanted to join in, and dressed in prom gear everything was allowed and forgiven. For me this was paradise, but for Mom, with whom I lived on my own, it was different, in the end she threw me out, which did not concern me too much, finding somewhere to sleep was the easiest thing in the world, whether it was a sofa in a friend's cellar or on the prom bus or under a bush in the park. For my grandparents this partying period was the transition to academic life, as it had been for my grandfather and his sons, there was a solemnity about it which I degraded by drinking myself senseless and getting stoned, and by being the editor of the student newspaper, which had illustrated the lead story, a deportation case from Flekkerøya, with a picture of Jews being deported from the ghettos to concentration camps. There was also the matter of tradition; my father had in his turn been the editor of the student magazine in the final school year. So I dragged everything into the dirt.

I didn't give this a moment's thought, however, which the diary I was keeping at the time made absolutely clear, the only thing I attached any importance to was a feeling of happiness.

Now I had burned all the diaries and notes I'd written, there was barely a trace left of the person I was until I turned twenty-five, perhaps for the better; no good ever came of that phase.

The air had become cooler now, and being so hot from work, I was aware of it enveloping me, pressing against my skin, and wafting into my mouth. Of it enveloping the trees in front of me, the houses, the cars, the mountain sides. Of it streaming somewhere as the temperature fell, these constant avalanches in the sky which we could not see, drifting in over us like enormous breakers, always in flux, descending slowly, swirling fast, in and out of all these lungs, meeting all these walls and edges, always invisible, always present.

But Dad was no longer breathing. That was what had happened to him, the connection with the air had been broken, now it pushed against him like any other object, a log, a gasoline can, a sofa. He no longer poached air, because that is what you do when you breathe, you trespass, again and again you trespass on the world.

He was lying somewhere in town now.

I turned and went in, someone opened a window on the other side of the street, and music and loud voices poured out.

Although the second bathroom was smaller, and not quite as filthy, it took me just as long to clean it. When I had finished I took the detergents, cloths, gloves, and the bucket and went up to the second floor. Yngve and Grandma were sitting by the kitchen table. The wall clock showed half past nine.

"You must have finished washing by now!" Grandma said.

"Yes," I said. "I've finished for the evening."

I glanced at Yngve.

"Did you talk to Mom today?"

He shook his head.

"I did yesterday."

"I promised to call today. But I don't think I have the energy. Perhaps it's a bit late too."

"Do it tomorrow," Yngve said.

"I do have to talk to Tonje, though. I'll do it now."

I went into the dining room and closed the kitchen door behind me. Sat in the chair for a moment to collect myself. Then I dialed our home number. She answered at once, as though she had been sitting by the phone, waiting. I knew all the cadences of her voice, and they were what I was listening to now, not to what she was saying. First the warmth and the sympathy and the longing, then her voice seemed to contract into something small, as if it wanted to snuggle up to me. My own was filled with distance. She came closer to me, and I needed that, but I didn't go closer to her, I could not. Briefly I described what had been happening down here, without going into any detail, just said it was awful, and that I was crying all the time. Then we talked a little about what she had been doing, although at first she was reluctant, and then we discussed when she should travel down. After hanging up I went to the kitchen, which was empty, and drank a glass of water. Grandma was back in the TV chair. I went over to her:

"Do you know where Yngve is?"

"No," she said. "Isn't he in the kitchen?"

"No," I said.

The stench of urine tore at my nostrils.

I stood there not knowing what to do. The evacuation was easy to explain. He had been so drunk he had lost control of his bodily functions.

But where had she been? What had she been doing?

I felt like going over to the television and kicking in the screen.

"You and Yngve don't drink, do you?" she said out of the blue, without looking at me.

I shook my head.

"No, that is, it does happen on the odd occasion, but just a drop. Never much more."

"Not tonight then?"

"No, are you out of your mind!" I said. "No, that would be unthinkable. For Yngve as well."

"What would be unthinkable for me?" Yngve said from behind me. I turned. He walked up the two steps that separated the lower living room from the upper.

"Grandma's asking if we drink."

"I suppose, it does happen now and then," Yngve said. "But not often. I've got two small children now, you know."

"Have you got *two*?" Grandma exclaimed.

Yngve smiled. I smiled.

"Yes," he said. "Ylva and Torje. You've met Ylva, haven't you. You'll meet Torje at the funeral."

The flicker of life that had risen in Grandma's face died. I met Yngve's eyes.

"It's been a long day," I said. "Time to hit the hay?"

"I'm going outside first," he said. "Want to join me on the veranda?" I nodded. He went into the kitchen.

"Do you usually stay up late?" I asked.

"What?"

"We were thinking of going to bed soon," I said. "Are you going to stay up?"

"No. Oh no. I'll go too," Grandma said.

She looked up at me.

"Are you boys sleeping downstairs, in our old bedroom? It's free."

I shook my head and arched my eyebrows in apology.

"We were thinking of sleeping upstairs," I said. "In the loft. We've already unpacked our things there."

"Well, that's fine too," she said.

"Are you coming?" Yngve said, standing in the lower living room with a glass of beer in one hand.

When I went out to the veranda Yngve was sitting on a wooden seat by a matching table.

"Where did you find it?" I said.

"Hidden under here," he said. "I seemed to remember seeing it at some point."

I leaned against the railing. The ferry to Denmark was glittering in the distance. It was on its way across. The few small boats I could see all had lanterns lit.

"We'll have to get hold of one of those electric scythes or whatever they're called," I said. "A standard lawn mower won't be any good here."

"We'll find a rental firm in the Yellow Pages on Monday," he said. Looking at me.

"Did you talk to Tonje?"

I nodded.

"Well, there won't be many of us," Yngve said. "Us, Gunnar, Erling, Alf, and Grandma. Sixteen including the children."

"Nope, it won't exactly be a state funeral."

Yngve put his glass down and leaned back in his chair. High above the trees, a bat careered around the gray, shadowy sky.

"Have you thought any more about how we should do it?" he asked.

"The funeral?"

"Yes."

"No, not really. But I certainly don't want any damned humanist funeral."

"Agreed. Church then."

"Yes, there aren't any alternatives, are there? But he wasn't a member of the Church of Norway."

"Wasn't he?" Yngve said. "I knew he wasn't a Christian, but not that he had left the church."

"Yes, he said so once. I left the church on my sixteenth birthday and then I told him at some dinner he was giving on Elvegata. He was furious. And then Unni said *he* had left the church, so he couldn't be angry at me for doing the same."

"He wouldn't have liked it," Yngve said. "He didn't want anything to do with the church."

"But he's dead," I countered. "And, anyway, I like it. I don't want to be part of some trumped-up pseudoritual with poetry readings. I want it to be decent. Dignified."

"I agree," Yngve said.

I turned around again and surveyed the town, a constant hum in the background, sometimes drowned by the sudden revving of an engine, often from the bridge where kids amused themselves racing up and down at this time of night, also on the long stretch along Dronningens gate.

"I'm off to bed," Yngve said. He went into the living room without closing the door behind him. I stubbed out my cigarette on the ground and followed. When Grandma realized we were going to bed she struggled to her feet and wanted to find us some bed linen.

"We'll sort it out," Yngve said. "No problem. You go to bed as well!"

"Are you sure?" she asked, standing small and bowed in the doorway to the stairs.

"Of course," Yngve said. "We can manage."

"Alright then," she said. "Good night."

And slowly she made her way downstairs, without a backward glance.

I shuddered with unease.

There was no water on the top floor, so we fetched our toothbrushes from upstairs, cleaned our teeth in the kitchen sink, taking turns to lean forward to the tap and rinse, as though we were children again. On summer holidays.

I wiped the toothpaste off my lips with my hand and dried it on my thigh. It was twenty to eleven. I hadn't gone to bed so early for several years. But it had been a long day. My body was numb with exhaustion, and my head ached from all the crying. Now, however, that was a distant memory. Maybe I had become immune. Maybe I had already gotten used to this.

Once upstairs, Yngve opened the window, fastened it with the catch, and switched on the small lamp above the bedhead. I did the same on my side, and turned off the ceiling light. There was a stale smell, and it didn't come from the air but from the furniture and carpets that had been gathering dust for a couple of years, perhaps longer.

Yngve sat on his side of the double bed and undressed. I did the same on mine. Sleeping in one bed was a little too intimate, we hadn't done that since we were small boys and close, in a very different way, to each other. But at least we each had our own duvet.

"Has it struck you that Dad never had a chance to read your novel?" Yngve said, turning to me.

"No," I said. "I hadn't given it a thought."

I had sent Yngve the manuscript when it was finished, at the beginning of June. The first thing he had said after reading it was that Dad would sue me. In precisely those words. I was in a telephone booth at the airport on my way to Turkey for a holiday with Tonje, unaware of whether he would be furious or supportive, I had no idea if what I had written would have any effect on those close to me. "I haven't a clue whether it's good or bad," he had said. "But Dad's going to sue you. Of that I am sure."

"But there's a sentence in the book that comes up again and again," I said now. "*My father's dead*. Do you remember it?"

Yngve flipped the duvet to the side, swung his legs onto the bed and lay back. Sat up and straightened the pillow.

"Vaguely," he said, lying back down.

"That's when Henrik flees. He needs an excuse, and that's the only one that occurs to him. *My father's dead*."

"That's right," Yngve said.

I took off my jeans and socks, and found a comfortable position. At first on my back, with my hands folded over my stomach, until it occurred to me that I was lying like a corpse, and rolled onto my side, horrified, looking straight down at the pile of my clothes on the floor. What a damned mess, I thought, and lowering my feet to the floor, I folded my jeans and T-shirt and laid them on the nearby chair with the socks on top.

Yngve switched off the light on his side.

"Are you going to read?" he asked.

"No, no chance," I said, fumbling for a pull switch. There wasn't one as far as I could feel. Was it on the lamp then? Yes, there it was.

I pressed it, hard, because the old mechanism was stiff. The lamps must have been from the 50s. From the days when they moved into the house.

"Good night then," Yngve said.

"Good night," I said.

How glad I was that he was here. If I had been alone my head would have been filled with images of Dad as a corpse, I would have thought only of the physicality of death, his body, the fingers and legs, the unseeing eyes, the hair and nails that were still growing. The room where he was lying, perhaps inside a drawer-like thing they always had in morgues in American films . But now the sound of Yngve's breathing and his many little twitches calmed me. All I had to do was close my eyes and let sleep come.

I woke up a couple of hours later with Yngve standing in the middle of the floor. At first he peered around, irresolute, then grabbed the duvet, rolled it up and carried it through the room and out the door, turned, and came back. As he was about to do the same again I said:

"You're sleepwalking, Yngve. Lie down and go back to sleep."

He looked at me.

"I am not sleepwalking," he said. "The duvet has to cross the threshold three times."

"Okay," I said. "If you say so, fine."

He crossed the floor twice more. Then he lay down and spread the duvet over himself. Tossed his head from side to side, mumbling something or other.

This wasn't the first time he had sleepwalked. When we were boys Yngve had been notorious for it. Once Mom had found him in the bathtub, naked with the tap running; on another occasion she had just managed to grab him on the road outside the house heading for Rolf's to ask if he wanted to come and play soccer. He could suddenly throw his duvet out of the window and lie on his bed freezing for the rest of the night without knowing why. Dad also walked in his sleep. Wearing only his underpants, he had once come into my room in the middle of the night, opened a cupboard, peeped in and glanced at me without any sign of recognition in his eyes. Sometimes I had heard him banging around in the living room, moving furniture this way and that. Once he had gone to sleep under the living room table and hit his head so hard when he sat up that it bled. When he wasn't walking in his sleep, he talked or shouted, and when he wasn't doing that, he ground his teeth. Mom used to say it was like being married to a merchant seaman. As for me, I had peed in the wardrobe one night, otherwise my nocturnal activities did not amount to any more than talking in my sleep until I reached my teenage years when there was a flurry of activity at certain periods. The summer I was selling cassettes on the streets in Arendal and living in Yngve's studio, I had taken his pencil case and walked across the lawn naked, standing in front of every window and peering in, until Yngve had managed to get through to me. I denied that I had been sleepwalking, the proof was the pencil case, look here, I had said, here's my wallet, I was going shopping. How many times had I stood by the window watching the ground disappear or rise, walls fall down or water surge upward! Once I had stood holding the wall, yelling to Tonje that she should make a run for it before the house collapsed. Another time I had got it into my head that she was in the wardrobe and I had thrown out all the clothes while looking for her. If I had to spend the night with anyone else apart from her I would warn them in advance, in case anything happened, and two years before, traveling with Tore, a friend, we had rented what was called a writer's flat in a large manor house on the outskirts of Kristiansand to write a screenplay, and this precautionary measure had saved the situation: we had beds in the same room and in the middle of the night I had got up, gone over, torn the blanket off him, grabbed his ankles and, as he stared up at me in shock, told him: *You're just a doll*. But the most frequently recurring delusion was that an otter or a fox had crawled into the duvet, which I then threw onto the floor and stomped on until I was sure the creature was dead. A year could pass without anything happening, then suddenly I had phases when hardly a night went by without my sleepwalking. I woke up in the loft, in corridors, on lawns, always busy doing something or other that seemed utterly meaningful but which, upon waking, was always utterly meaningless.

The strange thing about Yngve's nocturnal life was that on occasion he could be heard speaking eastern Norwegian dialect in his sleep. He moved from Oslo when he was four and had not spoken dialect for close to thirty years. Yet it could pass his lips when he was asleep. There was something spooky about it.

I watched him. He was lying on his back with one leg outside the duvet. It had always been said that we were identical, but that must have been an overall impression, our aura, because if you took us feature by feature there was very little similarity. The only thing was possibly the eyes, which both of us inherited from Mom. Yet when I moved to Bergen and met Yngve's more peripheral acquaintances they would sometimes ask: "Are you Yngve?" That I was not Yngve was obvious from the formulation of the question, because if they had thought I was, they clearly would not have asked. They had just found the similarity striking.

He twisted his head to the side of the pillow, as if sensing he was being observed and wanting to escape. I closed my eyes. He had told me often that Dad had totally crushed his self-esteem on a number of occasions, humiliated him as only Dad could, and that had colored periods of his life when he felt he was incapable of doing anything and was worthless. Then there were other periods when everything went well, when there were no hitches, no nagging doubts. From the outside, all you saw was the latter.

Dad had also affected my self-image, of course, but perhaps in a different way, at any rate I never had periods of doubt followed by periods of self-confidence, it was all entangled for me, and the doubts that colored such a large part of my thinking never applied to the larger picture but always the smaller, the one associated with my closer surroundings, friends, acquaintances, girls, who, I was convinced, always held a low opinion of me, considered me an idiot, which burned inside me, every day it burned inside me; however, as far as the larger picture was concerned, I never had any doubt that I could attain whatever I wanted, I knew I had it in me, because my yearnings were so strong and they never found any rest. How could they? How else was I going to crush everyone?

The next time I woke, Yngve was standing in front of the mirror buttoning up his shirt.

"What time is it?" I said.

He turned.

"Half past six. Early for you?"

"Yes, you can say that again."

He had put on a pair of light khaki shorts, the type that reach down to below the knees, and a gray-striped shirt with the shirttails hanging out.

"I'm going downstairs," he said. "You coming?"

"Yep," I said.

"You're not going back to sleep?"

"No."

As his steps receded on the staircase, I swung my feet onto the floor and grabbed my clothes from the chair. Looked down with displeasure at my stomach where two rolls of fat still protruded at the sides. Pinched my back, no excess flesh there yet, fortunately. Nevertheless, I would definitely have to start running when I got back to Bergen. And do sit-ups every morning.

I held the T-shirt to my nose and sniffed.

Hm, probably wouldn't make another day.

I opened the suitcase and pulled out a Boo Radleys' T-shirt which I had bought when they played in Bergen a couple of years ago, and a pair of dark blue jeans with the legs cut off. It might not have been sunny outside, but the air was warm and close.

Downstairs, Yngve had put on coffee, set out bread and sliced meats and so on from the fridge. Grandma sat at the table in the same dress she had been wearing the previous day, smoking. I wasn't hungry and made do with a cup of coffee and a cigarette on the veranda before grabbing the bucket, the cloths and the detergents to start work on the ground floor. First, I went into the bathroom to inspect what I had done. Apart from the stained, sticky shower curtain, which for some reason I had not thrown out, it all looked pretty good. Run-down, of course, but clean.

I removed the pole that ran from wall to wall above the bath, pulled off the curtain and threw it into a garbage bag, washed the pole and the two grips, and put them back up. So the question was: what next? The laundry room and the two bathrooms were done. On this floor there was Grandma's room, the hall, the corridor, Dad's room and the big bedroom left to do. I wouldn't touch Grandma's room now, it would have felt like a transgression, because it would be obvious to her we could see the state she was in, and because she would have been deprived of her independence, the grandchild cleaning the grandmother's bedroom. I couldn't bring myself to start on Dad's room either, also because there were papers and much besides we would have to sort through first. The corridor with the wall-to-wall carpet would have to wait until we had contacted a carpet cleaner. So it would have to be the staircase.

I filled the bucket with water, took a bottle of Klorin, a bottle of green soap and a bottle of Jif scouring cream and started on the banisters, which could not have been washed for a good five years. There were all sorts of filth between the stair-rods, disintegrated leaves, pebbles, dried-up insects, old spiderwebs. The banisters themselves were dark, in some places almost completely black, here and there, sticky. I sprayed Jif, wrung the cloth and scrubbed every centimeter thoroughly. Once a section was clean and had regained something of its old, dark golden color I dunked another cloth in Klorin and kept scrubbing. The smell of Klorin and the sight of the blue bottle took me back to the 1970s, to be more precise, to the cupboard under the kitchen sink where the detergents were kept. Jif didn't exist then. Ajax washing powder did though, in a cardboard container: red, white, and blue. It was a green soap. Klorin did too; the design of the blue plastic bottle with the fluted, childproof top had not changed since then. There was also a brand called OMO. And there was a packet of washing powder with a picture of a child holding the identical packet, and on that, of course, there was a picture of the same boy holding the same packet, and so on, and so on. Was it called Blenda? Whatever it was called, I often racked my brains over mise en abyme, which in principle of course was endless and also existed elsewhere, such as in the bathroom mirror by holding a mirror behind your head so that images of the mirrors were projected to and fro while going farther and farther back and becoming smaller and smaller as far as the eye could see. But what happened behind what the eye could see? Did the images carry on getting smaller and smaller?

A whole world lay between the trademarks of then and now, and as I thought about them, their sounds and tastes and smells reappeared, utterly irresistible, as indeed everything you have lost, everything that has gone, always does. The smell of short, freshly watered grass when you are sitting on a soccer field one summer afternoon after training, the long shadows of motionless trees, the screams and laughter of children swimming in the lake on the other side of the road, the sharp yet sweet taste of the energy drink XL-1. Or the taste of salt that inevitably gets into your mouth when you dive into the sea, even if you pinch your lips as your head sinks below the surface, the chaos of currents and rushing water beneath, but also the light playing on the seaweed and the sea grass and the bare rock face, clusters of mussels and fields of barnacles that all seem to radiate a still, gentle glow, for it is a cloudless midsummer day, and the sun is burning down through the high, blue sky and sea. The water streaming off your body as you haul yourself up using hollows in the rock face, the drops left on your shoulder blades for a few seconds until the heat has burned them off, the water in your trunks still dripping long after you have wrapped a towel around yourself. The speedboat skimming over the waves, stuttering and disharmonious, the bow thrust upward, the buffeting of the waves that is heard through the roar of the engine, the unreality of it, since the surroundings are too vast and open for the boat's presence to leave an impression.

All of this still existed. The smooth, flat rocks were exactly the same, the sea pounded down on them in the same way, and also the landscape under the water, with its small valleys and bays and steep chasms and slopes, strewn with starfish and sea urchins, crabs and fish, was the same. You could still buy Slazenger tennis rackets, Tretorn balls, and Rossignol skis, Tyrolia bindings and Koflach boots. The houses where we lived were still standing, all of them. The sole difference, which is the difference between a child's reality and an adult's, was that they were no longer laden with meaning. A pair of Le Coq soccer boots was just a pair of soccer boots. If I felt anything when I held a pair in my hands now it was only a hangover from my childhood, nothing else, nothing in itself. The same with the sea, the same with the rocks, the same with the taste of salt that could fill your summer days to saturation, now it was just salt, end of story. The world was the same, yet it wasn't, for its meaning had been displaced, and was still being displaced, approaching closer and closer to meaninglessness.

I wrung out the cloth, hung it from the edge of the bucket and studied the fruits of my labors. The gleam in the varnish had come to the fore although there was still a scattering of dark dirt stains as though etched into the wood. I suppose I must have done a third of the woodwork up to the first floor. Then there were the banisters and railings to the third floor as well.

Yngve's footfalls echoed in the corridor above.

He appeared with a bucket in his hand and a roll of garbage bags under his arm.

"Have you finished downstairs?" he asked, on seeing me.

"No, I haven't. Are you out of your mind? I've done just the bathrooms and the laundry room. I was thinking of waiting to do the others."

"I'm going to start on Dad's room now," he said. "That's the biggest job, it seems."

"Is the kitchen done?"

"Yes. Pretty damn close. Have to clean out a couple of cupboards. Otherwise it looks good."

"Okay," I said. "I'm going to take a break now. A bite to eat. Is Grandma in the kitchen?"

He nodded, and went past. I rubbed my hands, which were soft and wrinkled from the water, against my shorts, cast a last glance at the railings and went up to the kitchen.

Grandma was sitting in her chair brooding. She didn't even look up as I entered. I remembered the sedatives. Had she taken one? Probably not.

I opened the cupboard and took out the packet.

"Have you taken any today?" I said, holding it up.

"What is it?" she said. "Medicine?"

"Yes, the tablets you took yesterday."

"No, I haven't."

I fetched a glass from the cupboard, filled it with water, and passed it to her with a tablet. She put it on her tongue and washed it down. She didn't seem to want to say anymore, so to avoid being forced by the silence into talking, I grabbed a couple of apples, instead of the sandwiches I had planned, plus a glass of water and a cup of coffee. The weather was mild and gray, like yesterday. A light breeze blew off the sea, gulls screamed in the air above the harbor, metallic blows sounded from close by. The constant hum of urban traffic from below. A crane, high and fragile, steepled above the rooftops a couple of blocks from the quay. It was yellow with a white cabin or whatever the thingy the crane driver sat in at the top was called. Strange I hadn't seen it before. There were few things I found more beautiful than cranes, the skeletal nature of their construction, the steel wires running along the top and bottom of the protruding arm, the enormous hook, the way heavy objects dangled when being slowly transported through the air, the sky that formed a backdrop to this mechanical provisorium.

I had just eaten one apple – seeds, stalk, and all – and was about to sink my teeth into the second when Yngve walked through the garden. He was holding a fat envelope.

"Look what I found," he said, passing me the envelope.

I undid the flap. It was full of thousand-krone notes.

"There's about two hundred thousand in there," he said.

"Wow," I exclaimed. "Where was it?"

"Under the bed. It must be the money he got for the house on Elvegata."

"Oh, shit," I said. "So this is all that's left?"

"I guess so. He didn't even put the money in the bank, just kept it under his bed. And then he drank it, no less. Thousand-note by thousand-note."

"I don't give a shit about the money," I said. "The life he had here was just so sad."

"You can say that again," Yngve said.

He sat down. I put the envelope on the table.

"What shall we do with it?" he asked.

"No idea," I said. "Share it, I suppose?"

"I was thinking more about inheritance tax and that kind of thing."

I shrugged.

"We can ask someone," I said. "Jon Olav, for example. He's an attorney."

The sound of a car engine carried from the narrow street below the house. Even though I couldn't see it, I knew it was coming here by the way it stopped, reversed, and drove forward again.

"Who could that be?" I wondered.

Yngve got up, took the envelope.

"Who's going to look after this?" he asked.

"You," I said.

"Anyway, the problems regarding funeral expenses have been solved now," he said, walking past me. I followed him in. From the downstairs hall we could hear voices. It was Gunnar and Tove. We were standing between the hall door and the kitchen door, physically ill at ease when they came up, as though we were still children. Yngve was holding the envelope in one hand.

Tove was as suntanned and as well-preserved as Gunnar.

"Hello there!" she exclaimed with a smile.

"Hello," I said. "Long time, no see."

"Yes, that's true," she said. "Shame we should have to meet under such circumstances."

"Yes," I agreed.

How old could they have been? Late forties?

Grandma came out of the kitchen.

"So it's you," she said.

"Sit down, Mother," Gunnar said. "We just thought we should give Yngve and Karl Ove a hand with all this."

He winked at us.

"You've got time for a coffee, I suppose?" Grandma inquired.

"No coffee for us," Gunnar said. "We'll be off soon. The boys are alone at the cabin."

"All right," Grandma said.

Gunnar poked his head into the kitchen.

"You've already done a lot," he said. "Impressive."

"We were thinking of having the get-together here, after the funeral," I said. He looked at me.

"You'll never make it," he said.

"We will," I said. "We've got five days. It'll be fine."

He looked away. Perhaps because of the tears in my eyes.

"Well, it's your decision," he said. "So if you two think it's fine, then that's how we'll play it. But we'll have to get a move on!"

He turned and went into the living room. I followed him.

"We'd better toss out everything that's broken. There's no point in saving anything here. The sofas, what state are they in?"

"One of them's OK," I said. "We can wash that one. The other, I think, . . ."

"Then we'll take it," he said.

He stood in front of the large, black, leather three-seater. I went to the other end, bent down, and grabbed hold.

"We can carry it through the veranda door and out that way," Gunnar said. "Can you open it for us, Tove?"

As we carried it through the living room Grandma was standing in the kitchen doorway.

"What are you doing with the sofa?" she cried.

"We're getting rid of it," Gunnar said.

"Are you crazy!" she said. "Why are you getting rid of it? You can't just get rid of my sofa."

"It's ruined," Gunnar said.

"That's none of your business!" she said. "It's my sofa!"

I stopped. Gunnar looked at me.

"We have to, can't you see that?!" he said to her. "Come on, Karl Ove, and we'll get it out."

Grandma advanced toward us.

"You can't do that!" she said. "This is my house."

"Oh, yes, we can," Gunnar countered.

We had reached the steps down to the living room. I edged sideways without giving Grandma a look. She was standing beside the piano. I could feel her iron will. Gunnar didn't notice. Or did he? Was he struggling with it too? She was his mother.

He went backward down the two steps and slowly moved through the room.

"This is not right!" Grandma shouted. Over the last few minutes she had completely changed. Her eyes were shooting sparks. Her body, which earlier had been so passive and closed in on itself, was now opening outward. She stood with her hands on her hips, snarling.

"Oohh!"

Then she turned.

"No, I don't want to see this," she said, and returned to the kitchen.

Gunnar sent me a smile. I walked down the two steps, onto the floor and stepped sideways to reach the doorway. There was a draft coming from it, I could feel the wind against the bare skin on my legs, arms, and face. The curtains were flapping.

"Are you alright?" Gunnar asked.

"I think so," I said.

On the veranda we put down the sofa and rested for a few seconds before lugging it the last stretch, down the stairs and through the garden towards the trailer outside the garage door. Once it was loaded and in position, with one end sticking out perhaps a meter, Gunnar fetched a blue rope from the trunk and started lashing it tight. I didn't know quite what to do and stood there watching, in case he needed help.

"Don't take any notice of her," he said, while tying. "She doesn't know what's good for her right now."

"Right," I answered.

"You've probably got a better overview of things here than me. What else has to be thrown out?"

"Quite a bit from his room. And hers. And the living room. But nothing big. Not like the sofa."

"Her mattress maybe?" he wondered.

"Yes," I said. "And his. But if we get rid of hers we'll have to find her a new one."

"We can take one from their old bedroom," he said.

"We can do that," I agreed.

"If she complains when you boys are alone with her, don't take any notice. Just do what you have to do. It's for her own good."

"Okay," I said.

He coiled the remaining rope and tied it firmly to the trailer.

"That should hold," he said, straightening his back. He looked at me.

"Have you checked the garage, by the way?"

"No," I replied.

"He's got all his stuff in there. A whole truckload. You'll have to take it with you. But go through it now. Probably a lot of it can be thrown away."

"Okay," I said.

"There's not much room for anything else on the trailer, but we'll take what we can and drive to the dump. So bring out some more stuff in the meantime, and we can do another trip. And then I think that's it. If there's anything else, I can come during the week maybe."

"Thanks," I said.

"It's not easy for you kids," he said. "I understand that."

When our eyes met he held mine for a few seconds before looking away. In his tanned face his eyes seemed almost as clear and blue as Dad's.

There was so much he didn't want to engage with. All the emotions I was overflowing with, for example.

He laid his hand on my shoulder.

Something snapped in me. I sobbed.

"You're good kids," he said.

I had to turn away. I bent forward and covered my face with my hands. My body shook. Then it was over, I stood up, took a deep breath.

"Do you know anywhere that rents machinery? You know, floor polishers, industrial lawn mowers, that sort of thing?"

"Are you going to polish the *floor*?"

"No, no, that was just an example. But I was thinking of tackling this grass. And you can't do that with a standard lawn mower."

"Isn't that a bit ambitious? Isn't it best to concentrate on inside the house?"

"Yes, maybe it is. But if there's any time left over."

He bowed his head and scratched his scalp with a finger.

"There's a rental firm in Grim. They should have something suitable. But look in the Yellow Pages."

The white plinth of the house beside us began to shimmer. I looked up. There was a break in the clouds and the sun was shining through. Gunnar went up the steps and into the house. I followed. On the hall floor outside Dad's room were two garbage bags, full of clothes and junk. Beside them was the soiled chair. From inside the room Yngve stood looking at us. He was wearing yellow gloves.

"Perhaps we should throw out the mattress," he said. "Is there room?"

"Not on this run," Gunnar said. "We can take it on the next."

"By the way, we found this under the bed," Yngve said, gripping the envelope he had left on the wall shelf and passing it to Gunnar.

Gunnar opened the envelope and peered inside.

"How much is it?" he asked.

"About two hundred thousand," Yngve said.

"Well, it's yours now," he said. "But don't forget your sister when you divvy it up."

"Of course not," Yngve said.

Had he thought of her?

I hadn't.

"Then you'll have to decide whether you're going to declare the money or not," Gunnar said.

Tove stayed behind to clean when Gunnar drove off a quarter of an hour later with a full trailer. All the windows and the doors in the house were open, and that, the movement of air inside plus the sunlight falling over the floors and the overpowering smell of detergent on at least the second floor, allowed the house to open up, in a sense, and become a place the world flooded through, which, deep in my emotional gloom, I noticed and liked. I continued with the staircase, Yngve with Dad's room while Tove took care of the upstairs living room, the one where he had been found. The windowsills, the panels, the doors, the shelves. After a while I went upstairs to the kitchen to change the water. Grandma looked up as I emptied the bucket, but her eyes were vacant and uninterested and soon returned to the table. The water whirled slowly around the sink as it dwindled, gray-brown and turbid, until the last white suds were gone and a layer of sand, hair, and miscellaneous particles was left, matte against the shiny metal. I turned on the tap and let the jet run down the sides of the bucket until all the dirt was gone and I could fill it up with fresh, steaming hot water. As, straight afterward, I went into the living room, Tove turned to me with a smile.

"My God, this is something!" she commented.

I stopped.

"It's progressing, anyway," I said.

She put the cloth down on the shelf and ran a hand through her hair.

"She's never been one for cleaning," she said.

"It used to look fairly decent here, didn't it?" I asked.

She chuckled and shook her head.

"Oh, no. People might have had that impression, but no . . . as long as I have known this house it's always been filthy. Well, not everywhere, but in the corners. Under the furniture. Under the carpets. You know, where it can't be seen."

"Is that right?"

"Oh, yes, she's never been much of a housewife."

"Perhaps not," I said.

"But she deserved better than this. We thought she could enjoy some good years after Grandfather died. We got her some home-help, you know, and they took care of the whole house for her."

I nodded. "I heard about that," I said.

"That was some help for us too. Before that, it was always us who helped them. With all sorts of things. They've been old for a long time, of course. And with your father being the way he was, and Erling in Trondheim, everything fell on us."

"I know," I said, raising my hands and eyebrows in a gesture that was supposed to show that I sympathized with her, but could not have done anything myself.

"Now, though, she'll have to go into a home and be taken care of. It's terrible to see her like this."

"Yes," I said.

She smiled again.

"How's Sissel?"

"Fine," I said. "She lives in Jølster, she seems to love it there. And she's working at the nursing college in Førde."

"Give her my love when you see her," Tove said.

"Will do," I said and smiled back. Tove picked up the cloth again, and I went down to where I had reached on the stairs, about halfway, put down the bucket, wrung the cloth and squirted a line of Jif over the banister.

"Karl Ove?" Yngve called.

"Yes?" I answered.

"Come down here a minute."

He was standing in front of the hall mirror. A huge stack of papers on the oil-fired heater beside him. His eyes were shiny.

"Look at this," he said, passing me an envelope. It was addressed to Ylva Knausgaard, Stavanger. Inside was a piece of paper on which *Dear Ylva* was written but otherwise it was blank.

"Did he write to her? From here?" I asked.

"Seems like it," Yngve said. "It must have been her birthday or something. And then he gave up. Look, he didn't have our address."

"I didn't think he'd registered that she existed," I said.

"But he had," Yngve said. "He must have thought about her as well."

"She *is* his first grandchild," I said.

"True," Yngve said. "But this is Dad we're talking about. It doesn't have to mean a thing."

"Shit," I said. "It's all so sad."

"I found something else," Yngve said. "Look at this."

This time he passed me a typed, official-looking letter. It was from the State Educational Loan Fund. It was a statement to say his study loan had been repaid in full.

"Look at the date," Yngve said.

It was June 29.

"Two weeks before he died," I said, and met Yngve's eyes. We started laughing.

He laughed.

And I laughed. "So much for freedom."

We laughed again.

When Gunnar and Tove left an hour later, the atmosphere in the house changed again. With only us and Grandma at home, the rooms seemed to close around what had happened, as though we were too weak to open them. Or perhaps we were too close to what had happened and were a greater part of it than Gunnar and Tove. At any rate, the flow of life and movement abated, and every object inside, whether the television, the chairs, the sofa, the sliding door between the living rooms, the black piano, or the two baroque paintings hanging on the wall above it, appeared for what it was, heavy, immovable, laden with the past. Outside, it had clouded over again. The grayish-white sky muted all the colors of the landscape. Yngve sifted through papers, I washed the staircase, Grandma sat in the kitchen, immersed in her own gloom. At around four o'clock Yngve took the car and went to buy some lunch, and, conscious of the whole house around me, I fervently hoped that Grandma would not set out on one of her rare peregrinations and join me, for it felt as if my soul, or whatever it is other people, with such ease, leave their impressions on, was so fragile and sensitive that I would not be able to bear the strain that her grief and gloom-stricken presence would impose. But this hope was in vain, for after a while I heard the scrape of table legs upstairs, and soon afterward her footsteps, first into the living room, then on the staircase.

She held the rail tight, as though on the brink of a precipice.

"Is that you?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "But I'll soon have finished."

"Where's Ynge then?"

"He's gone shopping," I said.

"Yes, that's right, yes," she said. She stood watching my hand, which, with the cloth held between my fingers, was moving up and down the banister. Then she looked at my face. I met her gaze, and a chill ran down my spine. She looked as though she hated me.

She sighed and flicked the lock of hair that kept falling over one eye to the side.

"You're working hard," she said. "You're working very hard."

"Ye-es," I said. "But now that we've started it's great to make some progress, isn't it?"

There was the sound of a car engine outside.

"There he is," I said.

"Who?" she asked. "Gunnar?"

"Yngve," I said.

"But isn't he here?"

I didn't answer.

"Oh, that's right," she said. "I'm beginning to unravel too!"

I smiled, dropped the cloth in the turbid water, and grabbed the handle of the bucket.

"We'd better make something to eat," I said.

In the kitchen, I poured out the water, wrung the cloth dry, and hung it over the rim of the bucket while Grandma sat in her place. As I removed the ashtray from the table she moved the lowest part of the curtain aside and peered out. I emptied the ashtray, walked back, took the cups, put them in the sink, wet the kitchen rag, sprayed the table with a detergent and was washing it when Yngve came in with a grocery bag in each hand. He set them down and began to unpack. First, what we would have for lunch, which he laid out on the counter, four vacuum-packed salmon steaks, a bag of potatoes stained dark with soil, a head of cauliflower, and a packet of frozen beans, then all the other goods, some of which he stowed in the fridge, some in the cupboard next to it. A 1.5 liter bottle of Sprite, a 1.5 liter bottle of CB beer, a bag of oranges, a carton of milk, a carton of orange juice, a loaf. I switched on the stove, took a frying pan from the cupboard under the counter and some margarine from the fridge, cut off a slice and scraped it in the pan, filled a large saucepan with water and placed it on the rear burner, opened the bag of potatoes, spilled them into the sink, turned on the tap, and started washing them, as the dollop of margarine slowly slid across the black frying pan. Again it struck me how clean and, for that reason, heartening the presence of these purchases was, their bright colors, the green and white of the frozen beans bag, its red writing and red logo, or the white paper around most of the loaf, though not all, the dark, rounded, crusty end peeped out like a snail from its shell, or, so it appeared to me, like a monk from his cowl. The orange tint of the fruit bulging through the plastic bag. Together, one globular shape hidden behind the other, they almost resembled a textbook model of a molecule. The scent they spread through the room as soon as they were peeled or cut open always reminded me of my father. That was how the rooms he had been in smelled: of cigarette smoke and oranges. Entering my own office and smelling the air there, I was always filled with good feelings.

But why? What was it that constituted the "good?"

Yngve folded up the two grocery bags and put them in the bottom drawer. The margarine was sizzling in the pan. The jet from the tap was broken by the potatoes I was holding beneath it, and the water that ran down the sides of the sink was not powerful enough to remove all the soil from the tubers and so formed a layer of mud around the plughole until the potatoes were clean and I removed them from the jet, which then swept everything with it in a second, to reveal once again the spotless, gleaming metal base.

"Hmm," Grandma said from the table.

Her deep eye sockets, the darkness in her otherwise bright eyes, her bones visible all over her body.

Yngve was drinking a glass of Coke in the center of the floor.

"Anything I can do to help?" he asked.

He set the glass down on the counter and belched quietly.

"No, I'm fine," I said.

"I'll go for a walk then," he said.

"You should," I said.

I placed the potatoes in the water, which was already coming to a boil; small bubbles were rising. Found the salt, it was on the hood of the stove, in a small silver Viking ship with spoons as oars, sprinkled a little into the water, cut up the cauliflower, filled another pan with water and put it on, then sliced open a packet of salmon with a knife and took out the four filets which I drizzled with salt and laid on a plate.

"It's fish tonight," I said. "Salmon."

"Oh, yes," Grandma said. "I'm sure it'll be good."

Her hair needed washing, and she needed a bath. And a fresh change of clothes. I was almost dying for it to happen. But who would take charge of that? It didn't look as if she would do anything on her own initiative. We couldn't tell her. That was out of the question. And what if she didn't want to? We couldn't force her either.

We would have to ask Tove. At least it wouldn't be quite so humiliating for her if it came from someone of the same sex. And who was a generation closer.

I placed the filets in the pan and switched on the fan. In seconds the undersides lightened, going from a deep, reddish pink to pale pink and I watched the new color slowly permeate the flesh. Turned down the potatoes, which were boiling over.

"Ohh," said Grandma.

I looked at her. She was sitting exactly as before and was probably not aware that a groan had escaped her lips.

He had been her firstborn.

Children were not supposed to pre-decease their parents, they weren't supposed to. That was not the idea.

And to me, what had Dad been to me?

Someone I wished dead.

So why all these tears?

I snipped open the bag of green beans. They were covered with a thin layer of downy frost and had a grayish appearance. Now the cauliflower was boiling as well. I turned down the burner and glanced at the wall clock. Eighteen minutes to five. Four more minutes and the cauliflower would be ready. Or six. Maybe another fifteen for the potatoes. I should have cut them in half. After all, this was no banquet we were having.

Grandma looked at me.

"Do you boys ever drink beer with your meals?" she said. I saw that Yngve had bought a bottle.

Had she seen it?

I shook my head.

"It has happened," I said. "But it's rare. Very rare, in fact."

I turned the filets. There were a few brownish-black patches here and there on the light flesh. But they weren't burned.

I emptied some beans into the pan, added salt, and poured out the excess water. Grandma leaned forward and looked out of the window. I took the frying pan off the heat, turned down the temperature, and joined Yngve on the veranda. He was sitting in a chair and gazing out.

"Food'll soon be ready," I said. "Five minutes."

"Good," he said.

"The beer you bought. Was that for the meal?" I asked.

He nodded and glanced over at me.

"Why?"

"It's Grandma," I said. "She asked if we ever had beer with meals. I was thinking that perhaps we don't have to drink when she's there. There's been so much boozing here. She doesn't need to see anymore. Even if it's only a glass with food. Do you see what I mean?"

"Of course. But you're going too far."

"Possibly I am. But this is not exactly a huge sacrifice."

"No," Yngve said.

"Are we agreed then?"

"Okay!" he said.

The irritation in his voice was unmistakable. I didn't want to leave with that hanging in the air. At the same time I couldn't think of a way to smooth things over. So after a few seconds of indecision, with my arms hanging limply down by my sides and tears in my throat I went back to the kitchen, set the table, emptied the water from the saucepan of potatoes and let them steam themselves dry, lifted the salmon filets onto a dish with the spatula, sliced the cauliflower and put it and the beans on the same dish, then found a bowl to put the potatoes in, and set everything on the table. Pink, light-green, white, dark-green, golden-brown. I filled a jug of water and was putting it on the table with three glasses just as Yngve came in from the veranda.

"That looks really good," he said and sat down. "But a knife and fork might come in handy."

I grabbed some cutlery from the drawer, passed it to them, sat down, and started to peel a potato. The hot skin burned my fingers.

"Are you peeling them?" Yngve said. "But these are new potatoes."

"You're right," I said. Impaled another potato with my fork and transported it to my plate. It crumbled as I pressed my knife in. Yngve raised a sliver of salmon to his mouth. Grandma sat dividing it up into small chunks. I got up for some margarine from the fridge, put a blob on the potato. From force of habit I breathed through my mouth as I chewed the first mouthful. Yngve appeared to have a more normal, adult relationship with fish. He even ate lutefisk now, which at one time had been the worst of the worst. In my head I could hear him saying *In fact it's really nice with bacon and all the trimmings*, while he sat beside me eating in silence. Lutefisk lunches with friends, well, that wasn't a world I inhabited. Not because I couldn't force down lutefisk but because I wasn't invited to that kind of gathering. Why not, I had no idea. I didn't care anymore anyway. But there had been days when I had cared, days when I had been on the outside and had suffered. Now I was only on the outside.

"Gunnar said there was a tool rental in Grim," I said. "Shall we go there tomorrow after seeing the undertaker? It would be good to get this done before you go. While we have a car, I mean."

"Fine," Yngve said.

Also Grandma was eating now. A pointed, rodent-like expression came over her face. Every time she moved I caught a whiff of pee. Oh, we were going to have to get her into the bathtub. Get her into clean clothes. Get some food into her. Porridge, milk, butter.

I raised the glass to my lips and drank. The water, so cool in my mouth, had a faint metallic taste. Yngve's cutlery clattered against the plate. A wasp or a bee buzzed around the dining room, behind the half-open door. Grandma sighed. And she twisted sideways in her chair as though the thought that had occurred to her had passed not only through her consciousness but also her body.

In this house they had even eaten fish on Christmas Eve. When I was small it seemed outrageous. Fish on Christmas Eve! But Kristiansand was a coastal town, the tradition well-established and the cod on sale in the fish hall during the Christmas run-up carefully selected. I had been there once with Grandma, I remembered the atmosphere that met us in the hall, the darkness after the blinding sunshine outside in the snow, the large cod swimming calmly around in their tanks, their brown skin, which was yellowish in places, greenish in others, their mouths opening and closing so slowly, the beard beneath the soft, white chin, the rigid yellow eyes. The men working there wore white aprons and rubber boots. One of them cut off the head of a cod with a large, almost square knife. The next moment, after moving the heavy head to the side, he sliced open the stomach. The intestines oozed out between his fingers. They were pale and wet, and thrown into a large waste drum beside him. Why were they so pale? Another man had just wrapped a fish in paper and was stabbing a till with one finger. I noticed that he treated the keys quite differently from the way they were treated in other shops, as though two distinct worlds, one tidy and the other rough, one indoors and the other outdoors, were brought together here in the fish vendor's brusque yet unpracticed fingers. The hall smelled of salt. Fish and shrimp were bedded in ice on the counters. Grandma, who was wearing a fur hat and a dark, floor-length cloak queued in front of one of the counters while I wandered over to a wooden crate full of live crabs. From the top they were dark-brown like rotten leaves, underneath yellowish-white bones. Their black, pinlike eyes, antennae, claws that made clicking sounds when the crabs crawled up on one another. They were like a kind of container, I thought, containers of meat. It was a marvelous adventure that they came from the deep, and had been hauled up here, as all live fish had. A man was hosing down the concrete floor; the water flowed towards the grille. Grandma leaned forward and pointed to a completely flat fish, greenish with rust-red spots, and the assistant lifted it from the ice-bed and put it on some scales, then onto paper, and wrapped it up. He put the packet into a bag, handed the bag to Grandma who, in turn, passed him a banknote from her little purse. But the sense of adventure that surrounded the fish here was gone as soon as they were on my plate, white, quivering, salty and full of bones, the same as with the fish that Dad and I caught in the sea off Tormøya, or in the sound by the mainland, with a jig, trolling line, or pole, that sense left them as soon as they had been prepared for the table and lay on one of our brown lunch plates at home in Tybakken in the seventies.

When had I accompanied Grandma to the fish hall?

I hadn't stayed with my grandparents on many weekdays when I was growing up. So it must have been the winter holiday that Yngve and I had spent there. When we caught the bus on our own to Kristiansand. That meant Yngve must have been with us on that day as well. But in my memory he wasn't. And the crabs could not have been there; the winter holiday was usually in February when you couldn't buy live crabs. If it had been February they wouldn't have been in a wooden crate. So where did this image, so distinct and detailed, actually come from?

Could have been anywhere. If my childhood was full of anything, it was fish and crabs, shrimp and lobsters. Many was the time I had seen Dad fetch cold leftovers of fish from the fridge, which he ate standing in the kitchen at night, or on weekend mornings. He liked crab best, though; when late summer came and they began to fill out he used to go to the fish wharf in Arendal after school and buy some, if for once he didn't catch them himself, in the evening or at night, on one of the islets in the skerries, or by the rocks on the far edge of the island. Sometimes we joined him, and there is one special occasion that sticks in my memory, one night by Torungen lighthouse under the bluish-black August sky, when the gulls launched themselves at us as we were leaving the boat to make our way across the islet, and afterward, with two buckets full of crabs, we lit a fire in a hollow. The flames licked at the sky. The sea around us was immense. Dad's face shone.

I set down the glass, cut off a piece of fish, and stuck my fork into it. The dark gray, oily meat separated by the three prongs was so tender that I could break it up with my tongue against my palate.

After eating we resumed the cleanup. The stairs were finished, so I took over where Tove had left off while Yngve began in the dining room. Outside, it was raining. A fine layer of drizzle fell against the windows, the veranda wall was slightly darker, and at sea, where presumably it would have fallen with greater force, the clouds on the horizon were striped with rain. I wiped the dust off all the small ornaments, the lamps, the pictures and the souvenirs that littered the shelves, and put them on the floor piece by piece in order to clean the shelves themselves. An oil lamp that looked like something from *One Thousand and One Nights*, both cheap and precious, with ornate, gilt decorations, a Venetian gondola that gleamed like a lamp, a photograph of my grandparents in front of an Egyptian pyramid. As I examined it I heard Grandma get up in the kitchen. I wiped the glass and frame and put it down, reached for the little stand holding old-fashioned 45 rpm records. Grandma stood with her hands behind her back, watching me.

"No, you really don't need to do *that*," she said. "You don't need to be *so* thorough."

"It won't take a second," I said. "Might as well while I'm at it."

"Fair enough," she said. "It's looking nice."

After wiping the stand down I put it on the floor, piled the records beside it, opened the cupboard and removed the old stereo player.

"You don't take a little drop in the evening, do you?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Not during the week anyway."

"I guessed as much," she said.

In the town on the other side of the river the lights had started to shine more brightly. What could the time be? Half past five? Six?

I cleaned the shelves and replaced the stereo. Grandma, who must have gathered that there was nothing more to be gained here, turned with a sigh and went down to the second living room. Immediately afterward I heard her voice, and then Yngve's. On entering the kitchen to get some newspaper and a window spray I noticed through the open door that she had taken a seat at the table to chat with Yngve while he was working.

Drink really had gotten a hold on her, I was thinking, as I took the spray from the cupboard, tore a few pages from the newspaper on the chair under the wall clock, and returned to the living room. Not exactly a surprise. He had been systemically drinking himself to death, no other way of explaining it, and she had been here to witness it. Every morning, every afternoon, every evening, every night. For how long? Two years? Three years? Just the two of them. Mother and son.

I sprayed the glass door of the bookcase, crumpled up the newspaper, and rubbed it over the runny liquid a few times until the glass was dry and shiny. Looked around for more to do while I had the spray in my hand, but saw nothing apart from the windows, which I had determined to save till later. Instead, I went on with the bookcase, cleaned up everything, starting with its contents.

In the meantime the air in the harbor basin was streaked with rain. The next moment it beat against the window in front of me. Large, heavy drops that ran down and formed tremulous patterns across the whole pane. Grandma walked past behind me. I didn't turn, but her movements were still engaging my mind as she stopped, picked up the TV remote control, pressed it, and sat in the chair. I put the duster on the shelf and went to see Yngve.

"They're full of bottles as well," he said, nodding toward the line of cupboards along one entire wall. "But the dishes are fine."

"Has she asked you if we usually take a drink?" I said. "She must have asked me ten times since we arrived. At least."

"Yes, she certainly has," he said. "The question is whether she should have a little drink. She doesn't need our permission, but that's what she's asking for. So . . . what do you think?"

"What?"

"Didn't you understand?" he asked, looking up again. With a tiny mirthless smile on his lips.

"Understand what?" I replied.

"She wants a drink. She's desperate."

"Grandma?"

"Yes. What do you think? Is it okay for her to have one?"

"Are you sure that's what it is? I was thinking the opposite."

"That was my first thought too. But it's obvious when you think about it. He lived here for a long time. How else could she have stood it?"

"Is she an *alcoholic*?"

Yngve shrugged.

"Thing is she wants a drink now. And she needs our permission."

"Shit," I said. "What a mess this is."

"It's fine, but surely it wouldn't hurt to have a little drink now, would it? She is in shock, kind of."

"So what do we do?" I said.

"Well, we can ask her if she wants a drink? Then we can have one with her."

"Okay, but not right now, surely?"

"Let's finish up for the evening. And then ask her. As though it were nothing out of the ordinary."

Half an hour later I had finished the bookcase and went onto the terrace, where it had stopped raining and the air was full of fresh fragrances from the garden. The table lay under a film of water; the seat covers were dark with moisture. Plastic bottles lying on their sides on the brick floor were dotted with raindrops. The bottlenecks reminded me of muzzles, as if they were small cannons with their barrels pointing in all directions. Raindrops hung in clusters along the underside of the wrought-iron fence. Now and then one let go and fell onto the wall beneath with an almost imperceptible plop.

That Dad had been here only three days ago was hard to believe. That he had seen the same view three days ago, walked around the same house, seen Grandma as we saw her and thought his thoughts only three days ago was hard to grasp. That is, I could grasp that he had been here recently. But not that he couldn't see this now. The veranda, the plastic bottles, the light in the neighbor's windows. The flakes of yellow paint that had peeled off and now lay on the red terrace by the rusting table leg. The gutter and the rainwater still running down it into the grass. I could not grasp that he wouldn't see any more of this, however hard I tried. I did grasp that he wouldn't see Yngve or me again, that had something to do with our emotions, in which death was interwoven in a completely different way from the objective, concrete reality that surrounded me.

Nothing, just nothing. Not even darkness.

I lit a cigarette, ran my hand over the wet chair seat a couple of times and sat down. I only had two left. So I would have to go to the newsstand before it closed.

A cat slunk along the fence at the end of the lawn. Its coat was a grizzled gray and it looked old. It stopped with one paw raised, staring into the grass for a while, then went on. I thought about our cat, Nansen, on which Tonje lavished her affections. It was no more than a few months old and slept under her duvet with its head just peeping out.

I hadn't given Tonje a single thought during the day. Not one. What did that mean? I didn't want to call her because I had nothing to say, but I would have to for her sake. If I hadn't thought about her, she would have thought about me, I knew that.

In the air high above the harbor a seagull was flying toward us. It was heading for the veranda, and I felt myself smile, it was Grandma's seagull on its way for supper. But with me sitting there it didn't dare approach and landed on the roof instead, where it leaned back and squawked its seagull squawk.

Bit of salmon wouldn't go amiss, would it?

I stubbed the cigarette out on the veranda, put it in a bottle, stood up, and went to Grandma, who was watching TV.

"Your gull's here again," I said. "Shall I give it some salmon?"

"What?" she said, turning toward me.

"The gull's here," I said. "Shall I give it some salmon?"

"Oh," she said. "I can do that."

She got to her feet and walked with her head hunched into the kitchen. I grabbed the TV remote control and lowered the volume. Then I went into the dining room, which was empty, and sat by the telephone. I dialed home.

"Hello, Tonje here."

"Hi. Karl Ove here."

"Oh *hi* . . ."

"Hi."

"How's it going?"

"Not wonderfully," I said. "It's hard going here. I'm in tears almost all the time. But I don't really know what I'm crying about. Dad being dead, of course, but it's not just that . . ."

"I should have gone with you," she said. "I miss you so much."

"It's a house of death," I said. "We're wading through his death. He died in the chair in the room next door, it's still there. And then there's everything that happened here, I mean, a long time ago, when I was growing up, all that's here too, and it's surfacing. Do you understand? I'm somehow very close to everything. To the person I was when I was younger. To the person Dad was. All the feelings from that time are resurfacing."

"Poor Karl Ove," she said.

Grandma came through the door in front of me, carrying a dish of cut-up salmon. She didn't see me. I waited until she was in the other room.

"No, don't feel sorry for me," I said. "It's him we should feel sorry for. His life was so awful at the end you wouldn't believe it."

"How's your grandmother taking it?"

"I don't quite know. She's in shock, she seems senile. And she's so damn thin. They just sat here drinking. Her and him."

"Her as well. Your grandmother?"

"Absolutely. You wouldn't believe it. But we've decided to clean everything up and have a wake here after the funeral."

Through the glass door to the veranda I could see Grandma putting down the dish. She stepped back and peered around.

"That sounds like a good idea," Tonje said.

"I don't know," I said. "But that's what we're going to do now. Clean the whole damn house and then fix it up. Buy tablecloths and flowers and . . ."

Yngve stuck his head through the door. When he saw I was on the phone he raised his eyebrows and withdrew, just as Grandma came in from the veranda. She stood in front of the window and looked out.

"I was thinking of coming down a day before," Tonje said. "Then I can give you a hand."

"The funeral's on Friday," I said. "Can you get a day off work?"

"Yes. So, I'll come in the morning. I miss you so much."

"What have you been doing today?"

"Mm, nothing special. Had lunch with Mom and Hans. Love from them, they were thinking about you."

"Mm, that was nice of them," I said. "What did you have to eat?"

Tonje's mother was a fantastic cook; meals in her house were an experience, if you were the foodie type. I wasn't, I didn't give a rat's ass about food, I was just as happy to eat fish fingers as baked halibut, sausages as fillet of Beef Wellington, but Tonje was, her eyes lit up when she started talking about food, and she was a talented cook, she enjoyed working in the kitchen; even if it was only pizza she was making, she put her heart and soul into it. She was the most sensuous person I had ever met. And she had moved in with someone who regarded meals, home comforts, and closeness as necessary evils.

"Flounder. So it's just as well you weren't there."

I could hear her grinning.

"But, oh, it was fantastic."

"That I don't doubt," I said. "Were Kjetil and Karin there too?"

"Yes. And Atle."

A lot had happened in her family, as in all families, but this was not something they talked about, so if it was manifest anywhere, it was in each of them, and the atmospheres they created collectively. One of the things Tonje liked best about me, I suspected, was that I was so fascinated by precisely that, by all the contexts and potential of various relationships, she wasn't used to that, she never speculated along those lines, so when I opened her eyes to what I saw she was always interested. I had this from my mother, right from the time I went to school I used to carry on long conversations with her about people we had met or known, what they had said, why they might have said it, where they came from, who their parents were, what kind of house they lived in, all woven into questions to do with politics, ethics, morality, psychology, and philosophy, and this conversation, which continued to this day, had given my gaze a direction, I always saw what happened between people and tried to explain it, and for a long time I also believed I was good at reading others, but I was not, wherever I turned I only saw myself, but perhaps that was not what our conversations were about primarily, there was something else, they were about Mom and me, that was how we became close to each other, in language and reflection, that was where we were connected, and that was also where I sought a connection with Tonje. And it was good because she needed it in the same way that I needed her robust sensuousness.

"I miss you," I said. "But I'm glad you aren't here."

"You must promise you won't exclude me from what's happening to you now," she said.

"I won't," I said.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you too," I said.

As always when I said this, I wondered if it was actually true. Then the feeling passed. Of course I did, of course I loved her.

"Will you call me tomorrow?"

"Of course. Bye now."

"Bye. And give my love to Yngve."

I hung up and went into the kitchen where Yngve was standing over the counter.

"That was Tonje," I said. "She sends you her love."

"Thanks," he said. "Same to her."

I sat down on the edge of the chair.

"Shall we call it a day?"

"Yes. I couldn't do much more, anyway."

"I've just got to run down to the newsstand. So we can . . . well, you know. Is there anything you need?"

"Could you get me a pouch of tobacco? And maybe some chips or something?"

I nodded and got up, went downstairs, put on my coat, which was hanging in the wardrobe, checked that my bank card was in the inside pocket, glanced at myself in the mirror, and left. I looked exhausted. And even though it was quite a few hours since I had been crying you could see it in my eyes. They weren't red; it was more that they were swollen and watery.

I stopped for a moment on the steps. It struck me that there were a lot of things to ask Grandma. We had been too circumspect so far. When, for example, had the ambulance come? How quickly? Had there still been a life to save when they arrived? Had it been an emergency call?

Up the drive it must have come, lights flashing, siren blaring. The driver and doctor jumped out and dashed up the steps with the equipment to the door, which must have been locked. This door was always locked. Had she had the presence of mind to come down and unlock it before they arrived? Or did they stand here ringing the bell? What did she say to them when they came in? *He's over there?* And did she lead them to the living room? Was he sitting in the chair? Was he lying on the floor? Did they try to revive him? Heart massage, oxygen, mouth-to-mouth? Or did they immediately confirm that he was dead, beyond help, and lay him on the stretcher and take him away, after exchanging a few words with her? How much had she understood? What did she say? And when did this happen: in the morning, in the middle of the day, or in the evening?

Surely we couldn't leave Kristiansand without knowing the circumstances of his death, could we?

I set off with a sigh. Above me the entire sky had opened. What a few hours earlier had been plain, dense cloud cover now took on landscapelike formations, a chasm with long flat stretches, steep walls, and sudden pinnacles, in some places white and substantial like snow, in others gray and as hard as rock, while the huge surfaces illuminated by the sunset did not shine or gleam or have a reddish glow, as they could, rather they seemed as if they had been dipped in some liquid. They hung over the town, muted red, dark-pink, surrounded by every conceivable nuance of gray. The setting was wild and beautiful. Actually everyone should be in the streets, I thought, cars should be stopping, doors should be opened and drivers and passengers emerging with heads raised and eyes sparkling with curiosity and a craving for beauty, for what was it that was going on above our heads?

However, a few glances at most were cast upward, perhaps followed by isolated comments about how beautiful the evening was, for sights like this were not exceptional, on the contrary, hardly a day passed without the sky being filled with fantastic cloud formations, each and every one illuminated in unique, never-to-be-repeated ways, and since what you see every day is what you never see, we lived our lives under the constantly changing sky without sparing it a glance or a thought. And why should we? If the various formations had had some *meaning*, if, for example, there had been concealed signs and messages for us which it was important we decode correctly, unceasing attention to what was happening would have been inescapable and understandable. But this was not the case of course, the various cloud shapes and hues meant *nothing*, what they looked like at any given juncture was based on chance, so if there was anything the clouds suggested it was meaninglessness in its purest form.

I entered the main road, which was deserted of people and traffic, and followed it to the intersection, where the Sunday atmosphere also prevailed. An elderly couple was walking on the opposite sidewalk, a few cars passed slowly on their way to the bridge, the traffic lights didn't change to red for anyone. A black Golf was parked by the bus stop beside the newsstand, and the driver, a young man in shorts, clambered out, wallet in hand and darted into the shop, leaving the car idling. I met him in the doorway as he was coming out, this time holding an ice cream. Wasn't that a bit infantile? Leaving the car running to buy an *ice cream*?

The sportily dressed shop assistant from the previous day had been replaced by a girl in her early twenties. She was plump with black hair, and from her facial features, about which there was something Persian, I guessed she came from Iran or Iraq. Despite the round cheeks and full figure, she was attractive. She didn't so much as give me a glance. Her attention was held by a magazine on the counter in front of her. I slid open the fridge door and took out three half-liter bottles of Sprite, scanned the shelves for chips, found them, grabbed two bags and put them on the counter.

"And a pouch of Tiedemanns Gul with papers," I said.

She turned and reached down for the tobacco from the shelf behind her.

"Rizla?" she inquired, still without meeting my eyes.

"Yes, please," I answered.

She put the orange cigarette papers under the fold of the yellow tobacco pouch and put it on the counter while entering the prices on the till with her other hand.

"One hundred and fifty-seven kroner fifty," she said in broad Kristiansand dialect.

I passed her two hundred-notes. She entered the amount and selected the change from the drawer that slid out. Even though I had my hand outstretched she placed it on the counter.

Why? Was there something about me, something she had noticed and didn't like? Or was she just slow on the uptake? It is quite usual for shop assistants to register eye contact at some point during a transaction, isn't it? And if you have your hand outstretched, surely it is bordering on an insult to put the money anywhere else? At least demonstratively.

I looked at her.

"Could I have a bag as well?"

"Of course," she said, crouching down and pulling a white plastic bag from under the counter.

"Here you are."

"Thank you," I said, gathering the items and leaving. The desire to sleep with her, which manifested itself more as a kind of physical openness and gentleness than lust's more usual form, which of course is rougher, more acute, a kind of contraction of the senses, lasted all the way back to the house, but it was not in complete control because grief lay all around it, with its hazy, gray sky, which I suspected could overwhelm me again at any moment.

They were sitting in the living room watching TV. Yngve was in Dad's chair. He turned his head when I came in and got up.

"We thought we would have a little drink," he said to Grandma. "Since we've been slogging away all day. Would you like one as well?"

"That would be nice," said Grandma.

"I'll mix you one," Yngve said. "Then perhaps we can sit in the kitchen?"

"Fine," Grandma said.

Did she walk a touch faster across the floor than she had before? Had a little light lit her otherwise dark eyes?

Yes, indeed.

I put one bag of chips on the counter, emptied the contents of the second into a bowl, which I placed on the table while Yngve took a bottle of Absolut Blue from the cupboard – it had been among the food items when we were pouring all the alcohol we could find down the sink and we missed it – three glasses from the shelves above the counter, a carton of juice from the fridge and started mixing drinks. Grandma sat in her place watching him.

"So you like a bit of a stiffener in the evenings as well," she said.

"Yes," Yngve said. "We've been at it all day. It's good to relax a bit too!"

He smiled and gave her a glass. So, there we were, sitting around the table, all three of us, drinking. Outside, it had begun to get dark. There was no doubt that the alcohol was doing Grandma some good. Her eyes soon had their previous glint back, some color came into her wan, pale cheeks, her movements were gentler, and after she had finished the first drink and Yngve had given her a second it was as though she was able to unburden herself, for soon she was chatting away and laughing like in the old days. During the first half-hour I sat as if paralyzed, rigid with unease, because she was like a vampire that had finally gotten a taste of blood, I saw, that was how it was: life was returning to her, filling her limb by limb. It was terrible, terrible.

But then I felt the effect of the alcohol, my thoughts mellowed, my mind opened, and her sitting here, drinking and laughing, after having found her son dead in the living room no longer seemed creepy, there was no problem, she clearly needed it; after spending the whole day sitting motionless on the kitchen chair, interrupted only by her wanderings through the house, restless and confused, ever silent, she livened up, and it was good to see. And, as for us, we really needed it too. So there we sat, with Grandma telling stories, us laughing, Yngve adding his bit, and us laughing some more. They had always found a wavelength with their sense for wordplay but seldom better than on this evening. Every so often Grandma wiped tears of laughter from her eyes, every so often I met Yngve's gaze, and the pleasure I saw there, which at first contained an element of apology, was soon back to its initial state. This was a magic potion we were drinking. The shiny liquid that tasted so strong, even diluted with orange juice, changed the conditions of our presence there, by shutting out our awareness of recent events and thus opening the way for the people we normally were, what we normally thought, as if illuminated from below, for what we were and thought suddenly shone through with a luster and warmth and no longer stood in our way. Grandma still smelled of pee, her dress was still covered with grease and food stains, she was still frighteningly thin, she had still lived the last few months in a rat's nest with her son, our father, who had still died here of alcohol abuse and was still barely cold. But her eyes, they were gleaming. Her mouth, smiling. And her hands, which so far had remained motionless in her lap, unless they had been busy with her perpetual smoking, were beginning to gesticulate now. She was transforming before our very eyes into the person she had been, easy, razor-sharp, never far from a smile and laughter. We had heard the stories she told, but that was the point of them, at least for me, because hearing them took me back to the grandmother she had been, to the life that had been lived here. None of these stories was amusing in itself; it was the way Grandma told them that elevated the anecdotes to stories, and the fact that she found them amusing. She always had an eye for the drollness of everyday life and laughed just as much every time. Her sons were part of it, inasmuch as they kept telling her snippets from their lives, she laughed and, if they were to her taste, assimilated them and included them in her repertoire. Her sons, especially Erling and Gunnar, were also partial to wordplay. Wasn't it Gunnar they had sent to the shop to buy elbow grease? And an overhead cable? Wasn't it Yngve they had tricked into thinking that "exhaust pipe" and "carburettor" were the filthiest words in existence, and had made him promise he would never use them? Dad would also participate in these shenanigans, but I never associated it with him; when he did I generally reacted with surprise. The very idea that he would indulge in storytelling and laugh the way Grandma did was inconceivable.

Even though she had told the stories hundreds of times before, her telling of them was so vivid that it seemed to be the first. So the ensuing laughter was therefore utterly liberating: there wasn't a scrap of artificiality about it. And after we had drunk a bit, and the alcohol had brightened all the darkness that may have been in us, in addition to eradicating the observing eye, we had no compunction about joining in the party. One chorus of laughter led to another. Grandma drew from her profusion of anecdotes, collected over the eighty years of her life, but she did not stop there, for as her inebriation grew her defenses weakened, and she extended the familiar stories, told us more about what had happened in such a way that the point of them changed. For example, in the early 1930s she had worked as a chauffeur, we knew that already, it was part of the family mythology, there weren't many women with a driver's license at that time or, for that matter, who worked as chauffeurs. She had answered an advertisement, she said, she read the *Aftenposten* at home in Åsgårdstand and had spotted the position vacant, written a letter, accepted the job, and moved to Oslo. She worked for an elderly, eccentric, and wealthy woman. Grandma, who was in her early twenties then, had a room in her mansion and drove her wherever she wanted to go. She had a dog that used to hang its head out of the window and bark at passersby, and Grandma laughed when she described to us how embarrassed she had been. But there was another incident she used to mention to exemplify how eccentric and presumably senile the elderly lady had been. She kept her money all over the house. There were wads of banknotes in kitchen cupboards, in saucepans and teapots, under rugs, under pillows. Grandma used to laugh and shake her head as she was speaking, we were reminded that she had just left home, that she came from a small town, and this was her first experience of not only the world outside but of the finer world outside. This time, sitting around the lit kitchen table, with the shadows of our faces on the darkening windows, and a bottle of Absolut vodka between us, she suddenly asked, rhetorically: "So what was I to do? She was stinking rich, you know, boys. And she had her money lying around everywhere. She wouldn't notice if some disappeared. Surely it wouldn't make any difference if I took a bit?"

"You took her money?" I probed.

"Yes, of course I did. It wasn't much, it meant nothing to her. And if she didn't notice, what was the problem? And she was a cheapskate. Yes, she was, the wages I got were a pittance. Because I did more than drive for her, I was responsible for everything else too, so it was only right that I should be better paid!"

She banged the table with her fist. Then she laughed.

"But that dog of hers! What a sight we were, driving through Oslo. There weren't many cars at that time, as you know. So we were noticed. We certainly were."

She chuckled. Then she sighed.

"Oh well," she said. "Life's a pitch, as the old woman said. She couldn't pronounce her *b*'s. Ha ha ha."

She raised her glass to her lips and drank. I did the same. Then grabbed the bottle and refilled my empty glass, glancing at Yngve, who nodded, and I poured.

"Would you like some more?" I said, looking at Grandma.

"Please," she said. "Just a finger."

After I had attended to her glass, Yngve poured in some juice, but it ran out before the glass was half-full, and he shook the carton a few times.

"It's empty," he said, looking at me. "Didn't you buy some Sprite in the shop?"

"I did," I said. "I'll get it."

I went to the fridge. As well as the three half-liters I had bought there was a 1.5 liter bottle Yngve had picked up earlier in the day.

"Had you forgotten this one?" I said, holding it up.

"Oh yeah," Yngve said.

I put it on the table and left the room to go downstairs to the toilet. The darkened rooms lay around me, large and empty. But with the flame of alcohol burning in my brain I took no notice of the atmosphere that otherwise would have affected me, for although I wasn't outright happy, I was elated, exhilarated, motivated by the desire to continue this, which not even a direct reminder of Dad's death could shake, it was just a pale shadow, present but of no consequence, because life had taken its place, all the images, voices and actions that drinking alcohol conjured up at the drop of a hat and gave me the illusion that I was somewhere surrounded by a lot of people and merriment. I knew it wasn't true, but that was how it felt, and it was feeling that was leading me, also when I stepped on the stained wall-to-wall carpeting on the ground floor, illuminated by the dim light seeping in through the front door pane, and entered the bathroom that hissed and whistled as it had done for at least thirty years. On my way out I heard their voices above and hurried upstairs. In the living room, I took a few steps inside to see the place where he had died while I was in a different, a more carefree frame of mind. I was given a sudden sensation of who he had been. I didn't see him, it wasn't like that, but I could sense *him*, the whole of his being, the way he had been during his final days in these rooms. It was uncanny. But I didn't want to linger, nor could I perhaps, for the sensation lasted only a few moments, then my brain sank its claws into it and I went back to the kitchen where everything was as I had left it, except for the color of the drinks, which were shiny and full of small, grayish bubbles now.

Grandma was talking more about the years she had lived in Oslo. This story too was part of the family mythology, and this too she gave an unexpected, and for us new, twist at the end. I already knew that Grandma had been in a relationship with Alf, our grandfather's elder brother. At first they had been a couple. Both the brothers had been studying in Oslo, Alf natural science, while Grandad studied economics. When the relationship with Alf finished Grandma married Grandad and moved to Kristiansand, as did Alf, but with Sølvi as his wife. She had had TB in her youth, one lung was punctured and she was sickly all her life, she couldn't have children, so at a relatively late age they had adopted an Asian girl. When I was growing up most of our get-togethers were with Alf plus family, and Grandma and Grandad plus family, they were the ones who visited us, and the fact that Alf and Grandma had once been a couple was often mentioned, it was no secret, and when Grandad and Sølvi were dead, Grandma and Alf met once a week, she visited him every Saturday morning, at the house in Grim, no one considered this strange, but there were a few kindly smiles, for was this not how it should have been?

Grandma told us about the first time she had met the two brothers. Alf had been the extrovert, Grandad the more introverted one, but both apparently showed an interest in the girl from Åsgårdstrand, for when Grandad saw which way the wind was blowing with his brother, who was charming her with his good humor and wit, he whispered to her: *He's got the ring in his pocket!*

Grandma was laughing as she spoke.

"What was that?" I asked, despite having heard what he said. *He's got the ring in his pocket!* he repeated. *What kind of ring?* I asked. *An engagement ring!* he answered, boys. He thought I hadn't understood!"

"Was Alf already engaged to Sølvi at that time?" Yngve asked.

"Indeed he was. She lived in Arendal and was sickly, you know. He didn't expect it to last. But they made it in the end!"

She took another sip from the glass and licked her lips afterward. There was a silence, and she withdrew into herself as she had done so many times in the last two days. Sat with her arms crossed, staring into the distance. I drained my drink and poured myself a fresh one, took out a Rizla, laid a line of tobacco, spread it evenly to get the best possible draw, rolled the paper a few times, pressed down the end and closed it, licked the glue, removed any shreds of tobacco, dropped them in the pouch, put the somewhat deformed roll-up in my mouth and lit it with Yngve's green, semitransparent lighter.

"We were going to travel south to the sun the winter Grandad died," Grandma said. "We had bought the tickets and everything."

I looked at her as I blew out the smoke.

"The night he collapsed in the bathroom, you know . . . I just heard a crash inside and I got up, and there he was on the floor, telling me to call for an ambulance. When I'd done that I sat holding his hand as we waited for it to come. Then he said, *We'll still go south*. And I was thinking, *It's a different south you're heading for*."

She laughed, but with downcast eyes.

"It's a different south *you're* heading for!" she repeated.

There was a long silence.

"Ohh," she said then. "Life's a pitch, as the old woman said. She couldn't pronounce her *b*'s."

We smiled. Yngve shifted his glass, looked down at the table. I didn't want her thinking about either Grandad's or Dad's death, and I tried to change the subject by returning to her previous subject.

"But did you come here when you moved to Kristiansand?" I asked.

"Oh, no," she replied. "We were farther down Kuholmsveien. We bought this house after the war. It was a wonderful location, one of the best in Lund because we had a view of course. Of the sea and the town. And so high up that no one can look in. But when we bought the plot there was another house here. Although to call it a house is a bit of an exaggeration. Ha ha ha. It was a real hovel. The people who lived here, two men as far as I remember, yes, it was . . . you see, they drank. And the first time we came to see the house, I remember it well, there were bottles everywhere. In the hall where we entered, on the stairs, in the living room, in the kitchen. Everywhere! In some places it was so thick with bottles you couldn't set a foot inside. So we got it quite cheap. We demolished the house and then we built this. There hadn't been a garden, either, just rock, a hovel on rock, that was what we bought."

"Did you put a lot of work into the garden?" I asked.

"Oh yes, you can imagine. Oh yes, yes, I did. The plum trees down there, you know, I took them from my parents' house in Åsgårdstrand. They're very old. They're not that common anymore."

"I remember we used to take bags of the plums home," Yngve said.

"Yes," I said.

"Do they still bear fruit?" Yngve asked.

"Yes, I think so," Grandma said. "Perhaps not as much as before, but . . ."

I reached for the bottle, which was nearly half-empty now, and poured myself another glass. Not so strange perhaps that it had not struck my grandmother that the wheel had come full circle with what had gone on here, I mused. Wiped a drop from the bottleneck with my thumb and licked it off while Grandma, on the other side of the table, opened the tobacco pouch and placed a fingerful in the roller machine. However extreme life had been for her over recent years, it barely constituted a tiny part of all the things she had been through. When she had looked at Dad she had seen the baby, the child, the adolescent, the young man; the whole of his character and all of his qualities were contained in that one look, and if he was in such a drunken state that he shat his pants while lying on her sofa, the moment was so brief and she so old that it would not, compared with all the immense span of time together that she had stored, have had enough weight to become the image that counted. The same was true of the house, I assumed. The first house with the bottles became "the house of the bottles" whereas this house was her home, the place where she had spent the last forty years and the fact that it was full of bottles now could never be what the house meant to her.

Or was it just that she was so drunk she couldn't think straight any longer? In which case she hid it well, for apart from her obvious blossoming there were few signs of drunkenness in her behavior. On the other hand, I was not the right person to judge anyone. Spurred on by the alcohol's ever brighter light, which was corroding more and more of my thoughts, I had begun to knock back the drinks almost like juice. And the pit was bottomless.

After pouring Sprite into my glass I took the Absolut bottle, which was obscuring my view of Grandma, and stood it on the windowsill.

"What are you doing?!" Yngve asked.

"You've put the bottle in the window!" Grandma cried.

Flushed and confused, I snatched the bottle and returned it to the table.

Grandma began to laugh.

"He put the bottle of booze in the window!"

Yngve laughed too.

"Of course. The neighbors have to see us sitting here and drinking," he said.

"Okay, okay," I said. "I wasn't thinking."

"No, you weren't. You can say that again!" Grandma said, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes.

In this house where we had always been so careful to prevent others from prying, where we had always been so careful to be beyond reproach in everything that could be seen, from clothes to garden, from house front to car to children's behavior, the closest you could come to the absolutely unthinkable was to exhibit a bottle of booze in a brightly lit window. That was why they, and eventually I too, laughed as we did.

The light in the sky above the hill over the road, which could just be glimpsed through the reflection in the kitchen window, with us three resembling underwater figures, was a grayish-blue. This was as dark as the night sky ever got. Yngve had started to slur. To someone who didn't know him this would have been impossible to detect. But I noticed because he always slipped the same way when he drank, at first a touch unclear, then he slurred more and more, until toward the end, the moment before he passed out, he was almost incomprehensible. In my case the lack of clarity that went hand in hand with drinking was primarily an inner phenomenon, it was only there that it was manifest, and this was a problem because if it was not visible from the outside how utterly plastered I was, since I walked and talked almost as normal, there was no excuse for all the standards that at a later point I might let slip, either in language or behavior. Furthermore, my wild state always became worse for that reason, as my drunkenness was not brought to a halt by sleep or problems of coordination, but simply continued into the beyond, the primitive, and the void. I loved it, I loved the feeling, it was my favorite feeling, but it never led to anything good, and the day after, or the days after, it was as closely associated with boundless excess as with stupidity, which I hated with a passion. But when I was in that state, the future did not exist, nor the past, only the moment and that was why I wanted to be in it so much, for my world, in all its unbearable banality, was radiant.

I turned to look at the wall clock. It was twenty-five to twelve. Then I glanced at Yngve. He looked tired. His eyes were slits and slightly red at the margins. His glass was empty. I hoped he wasn't thinking of going to bed. I didn't want to sit there alone with Grandma.

"Do you want some more?" I asked, nodding to the bottle on the table.

"Well, maybe just a drop more," he said. "But it'll have to be the last. We need to get up early tomorrow."

"Oh?" I said. "Why's that?"

"We have an appointment at nine, don't you remember?"

I smacked my forehead. I doubted if I had performed this gesture since I left school.

"It'll be fine," I said. "All we have to do is turn up."

Grandma looked at us.

Please don't let her ask where we're going! I thought. The words "funeral director" would certainly break the spell. And then we would be sitting here again like a mother who has lost her son and two children who have lost their father.

However, I didn't dare ask her if she wanted anymore. There was a limit, it had something to do with decency, and it had been crossed ages ago. I reached for the bottle and poured a drop into Yngve's glass, then my own. But after I had done that, her eyes met mine.

"One more?" I heard myself ask.

"A little one perhaps," she replied. "It's late."

"Yes, it's late on earth," I said.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"He said it was late on earth," Yngve explained. "It's a quote from a famous Swedish poem."

Why did he say that? Did he want to put me in my place? Oh, what the hell, I suppose it was a stupid thing to say. "Late on earth" . . .

"Karl Ove's going to have a book published soon," Yngve said.

"Are you?" Grandma asked.

I nodded.

"Yes, now that you mention it, someone must have told me. Was it Gunnar, I wonder? Goodness. A book."

She raised the glass to her mouth and drank. I did the same. Was it my imagination, or had her eyes darkened again?

"So you didn't live here during the war then?" I said, before taking another sip.

"No, after the war, it was a few years after when we moved here. During the war we lived over there," she said, pointing behind her.

"What was it like actually?" I asked. "During the war, I mean?"

"Well, it was almost the same as before, you know. A bit harder to get hold of food, but otherwise there wasn't such an enormous difference. The Germans were normal people, like us. We got to know a few of them, you see. We went down to visit them after the war as well."

"In Germany?"

"Yes. And when they were leaving, in May 1945, they gave us a call and said we could go and help ourselves to some things they had left behind, if we wanted. They gave us the finest drinks. And a radio. And a lot of other things."

I hadn't heard that they had been given presents by the Germans before they capitulated. But then the Germans had been to their homes.

"Things they'd left behind?" I echoed. "Where?"

"By some cliff," Grandma said. "They called to tell us exactly where we could find them. So we went out that evening, and there they were, precisely as they had said. They were kind, no doubt about that."

Had Grandma and Grandad clambered around a cliff one May evening in 1945 hunting for the bottles left by the Germans?

The light from a pair of car headlights flitted across the garden and shone on the wall under the window for a few seconds, then the car was around the bend and slowly glided past along the alley below. Grandma leaned toward the window.

"Who could that be at this time of night?" she wondered.

She sighed and sat back down, with her hands in her lap. Looked at us.

"It's good you're here, boys," she said.

There was a silence. Grandma took another sip.

"Do you remember when you lived here?" she said suddenly, looking at Yngve with warmth in her eyes. "Your father came to pick you up and he had a beard. And you ran upstairs shouting 'He's not my dad!' Ha ha ha! 'He's not my dad!' We had so much fun with you, my goodness."

"I remember that very well," Yngve said.

"And then there was the time we were listening to the radio, and they were talking to the owner of Norway's oldest horse. Do you remember that? 'Dad, you're the same age as Norway's oldest horse!' you said."

She leaned forward as she laughed and rubbed her eyes with the knuckles of her index fingers.

"And you," she said, focusing on me. "Can you remember the time you came with us to the cabin on your own?"

I nodded.

"One morning we found you sitting on the steps crying, and when we asked why you were crying you said 'I'm so lonely.' You were eight years old."

It had been the summer Mom and Dad had gone on vacation to Germany. Yngve had been in Sørbøvåg with Mom's parents, and I had been here, in Kristiansand. What did I remember of that? That the distance between me and Grandma and Grandad had been too great. Suddenly I was just one part of their everyday lives. They were strangers to me more than ever, as there was no one or nothing to bridge the gap between us. One morning there had been a bug in the milk, I didn't want to drink it, and Grandma told me not to be so fussy, I just had to take it out, that's how it was in nature. Her voice had been sharp. And I drank the milk, queasy with disgust. Why had that memory of all memories stuck? And no others? There must have been others. Yes: Mom and Dad sent me a postcard with a picture of the Bayern Munich soccer team. How I had longed for that, and how happy I had been when it finally arrived! And the presents when they finally came home: a red-and-yellow soccer ball for Yngve, a red-and-green one for me. The colors . . . oh, the feeling of happiness they brought . . .

"Another time you were standing on the stairs here shouting for me," Grandma said, looking at Yngve. "*Grandma, are you upstairs or downstairs?* I answered *downstairs* and you shouted *Why aren't you upstairs?*"

She laughed.

"Yes, we had lots of fun . . . When you moved to Tybakken you just knocked on the neighbors' doors and asked if there were any children living there. *Are there any children living here?* you asked them." She broke into laughter again.

After the laughter had died down, she sat chuckling while forming another cigarette in the roller machine. The tip of the roll-up was empty and flared up when she lit it with the lighter. A tiny fragment of ash floated down to the floor. Then the flame reached the tobacco and shrank to a glow, which shone brighter every time she puffed on the filter.

"But now you've grown up," she said. "And that's so strange. It seems like only yesterday you were boys here . . ."

Half an hour later we went to bed. Yngve and I cleared the table, tucked the vodka bottle away in the cupboard under the sink, emptied the ashtray, and put the glasses in the dishwasher while Grandma watched. When we had finished she got up too. Some pee was dripping from the seat of the chair, but she paid it no attention. She leaned against the door frame on her way out, first in the kitchen, then on the landing.

"Good night!" I said.

"Good night, boys." She smiled. I watched her and saw the smile fade the moment she turned her head and began to go downstairs.

"Oh well," I said when, a minute later, we were upstairs. "That was that."

"Yup," Yngve said. He pulled off his sweater, laid it across the back of the chair, and took off his pants. Warmed by the alcohol, I felt like saying something kind to him. All the differences of opinion had been straightened out, there were no problems and everything was simple.

"What a day," he said.

"Mm, you can say that again."

He lay back in bed and pulled up the duvet.

"Good night," he said, closing his eyes.

"Good night," I said. "Sleep tight."

I went to the door and turned off the main light. Sat down on the bed. Didn't feel like sleeping. For one insane second it occurred to me that I could go out. There were still a couple of hours before the bars closed. And it was summer, the town was full of people, some of whom I probably knew.

But then the tiredness hit me. Suddenly all I wanted to do was sleep. Suddenly I could barely lift my arms. The thought of having to undress was unbearable, so I lay back in bed with all my clothes on and descended into the soft, inner light. Every tiny movement I made, even the stirring of my little finger, tickled my stomach, and when I fell asleep the very next second it was with a smile on my face.

Even in deepest sleep, I knew something terrible awaited me beyond. As I approached a quasiconscious state, I tried to go back and would certainly have succeeded, had it not been for Yngve's insistent voice and the knowledge that we had an important meeting that morning.

I opened my eyes.

"What time is it?" I asked.

Yngve was standing in the doorway, fully dressed. Black trousers, white shirt, black jacket. His face seemed puffy, his eyes were narrow and his hair tangled.

"Twenty to ten," he said. "Get up."

"Shit," I said.

I struggled into a sitting position and could feel the alcohol still in my body.

"I'll be downstairs," he said. "Hurry."

Still wearing the clothes from yesterday made me feel very uneasy, a feeling that grew as the memory struck me of what we had actually done. I pulled them off. There was a heaviness about all the movements I made, even getting up and standing on two feet took energy, not to mention what raising my arm and reaching for the shirt on the clothes hanger over the wardrobe door did to me. But there was no option, it had to be done. Right arm through, left arm through, do up the buttons on the sleeves first, then at the front. Why the hell had we done it? How could we have been so stupid? It wasn't what I had wanted, in fact it was the very last thing I had wanted, to sit drinking with her, here of all places. Yet that was *precisely* what I had done. How was that possible? How the hell had that been possible?

It was shameful.

I knelt in front of the suitcase and unpeeled layers of clothes before finding the black trousers, which I put on while sitting on the bed. And how good it was to sit! But I had to get to my feet again, to hoist my trousers, to find the jacket and put it on, to go down to the kitchen.

After pouring myself a glass of water and drinking it, my forehead was damp with sweat. I leaned forward and sprinkled water over my head from the running tap. It cooled me down and made my hair, which was short but untidy, look better.

With water dripping from my chin and my body as heavy as a sack, I lurched down to the hall and onto the steps where Yngve was waiting for me with Grandma. He was rattling the car keys in one hand.

"Got any chewing gum or something?" I said. "I didn't have time to clean my teeth."

"You can't skip cleaning your teeth today of all days," Yngve said. "You'll be fine if you hurry."

He was right. I probably smelled of alcohol, and that was not how you should smell at the undertaker's. But hurrying was beyond me. I had to pause on the second-floor landing and hang over the banister; my will seemed to be drained. After getting my toothbrush and toothpaste from the bedside table I cleaned my teeth as fast as I could over the kitchen sink. I should have left the toothbrush and tube there and dashed down, but something in me said that was not right, they didn't belong in the kitchen, they had to be taken back to the bedroom, and so two further minutes were lost. It was four minutes to ten by the time I was standing on the front steps again.

"We're off," Yngve said, turning to Grandma. "It won't take long. Back soon."

"That's fine," she answered.

I got into the car, strapped myself in. Yngve plumped down in the seat beside me, inserted the key in the ignition, twisted it, craned his head and began to reverse down the little slope. Grandma was standing on the top step. I waved to her, she waved back. As we reversed into the alley and could no longer see her I wondered if she was still waiting, as she had always done, because when we moved forward again we could see each other for a last time and wave a final goodbye, then she would turn to go in and we would enter the road.

She was still there. I waved, she waved, and then she went in.

"Did she want to come along today as well?" I asked.

Yngve nodded.

"We'll have to do what we said. Be quick. Although I wouldn't mind sitting in a café for a while. Or visiting some record shops."

He touched the indicator with his left index finger as he down-shifted and looked to the right. Nothing coming.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Absolutely fine," Yngve said. "And you?"

"I can still feel it," I said. "Think I'm still a bit drunk in fact."

He glanced at me as he set off.

"Oh dear," he said.

"Wasn't such a great idea," I said.

He smiled thinly, changed down again, came to a halt behind the white line. A white-haired, elderly man, stick-thin with a large nose, crossed in front of us. The corners of his mouth drawn down. His lips dark red. He first looked up at the hills to my right, then to the row of shops across the road before lowering his gaze to the ground, presumably to be sure where the coming curb was. All of this he did as though completely alone. As though he never took any account of other eyes. This was how Giotto painted people. They never seemed to be aware that they were being watched. Giotto was the only painter to depict the aura of vulnerability this gave them. It was probably something to do with the era because succeeding generations of Italian painters, the great generations, had always interwoven an awareness of watching eyes in their pictures. It made them less naïve, but they also revealed less.

On the other side of the street, a young, redhaired woman with a stroller bustled up. The pelican crossing lights changed from green at that moment, but she was watching the traffic lights, which were still on red, and she ventured across, dashing past us the very next second. Her child, about a year old, with chubby cheeks and a small mouth, sat upright in the stroller, looking around, slightly disorientated, as they rushed past.

Yngve released the clutch and carefully accelerated into the intersection.

"It's two minutes past," I said.

"I know," he said. "If we can find a place to park quickly, that's not too bad."

As we came to the bridge, I looked up at the sky above the sea. It was overcast, so light in some places that the white had taken on a touch of blue, as though a semitransparent membrane had been stretched over it, in other places it was heavier and darker, gray patches, their outer edges drifting across the whiteness like smoke. Wherever the sun was, the cloud cover had a yellowish tinge, though not so strong that the light beneath was anything but muted and seemed to come from all directions. It was one of those days when nothing casts a shadow, when everything holds on tight.

"It's tonight you're going, isn't it?" I said.

Yngve nodded.

"Ah, there's one!" he said.

The very next moment he pulled up to the curb, switched off the engine, and yanked the hand brake. The undertaker's was on the other side of the street. I would have preferred a slower transition, one in which I could have prepared myself for what was awaiting us, but there was nothing to be done, we just had to throw ourselves into it.

I got out, closed the door, and followed Yngve across the street. In the waiting room the woman behind the counter sent us a smile and said we could go straight in.

The door was open. The stout funeral director got up from behind his desk when he saw us, came over, and shook hands with a courteous but, in the circumstances, less than cordial a smile on his lips.

"So, here we are again," he said, motioning to the two chairs with his hand. "Please take a seat."

"Thank you," I said.

"I'm sure you've given the funeral some thought over the weekend," he said, sitting down, reaching for a thin sheaf of papers on the desk in front of him and flicking through them.

"We have, yes," Yngve said. "We've decided on a church burial."

"I see," said the funeral director. "Then I can give you the phone number of the priest's office. We'll deal with the practical side, but it would be good if you could have a word with him yourselves. As you know, he has to make a little speech about your father and it would be helpful if you could pass on some information."

He looked up at us. The folds of skin around his neck hung, lizardlike, over his shirt collar. We nodded.

"There are many ways to do this," he continued. "I have a list here of the various options. Such things as whether you would like music, for example, and if so in what form. Some people like to have live music, others prefer recorded music. But we do have a church singer whom we use a great deal and he can also play several instruments . . . Live music, of course, has a special atmosphere, a solemnity or dignity . . . I don't know, have you considered what you would like?"

My eyes met Yngve's.

"That might be good?" I offered.

"Yes," Yngve replied.

"Shall we go for it then?"

"I think so."

"So we're agreed then?" probed the funeral director.

We nodded.

He stretched across the desk to hand Yngve a sheet of paper.

"Here are a few options regarding the choice of music. But if you have any particular wishes not on the list it's not a problem, so long as we know a few days in advance."

I leaned over and Yngve moved the sheet to allow me to see.

"Bach might be good," Yngve suggested.

"Yes, he was very fond of Bach, wasn't he," I said.

For the first time in close to twenty-four hours I started to cry again.

Damned if I'm going to use one of his Kleenex tissues, I thought, wiping my eyes on the crook of my arm, took a deep breath, and slowly released it. I noticed Yngve sending me a quick glance.

Was he embarrassed by my tears?

No, he couldn't be.

No.

"I'm fine," I said. "Where were we?"

"Bach would be good," Yngve said, looking at the funeral director. "The cello sonata, for example . . ."

He faced me.

"Do you agree?"

I nodded.

"So that's agreed then," the funeral director said. "There are usually three musical items. And one or two hymns that everyone sings."

"*Deilig er jorden*," I said. "Can we have that one?"

"Naturally," he said.

Ohhh. Ohhh. Ohhh.

"Are you alright, Karl Ove?" Yngve asked.

I nodded.

We chose two songs that the church singer would perform, as well as a hymn everyone would sing, plus the cello piece and *Deilig er jorden*. We also agreed that no one would give a speech by the coffin, and with that the funeral was planned, for the other elements were part of the liturgy and fixed.

"Would you like flowers? Apart from the wreaths and so on? Many people think it lends atmosphere. I have a small selection here if you would like to see . . ."

He passed Yngve another sheet of paper. Yngve pointed to one option, glanced at me and I nodded.

"That's that then," the funeral director said. "That leaves the coffin . . . We have a variety of pictures here . . ."

Another piece of paper crossed the desk.

"White," I said. "Is that okay with you? That one."

"Fine by me," Yngve said.

The funeral director retrieved the sheet and made a note. Then he peered up at us.

"You requested a viewing today, didn't you?"

"Yes," Yngve said. "Preferably this afternoon, if that's possible."

"That's fine, of course. But . . . erm, you are aware of the circumstances he died in, aren't you? That his death was . . . alcohol-related?"

We nodded.

"Good," he said. "Sometimes it's just as well to be prepared for what might await one in such situations."

He shuffled his papers and tapped them on the table.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to receive you myself this afternoon, but my colleague will be there. At the chapel by Oddernes Church. Do you know where it is?"

"I think so," I said.

"Four o'clock. Is that convenient?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"So let's say that then. Four o'clock at the chapel by Oddernes Church.

And if there's anything else that occurs to you, or if you wish to change anything, just ring me. You have my number, don't you?"

"Yes, we do," Yngve said.

"Fine. Oh, there is one more matter. Would you like a funeral announcement in the newspaper?"

"I suppose we would, wouldn't we?" I said, looking at Yngve.

"Yes," he said. "We've got to do that."

"But it might be best to spend a bit of time on it," I said. "To decide what we should say and what names we should mention and all that . . ."

"No problem," said the funeral director. "You can just drop by or give a call when you've given it some thought. But don't leave it too late. The newspaper usually needs a couple of days' notice."

"I can call you tomorrow," I said. "Is that alright?"

"Excellent," he said, standing up with another sheet of paper in his hand. "Here's our telephone number and the priest's address. Which of you would like to hold on to it?"

"I will," I said.

Standing outside on the pavement, Yngve produced a packet of cigarettes and offered me one. I nodded and took it. Actually the thought of smoking was repugnant, as it always was the day after drinking because the smoke, not so much the taste or smell as what it stood for, created a connection between the present day and the previous one, a kind of sensory bridge across which all kinds of things streamed so that everything around me, the grayish-black tarmac, the light gray curbstones, the gray sky, the birds flying beneath it, the black windows in the rows of houses, the red car we were standing beside, Yngve's distracted figure, were permeated by terrifying internal images; at the same time there was something in the sense of destruction and desolation that the smoke in my lungs gave me that I needed, or wanted.

"That went well," I said.

"There are a few things we still have to sort out," he said. "Or rather you will have to sort out. Like the funeral announcement, for example. But you can just call me while I'm heading back."

"Mm," I said.

"Did you notice the word he used, by the way?" Yngve commented. "Viewing?"

I smiled.

"Yes, but then there is something estate agent–like about this industry. Their job is to make things look as good as possible and pocket as much as they can. Did you see how much the coffins cost?"

Yngve nodded.

"Hm, and you can't exactly be a tightwad when you're sitting there," he said.

"It's a bit like buying wine in a restaurant," I said. "If you're not a connoisseur, I mean. If you've got a lot of money you take the second-most expensive. If you haven't, you take the second-cheapest. Never the most expensive, nor the cheapest. That's probably the way it is with coffins as well."

"By the way, you expressed a very firm opinion there," Yngve said. "The coffin having to be white, I mean."

I shrugged and threw the glowing cigarette onto the road.

"Purity," I said. "I suppose that was what I must have been thinking."

Yngve dropped his cigarette on the ground, stepped on it, opened the car door, and got in. I followed.

"I'm dreading seeing him," Yngve said. He buckled the seat belt with one hand while putting the key in the ignition and twisting with the other. "Are you?"

"Yes. But I have to do it. Unless I do I will never comprehend that he's really dead."

"Same here," Yngve said, checking the mirror. Then he signaled and drove off.

"Shall we go home now?" he asked.

"The machines," I said. "The carpet cleaner and the lawn mower. Would be great if we could get them before you leave."

"Do you know where the shop is?"

"No, that's just it," I said. "Gunnar said there was a place to rent them in Grim, but I don't know the precise address."

"Okay," Yngve said. "We'll have to find a telephone directory. Do you know if there's a phone booth nearby?"

I shook my head.

"But there's a gas station at the end of Elvegata, we can try there."

"That's a good idea," Yngve said. "I have to fill up before I go tonight anyway."

A minute later we pulled up under the roof of a gas station. Yngve parked beside the pump and while he filled I went into the shop. There was a payphone on the wall and below it three boxed directories. After finding the address of the rental firm and memorizing it I went to the till to buy some tobacco. The man ahead of me in the queue turned around as I went up.

"Karl *Ove*?" he said. "Is it you?"

I recognized him. We had been at gymnas together. But I couldn't remember his name.

"Hello, it's been a long time," I said. "How's it going?"

"Great!" he said. "How are you?"

I was surprised by the genuine tone. During the prom period I had had a party at home and he had come, turned nasty, and kicked a hole in our bathroom door. Afterward he had refused to pay and there had been nothing I could do. Another time he had been driving a prom bus, with Bjørn I think it must have been and me sitting on the roof, we were going to the recreation center, and all of a sudden, on the hill after the Timenes intersection, he stamped on the accelerator and we had to spreadeagle and hold on tight to the bars, he was doing at least seventy, probably eighty, and just laughed when we arrived, even when we gave him a hard time.

So why the friendly overtures now?

I met his gaze. His face was perhaps a bit more fleshy, otherwise he hadn't changed at all. But there was something stiff about his features, a kind of fixedness, which the smile reinforced rather than softened.

"What are you doing now?" I asked.

"Working in the North Sea."

"Ah," I said. "So you're earning tons of money!"

"Yep. And I get lots of time off. So that's good. And you?"

While he was talking to me he looked at the shop assistant and pointed to a grilled sausage and hoisted one finger in the air.

"Still studying," I said.

"What subject?"

"Literature."

"Mm, you always did like that," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Do you see anything of Espen? Or Trond? Or Gisle?"

He shrugged.

"Trond lives in town so I see him now and then. Espen when he comes home for Christmas. And you? Do you have any contact with any of the others?"

"Just Bassen."

The assistant put the sausage in a bun and placed it on a napkin.

"Ketchup and mustard?" he asked.

"Yes, please, both. And onions."

"Raw or fried?"

"Fried. No, raw."

"Raw?"

"Yes."

After the order had been completed and he had the sausage in his hand, he turned back to me.

"Nice to see you again, Karl Ove," he said. "You haven't changed!"

"Nor you," I said.

He opened his mouth, bit off a chunk of the sausage and passed the assistant a fifty-krone note. There was a moment of embarrassment as he waited for his change because we had already concluded the conversation. He mustered a faint smile.

"Okay," he said as he closed his hand around the coins he was given. "See you around maybe!"

"Yeah, see you around," I said. I bought some tobacco and stood in front of the newspaper stand pretending I was interested, because I didn't want to bump into him again outside. Yngve came to pay and did so with a thousand-krone note. I looked away as he drew it from his wallet, didn't want to show that I knew it was Dad's money, just mumbled something about going out, and headed for the door.

The smell of gasoline and concrete, in the half-light beneath a gas station roof, is there anything more charged with associations? Engines, speed, future.

But also hot dogs and CDs by Celine Dion and Eric Clapton.

I opened the car door and got in. Yngve came soon after, started up, and we left without a word.

Up and down the garden I walked, cutting the grass. The machine we had hired consisted of a device you strapped to your back and a rod with a rotating blade on the end. I felt like a kind of robot as I walked around, wearing large, yellow ear protectors and attached, as it were, to roaring, vibrating machinery and methodically cutting down all the sapling trees, all the flowers and all the grass I came across. I was crying nonstop. Sob after sob surged through me as I worked, I didn't fight it any longer, I just let the tears come. At twelve Yngve called me from the veranda, and I went in to eat with them, he had set out tea and rolls, as Grandma had always done, heated on a gridiron over a burner so that the usually soft crust went crispy and sprinkled crumbs as you sank your teeth in, but I wasn't hungry and soon left to continue my work. It was liberating to be outside and alone, satisfying too, because you could see the results so quickly. The sky had closed over, the grayish-white clouds lay like a lid beneath, with the effect that the dark surface of the sea contrasted with greater clarity, and the town, which under an open sky was a small, insignificant cluster of houses, a speck of dust on the ground, was lent greater weight and solidity. This is where I was, this is what I saw. Mostly my gaze was focused on the rotating blade and the grass falling like soldiers being mown down, more yellow and gray than green, mixed with the red of foxtail grass and the yellow of black-eyed Susan, but occasionally I did raise my eyes to the massive, light-gray sky roof and the massive, dark-grey sea floor, to the jumble of hoods and hulls, masts and bows, containers and rusting junk by the quay, and to the town vibrating like a machine with its colors and activity, as tears flowed down my cheeks without cease, for Dad, who had grown up here, he was dead. Or perhaps that was not why I was crying, perhaps it was for quite different reasons, perhaps it was all the grief and misery I had accumulated over the last fifteen years that had now been released. It didn't matter, nothing mattered, I just walked around the garden cutting the grass that had grown too tall.

At a quarter past three I turned off the infernal machine, stowed it in the shed under the veranda, and went in for a shower before leaving. Went to get clothes, towel, and shampoo from the loft, laid them on the toilet seat, locked the door, undressed, clambered into the bathtub, adjusted the shower head away from me, and started the water. When it had run warm I twisted the shower head back and the hot water streamed down over me. Usually this was followed by a good feeling, but not this time, not here, so after I had hastily washed my hair and rinsed it, I turned off the water and got out, dried myself, and got dressed. Smoked a cigarette on the steps waiting for Yngve to come down. I was dreading the next stage, and as he unlocked the car, I could see from his face across the roof that he was too.

The chapel was adjacent to the gymnas I attended, located diagonally behind the large sports hall, and we drove the same route I had walked for the six months I had lived in Grandma's and Grandad's flat on Elvegata, but the sight of familiar places evoked nothing in me, and perhaps I was seeing them for the first time as they actually were, meaningless, devoid of atmosphere. A picket fence here, a white nineteenth-century house there, a few trees, some bushes, a bit of grass, a road barrier, a sign. Statutory cloud movement in the heavens.

Statutory human movement on earth. The wind lifting branches, making the thousands of leaves shake in patterns that are as unpredictable as they are inevitable.

"You can drive in here," I said as we passed the school and saw the church behind the stone wall in front of us. "It's in there."

"I've been here before," Yngve declared.

"Really?" I said.

"A confirmation ceremony. You were there too, weren't you?"

"I don't remember one," I said.

"But I do," Yngve said, leaning forward to be able to see farther ahead. "Is it behind the parking lot?"

"Has to be, I suppose," I answered.

"We're early," Yngve said. "It's only a quarter to."

I scrambled out of the car and closed the door. A lawn mower came toward us on the other side of the stone wall, pushed by a man with a bare chest. After the machine had passed, no more than five meters away, I saw that he was wearing a silver chain around his neck with what looked like a razor blade suspended from it. To the east, above the church, the sky had darkened. Yngve lit a cigarette and took a few steps across the parking lot.

"Yeah, well," he said. "We're here anyway."

I glanced at the chapel. A lamp was lit over the entrance, barely visible in the daylight. A red car was parked nearby.

My heart beat faster.

"Yes we are," I said.

Some birds circled high above us, under the sky, which was still a pale gray. The Dutch painter Ruisdael always painted birds high in his skies, to create depth, it was almost his signature, at any rate I had seen it in picture after picture in the book I had about him.

The undersides of the trees beyond were black.

"What's the time now?" I asked.

Yngve jerked his arm forward so that his jacket sleeve slid back and he could see his watch.

"Five to. Shall we go in?"

I nodded.

When we were ten meters from the chapel, the door opened. A young man in a dark suit looked at us. His face was tanned, his hair blond.

"Knausgaard?" he said.

We nodded.

We shook hands in turn. The skin around his nostrils was red and inflamed. The blue eyes absent.

"Shall we go in?" he suggested.

We nodded again. Entered a hall at first, where he stopped.

"It's in there," he explained. "But before we go in I should perhaps prepare you a little. This is not a very pleasant sight, there was a lot of blood, you see, so . . . well, we did what we could, but it's still visible."

The blood?

He looked at us.

I shivered.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," Yngve said.

He opened the door and we followed him into a larger room. Dad was lying on a bier in the middle. His eyes were closed, his features composed.

Oh God.

I stood beside Yngve, in front of my father. His cheeks were crimson, saturated with blood. It must have got caught in the pores when they tried to wipe it away. And the nose, it was broken. But even though I saw this, I still didn't see it, for all the detail disappeared into something other and something greater, into both the aura he gave off, which was death and which I had never been close to before, and also what he was to me, a father and all the life that lay therein.

* * *

It was only when I was back in Grandma's house, after seeing Yngve off for Stavanger, that the matter of the blood came back to me. How could it have ended like that? Grandma said she had found him dead in the chair, and on the basis of this information it would have been natural to assume his heart had given out while he was sitting there, probably while he was sleeping. The funeral director, however, had said there was not only blood but a great deal of it. And Dad's nose had been broken. So, some form of mortal combat must have taken place? Had he got up, in pain, and fallen against the chimney breast? To the floor? But if so, why wasn't there any blood on the wall or the floor? And how come Grandma hadn't said anything about the blood? Because *something* must have happened, he could *not* have died peacefully in his sleep, not with all that blood there. Had she washed it off and then forgotten to say? Why would she? She hadn't washed anything else, it didn't seem to be one of her drives. It was just as strange that I had forgotten so quickly. Or, perhaps not so strange, there had been so many other things I had to attend to. Nevertheless I would have to call Yngve as soon as I got back to Grandma's. We needed to get hold of the doctor who had organized the transfer of the body. He would be able to explain what had happened.

I walked as fast as I could up the gentle slope, along a green wire fence with a dense hedge on the other side, as though I could not arrive soon enough, while another impulse was also working inside me, to drag out the time I was on my own for as long as possible, maybe even find a café and read a newspaper. It was one thing to stay at Grandma's with Yngve and quite another to be there alone. Yngve knew how to handle her. But that light, bantering tone of theirs, which Erling and Gunnar also shared, had never been part of my nature, to put it mildly, and during the year at school in Kristiansand when I had spent a lot of time with them, since I lived nearby, my manner had seemed uncongenial to them, there had been something about me they didn't want to know, which suspicion was confirmed after a few months when one evening my mother told me Grandma had called to say I shouldn't go over there so often. I could handle most rejection, but not this, they were my grandparents, and the fact that not even they wanted to have anything to do with me was so shattering that I couldn't restrain myself and burst into tears, right in front of my mother. She was upset, but what could she do? At the time I didn't understand any of this and simply believed they didn't like me; however, since then I have begun to sense what it was that made my presence uncongenial. I was unable to dissemble, unable to play a role, and the scholarly earnestness I brought into the house was impossible to keep at arm's length in the long run, sooner or later even they would have to engage with it, and the disequilibrium it led to, as their banter never demanded anything at all of me, that was what must have made them call my mother in the end. My presence always made demands on them, either in concrete ways, such as food, for if I went there after school and before soccer practice, I would otherwise have had to last until eight or nine at night without eating, or money because only the afternoon buses were free for schoolchildren, and often I could not pay for the ticket. As far as both food and money were concerned, they didn't mind, in essence, giving me either, but what provoked them was, I assume, the fact that I had to have both, and as such they had no choice: food and bus money were no longer gifts from their hearts but something else, and this other thing impinged on our relationship, created a knot between us, of which they did not approve. I couldn't understand it then, but I do now. My manner, my getting close to them with my life and thoughts, was part of the same pattern. This closeness they couldn't and presumably wouldn't give me; that too was something I took from them. The irony was that during these visits I always considered them, always said what I thought they wanted to hear; even the most personal things I said because I thought it would be good for them to hear, not because I needed to say them.

The worst part of all this, however, I was thinking, as I walked along the avenue towards Lund, past the flow of afternoon traffic, past tree after tree whose trunks were blackened with asphalt dust and car exhaust, so hard and rocklike compared to the expanse of light, green leaves on the branches above, was that at that time I actually regarded myself as a sound judge of character. I had a gift, or so I had deluded myself into thinking, it was something I was good at. Understanding others. While I myself was more of a mystery.

How stupid can you get.

I laughed and glanced up immediately to check whether any of the people sitting in cars in the road alongside had seen me. They hadn't. Everyone was wrapped up in their own thoughts. I might have become smarter over those twelve years, but I still could not pretend. Nor could I lie, nor could I play roles. For that reason I had been only too happy to let Yngve deal with Grandma. But now I would have to stand on my own two feet.

I stopped to light a cigarette. Moving on, I somehow felt heartened. Was it the once white but now polluted houses on my left that had done that? Or was it the trees in the avenue? These motionless, foliage-laden, air-bathing beings with their boundless abundance of leaves? For whenever I caught sight of them I was filled with happiness.

I took an especially deep breath and flicked the silver-gray cigarette ash off as I walked. The unabsorbed memories evoked by my surroundings on the way to the chapel with Yngve now hit me with full force. I recognized them from two periods: the first, when I had been visiting Grandma and Grandad in Kristiansand as a boy and every tiny detail of the town had seemed like an adventure, the second, when I lived here as a teenager. I had been away for a number of years now, and ever since I arrived I had noticed how the stream of impressions the place left you with was partly tied to the first world of memories, partly to the second, and thus existed in three separate time zones at once. I saw the pharmacy and remembered when Yngve and I had been there with Grandma; the snow drifts had been high outside, it was snowing, she was wearing a fur hat and coat, in line, white-coated pharmacists were shuttling back and forth. Now and then she turned her head to see what we were doing. After the first searching glances, when her eyes were, if not cold, then at least neutral, she smiled, and they filled with warmth, as if at the wave of a magic wand. I saw the hill going up towards Lund Bridge and remembered that in the afternoon Grandad used to come cycling from that direction.

How different he seemed outdoors. As though the slight wobble, caused by the incline, said something not only about the bike he was riding but also the person he was: one moment any elderly Kristiansander in coat and beret, the next Grandad. I saw the rooftops in the residential area stretching down the road and remembered how I used to walk among them as a sixteen-year-old, bursting with emotions. When everything I saw, even a rusty, crooked rotary dryer in a back garden, even rotten apples on the ground beneath a tree, even a boat wrapped in a tarpaulin, with the wet bow protruding and the yellow, flattened grass beneath, was ablaze with beauty. I saw the grass-covered hill behind the buildings on the other side and remembered a blue sky and a cold winter's day when we had been sledding with Grandma. There was such a sparkling reflection of sun on snow that the light resembled that in the high mountains, and the town below us seemed so strangely open that everything that happened, people and cars passing in the streets, the man shovelling snow from the assembly room forecourt across the road, the other children sledging, did not appear to be attached anywhere, they were just floating beneath the sky. All of this was alive in me as I walked, and it made me acutely aware of my surroundings, but it was only the surface, only the uppermost layer of my consciousness, for Dad was dead, and the grief this stirred shone through everything I thought and felt, retracting the surface, in a sense. He also existed in these memories, but he was not important there, oddly enough, the thought of him evoked nothing. Dad walking on the sidewalk a few meters in front of me, once at the beginning of the seventies, we had been to the newsstand and bought pipe cleaners and were going to Grandma and Grandad's, the way he lifted his chin and raised his head while smiling to himself, the pleasure I felt at that, or Dad in the bank, the way he held his wallet in one hand, ran the other through his hair, catching a reflection of himself in the glass in front of the teller's window, or Dad on his way out of town: in none of these memories did I perceive him as important. That is, I did when I was experiencing them, but not at the moment of thinking about them. It was different now that he was dead. In death he was everything, of course, but death was also everything, for while I was walking, in the light drizzle, I seemed to find myself in a zone. What lay outside it meant nothing. I saw, I thought, and then what I saw and thought were withdrawn: it didn't count. Nothing counted. Just Dad, the fact that he was dead, that was all that counted.

All the time I was walking, the brown envelope, which contained the possessions he had on him when he died, was on my mind. I stopped outside the market across the road from the pharmacy, I turned to the wall and took it out. I looked at my father's name. It seemed alien. I had expected Knausgaard. But it was correct enough; this laughably pompous name was the one he had had when he died.

An elderly woman with a shopping bag in one hand and a small white dog in the other looked at me as she came out of the door. I took a few steps closer to the wall and shook the contents into my hand. His ring, a necklace, a few coins, and a pin. That was all. In themselves, as everyday as objects can be. But the fact that he had been wearing them, that the ring was on his finger, the chain around his neck when he died, gave them a special aura. Death and gold. I turned them over in my hand, one by one, and they filled me with disquiet. I stood there and was frightened of death in the same way that I had been when I was a child. Not of dying myself but of the dead.

I put the items back in the envelope, put the envelope back in my pocket, ran across the road between two cars, went to the newsstand and bought a newspaper and a Lion bar, which I ate while walking the last few hundred meters to the house.

Even after all that had happened, there were still echoes of the smell I remembered from childhood. As a young boy I had already wondered at the phenomenon: how every house I had been in, all the neighbors' and the family's houses, had a specific smell all of their own which never changed. All except for ours. It didn't have a specific smell. It didn't smell of anything. Whenever Grandma and Grandad came they brought the smell of their house with them; I remembered one particular occasion when Grandma had surprised us with a visit, I knew nothing about it, and when I came home from school and detected the aroma in the hall I thought I was imagining things, because there was no other evidence to support it. No car in the drive, no clothes or shoes in the hall. Just the aroma. But it wasn't my imagination: when I went upstairs Grandma was sitting in full regalia in the kitchen, she had caught the bus, she wanted to surprise us; so unlike her. It was odd that, twenty years later, after so much had changed, the smell in the house should be the same. It is conceivable that it was all to do with habit, using the same soaps, the same detergents, the same perfumes and aftershave lotions, cooking the same food in the same way, coming home from the same job and doing the same things in the afternoons and evenings. If you worked on cars, there would be traces of oil and white spirit, metal and exhaust fumes in the smell, if you collected old books, there would be traces of yellowing paper and old leather in the smell, but in a house where all previous habits had stopped, where people had died off, and those left were too old to do what they used to do, what about the smell in these houses, how could it be unchanged? Were the walls impregnated with forty years of living, was that what I could smell every time I stepped inside?

Instead of going to see her right away, I opened the cellar door and ventured down the narrow staircase. The cold, dark air that met me was like a concentrate of the usual air in the house, just as I remembered it. This was where they had stored the crates of apples, pears, and plums in the autumn, and combined with the stench of old brick and earth their exhalations lay like a sub-smell in the house, to which all the others were added and with which they contrasted. I had not been down there more than three or four times; like the rooms in the loft, this had been a forbidden area for us. But how often had I stood in the hall watching Grandma come up from the cellar with bags full of juicy, yellow plums or slightly wrinkled and wonderfully succulent red apples for us?

The only light came from a small porthole in the wall. Since the garden was lower than the house entrance you could see straight into it. It was a disorientating perspective, the sense of spatial connection was broken, for a brief moment the ground seemed to have disappeared beneath me. Then, as

I grabbed the banister, everything became clear to me again: I was here, the window was there, the garden there, the house entrance there.

I stood staring out of the window without registering anything or thinking of anything in particular. Then I turned and went up to the hall, hung my jacket on one of the clothes hangers in the wardrobe, and glanced at myself in the mirror by the stairs. Tiredness lay like a membrane over my eyes. When I ascended the stairs it was with heavy footfalls so that Grandma would hear me coming.

She was sitting as she had when we left her a few hours before, at the kitchen table. In front of her was a cup of coffee, an ashtray, and a plate full of crumbs from the roll she had eaten.

When I entered she glanced up at me in her alert, birdlike way.

"Ah, it's you," she said. "Did everything go alright?"

She had probably forgotten where I had been, though I could not be sure, and I answered with the gravity that such an occasion demanded.

"Yes," I nodded. "It went well."

"That's good," she said, looking down. I stepped into the room and put the newspaper I had bought on the table.

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked.

"Yes, please," I answered.

"The pot's on the stove."

Something in her tone made me look at her. She had never spoken to me like that before. The strange thing was that it didn't change her as much as it changed me. That was how she must have spoken to Dad of late. She had addressed him not me. And that was not how she would have addressed Dad if Grandad had been alive. This was the tone between mother and son when no one else was there.

I didn't think that she had mistaken me for Dad, only that she was talking out of habit, like a ship continuing to glide through the water after the engines had been switched off. It chilled me inside. But I couldn't let that affect me, so I helped myself to a cup from the cupboard, went over to the stove, felt the coffeepot with my finger. It was a long time since it had been warm.

Grandma whistled and drummed her fingers on the table. She had done that for as long as I could remember. There was something good about seeing it, for so much had changed about her otherwise.

I had seen photos of her from the 1930s, and she had been attractive, not strikingly so, but enough to mark her out, in the typical way for that era: dark, dramatic eyes, small mouth, short hair. When, toward the end of the fifties, as a mother of three, she had been photographed in front of some tourist sights on their travels, all of those characteristics were still there, if in a softer, less distinct yet not undefined way, and you could still use the word "attractive" to describe her. When I was growing up, and she was in her late sixties, early seventies, I couldn't see any of this of course, she was just "Grandma," I knew nothing about her characteristic traits, the things that told you who she was. An older woman, middle class, who was well-conserved and dressed elegantly, that must have been the impression she gave at the end of the seventies, when she took the unusual step of catching a bus to visit us and sat in our kitchen in Tybakken. Lively, mentally alert, vigorous. Right up until a couple of years ago that was how she was. Then something happened to her, and it was not old age that had her in its grip, nor illness, it was something else. Her detachment had nothing to do with the gentle otherworldliness or contentedness of old people, her detachment was as hard and lean as the body in which it resided.

I saw that, but there was nothing I could do, I could not build a bridge, could not help or console her, I could only watch, and every minute I spent with her I was tense. The only thing that helped was to keep moving and not to let any of what was present, in either her or the house, find a foothold.

With her hand, she wiped a flake of tobacco off her lap. Then looked at me.

"Shall I make you a cup as well?" I offered.

"Was there anything wrong with the coffee?" she said.

"It wasn't that hot," I said, taking the pot to the sink. "I'll put some fresh on."

"Wasn't that hot, did you say?"

Was she reproving me?

No. For then she laughed and brushed a crumb from her lap.

"I think my brain's unravelling," she said. "I was sure I'd only just made it."

"It wasn't *that* cold," I said, turning on the tap. "It's just that I like my coffee boiling hot."

I rinsed out the dregs and sprayed the bottom of the sink with the water until it had all gone down the drain. Then I filled the pot, which was almost completely black on the inside and covered with greasy fingerprints on the outside.

"Unravelling" was our family euphemism for senility. Grandad's brother, Leif, his brain "unravelled" when, on several occasions, he wandered from the old people's home to his childhood home, where he hadn't lived for sixty years, and stood shouting and banging on the door all through the night. His second brother, Alf, his mind had started unravelling in recent years; it was most obvious in his merging of the present and the past. And Grandad's mind also started unravelling at the end of his life when he sat up at night fiddling with an enormous collection of keys, no one knew he had them, let alone why. It was in the family; their mother's mind unravelled eventually, if we were to believe what my father had said. Apparently the last thing she did was climb into the loft instead of going down into the cellar when she had heard a siren; according to my father, she fell down the steep loft staircase in her house and died. Whether that was true or not, I don't know, my father could serve up all manner of lies. My intuition told me it wasn't, but there was no way of finding out.

I carried the pot to the stove and put it on the burner. The ticking of the safety device filled the kitchen. Then the damp pot began to crackle. I stood with folded arms, peering at the top of the steep hill outside the window, at the imposing white house. It struck me that I had stared at that house all my life without ever seeing anyone in or around it.

"Where's Yngve then?" Grandma asked.

"He had to go back to Stavanger today," I said, addressing her. "To his family. He'll be back for the f . . . for Friday."

"Yes, that was it." She nodded to herself. "He had to go back to Stavanger."

As she grasped the pouch of tobacco and the small, red-and-white roller machine, she said, without looking up: "But you're staying here?"

"Yes," I said. "I'll be here all the time."

I was happy that she so clearly wanted me to be here, even though I gathered that it was not me especially that she wanted here, anyone would do.

She cranked the handle of the machine with surprising vigor, flipped out the freshly filled cigarette and lit it, brushing a few flakes from her lap again and sat staring into space.

"I thought I would carry on cleaning," I said. "And then I'll have to work a bit later this evening and make a few phone calls."

"That's fine," she said and looked up at me. "But you aren't so busy that you don't have time to sit here for a while, are you?"

"Not at all, no," I answered.

The coffeepot hissed. I pressed it down harder on the burner, the steam hissed louder, and I removed it, sprinkled in some coffee, stirred with a fork, banged hard, once, on the stovetop and placed it on the table.

"There we are," I said. "Now it'll just have to brew for a bit."

The fingerprints on the pot, which we hadn't washed off, must have included Dad's. I visualized the nicotine stains on his fingers. There had been something undignified about doing this. Inasmuch as the trivial life it demonstrated did not go together with the solemnity death evoked.

Or that I wanted death to evoke.

Grandma sighed.

"Oh dear," she said. "Life's a pitch, as the old woman said. She couldn't pronounce her *b*'s."

I smiled. Grandma smiled too. Then her eyes glazed over again. I racked my brain for something to say, found nothing, poured coffee in the cup even though it was more a golden color than black, and tiny coffee grains floated to the surface.

"Do you want some?" I asked. "It's a bit thin, but . . ."

"Please," she said, nudging her cup a few centimeters along the table.

"Thank you," she said when it was half-full. Grasped the yellow carton of cream and poured.

"Where's Yngve then?" she asked.

"He's gone to Stavanger," I answered. "Home to his family."

"That's right. He had to go. When's he coming back?"

"On Friday, I think," I said.

I rinsed the bucket in the sink, ran the tap, poured in some green soap, put on rubber gloves, grabbed the cloth on the table with one hand, lifted the bucket with the other, and went to the back of the living room. Outside, darkness was beginning to fall. A faint bluish glimmer was visible in the light at ground height, around the foliage on the trees, their trunks, the bushes as far as the fence to the neighbor's plot. So faint was it that the colors were not muted as they would gradually become in the course of the evening, on the contrary, they were strengthened because the light no longer dazzled, and the dulled background allowed their fullness to come to the fore. But to the southwest, where you could just see the lighthouse in the sea, daylight was still unchallenged. Some clouds had a reddish glow, as though powered by their own energy, for the sun was hidden.

After a while Grandma came in. She switched on the TV and sat down in the chair. The sound of commercials, louder than the program, as always, filled not only the living room but also reverberated against the walls.

"Is the news on now?" I asked.

"I suppose so," she said. "Don't you want to see it as well?"

"Yes, I do," I said. "I'll just finish up here first."

After washing all the paneling along one wall I wrung out the cloth and went into the kitchen, where the reflection of my figure, in the form of vague, lighter and darker patches, was visible in the window, poured the water into the sink, draped the cloth over the bucket, stood motionless for a second, then opened the cupboard, pushed the paper towels to the side and pulled out the vodka bottle. I fetched two glasses from the cupboard above the sink, opened the fridge and took out the Sprite bottle, filled one glass with it, mixed the other with vodka and carried both into the living room.

"I thought we might allow ourselves a little drink," I smiled.

"How nice," she smiled back. "I think we might too."

I passed her the glass with the vodka, took the one with the Sprite, and sat down in the chair beside her. Terrible, it was terrible. It tore me apart. But there was nothing I could do about it. She needed it. That's the way it was.

If only it had been cognac or port!

Then I could have served it on a tray with a cup of coffee, and that would have given, if not a completely normal impression, then at least one not as conspicuous as clear vodka and Sprite.

I watched her opening her aged mouth and swallowing down the drink. I had been determined that this would not happen again. But now, there she was, sitting with a glass of alcohol in her hand. It cut me to the quick. Fortunately she didn't ask me for more.

I got up.

"I'll go and make some phone calls."

She turned her head toward me.

"Who are you going to call at this hour?" she asked.

Again she seemed to be addressing someone else.

"It's only eight o'clock," I said.

"It's not later?"

"No. I thought I would call Yngve. And then Tonje."

"Yngve?"

"Yes."

"Isn't he here then? No, of course, he isn't," she said. Then she focused her attention on the TV as though I had already left the room.

I pulled out a chair from under the table, sat down, and dialed Yngve's number. He had just walked in the door, everything had gone fine. In the background I could hear Torje screaming and Kari Anne hushing him.

"I was wondering about the blood," I said.

"Yes, what *was* that?" he said. "There must have been more going on than Grandma told us."

"He must have fallen or something," I said. "On a hard surface because his nose was broken. Did you see that?"

"Of course."

"We ought to have a word with someone who was here. Preferably, with the doctor."

"The funeral director probably has his name," Yngve said. "Do you want me to ask him?"

"Yes, could you?"

"I'll call tomorrow. It's a bit late now. Then we can talk about it."

I had thought of talking more about all the things that had happened here, but detected a certain impatience in his voice, and that was not so surprising. His daughter, Ylva, who was two years old, had waited up for him. And, of course, it was hardly more than a few hours since we had seen each other. However, he didn't make a move to end the conversation, so I had to do it myself. After hanging up I dialed Tonje's number. She had been waiting for me to call; I could hear it in her voice. I said I was very tired, that we could chat more the following day and that in a couple of days she would be down here very soon anyway. The conversation lasted only a few moments, nonetheless I felt better afterward. I fished out my cigarettes, snatched a lighter from the kitchen table, and went onto the veranda. The bay was full of returning boats. The mild air was filled with the town's smell of timber, as always when the wind came from the north, the scent of plants from the garden below and the faint, barely detectable, tang of the sea. In the room inside, the light from the TV flickered. I stood by the black wrought-iron gate at the end of the veranda, smoking. I extinguished the cigarette against the wall, and the glowing ash fell like tiny stars into the garden. Again I checked that Grandma was sitting in the living room before going upstairs to my bedroom. My suitcase lay open beside the bed. I picked up the cardboard box containing the manuscript, sat down on the edge of the bed, and tore off the tape. The thought that this had actually become a book which would soon be published struck me with full force when I saw the title page, set out so differently from the proof version to which I had become accustomed. I quickly put it at the bottom, couldn't spend time thinking about that, found myself a pencil from the pocket in the suitcase, picked up the sheet with a key to the proofreader's marks, slipped into bed with my back to the headboard and rested the manuscript on my lap. This was urgent, so I had planned to go through as much as I could during the evenings here. So far there hadn't been any time. But with Yngve in Stavanger and the evening still young I had at least four hours in front of me, if not more.

I started reading.

The two black suits, each one hanging on a half-open wardrobe door by the wall, disrupted my concentration, for while I was reading I was aware of them, and even though I knew they were only suits the perception that they were real bodies cast a shadow over my consciousness. After a few minutes I got up to move them. I stood with a suit in each hand, looking around for somewhere to hang them. From the curtain rod above the window? They would be even more visible there. From the door frame? No, I would have to walk through. In the end I walked into the adjacent loft drying room and hung them on separate clotheslines. Hanging freely, they looked more like people than before, but if I closed the door at least they were out of sight.

I went back to my room, sat down on the bed, and continued reading. In the streets below a car accelerated. From the floor below came the noise of the TV. In the otherwise quiet, empty house it sounded absolutely insane, there was a madness in the rooms.

I looked up.

I had written the book for Dad. I hadn't known, but that was how it was. I had written it for him.

I put down the manuscript and got to my feet, walked to the window.

Did he really mean so much to me?

Oh, yes, he did.

I wanted him to see me.

The first time I had realized what I was writing really was something, not just me wanting to be someone, or pretending to be, was when I wrote a passage about Dad and started crying while I was writing. I had never done that before, never even been close. I wrote about Dad and the tears were streaming down my cheeks, I could barely see the keyboard or the screen, I just hammered away. Of the existence of the grief inside me that had been released at that moment, I had known nothing; I had not had an inkling. My father was an idiot, I wanted nothing to do with him, and it cost me nothing to keep well away from him. It wasn't a question of keeping away from something, it was a question of the something not existing; nothing about him touched me. That was how it had been, but then I had sat down to write, and the tears poured forth.

I sat down on the bed again and placed the manuscript on my lap.

But there was more.

I had also wanted to show him that I was better than he was. That I was bigger than he was. Or was it just that I wanted him to be proud of me? To acknowledge me?

He hadn't even known I was having a book published. The last time I met him face to face before he died, eighteen months previously, he had asked me what I was doing with myself, and I had answered that I had just started writing a novel. We had been walking up Dronningens gate, we were going to eat out, sweat was running down his cheeks even though it was cold outside, and he asked, without looking at me, obviously to make conversation, if anything would come of it. I had nodded and said that one publishing house was interested. Whereupon he had glanced at me as we were walking, as though from a place in which he still was the person he had once been, and perhaps could be again.

"It's good to hear you're doing well, Karl Ove," he had said.

Why did I remember this so well? I usually forgot almost everything people, however close they were, said to me, and there was nothing in the situation that suggested this would be one of the last times we would meet. Perhaps I remembered it because he used my name; it must have been four years since I had heard him last use it, and for this reason his words were so unexpectedly intimate. Perhaps I remembered it because only a few days earlier I had written about him, and with emotions that were in stark contrast to those he had evoked in me by being friendly. Or perhaps I remembered because I hated the hold he had over me, which was clear from how I became so happy about so little. Not for anything in the world would I lift a finger for him, nor be forced into anything for his sake, neither in a positive nor a negative sense.

Now this show of will was worth nothing.

I placed the manuscript down on the bed, stuffed the pencil back in the suitcase pocket, leaned forward and reached for the cardboard box on the floor nearby, tried to squeeze the manuscript back in, but it wouldn't fit, so I laid it in the suitcase as it was, right at the bottom, carefully covered with clothes. The box, perched on the bed now, which I stared at for a long time, would remind me of the novel whenever I saw it. My first impulse had been to carry it downstairs and dispose of it in the kitchen trash can, but, upon reflection, I decided I didn't want to do that, I didn't want it to be become part of the house. So I parted the clothes in the suitcase again, put the box beside the manuscript, covered it with clothes, closed the suitcase lid, zipped it up, and then I left the room.

Grandma was in the living room watching TV. A talk show. It made no difference to her what was on, I supposed. She watched children's programs on TV2 and TV Norge in the afternoon with as much pleasure as late-night documentaries. I had never understood what appealed to her in this insane youth reality TV, with its endless cravings, of which even news and talk shows were full. She, who was born before the First World War and came from the really old Europe, on the outer perimeter though, it is true, but nevertheless? She, who had her childhood in the 1910s, her adolescence in the 1920s, adulthood in the 1930s, motherhood in the 1940s and 1950s, and was already an elderly woman in 1968? There had to be something, for she sat here watching TV every evening.

Beneath her chair there was a yellow-brown puddle on the floor. A dark patch down the side showed where it had come from.

"Yngve sends his love," I said. "He got back okay."

She threw me a brief glance.

"That's good," she said.

"Is there anything you need?" I asked.

"Need?"

"Yes, food, and so forth. I can easily make you something if you want."

"No, thanks," she said. "But you help yourself."

The sight of Dad's dead body had put me off any thought of food. But I could hardly associate a cup of tea with death, could I? I heated a pan of water on the stove, poured it, steaming, over a tea bag in a cup, watched for a while as the color was released and spread in slow spirals through the water until it was a golden tint everywhere, and I took the cup and carried it onto the veranda. A long way out, at the mouth of the fjord, the Danish ferry was approaching. Above it the weather had cleared. There were still traces of blue in the dark sky, which made it seem palpable, as though it were really one enormous cloth and the stars I could see came from the light behind, shining through thousands of tiny holes.

I took a sip and put the cup down on the windowsill. I remembered more from the evening with my father. There had been a thick layer of ice on the sidewalk; an easterly wind had been sweeping through almost deserted streets. We had gone to a hotel restaurant, hung up our coats, and taken a seat at a table. Dad had been breathing heavily, he wiped his brow, picked up the menu, and scanned it. Started again from the top.

"Looks like they don't serve wine here," he said and got up, went over and said something to the head waiter. When he shook his head, Dad turned on his heel and came back, almost tore his jacket off the chair and was putting it on as he headed for the exit. I hurried after him.

"What happened ?" I asked when we were outside on the sidewalk again.

"No alcohol," he said. "Jesus, it was a temperance hotel."

Then he looked at me and smiled.

"We have to have wine with our food, don't we? But that's fine. There's another restaurant down here."

We ended up in Hotel Caledonien, sat at a window table, and ate our steaks. That is, I ate; when I had finished, Dad's plate had barely been touched. He lit a cigarette, drank the last dregs of red wine, leaned back in the chair and said he was planning to become a long-distance truck driver. I didn't know how to react, just nodded without saying a word. Truckers had a great time, he said. He had always liked driving, always liked traveling, and if you could do that and get paid for it at the same time, why hang around? Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, Holland, Spain, Portugal, he said. Yes, it's a fine profession, I said. But now it's time for us to go our separate ways, he said. I'll pay. You just go. I'm sure you have a lot to do. It was good to see you. And I did as he suggested, got up, took my jacket, said goodbye, went out through the hotel reception area, onto the street, wondering briefly whether to get a taxi or not, decided against it and ambled toward the bus station. Through the window I saw him again, he was walking through the restaurant toward the door at the far end that led to the bars, and once again his movements, despite his large, heavy body, were hurried and impatient.

That was the last time I saw him alive.

I had the distinct impression that he had pulled himself together. That in those two hours he had summoned all his strength to stay in one piece, to be sensitive and present, to be what he had been.

The thought of it pained me as I paced back and forth on the veranda staring at the town and then the sea. I considered whether to go for a walk into town, or perhaps to the stadium, but I couldn't leave Grandma on her own, and I didn't feel like walking either. Besides, tomorrow everything would look different. The day always came with more than mere light. However frayed your emotions, it was impossible to be wholly unaffected by the day's new beginnings. So I took the cup to the kitchen, put it in the dishwasher, did the same with all the other cups and glasses, plates, and dishes, poured in powder and started it, wiped the table with a cloth, wrung it, and draped it over the tap, even though there was something obscene about the meeting between damp, crumpled rag and the tap's shiny chrome, went into the living room and stopped beside the chair where Grandma was sitting.

"I think I'm going to bed," I said. "It's been a long day."

"Is it so late already?" she asked. "Yes, I'll be off soon as well."

"Good night," I said.

"Good night."

I started to leave.

"Karl Ove?" she called.

I turned back.

"You're not thinking of sleeping up there tonight too, are you? It would be better for you downstairs. In our old bedroom, you know. Then you've got the bathroom next door."

"That's true," I said. "But I think I'll stay where I am. We've got all our things up there."

"Alright," she said. "You do as you like. Good night."

"Good night."

It was only when I was upstairs in the bedroom undressing that I realized it had not been for my sake that she had suggested I sleep down below, but for hers. I put my T-shirt back on, lifted the sheet, rolled the duvet into a ball, put it under one arm, grabbed the suitcase with the other, and made my way downstairs. I bumped into her on the first-floor landing.

"I've changed my mind," I explained. "It would be better downstairs, as you said."

"Yes, good," she said.

I followed her down. In the hall she turned to me.

"Do you have everything you need?"

"Everything," I answered.

Then she opened the door to her little room and was gone.

The room I was going to sleep in was one of those we had not tackled yet, but the fact that her things, such as hairbrushes, rollers, jewelery and jewelery box, clothes hangers, nightgowns, blouses, underwear, toilet bags, cosmetics lay scattered around on bedside tables, the mattress, shelves in the open wardrobe, on the floor, on the windowsills did not bother me in the slightest, I just cleared the mattress with a couple of sweeps of my hand, spread out the sheet and duvet, undressed, switched off the light and got into bed.

I must have fallen asleep at once for the next thing I remember is that I woke up and switched on the bedside lamp to look at my watch, it was two o'clock. On the staircase outside the door I heard footsteps. Still drowsy with sleep, the first thing that occurred to me, and presumably connected with something I had dreamed, was that Dad had returned. Not as a ghost, but in the flesh. Nothing in me refuted this notion, and I was frightened. Then, not right away, but somehow following up on this notion, I realized the idea was ridiculous and went into the hall. The door to Grandma's room was ajar. I looked in. Her bed was empty. I ascended the staircase. She was probably getting herself a glass of water, or perhaps she hadn't been able to sleep, and had gone up to watch TV, but I would check there anyway, to be on the safe side. First, the kitchen. She wasn't there. Then, the living room. Nor there. So she must have gone to the special occasion living room.

Yes, she was by the window.

For some reason I didn't make my presence known. I paused in the shadow of the dark sliding door, watching her.

It was as though she were in a trance. She was standing motionless, staring into the garden. Occasionally, her lips moved, as though whispering to herself. But not a sound emerged.

Without warning, she whirled around and came toward me. I didn't have the wit to react, just watched her coming toward me. She passed by half a meter away, but although her eyes flitted across my face she didn't see me. She walked straight past, as if I were just a piece of furniture.

I waited until I heard the door downstairs shut before following.

Once back in my bedroom, I was afraid. Death was everywhere. Death was in the jacket in the hall, where the envelope containing my father's possessions was, death was in the chair in the living room, where she had found him, death was on the stairs, where they had carried him, death was in the bathroom, where Grandad had collapsed, his stomach covered with blood. If I closed my eyes it was impossible to escape the thought that the dead might come, just like in my childhood. But I had to close my eyes. And if I succeeded in ridiculing these childish notions, there was no getting past the sudden image of Dad's dead body. The interlaced fingers with the white nails, the yellowing skin, the hollow cheeks. These images accompanied me deep into my light sleep, in such a way that I couldn't say whether they belonged to the world of reality or dreams. Once my consciousness had opened in this way, I was sure his body was in the wardrobe, and I checked, rummaged through all the dresses hanging there, checked the next, and the next, and having done that, I went back to bed and continued sleeping. In my dreams he was sometimes dead, sometimes alive, sometimes in the present, sometimes in the past. It was as if he had completely taken me over, as if he controlled everything inside me, and when at last I awoke, at around eight o'clock, my initial thought was it had been a nocturnal visitation, and then, that I had to see him again.

Two hours later I closed the door to the kitchen, where Grandma was sitting, went to the phone, and dialed the funeral director's number.

"Andenæs Funeral Parlor."

"Ah, hello, this is Karl Ove Knausgaard. I was at your office the day before yesterday, with my brother. About my father. He died four days ago . . ."

"Ah yes, hello . . ."

"As you know, we went to see him yesterday . . . But now I was wondering if it would be possible to see him again? A final visit, if you understand . . ."

"Yes, of course. When would be convenient?"

"We-ell," I said. "Some time this afternoon? Three? Four?"

"Shall we say three then?"

"Three's good."

"Outside the chapel."

"Okay."

"Okay, so it's set then. Excellent."

"Thank you very much."

"Not at all."

Relieved that the conversation had been so unproblematic, I went into the garden and continued cutting the grass. The sky was overcast, the light gentle, the air warm. I finished at around two o'clock. Then I went back in to see Grandma and said I was going to meet a friend, changed clothes, and headed for the chapel. The same car was by the front door, the same man opened up when I knocked. He acknowledged me with a nod, opened the door to the room where we had been the day before, did not enter himself, and I stood in front of Dad again. This time I was prepared for what awaited me, and his body – the skin must have darkened even further in the course of the previous twenty-four hours – aroused none of the feelings that had distressed me before. Now I saw his lifeless state. And that there was no longer any difference between what once had been my father and the table he was lying on, or the floor on which the table stood, or the wall socket beneath the window, or the cable running to the lamp beside him. For humans are merely one form among many, which the world produces over and over again, not only in everything that lives but also in everything that does not live, drawn in sand, stone, and water. And death, which I have always regarded as the greatest dimension of life, dark, compelling, was no more than a pipe that springs a leak, a branch that cracks in the wind, a jacket that slips off a clothes hanger and falls to the floor.

We would like to acknowledge the generous involvement of the following individuals:

Jennifer Acker, Cameron Ackroyd, Anonymous (4), Taylor Davis-Van Atta, Terry Atwater, David Auerbach, Jeremy Austin, Andy Bankin, Holt Barnitz, Alisa Bayes, Michael Bedrick, Jeanne Begley, Sherwood Belangia, Aaron Bell, Matt Bell, Stuart & Caitlin Benton, Nadia Ben-Youssef, Timothy Berge, Susan Bernofsky, Trevor Berrett, Sumit Bhardwaj, Black Mountain Institute, Penelope Boehm, James Boice, Alexander Brock, Parker Brown, Matthew Buell, David & Pamela Bullen, John Carmichael, Margaret Carson, Sonia & Roger Celestin, The Abbott Chalew Family, Mieke Chew, Jessica Chia, Jon Chodosh, David Christensen, Zenia Chrysostomidis, Steve Connell, Susan Cooke, Alex Cox, Sean Cronin, Moyra Davey, Susan DeWitt Davie, Colin Dickey, Darby M. Dixon III, Nicholas During, Erin Edmison, Kevin Elliott, Joshua Ellison, Karen Emmerich, Scott Esposito, Joshua Evans, Will Evans, Marc Feder, Bill Fitzgerald, Kelsey Ford, Kathryn Fox, Katharine Freeman, Mark Fried, Amos Friedland, Sarah Gaddis, Erika Goldman, Todd Goldwasser, Graydon Gordian, Sara Gore, Julia Grawemeyer, Nick Greene, Jessica Griffiths, Kyle Gross, Yannick Guillemot, David Haan, Daniel Hahn, Donavan Hall, Chris Hammer, Wendy Hardenberg, Elizabeth Harris, Susan Harris, Laura Hauther, Justin Haviland, Michael Heald, Mark Hendel, Jim Hicks, Susan Hight, David Hobson, Leslie Hodgkins, Geoffrey C. Howes, Nicholas Hudson, Brigid Hughes, Neil Hume, Laird Hunt, Christopher Iacono, James Jacobo-Mandryk, Matthew Jacobs, Kristin Jensen Storey, Sandra Johnson, Morgan Karr, Chris Kauffman, Mezan Khaja, Rafay Khalid, Cari Kilbride, Brandon Korch, Stephen Korpi, Jed Lackritz, Callan Lamb, Joseph Langdon, Sean LaRiche, Todd Lester, Cressida Leyshon, Todd Lieber, Michael Lin, Michael Lindgren, Andrew Linscott, Stefan Lorenzutti, Florence Lui, Irene Lui, Matthew Lundin, Dan Luu, Erling Maartmann-Moe, Elizabeth Macklin, Darlene Mazzone, Victor Mazzone, Tom McCarthy, Colin Meloy, Tony Messenger, Fredi Milberg, Josh Milberg, Lynda & Breon Mitchell, Brett Mizelle, Toril Moi, Honor Moore, Gabriel Munoz, Ragnar Naess, Kestutis Nakas, Alexander Neher, Mary Ann Newman, Tiffany Nichols, Patrick O'Hara, Zachary Pace, Ilaria Papini, Timothy Paulson, Emily Perper, Jim Petersen, Joy Pierce, Gerald Pirog, Jill Propst, Francine Prose, Jeff Purdue, Marcia Lynx Qualey, Wilder Ramsey, Red Hen Press, Brian Rogers, Rooftop Films, Steven Salardino, Ryan Schofield, Gloria Schoolman, Hugh Schoolman & Franci Diniz, Hank Scotch, Barbara Schulman, Marian M. Shear, Zach Shoup, Katherine Silver, Jacob Silverman, Russell Snowden, Harris Sockel, Sprucedale, Tim Stokes, Matt Storey, Miranda Tedholm, Justin TerAvest, Karen Tiefenwerth, Susan Tomaselli, Stephen Twilley, Maximiliano Udenio, Vaughn, Peter von Ziegesar & Hali Lee, Thomas Walker, Ted Warin, Ivan Webster, Evan Weingarten, Sasha Weiss, Brad Weslake, Rick Whitaker, Diane & Richard White, Richard Wiley, Christopher Winks, Bram Wispelwey, Alexander & Vanessa Wolff, Ingebjorg Wollo, Ryan Woodsmall, Ben Yarde-Buller, Steven Yit, Lila Azam Zanganeh, Anne Zinsser

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Karl Ove Knausgaard was born in Norway in 1968. His debut novel *Out of This World* won the Norwegian Critics Prize in 2004 and his *A Time for Everything* (Archipelago) was a finalist for the Nordic Council Prize. For *My Struggle*, Knausgaard received the Brage Award in 2009 (for Book One), the 2010 Book of the Year Prize in *Morgenbladet*, and the P2 Listeners' Prize. *My Struggle* has been translated into more than fifteen languages. Knausgaard lives in Sweden with his wife and three children.

Don Bartlett has translated dozens of books of various genres, including ten novels and short story collections by Jo Nesbø and *It's Fine by Me* by Per Petterson. He lives in Norfolk, England.

cover art: Anselm Kiefer   cover design: David Bullen

Perhaps the most significant literary enterprise of our time. *The Guardian*

Knausgaard has written one of those books so aesthetically forceful as to be revolutionary. Before, there was no *My Struggle*; now there is, and things are different. The digressiveness of Sebald or Proust is transposed into direct, unmetaphorical language, pushing the novel almost to the edge of unreadability, where it turns out to be addictive and hypnotic. *The Paris Review*

Why would you read a six-volume, 3,600-page Norwegian novel about a man writing a six-volume, 3,600-page Norwegian novel? The short answer is that it is breathtakingly good, and so you cannot stop yourself, and would not want to . . . Arrestingly beautiful. *The New York Times Book Review*

His preternatural facility for description, the dreamy thickness of his prose, speaks not only to the sheer pleasure his fiction affords, but to the philosophical stakes of that pleasure. *Los Angeles Review of Books*

Steadily absorbing, lit up by pages of startling insight and harrowing honesty, *My Struggle* introduces into world literature a singular character and immerses us in his fascinating Underground Man consciousness. PHILIP L

Intense and vital . . . so powerfully alive to death. JAMES WOOD, *The New*

$27
ISBN 978-0-914671-00-8
52700>
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08-ABD-589

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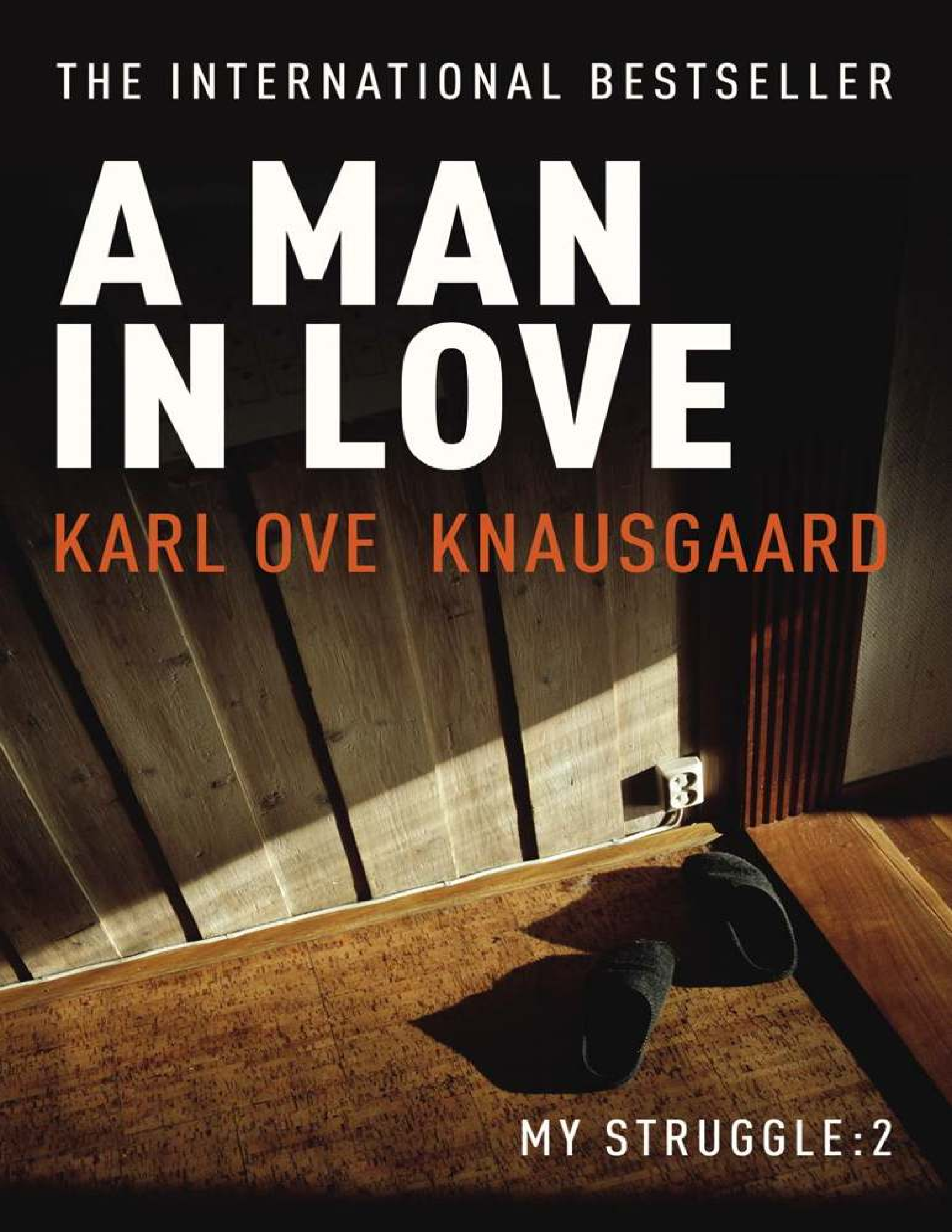
A MAN IN LOVE

KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD



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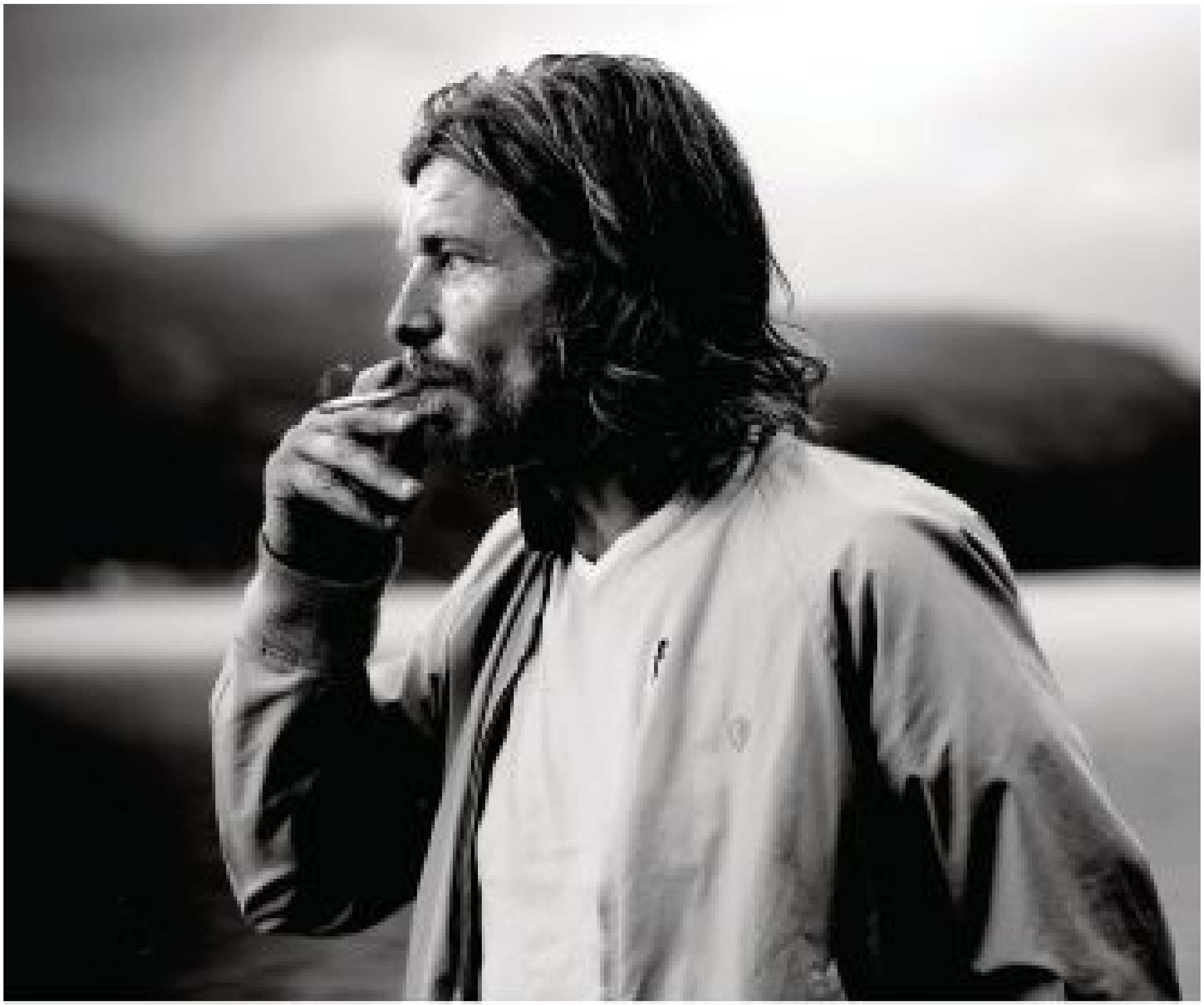

MY STRUGGLE

BOOK 2

KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD

"Perhaps the most significant literary enterprise of our time."

—**RACHEL CUSK, *THE GUARDIAN***

About the Book

Karl Ove Knausgaard leaves his wife and everything he knows in Oslo for a fresh start in Stockholm. There he strikes up a deep and competitive friendship with Geir and pursues Linda, a beautiful poet who captivated him years ago.

A Man in Love, the second book of six in the *My Struggle* cycle, sees Knausgaard write of tempestuous relationships, the trials of parenthood and an urge to create great art. His singular insight and exhilarating honesty must be read to be believed.

My Struggle: Book 2

Karl Ove Knausgaard

Translated from the Norwegian by
Don Bartlett

Harvill Secker
LONDON

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Epub ISBN: 9781448155989
Version 1.0
www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Harvill Secker 2013

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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First published with the title *Min Kamp Andre bok* in 2009
by Forlaget Oktober, Oslo

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by
HARVILL SECKER
Random House
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA

www.vintage-books.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group Limited can be found at: www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781846554698
www.vintage-books.co.uk

Contents

Cover

29 July 2008

About the Author
Also by Karl Ove Knausgaard

A Man In Love

29 July 2008

THE SUMMER HAS been long, and it still isn’t over. I finished the first part of the novel on 26 June, and since then, for more than a month, the nursery school has been closed, and we have had Vanja and Heidi at home with all the extra work that involves. I have never understood the point of holidays, have never felt the need for them and have always just wanted to do more work. But if I must, I must. We had planned to spend the first week at the cabin Linda got us to buy last autumn, intended partly as a place to write, partly as a weekend retreat, but after three days we gave up and returned to town. Putting three infants and two adults on a small allotment, surrounded by people on all sides, with nothing else to do but weed the garden and mow the grass, is not necessarily a good idea, especially if the prevailing atmosphere is disharmonious even before you set out. We had several flaming rows there, presumably to the amusement of the neighbours, and the presence of hundreds of meticulously cultivated gardens populated by all these old semi-naked people made me feel claustrophobic and irritable. Children are quick to detect these moods and play on them, particularly Vanja, who reacts almost instantly to shifts in vocal pitch and intensity, and if they are obvious she starts to do what she knows we like least, eventually causing us to lose our tempers if she persists. Already brimming with frustration, it is practically impossible for us to defend ourselves, and then we have the full woes: screaming and shouting and misery. The following week we hired a car and drove up to Tjörn, outside Gothenburg, where Linda’s friend Mikaela, who is Vanja’s godmother, had invited us to stay in her partner’s summer house. We asked if she knew what it was like living with three children, and whether she was really sure she wanted us there, but she said she was sure; she had planned to do some baking with the children and take them swimming and go crabbing so that we could have some time to ourselves. We took her up on the offer. We drove to Tjörn, parked outside the summer house, on the fringes of the beautiful Sørland countryside, and in we piled with all the kids, plus bags and baggage. The intention had been to stay there all week, but three days later we packed all our stuff into the car and headed south again, to Mikaela and Erik’s obvious relief.

People who don't have children seldom understand what it involves, no matter how mature and intelligent they might otherwise be, at least that was how it was with me before I had children myself. Mikaela and Erik are careerists: all the time I have known Mikaela she has had nothing but top jobs in the cultural sector, while Erik is the director of some multinational foundation based in Sweden. After Tjörn he had a meeting in Panama, before the two of them were due to leave for a holiday in Provence, that's the way their life is: places I have only ever read about are their stamping grounds. So into that came our family, along with baby wipes and nappies, John crawling all over the place, Heidi and Vanja fighting and screaming, laughing and crying, children who never eat at the table, never do what they are told, at least not when we are visiting other people and really *want* them to behave, because they know what is going on. The more there is at stake for us, the more unruly they become, and even though the summer house was large and spacious it was not large or spacious enough for them to be overlooked. Erik pretended to be unconcerned, he wanted to appear generous and child-friendly, but this was continually contradicted by his body language, his arms pinned to his sides, the way he went round putting things back in their places and that faraway look in his eyes. He was close to the things and the place he had known all his life, but distant from those populating it just now, regarding them more or less in the same way one would regard moles or hedgehogs. I knew how he felt, and I liked him. But I had brought all this along with me, and a real meeting of minds was impossible. He had been educated at Oxford and Cambridge, and had worked for several years as a broker in the City, but on a walk he and Vanja took up a mountainside near the sea one day he let her climb on her own several metres ahead of him while he stood stock-still admiring the view, without taking into account that she was only four and incapable of assessing the risk, so with Heidi in my arms I had to jog up and take over. When we were sitting in a café half an hour later – me with stiff legs after the sudden sprint – and I asked him to give John bits of a bread roll I placed beside him, as I had to keep an eye on Heidi and Vanja while finding them something to eat, he nodded, said he would, but he didn't put down the newspaper he was reading, did not even look up, and failed to notice that John, who was half a metre away from him, was becoming more and more agitated and at length screamed until his face went scarlet with frustration, since the bread he wanted was right in front of him but out of his reach. The situation infuriated Linda, sitting at the other end of the table – I could see it in her eyes – but she bit her tongue, made no comment, waited until we were outside and on our own, then she said we should go home. Now. Accustomed to her moods, I said she should keep her mouth shut and refrain from making decisions like that when she was in such a foul temper. That riled her even more of course, and that was how things stayed until we got into the car next morning to leave.

The blue cloudless sky and the patchwork, windswept yet wonderful countryside, together with the children's happiness and the fact that we were in a car, and not a train compartment or on board a plane, which had been the usual mode of travel for the last few years, lightened the atmosphere, but it was not long before we were at it again because we had to eat, and the restaurant we found and stopped at turned out to belong to a yacht club, but, the waiter informed me, if we just crossed the bridge, walked into town, perhaps 500 metres, there was another restaurant, so twenty minutes later we found ourselves on a high, narrow and very busy bridge, grappling with two buggies, hungry, and with only an industrial area in sight. Linda was furious, her eyes were black, we were always getting into situations like this, she hissed, no one else did, we were useless, now we should be eating, the whole family, we could have been really enjoying ourselves, instead we were out here in a gale-force wind with cars whizzing by, suffocating from exhaust fumes on this bloody bridge. Had I ever seen any other families with three children outside in situations like this? The road we followed ended at a metal gate emblazoned with the logo of a security firm. To reach the town, which looked run-down and cheerless, we had to take a detour through the industrial zone for at least fifteen minutes. I would have left her because she was always moaning, she always wanted something else, never did anything to improve things, just moaned, moaned, moaned, could never face up to difficult situations, and if reality did not live up to her expectations, she blamed me in matters large and small. Well, under normal circumstances we would have gone our separate ways, but as always the practicalities brought us together again: we had one car and two buggies, so you just had to act as if what had been said had not been said after all, push the stained rickety buggies over the bridge and back to the posh yacht club, pack them into the car, strap in the children and drive to the nearest McDonald’s, which turned out to be at a petrol station outside Gothenburg city centre, where I sat on a bench eating a sausage while Vanja and Linda ate theirs in the car. John and Heidi were asleep. We scrapped the planned trip to Liseberg Amusement Park, it would only make things worse given the atmosphere between us now; instead, a few hours later, we stopped on impulse at a shoddy so-called ‘Fairytale Land’, where everything was of the poorest quality, and took the children first to a small ‘circus’ consisting of a dog jumping through hoops held at knee height, a stout manly-looking lady, probably from somewhere in eastern Europe, who, clad in a bikini, tossed the same hoops in the air and swung them around her hips, tricks which every single girl in my first school mastered, and a fair-haired man of my age with curly-toed shoes, a turban and several spare tyres rolling over his harem trousers, who filled his mouth with petrol and breathed fire four times in the direction of the low ceiling. John and Heidi were staring so hard their eyes were popping out. Vanja had her mind on the lottery stall we had passed, where you could win cuddly toys, and kept pinching me and asking when the performance would finish. Now and then I looked across at Linda. She was sitting with Heidi on her lap and had tears in her eyes. As we came out and started walking down towards the tiny fairground, each pushing a buggy, past a large swimming pool with a long slide, behind whose top towered an enormous troll, perhaps thirty metres high, I asked her why.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘But circuses have always moved me.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, it’s so sad, so small and so cheap. And at the same time so beautiful.’

‘Even this one?’

‘Yes. Didn’t you see Heidi and John? They were absolutely hypnotised.’

‘But not Vanja,’ I said with a smile. Linda returned the smile.

‘What?’ Vanja said, turning. ‘What did you say, dad?’

‘I just said that all you were thinking about at the circus was that cuddly toy you saw.’

Vanja smiled in the way she often did when we talked about something she had done. Happy, but also keen, ready for more.

‘What did I do?’ she asked.

‘You pinched my arm,’ I answered. ‘And said you wanted to go on the lottery.’

‘Why?’ she asked.

‘How should I know?’ I said. ‘I suppose you wanted that cuddly toy.’

‘Shall we do it now then?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It’s down there.’

I pointed down the tarmac path to the fairground amusements we could make out through the trees.

‘Can Heidi have one as well?’ she asked.

‘If she wants,’ Linda said.

‘She does,’ Vanja said, bending down to Heidi, who was in the buggy. ‘Do you want one, Heidi?’

‘Yes,’ Heidi said.

We had to spend ninety kroner on tickets before each of them held a little cloth mouse in their hands. The sun burned down from the sky; the air beneath the trees was still, all sorts of shrill, plinging sounds from the amusements mixed with 80s disco music from the stalls around us. Vanja wanted candyfloss, so ten minutes later we were sitting at a table outside a kiosk with angry persistent wasps buzzing around us in the boiling-hot sun, which ensured that the sugar stuck to everything it came into contact with – the tabletop, the back of the buggy, arms and hands – to the children’s loud disgruntlement; this was not what they envisaged when they saw the container with the swirling sugar in the kiosk. My coffee tasted bitter and was almost undrinkable. A small dirty boy pedalled towards us on his tricycle, straight into Heidi’s buggy, then looked at us expectantly. He was dark-haired and dark-eyed, possibly Romanian or Albanian or perhaps Greek. After pushing his tricycle into the buggy a few more times, he positioned himself in such a way that we couldn’t get out and he stood there with eyes downcast.

‘Shall we go?’ I asked.

‘Heidi wanted a ride,’ Linda said. ‘Can’t we do that first?’

A powerfully built man with protruding ears, also dark-skinned, came and lifted the boy and bike and carried him to the open space in front of the kiosk, patted him on the head a couple of times and went over to the mechanical octopus he was operating. The arms were fitted with small baskets you could sit in, which rose and fell as they slowly rotated. The boy began to cycle across the entrance area where summer-clad visitors were constantly arriving and leaving.

‘Of course,’ I said, and got up, took Vanja’s and Heidi’s candyflosses and threw them in the waste bin, and pushed John, who was tossing his head from side to side to catch all the interesting things going on, across the square to the path leading up to ‘Cowboy Town’. But Cowboy Town, which was a pile of sand with three newly built sheds labelled, respectively, MINE, SHERIFF and PRISON, the latter two covered with WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE posters, surrounded on one side by birch trees and a ramp where some youngsters were skateboarding and on the other by a horse-riding area, was closed. Inside the fence, just opposite the mine, the eastern European woman sat on a rock, smoking.

‘Ride!’ Heidi said, looking around.

‘We’ll have to go to the donkey ride near the entrance,’ Linda said.

John threw his bottle of water to the ground. Vanja crawled under the fence and ran over to the mine. When Heidi saw that she scrambled out of her buggy and followed. I spotted a red and white Coke machine at the rear of the sheriff’s office, dredged up the contents of my shorts pocket and studied them: two hairslides, one hairpin with a ladybird motif, a lighter, three stones and two small white shells Vanja had found in Tjörn, a twenty-krone note, two five-krone coins and nine krone coins.

‘I’ll have a smoke in the meantime,’ I said. ‘I’ll be down there.’

I motioned towards a tree trunk at the far end of the area. John raised both arms.

‘Go on, then,’ Linda said, lifting him up. ‘Are you hungry, John?’ she asked. ‘Oh, it’s so hot. Is there no shade anywhere so that I can sit down with him?’

‘Up there,’ I said, pointing to the restaurant at the top of the hill. It resembled a train, with the counter in the locomotive and the tables in the carriage. Not a soul was to be seen up there. Chairs were propped against the tables.

‘That’s what I’ll do,’ Linda said. ‘And feed him. Will you keep an eye on the girls?’

I nodded, went to the Coke machine and bought a can, sat down on the tree trunk, lit a cigarette, looked up at the hastily constructed shed where

Vanja and Heidi were running in and out of the doorway.

‘It’s pitch black in here!’ Vanja shouted. ‘Come and look!’

I raised my hand and waved, which fortunately appeared to satisfy her. She was still clutching the mouse to her chest with one hand.

Where was Heidi’s mouse, by the way?

I allowed my gaze to drift up the hill. And there it lay, right outside the sheriff’s office, with its head in the sand. At the restaurant Linda dragged a chair to the wall, sat down and began to breastfeed John, who at first kicked out, then lay quite still. The circus lady was making her way up the hill. A horsefly stung me on the calf. I smacked it with such force that it splattered all over my skin. The cigarette tasted terrible in the heat, but I resolutely inhaled the smoke into my lungs, stared up at the tops of the spruce trees, such an intense green where the sun caught them. Another horsefly landed on my calf. I lashed out at it, got up, threw the cigarette to the ground and walked towards the girls with the half-full still cold can of Coke in my hand.

‘Daddy, you go round the back while we’re inside and see if you can see us through the cracks, OK?’ Vanja said, squinting up at me.

‘All right, then,’ I said, and walked round the shed. Heard them banging around and giggling inside. Bent my head to one of the cracks and peered in. But the difference between the light outside and the darkness inside was too great for me to see anything.

‘Daddy, are you outside?’ Vanja shouted.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Can you see us?’

‘No. Have you become invisible?’

‘Yes!’

When they came out I pretended I couldn’t see them. Focused my eyes on Vanja and called her name.

‘I’m *here*,’ she said, waving her arms.

‘Vanja?’ I shouted. ‘Where are you? Come out now. It’s not funny any more.’

‘I’m here! Here!’

‘Vanja?’

‘Can’t you see me, really? Am I really invisible?’

She sounded boundlessly happy although I sensed a touch of unease in her voice. At that moment John started screaming. I looked up. Linda got up clutching him to her breast. It was unlike John to cry like that.

‘Oh, there you are!’ I said. ‘Have you been there the whole time?’

‘Ye-es,’ she said.

‘Can you hear John crying?’

She nodded and looked up.

‘We’ll have to go then,’ I said. ‘Come on.’

I reached out for Heidi’s hand.

‘Don’t want to,’ she said. ‘Don’t want to hold hands.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘Hop into the buggy then.’

‘Don’t want buggy,’ she said.

‘Shall I carry you then?’

‘Don’t want carry.’

I went down and fetched the buggy. When I returned she had clambered onto the fence. Vanja was sitting on the ground. At the top of the hill Linda had left the restaurant; she was standing in the road now looking down, waving to us with one hand. John was still screaming.

‘I don’t want to walk,’ Vanja said. ‘My legs are tired.’

‘You’ve hardly walked a step all day,’ I said. ‘How can your legs be tired?’

‘Haven’t got any legs. You’ll have to carry me.’

‘No, Vanja, that’s rubbish. I can’t carry you.’

‘Yes, you can.’

‘Get in the buggy, Heidi,’ I said. ‘Then we’ll go for a ride.’

‘Don’t want buggy,’ she said.

‘I haven’t got any leeegs!’ Vanja said. She screamed the last word.

I felt the fury rising within me. My impulse was to lift them up and carry them, one pinned under each arm. This would not be the first time I had gone off with them kicking and screaming in my arms, oblivious of passers-by, who always stared with such interest when we had our little scenes, as though I was wearing a monkey mask or something.

But this time I managed to regain my composure.

‘Could you get into the buggy, Vanja?’ I asked.

‘If you lift me,’ she said.

‘No, you’ll have to do it yourself.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I haven’t got any legs.’

If I didn’t give way we would be standing here until the next day, for though Vanja lacked patience and gave up as soon as she met any resistance, she was infinitely stubborn when it was a question of getting her own way.

‘OK,’ I said, lifting her up into the buggy. ‘You win again.’

‘Win what?’ she asked.

‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘Come on, Heidi. We’re going.’

I lifted her off the fence, and after a couple of half-hearted ‘No, don’t want’s we were on our way up the hill, Heidi on my arm, Vanja in the buggy. As we passed, I picked up Heidi’s cloth mouse, brushed off the dirt and popped it into the net shopping bag.

‘I don’t know what’s up with him,’ Linda said as we arrived at the top. ‘He suddenly started crying. Perhaps he’s been stung by a wasp or something. Look . . .’

She pulled up his jumper and showed me a small red mark. He squirmed in her grip, his face red and his hair wet from all the screaming.

‘Poor little lad,’ she said.

‘I’ve been bitten by a horsefly,’ I said. ‘Perhaps that’s what happened. Put him in the buggy though and we can get going. We can’t do anything about it now anyway.’

When he was strapped in, he wriggled about and bored his head down, still screaming.

‘Let’s get into the car,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ Linda replied. ‘But I’ll have to change him first. There’s a nappy changing room down there.’

I nodded, and we began to walk down. Several hours had passed since we arrived, the sun was lower in the sky and something about the light it cast over the trees reminded me of summer afternoons at home when we either drove to the far side of the island with mum and dad to swim in the sea or walked down to the knoll in the sound beyond the estate. The memories filled my mind for a few seconds, not in the form of specific events, more as atmospheres, smells, sensations. The way the light, which in the middle of the day was whiter and more neutral, became fuller later in the afternoon and began to make the colours darker. Oh, running on the path through the shady forest on a summer day in the 70s! Diving into the salt water and swimming across to Gjerstadholmen on the other side! The sun shining on the sea-smoothed rocks, turning them almost golden. The stiff dry grass growing in the hollows between them. The sense of the depths beneath the surface of the water, so dark as it lay in the shadow beneath the mountainside. The fish gliding by. And then the treetops above us, their slender branches trembling in the sea breeze! The thin bark and the smooth leg-like tree beneath. The green foliage . . .

‘There it is,’ Linda said, nodding towards a small octagonal wooden construction. ‘Will you wait?’

‘We’ll amble down,’ I said.

In the copse inside the fence there were two gnomes carved in wood. That was how the place justified its status as Fairytale Land.

‘Look, *tompen*!’ Heidi shouted. *Tompen*, or in correct Swedish *tomten,* was a gnome.

She had been fixated on gnomes for quite a time. Well into spring she had pointed to the veranda where the gnome had appeared on Christmas Eve and said ‘*Tompen*’s coming,’ and when she played with one of the presents he had given her she always stated first of all where it had come from. What sort of status he had for her, however, was not easy to say, because when she spotted the gnome outfit in my wardrobe after Christmas she wasn’t in the least bit surprised or upset. We hadn’t said a word; she just pointed and shouted ‘*Tompen*’ as if that was where he changed his clothes, and when we met the old tramp with the white beard who hung around in the square outside our house she would stand up in the buggy and shout ‘*Tompen*’ at the top of her lungs.

I leaned forward and kissed her chubby cheek.

‘No kisses!’ she said.

I laughed.

‘Can I kiss you then, Vanja?’

‘No!’ Vanja said.

A meagre though regular stream of people flowed past us, most wearing summery clothes – shorts, T-shirts and sandals – some in jogging pants and trainers, a striking number of them fat, almost none well dressed.

‘My daddy in prison!’ Heidi shouted with glee.

Vanja turned in the buggy.

‘No, daddy’s not in prison!’ she said.

I laughed again and stopped.

'We'll have to wait for mummy here,' I said.

Your daddy's in prison: that was what kids in the nursery used to say to one another. Heidi had understood it as a great compliment, and often said it when she wanted to boast about me. Last time we were returning from the cabin, according to Linda, she had said it to an elderly lady sitting behind them on the bus. My daddy's in prison. As I hadn't been there, but was standing at the bus stop with John, the comment had been left hanging in the air, unchallenged.

I leaned forward and wiped the sweat off my forehead with my T-shirt sleeve.

'Can I have another ticket, daddy?' Vanja said.

'Nope,' I said. 'You've already won a cuddly toy!'

'Nice daddy, another one?' she said.

I turned and saw Linda walking over. John was sitting upright in the buggy and seemed content under his sun hat.

'Everything OK?' I said.

'Mm. I bathed the sting in cold water. He's tired, though.'

'He'll sleep in the car then,' I said.

'What time do you think it is?'

'Half past three maybe?'

'Home by eight then?'

'Or thereabouts.'

Once again we crossed the tiny fairground, passed the pirate ship, a pathetic wooden façade with gangways behind, where one-legged or one-armed men with headscarves brandished swords, the llama and ostrich enclosures, the small paved area where some kids rode four-wheelers and finally arrived at the entrance, where there was a kind of obstacle course, a few logs, that is, and some plank walls with netting in between, a stand with a bungee trampoline and a donkey-riding ring, where we stopped. Linda took Heidi, carried her to the queue and put a helmet on her head, while Vanja and I stood watching by the fence with John.

There were four donkeys in the ring at a time, led by parents. The circuit was no more than thirty metres in length, but most of the animals took a long time to complete it because these were donkeys, not ponies, and donkeys stop when the whim takes them. Desperate parents tugged at the reins with all their strength, but the creatures would not budge. In vain they patted them on their flanks; the accursed donkeys were as motionless as ever. One of the children was crying. The woman taking the tickets kept shouting advice to the parents. Pull as hard as you can! Harder! Just pull, they don’t mind! Hard! That’s the way, that’s it!

‘Can you see, Vanja?’ I said. ‘The donkeys are refusing to move!’

She laughed. I was happy because she was happy. At the same time I was a little concerned about how Linda would cope; she wasn’t much more patient than Vanja. But when it was her turn, she managed with aplomb. Whenever the donkey stopped she turned round and stood with her back to its flank while making smacking noises with her lips. In her youth she had ridden horses, they had formed a large part of her life, so that must have been how she knew what to do.

Heidi was beaming astride the donkey’s back. When the donkey no longer responded to her trick Linda pulled so hard on the bridle it was as if there was no room left for any obstinacy.

‘You’re such a good rider!’ I called to Heidi. Looked down at Vanja. ‘Do you want a go?’

Vanja firmly shook her head. Straightened her glasses. She had ridden ponies from the age of eighteen months, and the autumn we moved to Malmö, when she was two and a half, she had started at a riding school. It was in the middle of Folkets Park, a sad down-at-heel riding hall with sawdust on the ground, which was a wonderful experience for her, she absorbed everything and wanted to talk about it when the lesson was over. She sat erect on her straggly pony and was led round and round by Linda, or on those occasions I went with her on my own, by one of the eleven- or twelve-year-old girls who seemed to spend their lives there, while an instructor walked about in the middle telling them what to do. It didn’t matter that Vanja wouldn’t always understand the instructions; the main thing was the experience of the horses and the environment around them. The stable, the cat that had kittens in the hay, the list of who was going to ride which horse that afternoon, the helmet she chose, the moment the horse was led into the hall, the riding itself, the cinnamon bun and the apple juice she had in the café afterwards. That was the high point of the week. But things changed during the course of the following autumn. They had a new instructor, and Vanja, who looked older than her four years, came face to face with demands she couldn’t meet. Even though Linda told the instructor, things didn’t get any better and Vanja began to protest when she had to go – she didn’t want to go, not at all – and in the end we stopped. Even when she saw Heidi riding the little donkey in the park free of any demands, she didn’t want a ride.

Another thing we had signed her up for was a playgroup where the children sometimes sang together, but also did drawings and various other creative activities. The second time she went they were supposed to draw a house, and Vanja had coloured the grass blue. The playgroup leader had gone over to her and said grass wasn’t blue but green. Could she do another one? Vanja had torn up her drawing and then shown her annoyance in a way which made the children’s parents raise their eyebrows and consider themselves lucky to have the well-brought-up children they had. Vanja is a great many things, but above all she is sensitive, and the fact that this attitude is already hardening – and it is – causes me concern. Seeing her grow up also changes my view of my own upbringing, not so much because of the quality but the quantity, the sheer amount of time you spend with your children, which is immense. So many hours, so many days, such an infinite number of situations that crop up and are lived through. From my own childhood I remember only a handful of incidents, all of which I regarded as momentous but which I now understand were a few events among many, which completely expunges their meaning, for how can I know that those particular episodes that lodged themselves in my mind were decisive, and not all the others of which I remember nothing?

When I discuss such topics with Geir, with whom I talk on the telephone for an hour every day, he is wont to quote Sven Stolpe, who has written somewhere about Bergman that he would have been Bergman irrespective of where he had grown up, implying, in other words, that you are who you are whatever your surroundings. What shapes you is the way you are towards your family rather than the family itself. When I was growing up I was taught to look for the explanation of all human qualities, actions and phenomena in the environment in which they originated. Biological or genetic determiners, the givens, that is, barely existed as an option, and when they did they were viewed with suspicion. Such an attitude can at first sight appear humanistic, inasmuch as it is intimately bound up with the notion that all people are equal, but upon closer examination it could just as well be an expression of a mechanistic attitude to man, who, born empty, allows his life to be shaped by his surroundings. For a long time I took a purely theoretical standpoint on the issue, which is actually so fundamental that it can be used as a springboard for any debate – if environment is the operative factor, for example, if man at the outset is both equal and malleable and the good man can be shaped by engineering his surroundings, hence my parents' generation's belief in the state, the education system and politics, hence their desire to reject everything that had been and hence their new truth, which is not found within man's inner being, in his detached uniqueness, but on the contrary in areas external to his intrinsic self, in the universal and collective, perhaps expressed in its clearest form by Dag Solstad, who has always been the chronicler of his age, in a text from 1969 containing his famous statement 'We won't give the coffee pot wings': out with spirituality, out with feeling, in with a new materialism, but it never struck them that the same attitude could lie behind the demolition of old parts of town to make way for roads and car parks, which naturally the intellectual left opposed, and perhaps it has not been possible to be aware of this until now, when the link between the idea of equality and capitalism, the welfare state and liberalism, Marxist materialism and the consumer society is obvious because the biggest equality creator of all is money, it levels all differences, and if your character and your fate are entities that can be shaped, money is the most natural shaper, and this gives rise to the fascinating phenomenon whereby crowds of people assert their individuality and originality by shopping in an identical way, while those who once ushered all this in with their affirmation of equality, their emphasis on material values and belief in change, are now inveighing against their own handiwork, which they believe the enemy created, but like all simple reasoning this is not wholly true either: life is not a mathematical quantity, it has no theory, only practice, and though it is tempting to understand a generation's radical rethink of society as being based on its view of the relationship between heredity and environment, this temptation is literary and consists more in the pleasure of speculating, that is of weaving one's thoughts through the most disparate areas of human activity, than in the pleasure of proclaiming the truth. The sky is low in Solstad's books, they show an incredible awareness of the currents in modern times, from the feeling of alienation in the 60s, the celebration of political initiatives at the beginning of the 70s, and then, just as the winds of change were starting to blow, to the distance-taking at the end. These weathervane-like conditions need be neither a strength nor a weakness for a writer, but simply a part of his material, a part of his orientation, and in Solstad's case the most significant feature has always been located elsewhere, namely in his language, which sparkles with its new old-fashioned elegance, and radiates a unique lustre, inimitable and full of elan. This language cannot be learned, this language cannot be bought for money and therein lies its value. It is not the case that we are born equal and that the conditions of life make our lives unequal, it is the opposite, we are born unequal, and the conditions of life make our lives more equal.

When I think of my three children it is not only their distinctive faces that appear before me, but also the quite distinct feeling they radiate. This feeling, which is constant, is what they 'are' for me. And what they 'are' has been present in them ever since the first day I saw them. At that time they could barely do anything, and the little bit they could do, like sucking on a breast, raising their arms as reflex actions, looking at their surroundings, imitating, they could all do that, thus what they 'are' has nothing to do with qualities, has nothing to do with what they can or can't do but is more a kind of light that shines within them.

Their character traits, which slowly began to reveal themselves after only a few weeks, have never changed either, and so different are they inside each of them that it is difficult to imagine the conditions we provide for them, through our behaviour and ways of being, have any decisive significance. John has a mild, friendly temperament, loves his sisters, planes, trains and buses. Heidi is extrovert and talks to everyone she meets; she's obsessed with shoes and clothes, wants to wear only dresses, and is at ease with her little body, such as when she stood naked in front of the swimming pool mirror and said to Linda, Mummy, look what a nice bottom I've got! She hates being reprimanded; if you raise your voice to her she turns away and starts crying. Vanja, on the other hand, gives as good as she gets, has quite a temper, a strong will, is sensitive and gets on easily with people. She has a good memory, knows by heart most of the books we read to her as well as lines in the films we see. She has a sense of humour and is always making us laugh when we are at home, but when she is outside she is easily affected by what goes on around her, and if the situation is too new or unaccustomed she goes into her shell. Shyness made its appearance when she was around seven months, and manifested itself through her shutting her eyes as if asleep whenever a stranger approached; she simply shut her eyes, as if she were asleep. She still does that on rare occasions; if she is sitting in the car and we bump into a parent from the nursery, for example, her eyes suddenly close. At the nursery in Stockholm, which was directly opposite our flat, after a tentative, fumbling start, she attached herself to a boy of her age called Alexander, and together they ran riot on the playground equipment, so much so that the staff said they sometimes had to protect Alexander from her – he couldn’t always handle her intensity. But by and large he brightened up when she came, and was sorry when she left, and since then she has always preferred to play with boys; there is something about their physical and unrestrained side she obviously needs, perhaps because it is uncomplicated and easily gives her a feeling of control.

When we moved to Malmö she went to a new nursery, near the Western Harbour, in the newly built part of town where the most affluent lived, and as Heidi was so small I was the one who had to be responsible for settling her in. Every morning we cycled through the town, past the old shipbuilding yards and out towards the sea, Vanja with her little helmet on her head and her arms around me, me with my knees at stomach height on the undersized ladies’ bike, light-hearted and happy, for everything in the town was still new to me, and the shifts of light in the morning and afternoon sky had still not been dulled by the debilitating gaze of routine. I thought it would be no more than a transitional phase, Vanja telling me first thing every morning, with an occasional tear, that she didn’t want to go to the nursery; she would like it after a while, of course she would. But when we arrived she would not budge from my lap, no matter what the three young women who comprised the staff enticed her with. I thought it would be best to throw her in at the deep end, just walk away and leave her to fend for herself, but neither they nor Linda would hear of such brutality, so I sat there on a chair in a corner of the room with Vanja on my lap, surrounded by children at play, with the sun blazing outside, but the weather became gradually more autumnal as the days passed. In the break, for a snack consisting of apple and pear slices served by the staff in the yard, she would only take part if we sat ten metres away from the others, and when I agreed to that, me with an apologetic smile on my face, it was no surprise to me, for this was my way of relating to other people: how had she, only two and a half years old, managed to pick it up? Of course the staff eventually succeeded in coaxing her away from me, and I was able to cycle back to do some writing while she shed heart-rending tears, and after a month had passed I dropped her off and picked her up as normal. But sometimes in the mornings she still said she didn't want to go, still cried now and then, and when another nursery close to our flat rang to tell us they had a place free we didn't hesitate. It was called Lodjuret and was a parents' cooperative. That meant that all the parents had to put in two weeks' work a year on the staff, as well as filling one of the many administrative or practical posts. How far this nursery was to eat into our lives we had no idea; we talked only of the advantages it would bring: we would get to know Vanja's playmates and, through the duties and meetings, their parents. It was normal, we were told, for the children to go home together, so soon we would have some relief when we needed it. Furthermore, and this was perhaps the weightiest argument, we didn't know anyone in Malmö, not a soul, and this was an easy way to make contacts. And it was true: after a couple of weeks we were invited to one child's birthday party. Vanja was really looking forward to it, not least because she had just got a pair of gold-coloured party shoes she was going to wear, while at the same time not wanting to go, understandably enough, since she still didn't know the others very well. The invitation lay on the shelf in the nursery one Friday afternoon, the party was a week later on the Saturday, and every morning that week Vanja asked if it was Stella's party that day. When we said no, she asked if it was the day after tomorrow; that was about the furthest extent of the future horizon for her. The morning we were at last able to nod and say yes, we were going to Stella's today, she jumped out of bed and headed straight for the cupboard to put on her golden shoes. A couple of times every hour she asked whether it would soon be time to go, and it could have been an unbearable morning of nagging and scenes, but fortunately there were activities to fill it with. Linda took her to a bookshop to buy a present, afterwards they sat at the kitchen table and made a birthday card. We bathed the girls, combed their hair and put on their white stockings and party dresses. Then Vanja's mood suddenly changed – she didn't want to wear stockings or a dress, there was no question of her going to any party, and she threw the golden shoes at the wall – but after patiently sitting through the few minutes the outburst lasted we managed to get her into everything, including even the white knitted shawl she had been given for Heidi's christening, and when at last the girls were sitting in the buggy in front of us they were again filled with expectation. Vanja was serious and quiet, her golden shoes in one hand and the present in the other, but when she turned to say something to us it was with a smile on her lips. Beside her sat Heidi, excited and happy, for although she didn't understand where we were going, the clothes and preparations must have given her an indication that something unusual was in the offing. The apartment where the party was to take place was a few hundred metres up the street where we lived. It was full of the bustle that marks late Saturday afternoons, the last heavily laden shoppers mingling with kids who have come to the town centre to hang around outside Burger King and McDonald's, and the stream of traffic passing is no longer purely with a purpose in mind, families on their way to and from multi-storey car parks. Now there are more and more of the low shiny black cars with the bass throbbing through the bodywork driven by immigrant men in their twenties. Outside the supermarket there were so many people that we had to stop for a moment, and when the skinny wizened old lady who usually sat there in her wheelchair at this time of day caught sight of Vanja and Heidi she leaned towards them, rang the bell she had hanging from a stick and beamed a smile that was clearly meant to be engaging but to the girls must have been terrifying. But they said nothing, just looked at her. On the other side of the entrance sat a drug addict of my age, with a cap in his outstretched hand. He had a cat inside a cage next to him, and when Vanja saw it she turned to us.

'When we move to the country I want a cat,' she said.

'Cat!' Heidi said, pointing.

I steered the buggy over the kerb onto the road to pass three people walking so damned slowly, probably thought they owned the pavement, walked a few metres as fast as I could and steered back onto the pavement after we had passed them.

'That could be a long way off, you know, Vanja,' I said.

'You can't keep a cat in an apartment,' she said.

'Exactly,' Linda said.

Vanja looked ahead again. She was squeezing the bag containing the present with both hands.

I looked at Linda.

'What was his name again, Stella's father?'

'My mind's gone blank . . .' she said. 'Oh, it was Erik, wasn't it?'

'That's right,' I said. 'What was his job again?'

'I'm not sure,' she said. 'Something to do with design.'

We went past Gottgruvan and both Vanja and Heidi leaned forward to look through the window. Next door was a pawnbroker's. The shop beside that sold a variety of small statues and jewellery, angels and Buddhas, as well as joss sticks, tea, soap and other New Age knick-knacks. Posters hung in the windows giving information about when yoga gurus and well known clairvoyants were coming to town. On the other side of the street was a clothes shop with cheap brands, Ricco Jeans and Clothing, FASHION FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY, beside it was Taboo, a kind of 'erotic' boutique luring passers-by with dildos and dolls in various negligees and corsets in the window by the door, hidden from the street. Next to it was Bergman Bags and Hats, which must have remained unchanged in terms of interior and range from the day it was founded in the 40s, and Radio City, which had just gone bankrupt but where you could still see a window full of illuminated TV screens, surrounded by a wide selection of electrical goods, with prices written on large almost luminous orange and green bits of cardboard. The rule was that the further you advanced up the street, the cheaper and more dubious the shops became. The same applied to the people frequenting the area. Unlike in Stockholm, where we had also lived in the centre, the poverty and misery which existed here were visible in the street. I liked that.

'Here it is,' Linda said, stopping by a door. Outside a bingo hall a little further on three pale-skinned women in their fifties stood smoking. Linda's gaze glided down the list of names beside the intercom; she pressed a number. Two buses thundered past one after the other. Then the door buzzed, and we went into the dark hallway, parked the buggy by the wall and went up the two flights of stairs to the flat, me with Heidi in my arms, Linda holding Vanja's hand. The door was open when we arrived. The inside of the flat was dark too. I felt a certain unease walking straight in, I would have preferred to ring, that would have made our arrival more obvious, because now we were standing in the hall without anyone paying us the slightest attention.

I set Heidi down and took off her jacket. Linda was about to do the same with Vanja, but she protested: her boots were to come off first, then she could put on her golden shoes.

There was a room on either side of the hall. In one, children were playing excitedly; in the other some adults were standing around talking. In the hall, which continued deeper into the flat, I saw Erik standing with his back to us chatting to a mother and father from the nursery.

'Hello!' I said.

He didn't turn. I laid Heidi's jacket on top of a coat on a chair and met Linda's eye. She was looking for somewhere to hang Vanja's jacket.

'Shall we go in then?' she said.

Heidi wrapped her arms round my leg. I lifted her up and took a few steps forward. Erik turned.

'Hi,' he said.

'Hi,' I replied.

'Hi, Vanja!' he said.

Vanja turned away.

'Aren't you going to give Stella her present?' I asked.

'Stella, Vanja's here!' Erik said.

'You do it,' Vanja said.

Stella got up from the group of children on the floor. She smiled.

'Happy birthday, Stella!' I said. 'Vanja's got a present for you.'

I looked down at Vanja. 'Do you want to give it to her?'

'You do it,' she said in a low voice.

I took the present and passed it to Stella.

'It's from Vanja and Heidi,' I said.

'Thank you,' she said, and tore off the paper. When she saw it was a book she put it on the table next to the other presents and went back to the other children.

'Well?' said Erik. 'Everything OK?'

'Yes, fine,' I said. I could feel my shirt sticking to my chest. Was it noticeable? I wondered.

'What a nice apartment,' Linda said. 'Are there three bedrooms?'

‘Yes,’ Erik said.

He always looked so wily, always looked as though he had got something on the people he spoke to, it was hard to know where you stood with him; that half-smile of his could equally well have been sarcastic or congenial or tentative. If he’d had a pronounced or strong character, that might well have bothered me, but he was dithery in a weak-minded, irresolute kind of way, so whatever he might be thinking didn’t worry me in the slightest. My attention was focused on Vanja. She was standing close to Linda and looking down at the floor.

‘The others are in the kitchen,’ Erik said. ‘There’s some wine there, if you fancy a glass.’

Heidi had already entered the room, she was standing in front of a shelf with a wooden snail in her hand. It had wheels and a string you could pull.

I nodded to the two parents down the hall.

‘Hi,’ they said.

What was his name, now? Johan? Or Jacob? And hers? Was it Mia? Oh hell. Of course. Robin, that was it.

‘Hi,’ I said.

‘You all right?’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘What about you two?’

‘Everything’s fine, thank you.’

I smiled at them. They smiled back. Vanja let go of Linda and hesitantly entered the room where the children were playing. For a while she stood observing them. Then it was as if she had decided to take the plunge.

‘I’ve got golden shoes!’ she said.

She bent forward and took off one shoe, held it up in the air in case anyone wanted to see. But no one did. When she realised that she put it back on.

‘Wouldn’t you like to play with the children over there?’ I suggested. ‘Can you see? There’ve got a big doll’s house.’

She went over, sat down beside them but did nothing, just sat watching.

Linda lifted Heidi and carried her to the kitchen. I followed. Everyone said hello, we returned the greeting, sat down at the long table, I was by the window. They were talking about cheap air tickets, how they started out dirt cheap, slowly became more expensive as you had to pay one surcharge after another, until you were left with a ticket that cost as much as those from more expensive airlines. Then the topic moved to buying CO_2 quotas and after that to the newly introduced chartered train journeys. I could definitely have offered an opinion about that, but I didn't – small talk is one of the infinite number of talents I haven't mastered – so I sat nodding at what was said, as usual, smiling when others smiled, while ardently wishing myself miles away. In front of the worktop was Stella's mother, Frida, making some kind of salad dressing. She was no longer with Erik, and even though they were good at working together where Stella was concerned, you could still occasionally notice the tension and irritation between them at committee meetings in the nursery. She was blonde, had high cheekbones and narrow eyes, a long, slim body, and she knew how to dress, but she was much too pleased with herself, too self-centred for me to find her attractive. I have no problem with uninteresting or unoriginal people – they may have other, more important attributes, such as warmth, consideration, friendliness, a sense of humour or talents such as being able to make a conversation flow to generate an atmosphere of ease around them, the ability to make a family function – but I feel almost physically ill in the presence of boring people who consider themselves especially interesting and who blow their own trumpets.

She placed the dish of what I thought was a dressing but which turned out to be a 'dip' on a board beside a dish of carrot sticks and one of cucumber sticks. At that moment Vanja came into the room. When she had located us she came over and stood close.

'I want to go home,' she said softly.

'We've only just got here!' I said.

'We're going to stay a bit longer,' Linda said. 'And look, now you're all getting some goodies!' Was she was referring to the vegetables on the board?

She had to be.

They were crazy in this country.

'I'll go with you,' I said to Vanja. 'Come on.'

'Will you take Heidi as well?' Linda asked.

I nodded, and with Vanja at my heels I carried her into the room where the children were. Frida followed holding the board. She placed it on a little table in the middle of the floor.

'Here's something to eat,' she said. 'Before the cake arrives.'

The children, three girls and a boy, went on playing with the doll's house. In the other room two boys were running around. Erik was in there, by the stereo system with a CD in his hand.

'I've got a bit of Norwegian jazz here,' he said. 'Are you a jazz fan?'

'We-ell . . .' I said.

'Norway has a great jazz scene,' he said.

'Who's that you have there?' I asked.

He showed me the cover. It was a band I had never heard of.

'Great,' I said.

Vanja was standing behind Heidi trying to lift her. Heidi was protesting.

'She says no, Vanja,' I said. 'Put her down.'

As she carried on I went over to them.

'Don't you want a carrot?' I asked.

'No,' Vanja said.

'But there's a dip,' I said. Went over to the table, took a carrot stick and dunked it in the white, presumably cream-based, dip and put it in my mouth.

'Mm,' I said. 'It's good!'

Why couldn't they have given them sausages, ice cream and pop? Lollipops? Jelly? Chocolate pudding?

What a stupid, bloody idiotic country this was. All the young women drank water in such vast quantities it was coming out of their ears, they thought it was 'beneficial' and 'healthy', but all it did was send the graph of incontinent young people soaring. Children ate wholemeal pasta and wholemeal bread and all sorts of weird coarse-grained rice which their stomachs could not digest properly, but that didn't matter because it was 'beneficial', it was 'healthy', it was 'wholesome'. Oh, they were confusing food with the mind, they thought they could eat their way to being better human beings without understanding that food is one thing and the notions food evokes another. And if you said that, if you said anything of that kind, you were either reactionary or just a Norwegian, in other words ten years behind.

'I don't want any,' Vanja said. 'I'm not hungry.'

'OK, OK,' I said. 'But look here. Have you seen this? It's a train set. Shall we build it?'

She nodded, and we sat down behind the other children. I began to lay railway track in an arc while helping Vanja to fit her pieces. Heidi had moved into the other room, where she walked alongside the bookcase studying everything in it. Whenever the two boys' capers became too boisterous she swivelled round and glared at them.

Erik finally put on a CD and turned up the volume. Piano, bass and a myriad of percussion instruments that a certain type of jazz drummer adores – the kind that bangs stones against each other or uses whatever materials happen to be at hand. For me it sometimes meant nothing, and sometimes I found it ridiculous. I hated it when the audience applauded at jazz concerts.

Erik was nodding to the music, then turned, sent me a wink and went into the kitchen. At that moment the doorbell rang. It was Linus and his son Achilles. Linus had a pinch of *snus* under his top lip, was wearing black trousers, a dark coat and beneath it a white shirt. His fair hair was a touch unkempt, the eyes peering into the flat were honest and naïve.

'Hello!' he said. 'How are you doing?'

'Fine,' I said. 'And you?'

'Yep, jogging along.'

Achilles, who was small with large dark eyes, took off his jacket and shoes while staring at the children behind me. Children are like dogs, they always find their own in crowds. Vanja eyed him as well. He was her favourite, he was the one she had chosen to take over the role of Alexander. But after he had removed his outer clothing he went straight over to the other children, and there was nothing Vanja could do to stop him. Linus slipped into the kitchen, and the glint I thought I detected in his eye could only have been his anticipation of a chance to have a chat.

I got up and looked at Heidi. She was sitting beside the yucca plant under the window, taking earth from the pot and making small piles on the floor. I went over to her, lifted her, scraped what I could back with my hands, and went into the kitchen to find a rag. Vanja followed me. Once there, she climbed onto Linda's lap. In the living room Heidi started to cry. Linda sent me a quizzical look.

'I'll see to her,' I said. 'Just need something to wipe with.'

People were crowded round the worktop, it looked as if a meal was being prepared, and instead of squeezing through, I went to the toilet, unfurled a hefty handful of toilet paper, moistened it under the tap and went back to the living room to clean up. I lifted Heidi, who was still crying, and carried her to the bathroom to wash her hands. She wriggled and squirmed in my grip.

‘There, there, sweetheart,’ I said. ‘Soon be done. Just a bit more, now, OK. There we are!’

As we came out the crying subsided, but she wasn’t entirely happy, didn’t want to be put down, just wanted to be in my arms. Robin stood in the living room with his arms crossed following the movements of his daughter Theresa, who was only a few months older than Heidi, although she could already speak in long sentences.

‘Hi,’ he said. ‘Writing at the moment, are you?’

‘Yes, a bit,’ I said.

‘Do you write at home?’

‘Yes, I’ve got my own room.’

‘Isn’t that difficult? I mean, don’t you ever feel like watching TV or washing some clothes or something, instead of writing?’

‘It’s fine. I get less time than if I had an office, but . . .’

‘Yes, of course,’ he said.

He had quite long blond hair that curled at the nape of his neck, clear blue eyes, a flat nose, broad jawbones. He wasn’t strong, nor was he weak. He dressed as if he were in his mid-twenties, even though he was in his late thirties. What went through his mind I had no idea, I didn’t have a clue about what he was thinking, yet there was nothing secretive about him. On the contrary, his face and aura gave the impression of openness. But there was something else nevertheless, I sensed, a shadow of something else. His job was to integrate refugees into the community, he had told me once, and after a few follow-up questions about how many refugees were allowed into the country and so on, I let the matter drop because the opinions and sympathies I had were so far from the norm I assumed he represented that sooner or later they would shine through, whereupon I would come across as the baddie or the idiot, which I saw no reason to encourage.

Vanja, who was sitting on the floor slightly apart from the other children, looked towards us. I put Heidi down, and it was as though Vanja had been waiting for that: she got up at once and came over, took Heidi by the hand and led her to the games shelf, from which she passed her the wooden snail with feelers that whirred when you pulled it along the floor.

‘Look, Heidi!’ she said, taking it out of her hands and putting it on the floor. ‘You pull the string like this. Then it whirrs. See?’

Heidi grabbed the string and pulled. The snail toppled over.

‘No, not like that,’ Vanja said. ‘I’ll show you.’

She placed the snail upright and slowly dragged it a few metres.

‘I’ve got a little sister!’ she said aloud. Robin had gone to the window, where he stood staring out into the backyard. Stella, who was energetic and presumably extra lively since it was her party, excitedly shouted something which I didn’t understand, pointed to one of the two smaller girls, who handed her the doll she was clutching, took out a little buggy, placed the doll in it and began to push it down the hall. Achilles had found his way to Benjamin, a boy eighteen months older than Vanja who usually sat deeply absorbed in something, a drawing or a pile of Lego or a pirate ship with plastic pirates. He was imaginative, independent and well behaved, and was sitting with Achilles now, building the railway track Vanja and I had started. The two smaller girls ran after Stella. Heidi was whimpering. She was probably hungry. I went into the kitchen and sat down beside Linda.

‘Will you go and see to them for a bit?’ I said. ‘I think Heidi’s hungry.’

She nodded, patted my shoulder and got up. It took me a few seconds to figure out the subject of the two conversations going on round the table. One was about the car pool, the other about cars, and I inferred that the conversations must have gone off in opposite directions. The darkness outside the windows was dense, the light in the kitchen was frugal, the creases in the Swedish faces around the table were in shadow, and eyes gleamed in the glow from the candles. Erik and Frida and a woman whose name I didn’t remember were standing at the worktop with their backs to us, preparing food. The tenderness I felt for Vanja filled me to the brim, but there was nothing I could do. I glanced at the person speaking, gave a faint smile whenever there was a witticism and sipped at the glass of red wine someone had put in front of me.

Directly facing me was the only person who stood out. His face was large, his cheeks were scarred, features coarse, eyes intense. The hands on the table were large. He was wearing a 50s-style shirt and blue jeans rolled up to the calf. His hair was also typical of the 50s, and he sported sideboards. But that was not what made him different; it was his personality, you could sense him sitting there, even though he didn't say much.

Once I had been to a party in Stockholm at which a boxer had been present. He was sitting in the kitchen, his physical presence was tangible, and he filled me with a distinct but unpleasant sensation of inferiority. A sensation that I was inferior to him. Strangely enough, the evening was to prove me right. The party was hosted by one of Linda's friends, Cora, her flat was small, so people were standing around chatting everywhere. Music was blaring from a system in the living room. Outside, the streets were white with snow. Linda was heavily pregnant, this was perhaps the last party we would be able to go to before the child was born and changed everything, so even though she was tired, she wanted to try and stay there for a while. I had a drop of wine and chatted to Thomas, who was a photographer and friend of Geir's; he knew Cora through his partner, Marie, who was a poet and had been one of Cora's instructors at Biskops-Arnö Folk High School. Linda was sitting on a chair pulled back from the table because of her stomach, she was laughing and happy, and I was probably the only person aware of the slight introversion and faint glow that had come over her during these last few months. After a while she got up and went out, I smiled at her and turned my attention back to Thomas, who was saying something about the genes of redheads, so prevalent here this evening.

Someone was knocking.

'Cora!' I heard. 'Cora!'

Was it Linda?

I got up and went into the hallway.

The knocking was coming from inside the bathroom.

'Is that you, Linda?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'I think the door lock has jammed. Can you get Cora? There must be some sort of knack to it.'

I went into the living room and tapped Cora on the shoulder. She was holding a plate of food in one hand and a glass of red wine in the other.

'Linda's locked in the bathroom,' I said.

'Oh no!' she said, set the glass and the plate down and dashed out.

They conferred for a while through the locked door. Linda tried to follow the instructions she was given, but nothing helped, the door was and remained jammed. Everyone in the flat was aware of the situation now, the mood was both amused and excited, a whole flock of people were in the hall giving advice to Linda while Cora, flummoxed and anxious, kept saying that Linda was heavily pregnant, we had to do something now. In the end the decision was taken to ring for a locksmith. While we waited for him I stood by the door talking to Linda inside, unpleasantly conscious of the fact that everyone could hear what I said and of my own helplessness. Couldn't I just kick the door in and get her out? Simple and effective?

I had never kicked a door in before. I didn't know how solid it was. Imagine if it didn't budge. How stupid would that look?

The locksmith arrived half an hour later. He laid out a canvas bag of tools on the floor and began to fiddle with the lock. He was small, wore glasses and had the beginnings of a bald patch, said nothing to the circle of people around him, tried one tool after another in vain, the damned lock wouldn't budge. In the end, he gave up, told Cora it was no good, he couldn't get the door open.

'What shall we do then?' Cora asked. 'She's due soon!'

He shrugged.

'You'll have to kick it in,' he said, starting to pack his tools.

Who was going to kick it in?

It had to be me. I was Linda's husband. It was my responsibility.

My heart was pounding.

Should I do it? Take a step back in full view of everyone and kick it with all my might?

What if the door didn't give? What if it swung open and hit Linda?

She would have to take shelter in the corner.

Calmly, I breathed in and out several times. But it didn't help, I was still shaking inside. Attracting attention like this was anathema to me. If there was a risk of failure it was even worse.

Cora looked around.

'We have to kick the door in,' she said. 'Who can do that?'

The locksmith disappeared through the door. If it was going to be me, now was the time to step forward.

But I couldn't bring myself to do it.

'Micke,' Cora said. 'He's a boxer.'

She swivelled to fetch him from the living room.

‘I can ask him,’ I said. In that way I wouldn’t be hiding my humiliation at any rate, I would tell him straight out that I, as Linda’s husband, didn’t dare to kick in the door, I was asking you, as a boxer and a giant, to do it for me.

He was standing by the window with a beer in his hand chatting to two girls.

‘Hello, Micke,’ I said.

He looked at me.

‘She’s still locked in the bathroom. The locksmith couldn’t open the door. Could you kick it in, do you think?’

‘Of course,’ he said, eyeing me for a moment before putting down his beer and going into the hallway. I followed. People moved to the side as he made his way to the door.

‘Are you in there?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ said Linda.

‘Stand as far back from the door as you can. I’m going to kick it in.’

‘Right,’ Linda said.

He waited for a moment. Then he raised his foot and kicked the door with such force that the lock was knocked inwards. Splinters flew.

When Linda came out, some people clapped.

‘Poor you,’ Cora said. ‘I’m so sorry. Subjecting you to that, and then . . .’

Micke turned and went.

‘How are you?’ I asked.

‘Fine,’ Linda said. ‘But I think maybe we should go home soon.’

‘Of course,’ I said.

In the living room the music was turned down as two women in their early thirties were about to read their gushing poems. I passed Linda her jacket, put on mine, said goodbye to Cora and Thomas, my shame seared inside me, but the last duty remained, I had to thank Micke for what he had done. I made my way through the poetry audience and stopped by the window in front of him.

‘Thank you very much,’ I said. ‘You rescued her.’

He blew out his cheeks and shrugged his shoulders. ‘It was nothing.’

In the taxi on the way home I hardly looked at Linda. I hadn’t risen to the task. I had been so cowardly as to let someone else do the job, and all of that was visible in my eyes. I was a miserable wretch.

When we were in bed she asked what was wrong with me. I said I was ashamed that I hadn’t kicked in the door. She looked at me in astonishment. The thought had not even occurred to her. Why should I have done it? I wasn’t the type, was I.

The man sitting on the opposite side of the table radiated some of the same vibes the boxer in Stockholm had. It didn’t have anything to do with the size of his body or muscle mass, for even though several of the men here had well-trained powerful upper bodies they still made a lightweight impression, their presence in the room was fleeting and insignificant like a casual thought. No, there was something else, and whenever I met it I came off worse, I saw myself as the weak trammelled man I was, who lived his life in the world of words. I sat musing on this while taking occasional peeps at him and listening to the ongoing conversation with half an ear. Now it had turned to various teaching styles, and which schools each of them was considering for their children. After a short intermezzo in which Linus talked about a sports day he had attended, the conversation moved to house prices. There was agreement that house prices had soared over recent years, but more in Stockholm than here, and that presumably it was just a question of time before the tide would turn, maybe they would even fall as steeply as they had risen. Then Linus turned to face me.

‘What are house prices like in Norway, then?’ he asked.

‘About the same as here,’ I said. ‘Oslo’s as expensive as Stockholm. It’s a bit cheaper in the provinces.’

He kept his eyes fixed on me for a while, in case I might exploit the opening he had given me, but when this proved not to be the case, he turned back and continued chatting. He had done the very same thing at the first general meeting we had attended, though at that time with a kind of critical undertone, because, as he had put it, the meeting was drawing to a close and Linda and I still hadn’t said anything, the point was that everyone should have their say, that was the whole idea of a parents’ cooperative. I had no idea what to think about the matter under discussion, and it was Linda who, with a faint blush, weighed up the pros and cons on behalf of the family, with the whole assembly staring at her. First on the agenda was whether the nursery should get rid of the cook who was employed there, and instead go for a catering firm, which would be cheaper, and second, if they did that, what kind of food they should opt for: vegetarian or the standard? Lodjuret was actually a vegetarian nursery, that was the principle on which it had been founded in its day, but now only four of the parents were vegetarians, and since the children didn't eat much of the numerous varieties of vegetables that were served up, many parents thought they might as well dispense with the principle. The discussion lasted for several hours and scoured the subject like a trawl net on the seabed. The meat percentage in various types of sausage was brought up; it was one thing that the sausages bought in shops had the meat percentage printed on the label, but quite another what catering companies did with their sausages, because how could you know how much meat they contained? To me sausages were sausages. I didn't have the slightest idea about the world that was opening before my eyes that evening, least of all that there were people who could delve so deeply into it. Wasn't it nice for the children to have a cook who made food for them in their kitchen? I thought but didn't say, and I was beginning to hope that the whole discussion would pass without our having to say anything, before, that is, Linus fixed his astute and naïve eyes on us.

From the living room came the sound of Heidi crying. Again I thought of Vanja. Usually she solved situations like these by doing exactly the same as the others. If they pulled out a chair, she pulled out a chair, if they sat down, she sat down, if they laughed, she laughed, even if she didn't understand what they were laughing at. If they ran around calling a name, she ran around calling a name. That was her method. But Stella had seen through it. Once I happened to be there and heard her say, You just copy us! You're a parrot! A parrot! That hadn't deterred her from continuing, so far the method had proved too successful for that, but now when Stella herself was holding court it probably did inhibit her. I knew she understood what this was all about. Several times she had said the same to Heidi, that she copied her, she was a parrot.

Stella was eighteen months older than Vanja, who admired her above all else. When she was allowed to tag along, it was at Stella's grace, and she had this hold on all the children in the nursery. She was a beautiful child, she had blonde hair and big eyes, was always nicely, sensibly dressed, and the streak of cruelty she possessed was no worse and no better than that displayed by other children at the top of the hierarchy. That was not why I had problems with her. The problems for me were that she was so aware of the impression she made on adults, and the way in which she exploited this charming innocence. During my compulsory duties at the nursery I had never fallen for it. No matter how sparkling the eyes she clapped on me when she asked for something, my reaction remained one of indifference, which of course confused her, and she redoubled her endeavours to charm me. Once she had stayed with us after nursery to go to the park and sat beside Vanja in the double buggy while I carried Heidi on one arm and pushed them with the other. She jumped out a few hundred metres before the park to run the last stretch, which I reacted sharply to. I called her back and said that she was to sit nicely in the buggy until we arrived, there were cars around, couldn’t she see them? She looked at me in surprise, she wasn’t used to that tone, and even though I was not satisfied with the way I had resolved the situation, I also thought that a *No!* was not the worst thing that could befall this creature. But she had taken note of it, because when, half an hour later, I swung them round by their feet to their immense glee, and then knelt down to fight with them, which Vanja loved, especially when she took a run-up and knocked me over onto the grass, Stella, when it was her turn, kicked me on the calf instead, and that was all right once, all right twice, but when she did it a third time I told her, That hurts, that does, just stop it now, Stella, which of course she ignored, now it had become exciting, and she kicked me again, with a loud laugh, and Vanja, who always aped her, also laughed, whereupon I got up, grabbed Stella around the waist and stood her up. ‘Listen to me, you little brat,’ I felt like saying, and would have done had her mother not been coming to collect her in half an hour. ‘Listen, Stella,’ I said instead, harshly, with annoyance, looking her in the eye. ‘When I say no, I mean no. Do you understand?’ She looked down, refusing to answer. I raised her chin. ‘Do you understand?’ I asked again. She nodded, and I let her go. ‘I’m going to sit on that bench over there. You can play on your own until your mother comes.’ Vanja sent me a bemused look. But then she laughed and tugged at Stella. For her, scenes like this were everyday occurrences. Fortunately, Stella dropped the matter at once, for I was really skating on thin ice – what on earth would I do if she began to cry or scream? But she went with Vanja over to the big ‘train’ which was teeming with kids. When her mother came she had two paper cups of latte in her hand. Usually I would have gone as soon as she arrived, but when she passed me a cup of coffee I had no option but to sit down and listen to her chatter on about her job, while squinting into the low November sun and keeping half an eye on the children.

The week when I'd had nursery duty and in principle had been like any employee ran more or less like clockwork; I had worked a lot in institutions before and soon had all the routines off pat, which the staff were not accustomed to seeing with parents, nor was I a stranger to dressing and undressing children, changing their nappies and even playing if it was required. The children reacted to my presence in different ways, of course. For example, one of them who hung around without any friends, a gangling white-haired boy, wanted to crawl up onto my lap all the time, either to have a story read or just to sit there. I played with another one for half an hour after the others had gone, his mother was late, but he forgot all about that when we played pirate ships. To his great delight, I kept adding new features like sharks and marauding boats and fires. A third boy, on the other hand, the oldest there, immediately discovered one of my weak spots by taking a bunch of keys from my pocket while we were at the table eating. The mere fact that I didn't stop him, even though I was angry, allowed him to follow the scent. First of all, he asked if there was a car key. When I shook my head he asked me why not. I haven't got a car, I said. Why not? he asked. I haven't got a licence, I said. Can't you drive a car? he said. Aren't you an adult, then? he asked. All adults can drive cars, can't they? Then he jingled the keys under my nose. I let him do it, thinking he would soon tire of it, but he didn't; on the contrary he persisted. I've got your keys, he said. And you can't get them. He kept jingling them under my nose. The other children watched us, the three members of staff as well. I made the mistake of lunging for the keys. He managed to pull them away in time, and laughed and jeered. Ha, ha, you didn't get them! he crowed. Again I tried not to show my annoyance. He started banging the keys on the table. Don't do that, I said. He just smiled cheekily and persisted. One of the nursery staff told him to stop. And he did. But continued to dangle them from his hand. You'll never get them, he said. Then Vanja broke in.

'Give the keys to daddy!' she said.

What kind of situation was this?

I acted as if nothing was happening, leaned over the food again and went on eating. But the little devil continued to tease me. Jingle, jingle. I decided to let him keep them until we had finished eating. Drank some water, feeling my face strangely flushed over such a tiny matter. Was that what Olaf, the head of the nursery, saw? At any rate, he ordered Jocke to hand back the keys. And Jocke did, without any fuss.

All my adult life I have kept a distance from other people, it has been my way of coping because I come so incredibly close to others in my thoughts and feelings they only have to look away dismissively for a storm to break inside me. That closeness naturally informs my relationship with children too, that is what allows me to sit down and play with them, but as they lack any veneer of courtesy and decency that adults have, this also means they can freely penetrate the outer bulwarks of my personality and then wreak as much havoc as they wish. My only defence, when it all started, was either sheer physical strength, which I was not able to use, or else simply to pretend I wasn’t bothered, possibly the best approach, but something I wasn’t so adept at, since the children, at least the most forward of them, immediately discovered how uncomfortable I was in their presence.

Oh, how undignified this was!

Everything was suddenly turned on its head. I, who wasn’t fond of the nursery Vanja attended, who just wanted it to look after Vanja for me so that I could work in peace for some hours every day without knowing what she was doing or how she was, I who didn’t want any closeness in my life, who could not get enough of distance, could not be alone enough, who all of a sudden had to spend a week there as an employee and get involved in everything that happened, but it did not stop there, for when you dropped off your children or picked them up it was normal to sit for a few minutes in the playroom or dining room or wherever they were, and chat to the other parents, perhaps play a little with the children, and every day of the week . . . I usually kept this to the bare minimum, took Vanja and put on her coat before anyone discovered what was going on, but now and then I was trapped in the corridor, a conversation was initiated, and, hey presto, there I was sitting on one of those low deep sofas making agreement noises about something or other that was of no interest to me whatsoever while the brashest of the children yanked and tugged at me, wanting me to throw them, carry them, swing them round or, in the case of Jocke, who incidentally was the son of the kind book-loving banker Gustav, was content merely to stab me with sharp objects.

Spending Saturday afternoon and evening squeezed between others at a table and eating vegetables with a strained but courteous smile on your face was part of the same obligation.

Erik lifted down a stack of plates from a cupboard above the worktop while Frida counted knives and forks. I took a sip of wine and could feel how hungry I was. Stella stopped in the doorway, her face red and a little sweaty.

‘Is it time for the cake now?’ she called.

Frida swivelled round.

‘Soon, sweetheart. But first we have to eat some proper food.’

Her attention wandered from the child to those sitting around the table.

‘The food’s ready,’ she said. ‘Help yourselves. There are the plates and cutlery. And you can take some food for your children too.’

‘Ah, that sounds good,’ Linus said, getting up. ‘What is there?’

I had planned to stay seated until the queue had died down. When I saw what Linus had returned with – beans, salad, the ever-present couscous and a hot dish I assumed was chickpea casserole – I got up and went into the kitchen.

‘Food’s in there,’ I said to Linda, who was standing with Vanja wrapped around her legs and Heidi in her arms chatting to Mia. ‘Shall we swap?’

‘Yes, that’s good,’ Linda said. ‘I’m ravenous.’

‘Can we go home now, daddy?’ Vanja said.

‘But we’re eating,’ I said. ‘And afterwards there’s cake. Shall I get you some food?’

‘Don’t want anything,’ she said.

‘I’ll get you something anyway,’ I said, and took Heidi by the arm. ‘And you come with me.’

‘Heidi’s had a banana, by the way,’ Linda said. ‘But she’ll probably want some food as well.’

‘Come on, Theresa, let’s go and get something for you,’ Mia said.

I followed them in, lifted Heidi into my arms and stood in the queue. She rested her head against my shoulder, which she only did when she was tired. My shirt stuck to my chest. Every face I saw, every glance I met, every voice I heard, hung like a lead weight on me. When I was asked a question, or asked a question myself, it was as if the words had to be dynamited out. Heidi made it easier, having her there was a kind of protection, both because I had something to occupy myself with and because her presence diverted others' attention. They smiled at her, asked if she was tired and stroked her cheek. A large part of my relationship with Heidi was based on me carrying her. It was the basis of our relationship. She always wanted to be carried, never wanted to walk, stretched up her arms as soon as she saw me, and smiled with pleasure whenever she was allowed to hang from my arms. And I liked having her close, the little chubby creature with the greedy mouth.

I put some beans, a couple of spoonfuls of chickpea casserole and a dollop of couscous on a plate and carried it into the living room, where all the children were sitting around the low table in the middle, with a helpful parent behind.

'Don't want anything,' Vanja said as soon as I set the plate in front of her.

'That's OK,' I said. 'You don't have to eat if you don't want to. But do you think Heidi wants some?'

I speared some beans on the fork and raised it to her mouth. She pinched her lips together and twisted her head away.

'Come on now,' I said. 'I know you're both hungry.'

'Can we play with the train?' Vanja asked.

I looked at her. Normally she would have stared either at the train set or up at me, begging as often as not, but now she was staring straight ahead.

'Of course we can,' I said. I put Heidi down and went to the corner of the room where I had to press my knees against my body, almost into my chest, to make room between the tiny children's furniture and the toy boxes. I took the railway track apart and passed it piece by piece to Vanja, who tried to reassemble it. When the pieces didn't fit she forced them together with all her strength. I waited until she was on the point of throwing them down in fury before intervening. Heidi constantly wanted to tear the track up, and my eyes searched for something to give her as a diversion. A puzzle? A cuddly toy? A little plastic pony with large eyelashes and a long pink synthetic mane? She hurled all of them away.

'Daddy, can you help me?' Vanja said.

'Course I can,' I said. 'Look. Let's put a bridge here, so the train can go over and under it. That'll be good, won't it.'

Heidi grabbed one of the bridge pieces.

'Heidi!' Vanja said.

I took it from her, and she began to scream. I took her in my arms and stood up.

‘I can’t do it!’ Vanja said.

‘I’ll be there in a sec. I’m just going to take Heidi to mummy,’ I said, and went to the kitchen carrying Heidi on my hip like an experienced housewife. Linda was chatting with Gustav, the only one of the Lodjuret parents with a good old-fashioned profession, and with whom for some reason she got on well. He was jovial, his face shone, his short always neatly dressed body was robust and stocky, his neck strong, his chin broad, his face chubby but open and cheerful. He liked talking about books he had enjoyed, the latest of which were by Richard Ford.

‘They’re fantastic,’ he would say. ‘Have you read them? They’re about an estate agent, an ordinary man, yes, and his life, so recognisable and normal. Ford captures the whole spirit of America! The American mood, the very pulse of the country!’

I liked Gustav, especially his decency, which was thanks to nothing more complicated than his having a basic, honest job, which incidentally none of my friends had, least of all myself. We were the same age, but I thought of him as ten years older from his appearance. He was adult in the way our parents had been when I was growing up.

‘I think perhaps Heidi ought to go to sleep soon,’ I said. ‘She seems tired. And probably hungry too. Will you take her home?’

‘Yes, just have to finish eating first, OK?’

‘Of course.’

‘Now I’ve held your book in my hand!’ Gustav said. ‘I was in the bookshop, and there it was. It looked interesting. Was it published by Norstedts?’

‘Yes,’ I said with a strained smile. ‘It was.’

‘You didn’t buy it then?’ Linda asked, not without a teasing tone to her voice.

‘No, not this time,’ he said, wiping his mouth with a serviette. ‘It’s about angels, isn’t it?’

I nodded. Heidi had slipped from my grasp, and when I lifted her up again I noticed how heavy her nappy was.

‘I’ll change her before you go,’ I said. ‘You brought the changing bag, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, it’s in the hall.’

‘OK,’ I said, and went out to fetch a nappy. In the living room Vanja and Achilles were running around, jumping from the sofa onto the floor, laughing, getting up and jumping off again. I felt a surge of warmth in my breast. Leaned over and picked up a nappy and a packet of wipes while Heidi clung to me like a little koala bear. There was no changing table in the bathroom, so I laid her on the floor tiles, took off her stockings, tore off the two adhesive tabs on the nappy and threw it in the bin under the sink while Heidi watched me with a serious expression.

‘Just wee-wee!’ she said. Then she turned her head to the side and stared at the wall, apparently unmoved by my putting on a clean nappy, the way she had done ever since she was a baby.

‘There we are,’ I said. ‘That’s you done.’

I grabbed her hands and pulled her up. Then folded her tights, which were slightly damp, and took them to the bag on the buggy, whereupon I dressed her in some jogging pants I found, and then the brown bubble-lined corduroy jacket she had been given for her first birthday by Yngve. Linda came in while I was putting on Heidi’s shoes.

‘I’ll be coming soon too,’ I said. We kissed, Linda took the bag in one hand, Heidi in the other, and they left.

Vanja ran at top speed down the hallway, with Achilles in tow, into what must have been the bedroom, from where her overexcited voice could be heard soon afterwards. The thought of going in and sitting at the kitchen table again was not exactly appealing, so I opened the bathroom door, locked it behind me and stood there motionless for a few minutes. Then washed my face in cold water, dried it carefully on a white towel and met my eyes in the mirror, so dark and in a face so rigid with frustration I almost started with alarm at the sight.

No one in the kitchen noticed that I was back. Except for a stern-looking little woman with short hair and ordinary angular features, who stared for a brief moment at me from behind her glasses. What did she want now?

Gustav and Linus were discussing pension arrangements, the taciturn man with the 50s shirt had his child, a wild boy with blond, almost white hair, on his lap, and was discussing FC Malmö with him, while Frida chatted with Mia about club evenings she and some friends were going to start. Meanwhile, Erik and Mathias compared TV screens, a discussion which Linus wanted to join, I could see that from his long glances and the shorter ones to Gustav so as not to appear impolite. The only person not deep in conversation was the woman with cropped hair, and even though I looked in every direction apart from hers she still leaned across the table and asked if I was satisfied with the nursery. I said I was. There was perhaps a bit too much to do there, I added, but it was definitely worth the investment of time; you got to know your children's playmates, and that could only be good, I opined.

She smiled at what I said without any great fervour. There was something sad about her, some unhappiness.

'What the hell?' Linus said suddenly, thrusting his chair back. 'What are they *doing* in there?'

He got up and went to the bathroom. The next moment he came out with Vanja and Achilles in front of him. Vanja had put on her broadest smile, Achilles looked rather more guilt-ridden. The sleeves of his small suit jacket were soaked. Vanja's bare arms glistened with moisture.

'They had their hands as far down the toilet as they could get them when I went in,' Linus said. I met Vanja's eyes and couldn't help smiling.

'We'll have to take this off now, young man,' Linus said, leading Achilles into the hall. 'And you make sure you wash your hands properly.'

'The same applies to you, Vanja,' I said, getting up. 'Into the bathroom with you.'

She stretched out her arms over the basin and looked up at me.

'I'm playing with Achilles!' she said.

'I can see that,' I said. 'But you don't have to stick your hands down the loo to do that, do you?'

'No,' she said, and laughed.

I wetted my hands under the tap, soaped them, and washed her arms from the tips of her fingers to her shoulders. Then I dried them before kissing her on the forehead and sending her out again. The apologetic smile I wore when I sat down was unnecessary, no one was interested in pursuing this little episode, not even Linus, who as soon as he returned continued the story about a man he had seen attacked by monkeys in Thailand. His face didn't even break into a smile when the others laughed, but he seemed to inhale their laughter, as if to give the story renewed vigour, which it did, and only when the next wave of laughter broke did he smile, not much, and not at his own wit, it struck me; it was more like an expression of the satisfaction he felt when his face could bask in the merriment he had evoked. ‘Yeah, yeah, yeah,’ he said, jabbing his hand in the air. The stern woman, who thus far had been looking out of the window, pulled her chair up and leaned across the table again.

‘Isn’t it tough to have two children so close in age?’ she asked.

‘Yes and no,’ I answered. ‘It is a bit wearing. But it’s still better with two than one. The single-child scenario seems a bit sad, if you ask me . . . I’ve always thought I wanted to have three children. Then there are lots of permutations when they play. And the children are in the majority vis-à-vis the parents . . .’

I smiled. She said nothing. All of a sudden I realised she had an only child.

‘But just one can be brilliant too,’ I said.

She rested her head on her hand.

‘But I wish Gustav had a brother or a sister,’ she said. ‘It’s too much with just us two.’

‘Not at all,’ I said. ‘He’ll have loads of pals in the nursery, and that’s great.’

‘The problem is I haven’t got a husband,’ she said. ‘And so it’s not possible.’

What the *fuck* had that got to do with me?

I sent her a look of sympathy and concentrated on preventing my eyes from wandering, which can easily happen in such situations.

‘And I can’t imagine the men I meet as fathers to my children,’ she continued.

‘Nonsense,’ I said. ‘These things sort themselves out.’

‘I don’t believe they do,’ she said. ‘But thank you anyway.’

From the corner of my eye I detected a movement. I turned and looked towards the door. Vanja was coming my way. She stopped right next to me.

‘I want to go home,’ she said. ‘Can’t we go now?’

‘We have to stay for a just a little longer,’ I said. ‘Soon there’ll be cake too. You want some of that, don’t you?’

She didn’t answer.

‘Do you want to sit on my lap?’ I asked.

She nodded, and I moved my wine glass and lifted her up.

‘You sit with me for a bit, and then we’ll go back in. I can stay with you. OK?’

‘OK.’

She sat watching the others round the table. I wondered what she was thinking. How did it seem to her?

I observed her. Her blonde hair was already over her shoulders. A small nose, a little mouth, two tiny ears, both with pointed elfin tips. Her blue eyes, which always betrayed her mood, had a slight squint, hence the glasses. At first she had been proud of them. Now they were the first thing she took off when she was angry. Perhaps because she knew it was important for us that she should wear them?

With us her eyes were lively and cheerful, that is if they didn’t lock and become unapproachable when she was having one of her grand bouts of fury. She was hugely dramatic and could rule the whole family with her temperament; she performed large-scale and complicated relational dramas with her toys, loved having stories read to her but watching films even more, and then preferably ones with characters and high drama which she puzzled over and discussed with us, bursting with questions but also the joy of retelling. For a period it was Astrid Lindgren’s character Madicken she was mad about, and this caused her to jump off the chairs and lie on the floor with her eyes closed; we had to lift her and think at first that she was dead, then realise she had fainted and had concussion, before carrying her, with eyes closed and arms hanging down, to her bed, where she was to lie for three days, preferably while we hummed the sad theme from this scene in the film. Then she leaped to her feet, ran to the chair and started all over again. At the nursery’s Christmas party she was the only one who bowed in response to the applause and who obviously enjoyed the attention. Often the idea of something meant more to her than the thing itself, such as with sweets; she could talk about them for an entire day and look forward to them, but when the sweets were in the bowl in front of her she barely tasted one before spitting it out. However, she didn’t learn from the experience: the next Saturday her expectations of the fantastic sweets were as high again. She wanted so much to go skating, but when we were there, at the rink, with the small skates Linda’s mother had bought for her on her feet and the little ice hockey helmet on her head, she shrieked with anger at the realisation that she couldn’t keep her balance and probably wouldn’t learn to do so any time soon. All the greater therefore was her joy at seeing that she could in fact ski, which happened once when we were on the small patch of snow in my mother’s garden trying out equipment she had come by. But then too the idea of skiing and the joy at being able to do it were greater than actually skiing; she could function quite happily without that. She loved to travel with us, loved to see new places and talked about all the things that had happened for several months afterwards. But most of all she loved to play with other children, of course. It was a great experience for her when other children at the nursery came back home with her. The first time Benjamin was due to come she went around the evening before, inspecting her toys, worried stiff that they were not good enough for him. She had just turned three. But when he arrived they got on like a house on fire and all prior concerns went up in a whirl of excitement and euphoria. Benjamin told his parents that Vanja was the nicest girl in the nursery, and when I told her that – she was sitting in bed playing with her Barbies – she reacted with a display of emotion she had never manifested before.

‘Do you know what Benjamin said?’ I said from the doorway.

‘No,’ she said, looking up at me with sudden interest.

‘He said you were the nicest girl in the nursery.’

I had never seen her filled with such light. She was glowing with happiness. I knew that neither Linda nor I would be able to say anything to make her react like that, and I understood with the immediate clarity of an insight that she was not ours. Her life was utterly her own.

‘What did he say?’ she answered, she wanted to hear it again.

‘He said you were the nicest in the nursery.’

Her smile was shy but happy, and that made me glad too, yet a shadow hung over my happiness, for was it not alarmingly early for others’ thoughts and opinions to mean so much to her? Wasn’t it best for everything to come from her, for it to be rooted in herself? Another time she surprised me like this was when I was in the nursery. I had gone to pick her up and she ran towards me in the corridor and asked if Stella could go with her to the stables afterwards. I said that things didn’t work like that, it had to be planned in advance, we had to speak to her parents first, and Vanja stood watching me say this, obviously disappointed, but when she went to pass on the news to Stella, she didn’t use my reasons. I heard her as I was rummaging in the hall for her rain gear.

‘It’ll be a bit boring for you at the stables,’ she said. ‘Just watching isn’t cool.’

This way of thinking, putting others’ reactions before your own, I recognised from myself, and as we walked towards Folkets Park in the rain I wondered about how she had picked that up. Was it just there, around her, invisible but present, like the air she breathed? Or was it genetic?

I never expressed any of these thoughts I had about the children, except to Linda of course, because these complex questions belonged only where they were, in me and between us. In reality, in the world Vanja inhabited everything was simple and found simple expression, and the complexity arose only in the sum of all the parts, of which naturally she knew nothing. And the fact that we talked a lot about them did not help at all in our daily lives, where everything was a mess and constantly on the verge of chaos. In the first of the Swedish ‘progress conversations’ we had with the nursery staff there was a lot of talk about her not making contact with the teachers, not wanting to sit on their laps or be patted, as well as her shyness. We should work on toughening her up, teaching her to play a more dominant role in games, taking the initiative and talking more, they said. Linda replied that she was tough enough at home, took the lead in all the games, always showed initiative and could talk the hind leg off a donkey. They told us the little she said in the nursery was unclear, her Swedish wasn’t correct, her vocabulary was not that large, so they were wondering if we had considered speech therapy. At this juncture in the conversation we were handed a brochure from one of the town’s speech therapists. They are crazy in this country, I thought. A speech therapist? Did everything have to be institutionalised? She’s only three!

‘No, speech therapy’s out of the question,’ I said. Until that point Linda had been the one to do all the talking. ‘It will sort itself out. I only *started* talking when I was three. Before that I said nothing, apart from single words which were incomprehensible to anyone except my brother.’

They smiled.

‘And when I started speaking it came in long, fluent sentences. It all depends on the individual. We are not sending her to a speech therapist.’

‘Well, that’s up to you,’ said Olaf, the head of the nursery. ‘But you’re welcome to hang on to the brochures and give it some thought.’

‘OK then,’ I said.

I collected her hair in one hand and stroked her neck and the top of her back with one finger. Usually she loved this, especially before going to sleep, until she settled for the night, but this time she squirmed away.

On the other side of the table the stern woman had struck up a conversation with Mia, who gave her her undivided attention while Frida and Erik had begun to clear away the plates and cutlery. The white layer cake, which was the next item on the agenda, stood proudly on the worktop, decorated with raspberries and five small candles, beside a column of square cartons containing Bravo, a sugar-free apple drink.

Gustav, who until now had been sitting beside me with his back half-turned, swivelled round to face us.

'Hi, Vanja,' he said. 'Are you having fun?'

As he didn't get a response, nor any eye contact, he looked at me.

'You'll have to come and play with Jocke one day,' he said, winking at me. 'Fancy doing that?'

'Yes,' Vanja said, regarding him with eyes that suddenly dilated. Jocke was the biggest boy in the nursery. Going to his house was more than she dared hope for.

'We'll fix something up,' Gustav said. Raised his glass, took a swig of red wine and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'Are you writing anything new then?' he asked.

I shrugged.

'Yes, I'm keeping busy,' I said.

'Do you work at home?'

'Yes.'

'How do you go about it? Do you sit waiting for inspiration?'

'No, that's no good. I have to work every day like you.'

'Interesting. Interesting. There are not many distractions at home then?'

'I manage fine.'

'Ah, you do, do you? Well . . .'

'Let's all go into the living room then,' Frida said. 'And we can sing for Stella.'

She took a lighter from her pocket and lit the five candles.

'What a wonderful cake,' Mia said.

'Yes, isn't it?' Frida said. 'And it's healthy too. There's hardly any sugar in the cream.'

She lifted it up.

'Will you go in and switch off the light, Erik?' she said as people began to move from their seats and leave the room. I followed holding Vanja's hand, and just managed to find a position against the wall furthest away when Frida entered the darkened hall with the illuminated cake in her hands. As she came into view from the table she began to sing *Ja må hon leva*, whereupon the other adults immediately joined in, and the birthday song rang around the small room as she placed the cake on the table in front of Stella, who was watching with gleaming eyes.

'Shall I blow now?' she asked.

Frida nodded as she sang.

Everyone clapped afterwards, me too. Then the lights came back on, and for a few minutes slices of the cake were distributed among the children. Vanja didn't want to sit at the table, but on the floor by the wall, where we settled down, her with a plate of cake on her lap. It was only then I noticed she wasn't wearing her shoes.

'Where are your golden shoes?' I asked.

'They're stupid,' she said.

'No, they're not, they're lovely,' I said. 'They're a proper princess's shoes!'

'They're stupid,' she repeated.

'But where are they?'

She didn't answer.

'Vanja,' I said.

She looked up at me. Her mouth was white with cream.

'Over there,' she said, motioning towards the other room. I got up and went in, looked around, no shoes. I went back.

'Where did you put them? I can't see them anywhere?'

'By the flower,' she said.

Flower? I went back, peered between the flower pots on the windowsill, no, not there.

Could she have meant the yucca?

Yes, indeed. They were in the pot. I grabbed them, brushed the earth off over the pot, took them to the bathroom and wiped off the rest, then put them under the chair where her jacket was.

The interruption for cake, which had occupied all the children’s attention, might give her a chance for a new beginning, I thought, perhaps it would be easier to be there after that.

‘I’m going to have a piece of cake too,’ I said to her. ‘I’ll be in the kitchen. Just come and find me if there is anything you want, OK?’

‘OK, daddy.’

It was only half past six according to the clock above the kitchen door. No one had left yet, so we would have to wait for a while. I cut myself a thin sliver of the cake on the worktop, put it on a plate and sat at the other side of the table as my seat was occupied.

‘There’s coffee as well if you’d like some,’ Erik said, looking at me with a kind of pregnant smile, as if there lay more in the question and what he said than met the eye. For all I knew, it was a technique he had learned so as to appear important, more or less like the tricks the average writer resorts to when trying to lend his stories the semblance of immense profundity.

Or had he really seen something?

‘Yes, please,’ I said and got up, took a cup from the pile and filled it with coffee from the grey Stelton pot nearby. By the time I got back to my seat he was on his way out of the room. Frida was talking about a coffee machine she had bought, it was expensive and she had been torn, but she had no regrets, it was definitely worth the money, the coffee was fantastic, and it was important to spoil yourself with such things, perhaps more important than was generally thought. Linus talked about a Smith and Jones sketch he had seen once, two guys sitting at a table with a cafetière in front of them, one presses the plunger, but everything is pushed down, not just the coffee grains, until the jug is empty. No one laughed, and Linus hunched his shoulders and raised his palms.

‘A simple coffee anecdote,’ he said. ‘Anyone got a better one?’

Vanja stood in the doorway. Her gaze took in the table, and when she had found me, she came over.

‘Do you want to go home?’ I said.

She nodded.

‘Right, do you know what?’ I said. ‘I do too. I’ll just eat this cake first. And drink my coffee. Do you want to sit on my lap in the meantime?’

She nodded again. I lifted her up.

‘Nice you could come, Vanja,’ Frida said to her with a smile from the other side of the table. ‘Soon it’ll be fishing time. You want to join in, don’t you?’

Vanja nodded and Frida turned back to Linus. There was a TV series on Home Box Office she had seen, but he had missed it, and she couldn’t praise it enough.

‘Do you want to?’ I asked. ‘Shall we wait for the fishing game before going?’

Vanja shook her head.

In the game each child was given a little fishing rod which they would cast over a sheet behind which an adult sat waiting to attach a bag containing a prize, some sweets or small toy or the like. In this family they would probably fill it with peas or artichokes, I thought, manoeuvring my fork down past Vanja to my plate, where I cut off a piece with the edge – brown crust under the white cream, yellow inside, with red streaks of jam – twisted my wrist so that the piece of cake remained on the fork, raised it past Vanja, and inserted it in my mouth. The base was too dry, and there was far too little sugar in the cream, but with a mouthful of coffee it wasn’t too bad.

‘Would you like a bit?’ I asked. Vanja nodded. I forked a piece into her open mouth. She looked up and smiled.

‘I can go into the living room with you,’ I said. ‘Then we can see what the others are doing. And maybe join in the fishing game as well?’

‘You said we were going home,’ she said.

‘I did. Let’s be off.’

I placed the fork on the plate, finished off the coffee, put her on the floor and stood up. Looked around. No eyes met mine.

‘We’ll be on our way now,’ I said.

Right then Erik came in with a small bamboo pole in one hand and a plastic Hemköp bag in the other.

‘We’re going to do the fishing now,’ he said.

Some got up to join in, others remained where they were. No one had noticed that I had said goodbye. And since people’s attention around the table had been drawn in different directions now, I saw no need to say it again. Instead I laid my hand on Vanja’s shoulder and led her out. In the living room Erik shouted ‘Fishing!’ and all the children hurried past us to the end of the hall where the cover, a white sheet, hung from wall to wall. Erik, who followed them like a shepherd, told them to sit down. Standing in the hall with Vanja and putting on her jacket, we could see right into the room.

I pulled up the zip on her red bubble jacket, which was already a little tight, set the red Polarn O. Pyret woolly hat on her head and buttoned up the chinstrap, placed her boots in front of her so that she could stick her feet in them herself, and zipped them from the back when she was ready.

‘There we are,’ I said. ‘Now all we have to do is say thank you and we can go. Come on.’

She raised her arms towards me.

‘Can’t you walk?’ I said.

She shook her head, keeping her arms outstretched.

‘OK,’ I said. ‘But first I’ll have to put on my things.’

In the hall Benjamin was the first to ‘fish’. He cast his line, and someone, I suppose Erik, caught it on the other side.

‘I’ve got a bite!’ Benjamin shouted.

The parents standing along the wall smiled, the children on the floor shouted and laughed. The next second Benjamin yanked at his rod, and a red and white Hemköp goodie bag came flying over the sheet, attached by a clothes peg. He removed it and took a few steps away to open the bag in peace and quiet while the next child, Theresa, grabbed the fishing rod, helped by her mother. I wound my scarf round my neck and buttoned up the reefer jacket I had bought on offer last spring at Paul Smith in Stockholm, put on the hat I had bought at the same place, bent down over the pile of shoes by the wall, found mine, a pair of black Wrangler shoes with yellow laces I had bought in Copenhagen when I was at the book fair, and which I had never liked, not even when I bought them, and which furthermore were now tainted by the thought of the catastrophe that had befallen me there, as I had been incapable of answering sensibly a single question the enthusiastic and insightful interviewer had asked me on the stage. The reason I hadn’t thrown them out long ago rested exclusively on the fact that we were hard up. And the laces were so yellow!

I tied them and stood up.

‘I’m ready,’ I said. Vanja stretched out her arms again. I lifted her, walked along the hall and stuck my head into the kitchen where four or five parents were chatting.

‘We’re off now,’ I said. ‘All the best, and thanks for a nice evening.’

‘Thank *you*,’ Linus said. Gustav half-raised his hand to his forehead.

Then we went into the hall. I patted Frida’s shoulder to catch her attention. She was standing by the wall, smiling, fully absorbed in the scene on the floor.

‘We’re off now,’ I said. ‘Thank you for inviting us. It was a lovely party. Very nice company.’

‘But doesn’t Vanja want to catch a fish?’ she said.

I made a very expressive kind of grimace, intended to mean something on the lines of ‘You know how illogical children can be.’

‘Right, right,’ she said. ‘Well, thanks for coming. Take care, Vanja!’

Mia, who was standing alongside, with Theresa in front of her, said, ‘Just a moment.’

She leaned over the sheet and asked Erik, who was on his haunches, if he could give her a goodie bag. He certainly could, and she passed it to Vanja.

‘Here, Vanja. You can take this home with you. And perhaps share it with Heidi if you want.’

‘I don’t want,’ Vanja said, holding the bag to her chest.

‘Thank you very much.’ I said. ‘Bye, everyone!’

Stella turned and looked at us.

‘Are you going, Vanja? Why?’

‘Bye, Stella,’ I said. ‘Thanks for inviting us to your party.’

I turned and went. Down the dark stairs, through the hall and onto the pavement. Voices, shouting, footsteps and the noise of engines rose and fell continuously in the street. Vanja wrapped her arms around me and leaned her head against my shoulder. Which she never did usually. This was Heidi’s way.

A taxi swept past with its roof light on. A couple with a buggy passed us; she had a scarf round her head and was young, twenty maybe. A rough complexion I saw as they walked past, her face was thick with powder. He was older, my age, and kept looking around nervously. The buggy was the ridiculous type with a thin stalk-like rod going from the wheels which the basket-seat with the child rested on. Coming towards us from the other side of the road was a gang of youngsters aged fifteen or sixteen. Black combed-back hair, black leather jackets, black trousers, and at least two of them wore Puma trainers with the logo on the toe, which I had always thought looked idiotic. Gold chains around their necks, slightly unsteady, clumsy arm movements.

The shoes.

Shit, they were still up in the flat.

I stopped.

Should I just leave them there?

No, that was too pathetic. We were right outside the door.

‘We have to go back up,’ I said. ‘We’ve forgotten your golden shoes.’

She stiffened.

‘I don’t want them,’ she said.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘But we can’t leave them there. We’ll have to take them home with us, and they don’t have to be yours any more.’

I dashed up the stairs again, put Vanja down, opened the door, stepped inside and grabbed the shoes without looking any further into the flat, but could not avoid doing so as I straightened up and met Benjamin’s eyes. He was sitting on the floor in his white shirt with a car in one hand.

‘Hi!’ he said, and waved with the other.

I smiled.

‘Hi, Benjamin,’ I said, closed the door behind me, lifted Vanja and went back downstairs. It was cold and clear outside, but all the light in the town, from street lamps, shop windows and car lights, seeped upwards and lay like a shimmering dome above the rooftops, through which no starry lustre could penetrate. Of all the heavenly bodies only the moon, hanging, almost full, above the Hilton hotel, was visible.

Vanja clung to me as I hurried down the street, our breath like white smoke around our heads.

‘Maybe Heidi wants my shoes?’ she said.

‘When she’s as big as you she can have them,’ I said.

‘Heidi loves shoes,’ she said.

‘Yes, she does,’ I said.

We continued for a while in silence. By Subway, the big sandwich bar beside the supermarket, I saw the white-haired crazy woman staring through the window. Aggressive and unpredictable, she walked back and forth around our district, more often than not talking to herself, always with her white hair tied in a tight knot, and in the same beige coat, summer and winter alike.

‘Will I have a party when it’s my birthday, daddy?’ Vanja asked.

‘If you want,’ I said.

‘I do,’ she said. ‘I want Heidi and you and mummy to come.’

‘That sounds like a nice little party,’ I said, shifting her from my right to my left arm.

‘Do you know what I want?’

‘No.’

‘A goldfish,’ she said. ‘Can I have one?’

‘We-ell . . .’ I said. ‘To have a goldfish you have to be able to take care of it properly. Feed it, clean the water and so on. And you have to be a bit bigger than four, I think.’

‘But I can feed it! And Jiro’s got one. He’s smaller than me.’

‘That’s true,’ I said. ‘We’ll have to see. Birthday presents are supposed to be secret, you know, that’s the whole point about them.’

‘Secret? Like *a* secret?’

I nodded.

Oh bugger! Oh bugger! said the crazy woman, who was now only a few metres ahead. Warned by the movement, she turned and looked at me. Oh, her eyes were evil.

‘What are those shoes you’re carrying?’ she said behind us. ‘Hey, *pappa*! What are those shoes you’re carrying? Let me have a word with you right now!’

And then louder: ‘Bugger! Oh BUGGer!’

‘What did the old lady say?’ Vanja asked.

‘Nothing,’ I answered, squeezing her tighter to me. ‘You’re the best thing I’ve got, Vanja, do you know that? The very, very best.’

‘Better than Heidi?’ she asked.

I smiled.

‘You’re both the best, you and Heidi. *Exactly* the same.’

‘Heidi’s better,’ she said. Her tone of voice was completely neutral, as if she were stating an incontrovertible fact.

‘What nonsense,’ I said. ‘You little monkey.’

She smiled. I looked past her and into the large almost deserted supermarket, where the goods lay gleaming on each side of the narrow avenues of shelves and counters. Two women sat at their cash desks staring into the middle distance waiting for customers. At the traffic lights across from us a car was revving, and when I turned my head I saw the sound was coming from one of those enormous jeep-like vehicles that had begun to fill our streets in recent years. The tenderness I felt for Vanja was so great it was almost tearing me to pieces. To counteract it, I broke into a jog. Past Ankara, the Turkish restaurant with belly dancing and karaoke on the menu, and its door, where well dressed men from the east often stood in the evenings, smelling of aftershave and cigar smoke, but which was empty now, on past Burger King, where an incredibly fat girl, wearing a hat and fingerless gloves, sat alone on the bench outside devouring a hamburger, then over the crossing, past the Systembolaget and the Handelsbanken, where I stopped as the lights were on red, even though there were no cars in any of the lanes. All this while holding Vanja tight to my chest.

‘Can you see the moon?’ I asked, pointing to the sky as we stood waiting for the lights to change.

‘Mm,’ she said. And then, after a short pause, ‘Have any people been there?’

She knew very well there had, but she also knew that I liked talking about such things.

‘Yes, there have,’ I said. ‘Just after I was born three men flew there. It’s a long way and it took several days. And then they flew around it.’

‘They didn’t fly; they had a spaceship,’ she said.

‘You’re right,’ I said. ‘They went in a rocket.’

The lights changed to green, and we crossed to the other side, where the square began and we had our flat. A slim man in a leather jacket with hair down his back was standing by a cashpoint. He put out one hand to receive his card; with the other he stroked the hair from his face. It was a feminine gesture, and amusing, as everything else about him, the entire heavy-metal look, was designed to be dark and hard and masculine.

The tiny pile of bank receipts on the ground by his feet blew up in a gust of wind.

I shoved my hand in my pocket and took out a bunch of keys.

‘What’s that?’ Vanja asked, pointing to the two slush machines outside the little Thai takeaway next to our front entrance.

‘Slush ice,’ I said. ‘But you knew that.’

‘I want some!’ she said.

I looked at her.

‘No, you’re not having that. But *are* you hungry?’

‘Yes.’

‘We can buy some chicken satay if you like. Would you like that?’

‘Yes.’

‘OK,’ I said, put her down on the ground and opened the door to the restaurant, which was not much more than a hole in the wall and filled our veranda, seven floors up, with the smell of noodles and fried chicken every day. They sold two dishes in a box for forty-five kroner, so it was not exactly the first time I was standing at the glass counter and ordering from the young skinny expressionless hard-working Asian girl. Her mouth was always open, her gums visible above her teeth, her eyes always neutral as if they couldn’t make any distinctions. In the kitchen were two equally young men – I had caught only brief glimpses of them – and between them flitted a man in his fifties, his face expressionless as well, though a touch more friendly, at least whenever we bumped into each other in the long labyrinthine corridors beneath the house: he was fetching something from or taking something to a storeroom, I was washing clothes, throwing out rubbish or pushing my bike in or out.

'Can you carry it?' I asked Vanja and passed her the hot box which appeared on the counter twenty seconds after the order had been placed. Vanja nodded, I paid, and then we went into the next front hall entrance, where Vanja put down the box on the floor so as to press the button for the lift.

She counted all the floors aloud on the way up. When we were standing outside our flat she handed me the box, opened the door and called for her mother even before she was inside.

'Shoes first,' I said, holding her back. At that moment Linda came from the living room. The TV was on, I could hear.

A faint odour of putrescence and something worse rose from the large bag of rubbish and the two small nappy bags in the corner by the folded double buggy. Heidi's shoes and jacket were on the floor next to it.

Why the HELL hadn't she put them in the wardrobe?

The hall was awash with clothes, toys, old advertising leaflets, buggies, bags, bottles of water. Hadn't she been here all afternoon?

But she had plenty of time to lie on the sofa and watch TV.

'I got a goodie bag even though I didn't do any fishing!' Vanja said.

So that was what she considered important, I mused, bending forward to remove her shoes. Her body was twitching with impatience.

'And I played with Achilles!'

'Nice,' Linda said, crouching down in front of her.

'Let me see what's in the goodie bag, then,' she said.

Vanja showed her.

As I thought. Ecological goodies. Must have come from the shop that had just opened in the mall opposite. A selection of chocolate-covered nuts in various colours. Candied sugar. Some raisin-like sweets.

'Can I eat them now?'

'Chicken first,' I said. 'In the kitchen.'

I hung her jacket on a hook, put her shoes in the wardrobe and went into the kitchen, where I served the chicken, spring rolls and noodles on a plate. Took out a knife and fork, filled a glass with water, put everything in front of her on the table, which was still littered with felt-tips, watercolour paint boxes, glasses of water, brushes and sheets of paper.

‘Everything go all right there?’ Linda asked, and sat down beside her.

I nodded. Leaned back against the worktop, with arms folded.

‘Did Heidi go to sleep easily?’ I asked.

‘No, she’s got a temperature. That must be why she was so crotchety.’

‘Again?’ I said.

‘Mm, but not so high.’

I sighed. Turned and looked at the piles of washing-up on the side and in the sink.

‘Looks a hell of a mess here,’ I said.

‘I want to watch a film,’ Vanja said.

‘Not now,’ I said. ‘It was bedtime ages ago.’

‘I want to!’

‘What were you watching on TV?’ I asked, meeting Linda’s eyes.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing special. You were watching TV when we came. I was wondering what you were watching.’

Now it was her turn to sigh.

‘I don’t want to go to bed!’ Vanja said, lifting the chicken skewer as if about to throw it. I grabbed her arm.

‘Put it down,’ I said.

‘You can watch for ten minutes and have a bowl of sweets,’ Linda said.

‘I just said she couldn’t,’ I said.

‘Ten minutes, that’s all,’ she said and got up. ‘Then I’ll put her to bed.’

‘Oh yes?’ I said. ‘So I’m supposed to do the washing-up, am I?’

‘What are you talking about? Do what you like. I’ve had Heidi here the whole time, if you really want to know. She was ill and grumbly and –’

‘I’ll go out for a smoke.’

‘– quite impossible.’

I put on my jacket and shoes and went onto the east-facing balcony where I usually smoked, because it had a roof and because it was rare you saw anyone from there. The balcony on the other side, which ran alongside the whole flat and was more than twenty metres long, didn’t have a roof, but it had a view of the square below, where there were always people, and the hotel and the mall on the other side of the street as well as the house fronts all the way to Magistrat Park. What I wanted, however, was peace and quiet, I didn't want to see people, so I closed the door of the smaller balcony behind me and sat on the chair in the corner, lit a cigarette, put my feet on the railing and stared across the backyards and roof ridges, the harsh shapes against the vast canopy of the sky. The view changed constantly. One moment immense accumulations of cloud resembling mountains, with precipices and slopes, valleys and caves, hovered mysteriously in the middle of the blue sky, the next moment a wet weather front might drift in from the far distance, visible as a huge greyish-black duvet on the horizon, and if this occurred in the summer a few hours later the most spectacular flashes of lightning could rip through the darkness at intervals of only a few seconds, with thunder rolling in across the rooftops. But I liked the most ordinary of the sky's manifestations, even the very smooth grey rain-filled ones, against whose heavy background the colours in the backyards beneath me stood out clearly, almost shone. The verdigris roofs! The orangey red of the bricks! And the yellow metal of the cranes, how bright it was against all the greyish white! Or one of the normal summer days when the sky was clear and blue and the sun was burning down, and the few clouds drifting by were light, almost contourless, then the glittering, gleaming expanse of buildings stretched into the distance. And when evening fell there was an initial flare of red on the horizon, as though the land below was aflame, then a light gentle darkness, under whose kind hand the town settled down for the night, as though happily fatigued after a whole day in the sun. Stars lit the sky, satellites hovered, planes twinkled, flying into and out of Kastrup and Sturup.

If it was people I wanted to see I had to lean forward and look down to the yard on the other side, where faceless figures occasionally appeared in the windows, in the eternal merry-go-round between rooms and doors: a fridge door is opened, a man wearing only boxers takes out something, closes the door and sits at a kitchen table, somewhere else a front door is slammed, and a woman in a coat with a bag over her shoulder hurries down the stairs, round and round it goes, and over there what must be an elderly man, judging by the silhouette and the paucity of movement, is ironing; when he finishes he switches off the light and the room dies. So where should you look? Above, where a man sometimes jumps up and down on the floor waving his arms in front of something you can't see but is no doubt a little baby? Or at the woman in her fifties who so often stands by the window looking out?

No, those lives were spared my gaze. It searched upwards and outwards, and not to scrutinise what it found there, nor to be struck by the beauty, but to rest. To be utterly alone.

I grabbed the half-full two-litre bottle of Coke Light that stood on the floor beside the chair and filled one of the glasses on the table. The screw top was off and the Coke was flat, so the taste of the somewhat bitter sweetener, which was generally lost in the effervescence of the carbonic acid, was all too evident. But it didn't matter, I had never been bothered much by how things tasted.

I returned the glass to the table and stubbed out my cigarette. There was nothing left of my feelings for those I had just spent several hours with. The whole crowd of them could have burned in hell for all I cared. This was a rule in my life. When I was with other people I was bound to them, the nearness I felt was immense, the empathy great. Indeed, so great that their well-being was always more important than my own. I subordinated myself, almost to the verge of self-effacement; some uncontrollable internal mechanism caused me to put their thoughts and opinions before my own. But the moment I was alone others meant nothing to me. It wasn't that I disliked them, or nurtured feelings of loathing for them; on the contrary, I liked most of them, and the ones I didn't actually like I could always see some worth in, some attribute I could identify with, or at least find interesting, something which could occupy my mind for the moment. But liking them was not the same as caring about them. It was the social situation that bound me, the people within it did not. Between these two perspectives there was no halfway house. There was just the small self-effacing one and the large distance-creating one. And in between them was where my daily life lay. Perhaps that was why I had such a hard time living it. Everyday life, with its duties and routines, was something I endured, not a thing I enjoyed, nor something that was meaningful or made me happy. This had nothing to do with a lack of desire to wash floors or change nappies but rather with something more fundamental: the life around me was not meaningful. I always longed to be away from it, and always had done. So the life I led was not my own. I tried to make it mine, this was my struggle, because of course I wanted it, but I failed, the longing for something else undermined all my efforts.

What was the problem?

Was it the shrill sickly tone I heard everywhere, which I couldn't stand, the one that arose from all the pseudo people and pseudo places, pseudo events and pseudo conflicts our lives passed through, that which we saw but did not participate in, and the distance that modern life in this way had opened up to our own, actually inalienable, here and now? If so, if it was more reality, more involvement I longed for, surely I should be embracing that which I was surrounded by? And not, as was the case, longing to get away from it? Or perhaps it was the prefabricated nature of the days in this world I was reacting to, the rails of routine we followed, which made everything so predictable that we had to invest in entertainment to feel any hint of intensity? Every time I went out of the door I knew what was going to happen, what I was going to do. This was how it was on the micro level, I go to the supermarket and do the shopping, I go and sit down at a café with a newspaper, I fetch my children from the nursery, and this is how it was on the macro level, from the initial entry into society, the nursery, to the final exit, the old folks' home. Or was the revulsion I felt based on the sameness that was spreading through the world and making everything smaller? If you travelled through Norway now you saw the same everywhere. The same roads, the same houses, the same petrol stations, the same shops. As late as in the 60s you could see how local culture changed as you drove through Gudbrandsdalen, for example, the strange black timber buildings, so pure and sombre, which were now encapsulated as small museums in a culture which was no different from the one you had left or the one you were going to. And Europe, which was merging more and more into one large, homogeneous country. The same, the same, everything was the same. Or was it perhaps that the light which illuminated the world and made everything comprehensible also drained it of meaning? Was it perhaps the forests that had vanished, the animal species that had become extinct, the ways of life that would never return?

Yes, all of this I thought about, all of this filled me with sorrow and a sense of helplessness, and if there was a world I turned to in my mind, it was that of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with its enormous forests, its sailing ships and horse-drawn carts, its windmills and castles, its monasteries and small towns, its painters and thinkers, explorers and inventors, priests and alchemists. What would it have been like to live in a world where everything was made from the power of your hands, the wind or the water? What would it have been like to live in a world where the American Indians still lived their lives in peace? Where that life was an actual possibility? Where Africa was unconquered? Where darkness came with the sunset and light with the sunrise? Where there were too few humans and their tools were too rudimentary to have any effect on animal stocks, let alone wipe them out? Where you could not travel from one place to another without exerting yourself, and a comfortable life was something only the rich could afford, where the sea was full of whales, the forests full of bears and wolves, and there were still countries that were so alien no adventure story could do them justice, such as China, to which a voyage not only took several months and was the prerogative of only a tiny minority of sailors and traders, but was also fraught with danger. Admittedly, that world was rough and wretched, filthy and ravaged with sickness, drunken and ignorant, full of pain, low life expectancy and rampant superstition, but it produced the greatest writer, Shakespeare, the greatest painter, Rembrandt, the greatest scientist, Newton, all still unsurpassed in their fields, and how can it be that this period achieved this wealth? Was it because death was closer and life was starker as a result?

Who knows?

Be that as it may, we can’t go back in time, everything we undertake is irrevocable, and if we look back what we see is not life but death. And whoever believes that the conditions and character of the times are responsible for our maladjustment is either suffering from delusions of grandeur or is simply stupid, and lacks self-knowledge on both accounts. I loathed so much about the age I lived in, but it was not that that was the cause of the loss of meaning, because it was not something that had been constant . . . The spring I moved to Stockholm and met Linda, for example, the world had suddenly opened, the intensity in it increased at breakneck speed. I was head over heels in love and everything was possible, my happiness was at bursting point all the time and embraced everything. If someone had spoken to me then about a lack of meaning I would have laughed out loud, for I was free and the world lay at my feet, open, packed with meaning, from the gleaming futuristic trains that streaked across

Slussen beneath my flat, to the sun colouring the nineteenth-century-style church spires in Ridderholmen red, sinisterly beautiful sunsets I witnessed every evening for all those months, from the aroma of freshly picked basil and the taste of ripe tomatoes to the sound of clacking heels on the cobbled slope down to the Hilton hotel late one night when we sat on a bench holding hands and knowing that it would be us two now and for ever. This state lasted for six months, for six months I was truly happy, truly at home in this world and in myself before slowly it began to lose its lustre, and once more the world moved out of my reach. One year later it happened again, if in quite a different way. That was when Vanja was born. Then it was not the world which opened – we had shut it out, in a kind of total concentration on the miracle taking place in our midst – no, something opened in me. While falling in love had been wild and abandoned, brimming with life and exuberance, this was cautious and muted, filled with endless attention to what was happening. Four weeks, maybe five, it lasted. Whenever I had to do some shopping in town I *ran* down the streets, grabbed whatever we needed, shook with impatience at the counter, and *ran* back with the bags hanging from my hands. I didn’t want to miss a minute! The days and nights merged into one, everything was tenderness, everything was gentleness, and if she opened her eyes we rushed towards her. Oh, there you are! But that passed too, we got used to that too, and I began to work, sat in my new office in Dalagatan writing every day while Linda was at home with Vanja and came to see me for lunch, often worried about something but also happy, she was closer to the child and what was happening than me, for I was writing, what had started out as a long essay slowly but surely was growing into a novel, it soon reached a point where it was everything, and writing was all I did, I moved into the office, wrote day and night, sleeping an hour here and there. I was filled with an absolutely fantastic feeling, a kind of light burned within me, not hot and consuming but cold and clear and shining. At night I took a cup of coffee with me and sat down on the bench outside the hospital to smoke, the streets around me were quiet, and I could hardly sit still, so great was my happiness. Everything was possible, everything made sense. At two places in the novel I soared higher than I had thought possible, and those two places alone, which I could not believe I had written, and no one else has noticed or said anything about, made the preceding five years of failed writing worth all the effort. They are two of the best moments in my life. By which I mean my whole life. The happiness that filled me and the feeling of invincibility they gave me I have searched for ever since, in vain.

A few weeks after the novel was finished life began as a house husband, and the plan was it would last until next spring while Linda did the last year of her training at the Dramatiska Institut. The novel writing had taken its toll on our relationship. I slept in the office for six weeks, barely seeing Linda and our five-month-old daughter, and when at last it was over she was relieved and happy, and I owed it to her to be there, not just in the same room, physically, but also with all my attention and participation. I couldn’t do it. For several months I felt a sorrow at not being where I had been, in the cold clear environment, and my yearning to return was stronger than my pleasure at the life we lived. The fact that the novel was doing well didn’t matter. After every good review I put a cross in the book and waited for the next, after every conversation with the agent at the publisher’s, when a foreign company had shown some interest or made an offer, I put a cross in my book and waited for the next, and I wasn’t very interested when it was eventually nominated for the Nordic Council Literature Prize, for if there was one thing I had learned over the last six months it was that all writing was about *writing*. Therein lay all its value. Yet I wanted to have more of what came in its wake because public attention is a drug, the need it satisfies is artificial, but once you have had a taste of it you want more. So there I was, pushing the buggy on my endless walks on the island of Djurgården in Stockholm waiting for the telephone to ring and a journalist to ask me about something, an event organiser to invite me somewhere, a magazine to ask for an article, a publisher to make an offer, until at last I took the consequences of the disagreeable taste it left in my mouth and began to say no to everything at the same time as the interest ebbed away and I was back to the everyday grind. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get into it, there was always something else that was more important. Vanja sat there in the buggy looking around while I trudged through the town, first here, then there, or sat in the sandpit digging with a spade in the play area in Humlegården, where the tall lean Stockholm mothers who surrounded us were constantly on their phones, looking as if they were part of some bloody fashion show, or she was in her high chair in the kitchen at home swallowing the food I fed her. All of this bored me out of my mind. I felt stupid walking round indoors chatting to her, because she didn’t say anything; there was just my inane voice and her silence, happy babbling or displeased tears, then it was on with her clothes and tramping into town again, to the Moderna Museet in Skeppsholmen, for example, where at least I could see some good art while keeping an eye on her, or to one of the big bookshops in the centre, or to Djurgården or Brunnsviken Lake, which was the closest the town came to nature, unless I took the road out to see Geir, who had his office in the university at that time. Little by little, I mastered everything with regard to small children, there wasn’t a single thing I couldn’t do with her, we were everywhere, but no matter how well it went, and irrespective of the great tenderness I felt for her, my boredom and apathy were greater. A lot of effort was spent getting her to sleep so that I could read and to making the days pass so that I could cross them off in the calendar. I got to know the most out-of-the-way cafés in town, and there was hardly a park bench I had not sat on at some time or other, with a book in one hand and the buggy in the other. I took Dostoevsky with me, first *Demons*, then *The Brothers Karamazov*. In them I found the light again. But it wasn’t the lofty, clear and pure light, as with Hölderlin; with Dostoevsky there were no heights, no mountains, there was no divine perspective, everything was in the human domain, wreathed in this characteristically Dostoevskian wretched, dirty, sick, almost contaminated mood that was never too far from hysteria. That was where the light was. That was where the divine stirred. But was this the place to go? Was it necessary to go down on bended knee? As usual I didn’t think as I read, just engrossed myself in it, and after a few hundred pages, which took several days to read, something suddenly happened: all the details that had been painstakingly built up slowly began to interact, and the intensity was so great that I was carried along, totally enthralled, until Vanja opened her eyes from the depths of the buggy, almost suspicious, it seemed: where have you taken me now?

There was no option but to close the book, lift her up, get out the spoon, the jar of food and the bib if we were indoors, set a course for the nearest café if we were outside, fetch a high chair, put her in it and go over to the counter and ask the staff to warm the food, which they did grudgingly because Stockholm was inundated with babies at that time, there was a baby boom, and since there were so many women in their thirties among the mothers who had worked and led their own lives until then, glamorous magazines for mothers began to appear, with children as a sort of accessory, and one celebrity after another allowed herself to be photographed with and interviewed about her family. What had previously taken place in private was now pumped into the public arena. Everywhere you could read about labour pains, Caesareans and breastfeeding, baby clothes, buggies and holiday tips for parents of small children, published in books written by house husbands or bitter mothers who felt cheated as they collapsed with exhaustion from working and having children. What had once been normal topics you didn’t talk about much were now placed at the forefront of existence and cultivated with a frenzy that ought to make everyone raise their eyebrows, for what could be the meaning of this? In the midst of this lunacy there was me trundling my child around like one of the many fathers who had evidently put fatherhood before all else. When I was in the café feeding Vanja there was always at least one other father there, usually of my age, that is, in his mid-thirties, almost all of whom had shaved heads to hide hair loss. You hardly ever saw a bald patch or a high forehead any longer, and the sight of these fathers always made me feel a little uncomfortable. I found it hard to take the feminised aspect of their actions, even though I did exactly the same and was as feminised as they were. The slight disdain I felt for men pushing buggies was, to put it mildly, a two-edged sword as for the most part I had one in front of me when I saw them. I doubted I was alone in these feelings, I thought I could occasionally discern an uneasy look on some men’s faces in the play area, and the restlessness in the bodies, which were prone to snatching a couple of pull-ups on the bars while the children played around them. However, spending a few hours every day in a play area with your child was one thing. There were things that were much worse. Linda had just started to take Vanja to Rhythm Time classes for tiny tots at the Stadsbiblioteket library, and when I took over responsibility she wanted Vanja to continue. I had an inkling something dreadful was awaiting me, so I said no, it was out of the question, Vanja was with me now, so there would be no Rhythm Time. But Linda continued to mention it off and on, and after a few months my resistance to what the role of the soft man involved was so radically subverted, in addition to which Vanja had grown so much that her day needed a modicum of variety, that one day I said, yes, today we were thinking of going to the Rhythm Time course at the

Stadsbiblioteket. Remember to get there in good time, Linda said, it fills up quickly. And so it was that early one afternoon I was pushing Vanja up Sveavägen to Odenplan, where I crossed the road and went through the library doors. For some reason I had never been there before, even though it was one of Stockholm’s most beautiful buildings, designed by Asplund some time in the 1920s, the period I liked best of all in the previous century. Vanja was fed, rested and wearing clean clothes, carefully chosen for the occasion. I pushed the buggy into the large completely circular interior, asked a woman behind a counter where the children’s section was, followed her instructions into a side room lined with shelves of children’s books, where on a door at the back there was a poster about this Rhythm Time class starting here at 2 p.m. Three buggies were already present. On some chairs a little further away sat the owners, three women in heavy jackets and worn faces, all around thirty-five, while what must have been their snot-nosed children were crawling around on the floor between them.

I parked the buggy by theirs, lifted Vanja out, sat down on a little ledge with her on my lap, removed her jacket and shoes and lowered her gently to the floor. Reckoned she could crawl around a bit as well. But she didn’t want to, she couldn’t remember being here before, so she wanted to stick with me and stretched her arms out. I lifted her back onto my lap. She sat watching the other children with interest.

An attractive young woman holding a guitar walked across the floor. She must have been about twenty-five; she had long blonde hair, a coat reaching down to her knees, high black boots and she stopped in front of me.

‘Hi!’ she said. ‘Haven’t seen you here before. Are you coming to the Rhythm Time class?’

‘Yes,’ I said, looking up at her. She really was attractive.

‘Have you signed up?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Do you have to?’

‘Yes, you do. And I’m afraid it’s full today.’

Good news.

‘What a shame,’ I said, getting up.

‘As you didn’t know,’ she said. ‘I suppose we can squeeze you in. Just this once. You can sign up afterwards for the next time.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

Her smile was so attractive. Then she opened the door and went in. I leaned forward and watched her putting her guitar case on the floor, removing her coat and scarf and hanging them over a chair at the back of the room. She had a light fresh spring-like presence.

I had a hunch where this was going, and I should have got up and left. But I wasn't there for my sake, I was there for Vanja and Linda. So I stayed put. Vanja was eight months old and absolutely bewitched by anything that resembled a performance. And now she was attending one.

More women with buggies came, in dribs and drabs, and soon the room was filled with the sounds of chatting, coughing, laughing, clothes rustling and rummaging through bags. Most seemed to come in twos or threes. For a long time I seemed to be the only person on my own. But just before two a couple more men arrived. From their body language I could see they didn't know each other. One of them, a small guy with a big head, wearing glasses, nodded to me. I could have kicked him. What did he think: that we belonged to the same club? Then it was off with the overalls, the hat and the shoes, out with the feeding bottle and rattle, down on the floor with the child.

The mothers had long since gone into the room where Rhythm Time was due to take place. I waited until last, but at a minute to, I got up and went in with Vanja on my arm. Cushions had been strewn across the floor for us to sit on, while the young woman leading the session sat on a chair in front of us. With the guitar on her lap she scanned the audience smiling. She was wearing a beige cashmere jumper. Her breasts were well formed, her waist was narrow, her legs, one crossed over the other and swinging, were long and still clad in black boots.

I sat down on my cushion. I put Vanja on my lap. She stared with big eyes at the woman with the guitar, who was now saying a few words of welcome.

'We've got some new faces here today,' she said. 'Perhaps you'd like to introduce yourselves?'

'Monica,' said one.

'Kristina,' said another.

'Lul,' said a third.

Lul? What sort of bloody name was that?

The room went quiet. The attractive young woman looked at me and sent me a smile of encouragement.

'Karl Ove,' I said sombrely.

'Then let's start with our welcome song,' she said, and struck the first chord, which resounded as she was explaining that parents should say the name of their child when she nodded to them, and then everyone should sing the child's name.

She strummed the same chord, and everyone began to sing. The idea behind the song was that everyone should say 'Hi' to their friend and wave a hand. Parents of the children too small to understand took their wrists and waved their hands, which I did too, but when the second verse started I no longer had any excuse for sitting there in silence and had to start singing. My own deep voice sounded like an affliction in the choir of high-pitched women's voices. Twelve times we sang 'Hi' to our friend before all the children had been named and we could move on. The next song was about parts of the body, which, of course, the children should touch when they were mentioned. Forehead, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, stomach, knee, foot. Forehead, eyes, ears, nose, mouth, stomach, knee, foot. Then we were handed some rattle-like instruments which we were supposed to shake as we sang a new song. I wasn't embarrassed, it wasn't embarrassing sitting there, it was humiliating and degrading. Everything was gentle and friendly and nice, all the movements were tiny, and I sat huddled on a cushion droning along with the mothers and children, a song, to cap it all, led by a woman I would have liked to bed. But sitting there I was rendered completely harmless, without dignity, impotent, there was no difference between me and her, except that she was more attractive, and the levelling, whereby I had forfeited everything that was me, even my size, and that voluntarily, filled me with rage.

'Now it's time for the children to do a bit of dancing!' she said, laying her guitar on the floor. Then she got up and went to a CD player on a chair.

'Everyone stand in a ring, and first we go one way, stamp with our feet, like so,' she said, stamping her attractive foot, 'turn round once and go back the other way.'

I got up, lifted Vanja and stood in the circle that was forming. I looked for the other two men. Both were completely focused on their children.

‘OK, OK, Vanja,’ I whispered. ‘“Each to his own,” as your great-grandfather used to say.’

She looked up at me. So far she hadn’t shown any interest in any of the things the children had to do. She didn’t even want to shake the maracas.

‘Away we go, then,’ said the attractive woman, pressing the CD player. A folk tune poured into the room, and I began to follow the others, each step in time to the music. I held Vanja with a hand under each arm, so that she was dangling, close to my chest. Then what I had to do was stamp my foot, swing her round, after which it was back the other way. Lots of the others enjoyed this, there was laughter and even some squeals of delight. When this was over we had to dance alone with our child. I swayed from side to side with Vanja in my arms thinking that this must be what hell was like, gentle and nice and full of mothers you didn’t know from Eve with their babies. When this was finished there was a session with a large blue sail which at first was supposed to be the sea, and we sang a song about waves and everyone swung the sail up and down, making waves, and then it was something the children had to crawl under until we suddenly raised it, this too to the accompaniment of our singing.

When at last she thanked us and said goodbye, I hurried out, dressed Vanja without meeting anyone’s eye, just staring down at the floor, while the voices, happier now than before they went in, buzzed around me. I put Vanja in the buggy, strapped her in and pushed her out as fast as I could without drawing attention to myself. Outside on the street I felt like shouting till my lungs burst and smashing something. But I had to make do with putting as many metres between me and this hall of shame in the shortest possible time.

‘Vanja, O Vanja,’ I said, scurrying down Sveavägen. ‘Did you have fun then? It didn’t really look like it.’

‘Tha tha thaa,’ Vanja said.

She didn’t smile, but her eyes were happy.

She pointed.

‘Ah, a motorbike,’ I said. ‘What is it with you and motorbikes, eh?’

When we reached the Konsum shop at the corner of Tegnérgatan I went in to buy something for supper. The feeling of claustrophobia was still there, but the aggression had diminished, it wasn’t anger I felt as I pushed the buggy down the aisle between the shelves. The shop evoked memories, it was the one I had used when I had moved to Stockholm three years earlier, when I was staying at the flat Norstedts, the publishers, had put at my disposal a stone's throw further up the street. I had weighed over a hundred kilos at the time and moved in a semi-catatonic darkness, escaping from my former life. It hadn't been much fun. But I had decided to pick myself up, so every evening I went to the Lill-Jansskogen forest to run. I couldn't even manage a hundred metres before my heart was pounding so fast and my lungs were gasping so much that I had to stop. Another hundred metres and my legs were trembling. Then it was back to the hotel-like flat at walking pace for crispbread and soup. One day I had seen a woman in the shop, suddenly she was standing next to me, by the meat counter of all places, and there was something about her, the sheer physicality of her appearance, which from one moment to the next filled me with almost explosive lust. She was holding her basket in front of her with both hands, her hair was auburn, her pale complexion freckled. I caught a whiff of her body, a faint smell of sweat and soap, and stood staring straight ahead with a thumping heart and constricted throat for maybe fifteen seconds, for that was the time it took her to come alongside me, take a pack of salami from the counter and go on her way. I saw her again when I was about to pay, she was at the other cash desk, and the desire, which had not gone away, welled up in me again. She put her items in her bag, turned and went out of the door. I never saw her again.

From her low position in the buggy Vanja had spotted a dog, which she was pointing a finger at. I never stopped pondering about what she saw when she watched the world around her. What did this endless stream of people, faces, cars, shops and signs mean to her? She did not see it in an undiscriminating way, that at least was certain, for not only did she regularly point at motorbikes, cats, dogs and other babies, she had also constructed a very clear hierarchy with respect to the people around her: first Linda, then me, then grandma and then everyone else, depending on how long they had been near her over the last few days.

'Yes, look, a dog,' I said. I picked up a carton of milk, which I put on the buggy, and a packet of fresh pasta from the adjacent counter. Then I took two packets of serrano ham, a jar of olives, mozzarella cheese, a pot of basil and some tomatoes. This was food I would never have dreamed of buying in my former life because I had no idea it existed. But now I was here, in the midst of Stockholm's cultural middle classes, and even though this pandering to all things Italian, Spanish, French and the repudiation of all things Swedish appeared stupid to me, and gradually, as the bigger picture emerged, also repugnant, it wasn't worth wasting my energy on. When I missed pork chops and cabbage, beef stew, vegetable soup, dumplings, meatballs, lung mash, fishcakes, mutton and vegetables, smoked sausage ring, whale steaks, sago pudding, semolina, rice pudding and Norwegian porridge, it was as much the 70s I missed as the actual tastes. And since food was not important to me, I might as well make something Linda liked.

I stopped for a few seconds by the newspaper stand wondering whether to buy the two evening papers, the two biggest publications. Reading them was like emptying a bag of rubbish over your head. Now and then I did buy them, when it felt as though a bit more rubbish up there wouldn't make any difference. But not today.

I paid and went into the street again, with the tarmac vaguely reflecting the light from the mild winter sky, and the cars queueing on all sides of the crossing resembling a huge pile-up of logs in a river. To avoid the traffic I went along Tegnérgatan. In the window of the second-hand bookshop, which was one of the ones I kept an eye on, I saw a book by Malaparte that Geir had spoken about with warmth and one by Galileo Galilei in the Atlantis series. I turned the buggy, nudged the door open with my heel and entered backwards with the buggy following.

'I'd like two of the books in the window,' I said. 'The Galileo Galilei and the Malaparte.'

'Pardon me?' said the shirt-clad man in his fifties who ran the place, as he peered at me over the square-rimmed glasses perched on the tip of his nose.

'In the window,' I said in Swedish. 'Two books. Galilei, Malaparte.'

'The sky and the war, eh?' he said, and turned to pick them out for me.

Vanja had gone to sleep.

Had it been so exhausting at Rhythm Time?

I pulled the little lever under the headrest towards me and lowered her gently into the buggy. She waved a hand in her sleep, and clenched it exactly as she had done just after she had been born. One of the movements that nature had supplied her with but which she had slowly replaced with something of her own. But when she slept it reawakened.

I pushed the buggy to the side so that people could pass, and turned to the shelf of art books as the bookshop owner rang up the prices of the two books on his antiquated cash till. Now that Vanja was asleep I had a few more minutes to myself, and the first book I caught sight of was a photographic book by Per Maning. What luck! I had always liked his photos, especially these ones, the animal series. Cows, pigs, dogs, seals. Somehow he had succeeded in capturing their souls. There was no other way to understand the looks of these animals in the pictures. Complete presence, at times anguished, at others vacant, and sometimes penetrating. But also enigmatic, like portraits by painters in the seventeenth century.

I put it on the counter.

'That one's just come in,' the owner said. 'Fine book. Are you Norwegian?'

'Yes, I am,' I said. 'I'd like to browse a bit more if that's OK.'

There was an edition of Delacroix's diary, I took it, and then a book about Turner, even though no paintings lost as much by being photographed as his, and Poul Vad's book about Hammershøi, and a magnificent work about orientalism in art.

As I placed them on the counter my mobile rang. Almost no one had my number, so the ringtone, which found its way out of the depths of the side pocket in my parka a touch muffled, aroused no disquiet in me. Quite the contrary. Apart from the brief exchange with the Rhythm Time woman I hadn't spoken to anyone since Linda cycled to school that morning.

'Hello?' Geir said. 'What are you up to?'

'Working on my self-esteem,' I said, turning to the wall. 'And you?'

'Not that, at any rate. I'm just sitting here in the office watching everyone scurry past. So what's been happening?'

'I've just met an attractive woman.'

'And?'

'Chatted to her.'

'Mm?'

'She invited me to hers.'

'Did you say yes?'

'Of course. She even asked what my name was.'

'But?'

‘She was the teacher in charge of a Rhythm Time class for babies. So I had to sit there clapping my hands and singing children’s songs in front of her, with Vanja on my lap. On a little cushion. With a load of mothers and children.’

Geir burst into laughter.

‘I was also given a rattle to shake.’

‘Ha ha ha!’

‘I was so furious when I left I didn’t know what to do with myself,’ I said. ‘I also had a chance to try out my new waistline. And no one was bothered about the rolls of fat on my stomach.’

‘No, they’re nice and soft, they are,’ Geir said, laughing again. ‘Karl Ove, aren’t we going out tonight?’

‘Are you winding me up?’

‘No, I’m serious. I was planning to work here till seven, more or less. So we could meet in town any time after.’

‘Impossible.’

‘What the hell’s the point of you living in Stockholm if we can never meet?’

‘You realise you just used a Swedish word, don’t you,’ I said.

‘Can you remember when you first came to Stockholm?’ Geir said. ‘When you were in the taxi lecturing me about the expression “hen-pecked” when I didn’t want to go to the nightclub with you?’

‘There you go. And another. Your Norwegian’s gone to pot,’ I said.

‘For Christ’s sake, man. What we’re talking about is the expression you used. Hen-pecked. Do you remember?’

‘Yes, I’m afraid I do.’

‘And?’ he said. ‘What do you deduce from that?’

‘That there are differences,’ I said. ‘I’m not hen-pecked. I’m a hen-pecker. And you’re a woodpecker.’

‘Ha ha ha. Tomorrow then?’

‘We’re eating out with Fredrik and Karin tomorrow night.’

‘Fredrik? Is he that idiot of a film producer?’

‘I wouldn’t express it in that way, but, yes, he is.’

‘Oh my God. All right. Sunday? No, that’s your day of rest. Monday?’

‘OK.’

‘There are lots of people in town then, too.’

‘Monday at Pelikanen then,’ I said. ‘By the way, I’m holding a Malaparte book in my hand here.’

‘Oh yes? Are you in a second-hand bookshop then? It’s good, that one.’

‘And Delacroix’s diary.’

‘That’s supposed to be good as well. Thomas has talked about it, I know. Anything else?’

‘*Aftenposten* rang yesterday. They wanted to do an interview.’

‘You didn’t say yes, did you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You idiot. You said you were going to stop doing them.’

‘I know. But the publishers said the journalist was particularly good. And so I thought I would give it one last chance. It *could* turn out all right after all.’

‘No, it can’t,’ Geir said.

‘Yes, I know,’ I said. ‘But never mind. Now I’ve said yes anyway. Anything new with you?’

‘Nothing. Had some bread rolls with the social anthropologists. Then the old institute head popped by with crumbs in his beard and his flies open, wanting to talk. I’m the only one who doesn’t give him the heave-ho. So he comes here.’

‘The one who was so tough?’

‘Yes. And who’s now terrified of losing his office. That’s all he’s got left of course. And so now he’s as nice as pie. It’s a question of adapting. Tough when he can be, nice when he has to be.’

‘I might pop round tomorrow,’ I said. ‘Have you got any time?’

‘Dead right I have. So long as you don’t bring Vanja along, that is.’

‘Ha ha. Right, but I’ve got to pay now. See you tomorrow.’

‘OK. All the best to Linda and Vanja.’

‘And to Christina.’

‘See you.’

‘Yes, see you.’

I rang off and stuffed the mobile back in my pocket. Vanja was still asleep. The bookshop owner was studying a catalogue. He looked up as I approached the counter.

‘That’ll be 1,530 kroner,’ he said.

I passed him my card. I put the receipt in my back pocket – the only way I could justify these purchases of mine was that they could be written off against tax – I put the two bags of books underneath the buggy, and then I pushed it out of the shop to the sound of the doorbell ringing in my ears.

It was already twenty minutes to four. I had been up since half past four in the morning going through a problematic translation for Damm until half past six, and even though it was tedious work in which all I did was weigh one sentence against the other in the original, it was still a hundred times more interesting and rewarding than what I did during the morning in terms of nappy changing and children's activities, which for me were no longer any more than a means of occupying my time. I wasn't exhausted by this lifestyle, it had nothing to do with expending energy, but as there wasn't even the slightest spark of inspiration in it, it deflated me nonetheless, rather as if I'd had a puncture.

By the crossing at Döbelnsgatan I took a left turn, walked up the hill below Johanneskyrk, which with its red brick walls and green tin roof was similar to Johanneskirk in Bergen and Trefoldighetskirk in Arendal, followed Malmskillnadsgatan for a while, then turned down David Bagares gata and through the gate to our backyard. Two torches were burning on the pavement outside the café opposite. There was a stench of piss, because people stopped here on their way home from Stureplan at night and pissed through the railings, and a stink of rubbish from the line of dustbins along the wall. In the corner was the pigeon that had taken up residence here when we moved in two years before. At the time it lived in a hole in the wall. When it was bricked up and sharp spikes were cemented into all the flat surfaces higher up, she moved down to ground level. There were rats here too. I saw them occasionally when I went out for a smoke at night, black backs sliding through the bushes and suddenly scuttling across the open illuminated square towards the security of the flower beds on the other side. Now one of the women hairdressers was standing there, talking on her mobile while smoking. She must have been about forty, and I guessed she had grown up as a small-town beauty, at any rate she reminded me of the type you can see in restaurants in Arendal in the summer, women in their forties with hair dyed much too blonde or much too black, skin that was much too brown, eyes much too flirtatious, laughter much too loud. Her voice was raucous, she spoke broad Skåne dialect, and today she was dressed all in white. She nodded on seeing me, and I nodded back. Even though I had barely spoken to her I liked her, she was so different from all the other people I met in Stockholm, who were either on their way up, or were up, or thought they were. She had no truck, to put it mildly, with their homogeneous style, which not only applied to clothes and objects but also their thoughts and attitudes.

I paused in front of the door and pulled out my key. The smell of detergent and clean clothes streamed out from the vent above the cellar window. I unlocked the door and walked as quietly as I could into the hall. Vanja knew these sounds and the order in which they occurred so well that she almost always woke when we came in here. She did so this time too. With a scream. I let her scream, opened the lift door, pressed the button and regarded myself in the mirror as we went up the two floors. Linda, who must have heard the screams, was waiting for us at the door when we arrived.

'Hi,' she said. 'Have you had a good time? Have you just woken up, sweetheart? Come here then and I'll . . .'

She undid the belt and lifted Vanja up.

'We've been fine,' I said, pushing the empty buggy in while Linda unbuttoned her cardigan and went into the living room to feed her.

'But I'll never set foot in the Rhythm Time session for as long as I draw breath.'

'Was it that bad?' she asked, glancing at me with a fleeting smile before looking down at Vanja and nestling her against her bared breast.

'Bad? It's the worst experience I've ever had. I was furious when I left.'

'I see,' she said, no longer interested.

Her care for Vanja was so different. It was all-embracing. And completely genuine.

I went into the kitchen with the shopping, put the perishables in the fridge, placed the pot of basil on a dish on the windowsill and watered it, fetched the books from under the buggy and put them in the bookcase, sat down in front of the computer and checked my emails. I hadn't looked since the morning. There was an email from Carl-Johan Vallgren, he congratulated me on the nomination, said he was afraid he hadn't read my book yet, and that I just had to ring if I felt like a beer one day. Carl-Johan was someone I really liked, I valued his extravagance – which some found disagreeable, snobbish or stupid – especially after two years in Sweden. But it was impossible for me to have a beer with him. I would just sit there in silence, I knew I would; I had already done it twice. Then there was one from Marta Norheim about an interview in connection with NRK 2’s Novel Award, which I had won. And one from my uncle Gunnar, who thanked me for the book and said he was building up his strength to read it, wished me luck with the Nordic championship in literature and concluded with a PS that it was a shame Yngve and Kari Anne were going to divorce. I closed the window without answering.

‘Anything interesting?’ Linda asked.

‘Well. Carl-Johan congratulated me. And then NRK wanted to do an interview in two weeks. Gunnar wrote as well, of all people. He just thanked me for the book. But that’s not bad, considering how angry he was about *Out of the World*.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ Linda said. ‘Aren’t you going to call Carl-Johan and get him to come over?’

‘Are you in such a good mood?’ I said.

She pouted at me.

‘I’m just trying to be nice,’ she said.

‘I know that,’ I said. ‘Sorry. Didn’t mean it. OK?’

‘That’s all right.’

I walked past her and picked up the second volume of *The Brothers Karamazov*, which was lying on the sofa.

‘I’m off then,’ I said. ‘Bye.’

‘Enjoy,’ she said.

Now I had an hour to myself. It was the sole condition I had made before taking over responsibility for Vanja during the daytime, that I would have an hour on my own in the afternoon, and even though Linda considered it unfair since she’d never had an hour to herself like that, she agreed. The reason she’d never had an hour, I assumed, was that she hadn’t thought of it. And the reason she hadn’t thought of it was, I also assumed, that she would rather be with us than alone. But that wasn’t how I felt. So for an hour every afternoon I sat in a nearby café reading and smoking. I never went to the same café more than four or five times at a stretch because then they started to treat me like a *stammis*, that is, they greeted me when I arrived and wanted to impress me with their knowledge of my predilections, often with a friendly comment about some topic on everyone’s lips. But the whole point for me of living in a big city was that I could be completely alone in it while still surrounded by people on all sides. All with faces I had *never* seen before! The unceasing stream of new faces. For me the very attraction of a big city was immersing myself in that. The Metro swarming with different types and characters. The squares. The pedestrian zones. The cafés. The big malls. Distance, distance, I could never have enough distance. So when a barista began to say hello and smile on catching sight of me and not only brought me a cup of coffee before I asked but also offered me a free croissant, it was time to leave. And it wasn’t very hard to find alternatives, we were living in the city centre, and there were hundreds of cafés within a ten-minute radius.

This time I followed Regeringsgatan down towards the centre. It was packed with people. I thought about the attractive woman in the Rhythm Time class as I walked. What had that been all about? I wanted to sleep with her but didn’t believe I would get an opportunity, and if I’d had an opportunity I wouldn’t have taken it. So why should it be of any importance if I behaved like a woman in front of her?

You can say a lot about my self-image, but it was definitely not shaped in the cool chambers of reason. My intellect may be able to understand it, but it did not have the power to control it. One’s self-image not only encompasses the person you are but also the person you want to be, could be or once had been. For the self-image there was no difference between the actual and the hypothetical. It incorporated all ages, all feelings, all drives. When I pushed the buggy all over town and spent my days taking care of my child it was not the case that I was adding something to my life, that it became richer as a result; on the contrary, something was removed from it, part of myself, the bit relating to masculinity. It was not my intellect which made this clear to me, because my intellect knew I was doing this for a good reason, namely that Linda and I would be on an equal footing with regard to our child, but rather my emotions, which filled me with desperation whenever I squeezed myself into a mould that was so small and so constricted that I could no longer move. The question was which parameter should be operative. If equality and fairness were to be the parameters, well, there was nothing to be said about men sinking everywhere into the the thralls of softness and intimacy. Nor about the rounds of applause this was met with, for if equality and fairness were the dominant parameters, change was an undoubted improvement and a measure of progress. But these were not the only parameters. Happiness was one; an intense sense of being alive was another. And it may be that women who followed their careers until they were almost in their forties and then at the last moment had a child, which after a few months the father took care of until a place was found in a nursery so that they could both continue their careers, may have been happier than women in previous generations. It was possible that men who stayed at home and looked after their infants for six months may have increased their sense of being alive as a result. And women may actually have desired these men with thin arms, large waistlines, shaven heads and black designer glasses who were just as happy discussing the pros and cons of Babybjørn carriers and baby slings as whether it was better to cook one's own baby food or buy ready-made ecological purées. They may have desired them with all their hearts and souls. But even if they didn't, it didn't really matter because equality and fairness were the parameters, they trumped everything else a life and a relationship consisted of. It was a choice, and the choice had been made. For me as well. If I had wanted it otherwise I would have had to back out and tell Linda before she became pregnant: listen, I want children, but I don't want to stay at home looking after them, is that fine with you? Which means, of course, that you're the one who will have to do it. Then she could have said, no, it's not fine with me, or, yes, that's fine and our future could have been planned on that basis. But I didn't, I didn't have sufficient foresight, and consequently I had to go by the rules of the game. In the class and culture we belonged to, that meant adopting the same role, previously called the woman's role. I was bound to it like Odysseus to the mast: if I wanted to free myself I could do that, but not without losing everything. As a result I walked around Stockholm's streets, modern and feminised, with a furious nineteenth-century man inside me. The way I was seen changed, as if at the stroke of a magic wand the instant I laid my hands on the buggy. I had always eyed the women I walked past, the way men always have, actually a mysterious act because it couldn't lead to anything except a returned gaze, and if I did see a really beautiful woman I might even turn round to watch her, discreetly of course, but nevertheless: why, oh why? What function did all these eyes, all these mouths, all these breasts and waists, legs and bottoms serve? Why was it so important to look at them? When a few seconds, or occasionally minutes, later I had forgotten everything about them? Sometimes I had eye contact, and a rush could go through me if the gaze was held a tiny second longer, because it came from a person in a crowd, I knew nothing about her, where she was from, how she lived, nothing, yet we looked at each other, that was what it was about, and then it was over, she was gone and it was erased from memory for ever. When I came along with a buggy no women looked at me, it was as if I didn't exist. One might think it was because I gave such a clear signal that I was taken, but this was just as evident when I was walking hand in hand with Linda, and that had never prevented anyone from looking my way. My God, wasn't I only getting my just deserts, wasn't I being put in my place for walking around ogling women when there was one at home who had given birth to my child?

No, this was not good.

It certainly was not.

Tonje told me once about a man she had met at a restaurant, it was late, he came over to their table, drunk but harmless, or so they had thought, since he had told them he had come straight from the maternity ward, his partner had given birth to their first baby that day, and now he was on the town celebrating. But then he had started to make advances, he became more and more insistent and in the end suggested they should go back to his . . . Tonje was shaken deep into her soul, full of disgust, though also fascination, I suspected, because how was it possible, what was he thinking of?

I couldn't imagine a greater act of betrayal. But wasn't it what I was doing when I sought the eyes of all these women?

My thoughts inevitably went back to Linda sitting at home and washing and dressing Vanja, their eyes, Vanja's inquisitive or happy or sleepy eyes, Linda's beautiful eyes. I had never ever wanted anyone more than her, and now I had not only her but also her child. Why couldn't I be content with that? Why couldn't I stop writing for a year and be a father to Vanja while Linda completed her training? I loved them; they loved me. So why didn't all the rest stop plaguing and harrying me?

I had to apply myself harder. Forget everything around me and just concentrate on Vanja during the day. Give Linda all she needed. Be a good person. For Christ’s sake, being a good person, was that beyond me?

I had reached the new Sony shop and was considering going into the Akademi bookshop on the corner, buying a few books and settling down in the café there when I spotted Lars Norén across the street. He had a Nike carrier bag in his hand and was walking in the direction I had just come from. The first time I saw him was a few weeks after we had moved into our flat here, it was in Humlegården, the mist was hanging over the trees, and towards us walked a hobbit-like man dressed all in black. I met his gaze, it was as black as the night, and my spine ran cold, what kind of person was this? A troll?

‘Did you see *him*?’ I said to Linda.

‘That was Lars Norén,’ she said.

‘Was *that* Lars Norén?’ I said.

Linda’s mother, who was an actress, had worked with him in a play at the Royal Dramatic Theatre a long time ago, and Linda’s best friend, Helena, also an actress, had done as well. Linda told me he had chatted to Helena, in a friendly way, and described how her precise words had appeared later in the play, put into the mouth of the character she was playing. Linda was always pestering me to read *Chaos Is the Neighbour of God* and *Night Is the Mother of Day*, which she said was quite fantastic, but I never did, my list of books to read was as long as my arm, and for the time being I had to make do with an occasional sighting, for he appeared on the street at regular intervals, and when we went to our favourite café, Saturnus, he was not infrequently there being interviewed or just talking to someone. He wasn’t the only writer I bumped into; in the bakery close to ours I once saw Kristian Petri, whom I was on the point of saying hello to, unaccustomed as I was to meeting faces I had seen before, and on another occasion Peter Englund was in the same place, while Lars Jakobson, who wrote the fantastic *In the Red Queen’s Castle*, once came into Café Dello Sport while we were there, and Stig Larsson, whom I had been addicted to when I was in my twenties and whose book *Watch Over Mine* had hit me like a clenched fist, I saw on the terrace at Sturehof. He was reading a book, and my heart beat so fast it was as if I had seen a corpse. Another time I saw him at Pelikanen, where I was with some people who knew the crowd he was with, and I shook his hand, dry as a bundle of withered straw as he gave me an apathetic smile. I saw Aris Fioteros at Forum Culture House one night, Katarina Frostenson was also there, and I met Ann Jäderlund at a party in Södermalm. I had read all these authors when I was in Bergen, back then they were no more than foreign names living in a foreign country, and seeing them now in the flesh they were shrouded in the aura of that time, which gave me a strong historical sense of the present, they wrote in our era and filled it with moods on which generations to come would base their understanding of us. Stockholm at the beginning of the millennium, that was the feeling I had when I saw them, and it was a good uplifting feeling. I didn’t care that many of these writers had had their heyday in the 80s and 90s and had long been pushed aside, it wasn’t reality I wanted but enchantment. Of the young writers I had read there was only Jerker Virdborg I liked; his novel *Black Crab* had something that raised it above the mist of morals and politics others were cloaked in. Not that it was a fantastic novel, but he was searching for something different. That was the sole obligation literature had, in all other respects it was free, but not in this, and when writers disregarded this they did not deserve to be met with anything but contempt.

How I hated their journals. Their articles. Gassilewski, Raattamaa, Halberg. What terrible writers they were.

No, not the Akademi bookshop.

I stopped by the zebra crossing. On the other side, in the passage leading to the old, traditional NK department store, there was a little café, and I decided to head for it. Even though I often went there the flow of customers was so great and the surroundings so anonymous that you were invisible nevertheless.

There was one free table by the railings of the staircase leading down to the DIY shop in the cellar. I hung my jacket on the back of the chair, put the book on the table, front cover down, spine facing away, so that no one could see what I was reading, and joined the queue by the counter. The three people working there, two women and a man, looked like sisters and a brother. The oldest of them, now standing by the hissing coffee machine, had the appearance and radiance of someone you normally only ever saw in magazines, and her photo-like appearance almost cancelled out any lust I felt as I watched her flit about behind the counter, as though the world I moved in was incommensurable with hers, and I suppose it was. We didn’t have a thing in common, apart from the gaze.

Hell. There I go again.

Wasn’t I supposed to be stopping all this?

I took out a crumpled hundred-krone note from my pocket and smoothed it in my hand. Scanned the other customers, who were almost all sitting on a chair with their gleaming carrier bags on another. Shiny boots and shoes, elegant suits and coats, the odd fur collar, the odd gold necklace, old skin and old eyes in their old mascaraed sockets. Coffee was drunk, Danish pastries consumed. I would have given a fortune to know what the people sitting there were thinking. What the world looked like to them. Imagine if it was radically different from what I saw. If it was full of pleasure at the dark leather of the sofa, the black surface of the coffee and its bitter taste, not to mention the yellow eye of custard in the centre of the puff pastry’s winding and cracked terrain. What if the whole of this world sang inside them? What if they were full to bursting with the many delights the day had bestowed on them? Their carrier bags, for example, the ingenious and extravagant handles of string some of them were fitted with instead of the small cardboard handles stuck on the bags in the supermarkets. And the logos which someone with all their specialist knowledge and expertise had spent days and weeks designing, the meetings with feedback from other departments, more work refining the design, perhaps they had shown samples to friends and family, lain awake at night, for there was always someone who would not have liked it, despite all the meticulous care and ingenuity that had gone into it, until the day it became a reality, and now lay, for example, in the lap of that woman in her fifties with the stiff hair dyed a golden tint.

Maybe she didn’t seem that elated. More like mildly contemplative. Filled with a great inner peace after a long and happy life? In which the perfect contrast between the coffee cup’s cold, hard, white stoneware and the coffee’s hot, fluid, black liquid was only a temporary stopping point on a journey through the world’s noumena and phenomena? For had she not seen foxgloves growing in rocky scree once? Had she not seen a dog pissing against a lamp post in the park on one of those misty November nights that fill the town with such mystique and beauty? Ah, ah, for isn’t the air full of tiny rain particles then that not only lie like a film over skin and wool, metal and wood, but also reflect the light around such that everything glistens and glimmers in the greyness? Had she not seen a man first smash the basement window on the other side of the backyard, and then lift the hasp and crawl in to steal whatever might be inside? The ways of man are indeed weird and wonderful! Did she not have in her possession a little metal stand with salt and pepper cellars, both made of fluted glass, the top made of the same metal as the stand and perforated with lots of small holes so that the salt and pepper, respectively, could *sprinkle* out? And what had she seen them sprinkle on? Roast pork, a leg of mutton, wonderful yellow omelettes with chopped green chives in, pea soups and joints of beef. Filled to the brim with all these impressions, each and every one, with all their tastes, smells, colours and shapes, in themselves an experience of a lifetime, was it perhaps not surprising that she sought peace and quiet where she sat, and did not appear to want to absorb *any* more of the world?

At last the man in front of me in the queue had his order placed on the counter, three latte coffees, evidently an extremely demanding task, and the woman serving, with the shoulder-length black hair, the gentle lips and the black eyes which brightened in an instant if there was a customer she knew, they were watching, but now they were neutral, now she was looking at me.

‘A black coffee?’ she said before I had time to ask.

I nodded, and sighed as she turned to get it. So she too had noticed the tall drab man with the jumper stained by baby food who never washed his hair any more.

In the few seconds it took her to find a cup and fill it with coffee I ran my eyes over her. She too had knee-high black boots. It was this winter’s fashion, and I wished it would last for ever.

‘Here you are,’ she said.

I handed her a hundred-krone note, she took it with her well-manicured fingers, I noticed the nail varnish was transparent, she counted up the change at the till and placed it in my hand as the smile she gave me transmuted into a smile for three friends behind me in the queue.

The sight of the Dostoevsky book on the table was not exactly tempting. The threshold for reading became higher the less I read; it was a typical vicious circle. In addition, I didn’t like being in the world Dostoevsky described. However rapt I could be and however much admiration I had for what he did, I couldn’t rid myself of the distaste I felt when reading his books. No, not distaste. Discomfort was the word. I was uncomfortable in Dostoevsky’s world. But I opened the book anyway and settled down on the chair to read, after glancing round the room to make sure no one saw me doing it.

Before Dostoevsky, the ideal, even the Christian ideal, was always pure and strong, it was part of heaven, unattainable for almost everyone. The flesh was weak, the mind frail, but the ideal was unbending. The ideal was about aspiring, enduring, fighting the fight. In Dostoevsky's books everything is human, or rather, the human world is everything, including the ideals, which are turned on their heads: now they can be achieved if you give up, lose your grip, fill yourself with non-will rather than will. Humility and self-effacement, those are the ideals in Dostoevsky's foremost novels, and inasmuch as they are never realised within the framework of the storyline, therein lies his greatness, because this is precisely a result of his own humility and self-effacement as a writer. Unlike most other great writers, Dostoevsky himself is not discernible in his novels. There are no brilliant turns of phrase that can point to him, there is no definitive moral that can be elicited; he uses all his ingenuity and diligence to individualise people, and since there is so much in man that will not allow itself to be humbled or effaced, the struggle and active striving are always stronger than the passives of mercy and forgiveness, which is how they end up. From here one might go on and examine, for example, the concept of nihilism in his work, which never seems real, always seems like a mere *idée fixe*, a piece of his era's intellectual history heaven, for the very reason that humanness bursts forth everywhere, in all its forms, from the most grotesque and brutish to the aristocratically refined and the besmirched, impoverished and worldly splendour-repudiating Jesus ideal, and it quite simply packs everything, including a discussion about nihilism, to the brim with meaning. With a writer like Tolstoy, who also worked and wrote during the period of great upheavals that was the latter half of the nineteenth century and which furthermore was riddled with all manner of religious and moral qualms, everything looks different. There are long descriptions of landscapes and space, customs and costumes, a rifle barrel smoking after a shot has been fired, the report reverberating with a faint echo, a wounded animal rearing up before falling down dead, and the blood steaming as it flows to the ground. Hunting is discussed in lengthy analyses which do not pretend to be anything other than that, an informed account of an objective phenomenon, inserted in an otherwise eventful narrative. This preponderance of deeds and events for their own sake does not exist in Dostoevsky, there is always something lying hidden behind them, a drama of the soul, and this means there is always an aspect of humanness he doesn't include, the one that binds us to the world outside us. There are many kinds of wind that blow through man, and there are other entities inside him apart from depth of soul. The authors of the books in the Old Testament knew that better than anyone. The richest conceivable portrayal of the possible manifestations of humanness is to be found there, where all possible forms of life are represented, apart from one, for us the only relevant one, namely our inner life. The division of humanness into the subconscious and the conscious, the rational and the irrational, whereby one always explains or clarifies the other, and the perception of God as something you can sink your soul in, such that the struggle ends and peace prevails, are new concepts, inextricably linked to us and our time, which not without reason has also let things slip out of our hands by allowing them to merge with our knowledge of them or with our image of them, while at the same time turning the relationship between man and the world on its head: where before man wandered through the world, now it is the world that wanders through man. And when meaning shifts, meaninglessness follows. It is no longer the abandonment of God which opens us to the night, as it did in the nineteenth century, when the humanness that was left took over everything, as we can see in Dostoevsky and Munch and Freud, when man, perhaps out of need, perhaps out of desire, became his own heaven. However, a single step backwards from that heaven was all that was necessary for all meaning to be lost. Then it was evident that there was a heaven over and above humanness, and that it was not only empty, black and cold, but also endless. How much was humanness worth in the context of the universe? What was man on this earth other than an insect among other insects, a life form among other life forms, which might just as well take the form of algae in a lake or fungi on the forest floor, roe in a fish's stomach, rats in a nest or a cluster of mussels on a reef? Why should we do one thing rather than another when there was no goal anyway, nor any direction in life, apart from to huddle together, live and then die? Who enquired about the value of this life when it was gone for ever, turned into a fistful of damp earth and a few yellowing brittle bones? The skull, wasn't it grinning with derision down there in the grave? What difference did a few extra dead bodies make from that perspective? Oh yes, there were other perspectives on this same world; couldn’t it be seen as a miracle of cool rivers and vast forests, whorled snail shells and deep potholes, veins and grey matter, deserted planets and expanding galaxies? Yes, it could, because meaning is not something we are given but which we give. Death makes life meaningless because everything we have ever striven for ceases when life does, and it makes life meaningful too, because its presence makes the little we have of it indispensable, every moment precious. But in my lifetime death was removed from our lives, it no longer existed, except as a constant item in all the newspapers, on the TV news and in films, where it didn’t mark the end of a process, discontinuity, but, on account of daily repetition, represented, on the contrary, an extension of the process, continuity, and in this way, oddly enough, had become a source of our security and our anchor. A plane crash was a ritual, it happened every so often, the same chain of events, and we were never part of it ourselves. A sense of security, but also excitement and intensity, for imagine how terrible the last seconds were for the passengers . . . everything we saw and did contained the intensity that was triggered in us, but had nothing to do with us. What was this? Were we living other people’s lives? Yes, everything we didn’t have and were not experiencing we had and were experiencing even so, because we saw it and we took part in it without being there ourselves. Not only once in a while but every day . . . And not just me and everyone I knew but all major cultures, indeed almost everyone in existence, all bloody humanity. It had explored everything and made it its own, as the ocean does with rain and snow, there were no longer any things or places we had not made our own, and thereby loaded with humanness: our mind had been there. In the context of the divine, humanness was always small and insignificant, and it must have been because of this perspective’s enormous import – which perhaps can only be compared with the significance contained in the recognition that knowledge was always a fall – that the notion of the divine arose in the first place, and had now come to an end. For who brooded over the meaninglessness of life any more? Teenagers. They were the only ones who were preoccupied with existential issues, and as a result there was something puerile and immature about them, and hence it was doubly impossible for adults with their sense of propriety intact to deal with them.

However, this is not so strange, for we never feel more strongly and passionately about life than in our teenage years, when we step into the world for the first time, as it were, and all our feelings are new feelings. So there they are, with their big ideas on small orbits, looking this way and that for an opportunity to launch them, as the pressure builds. And who is it they light upon sooner or later but Uncle Dostoevsky? Dostoevsky has become a teenager's writer, the issue of nihilism a teenage issue. How this has come about is hard to say, but the result is at any rate that the whole of this vast question has been disregarded while at the same time all critical energy is directed to the left, where it is swallowed up in ideas of justice and equality, which of course are the very ones that legitimise and steer the development of our society and the abyss-less life we live within it. The difference between nineteenth-century nihilism and ours is the difference between emptiness and equality. In 1949 the German writer Ernst Jünger wrote that in the future we would have something approaching a world state. Now, when liberal democracy reigns supreme in modern societies, it looks as though he was right. We are all democrats, we are all liberal, and the differences between states, cultures and people are being broken down everywhere. And this movement, what else is it at heart, if not nihilistic? 'The nihilistic world is in essence a world that is being increasingly reduced, which naturally of necessity coincides with the movement towards a zero point,' Jünger wrote. A case in point of such a reduction is God being perceived of as 'good', or the inclination to find a common denominator for all the complicated tendencies in the world, or the propensity for specialisation, which is another form of reduction, or the determination to convert everything into numerical figures, beauty as well as forests as well as art as well as bodies. For what is money if not an entity that commodifies the most dissimilar things? Or as Jünger writes, 'Little by little all areas are brought under this single common denominator, even one with its residence as far from causality as the dream.' In our century even our dreams are alike, even dreams are things we sell. Undifferentiated, which is just another way of saying indifferent.

That is where our night is.

I had a sense the crowds around me were thinning and that the streets outside were dark, but not until I put the book down to go and get a refill of coffee did it strike me that this was a sign that time was passing.

It was ten minutes to six.

Bloody hell.

I should have been home at five. And it was Friday today, when we always went to a bit of extra trouble with the dinner and the evening that followed. At least that was the idea.

Shit. Fuck and bollocks.

I put on my jacket, stuffed the book in my pocket and hurried out.

‘Bye!’ the girl behind the counter said as I left.

‘Bye!’ I replied, without turning. I had to do some shopping before going home too. First of all, I went into the Systembolaget opposite, blindly grabbed a bottle of red wine from the most expensive shelf, after first checking there was a bull’s head on the label, then followed the passage into the mall, which was so big and luxurious it always made me feel shabby, like a hobo, to the staircase and down into the supermarket in the basement, where the selection of goods on offer was the most exclusive in Stockholm, and where a large slice of our income ended up, not that we were gourmets by any stretch of the imagination, but because we were too lazy to walk to the cheap supermarket in the subway in Birger Jarlsgatan, and because I didn’t care two hoots about the value of money, in the sense that I had no hesitation about spending it like water when I had it and hardly missed it when I didn’t. Of course it was stupid; it made life harder for us than it needed to be. Our finances, though limited, could easily have been regular and healthy, instead of me splashing money around as soon as I had it and then living for the next three years on the basic minimum. But who could be bothered to think like that? Not me at any rate. So it was off to the meat counter, where they had wonderful well-hung and matured but by our standards staggeringly expensive entrecote steak from a farm in Gotland, meat which even I could tell tasted especially good, and where there were also some plastic pots of home-made sauces, which I grabbed hurriedly, along with a bag of potatoes, some tomatoes, broccoli and mushrooms. I saw they had fresh raspberries and grabbed a punnet, dashed to the freezer counter and selected the vanilla ice cream with the little label they had just started stocking, and lastly, at the other end of the shop, picked up some of the French waffles that were so good with it, where, fortunately, there was also a till.

Dear oh dear oh dear, now it was a quarter past.

It wasn’t only that I had been away for an hour and a half longer than I should have been, and that she was waiting, but also that the evening would be so short now, as we went to bed very early. For my part, it didn’t matter, I was just as happy eating sandwiches in front of the TV and could go to bed at half past seven if necessary, it was her I was worried about.

Furthermore, I had recently been on a three-day mini-tour doing readings and was going to Oslo to give a talk next week, so the leash was even tighter than usual.

I put the goods on the metal disc that slowly rotated towards the checkout assistant. She lifted them one by one and twisted them in the air until the bar code was over the laser reader, placed them on the small black conveyor belt after the beep, all with somnambulistic movements as if she were moving in a dream. The light above us was sharp and not a pore in her skin was left unexposed. Her mouth drooped at the corners, not because she was old, but because her cheeks were so big and fleshy. Her whole head was bloated with flesh. She might have spent a lot of time on her hairdo but it did nothing to improve the overall impression; it was like titivating the green top on a carrot.

‘Five hundred and twenty kroner,’ she said, looking at her nails, which she splayed for a brief moment. I swiped my card and tapped in my PIN. While staring at the display as I waited for the transaction to be accepted it struck me I had forgotten to buy a carrier bag. When this happened I was always careful to pay, so they didn’t think I had forgotten it on purpose, hoping they would say I could have one free, as they often did. But this time I had no change on me, and it was ridiculous to use my card for such a small sum. On the other hand, did it matter what she thought about me? She was so fat.

‘I forgot to take a bag,’ I said.

‘That’ll be two kroner,’ she said.

I took a bag from the box underneath the cash till and produced my card again.

‘Haven’t you got any cash?’ she said.

‘I’m afraid not,’ I said.

She waved her hand.

‘But I’d like to pay,’ I said. ‘It’s not that.’

She smiled wearily.

‘Go on, take it,’ she said.

‘Thank you,’ I said, stuffing the goods inside and walking towards the stairs which, on this side, led up to a hall with some auction firm’s display cases along the walls. I left by the door there, and NK was on the other side of the street, glittering in the underground shopping street which, on the left, was connected to another mall, Gallerian, and further up on the same side to the Kulturhus, while straight ahead it came out at Plattan and thus the Metro, from which tunnels led to the main station. On rainy days I always walked this way, on others too, for I found everything subterranean fascinating, it was like an adventure. I suppose this must have originated in my childhood when a cave was absolutely the most exciting find we could have made. One winter, I remembered, more than two metres of snow had fallen, it must have been in 1976 or 1977, and one weekend we dug small dens connected by tunnels stretching right across the garden to the neighbour’s. We were like creatures possessed and totally enchanted by the result when evening fell and we could sit chatting deep beneath the snow.

I walked past the crowded American bar. It was Friday, and people went there after work for a beer or before their night out started in earnest, sat with their thick jackets over the backs of the chairs smiling and drinking, their faces flushed, most of them in their forties, while young, slim men and women with black aprons walked round taking orders, placing trays of beer on the tables and collecting empty glasses. The sound of all these happy people, this warm good-natured buzz, spiced as it were with the occasional roar of laughter, met me as the door was opened and a group of five people stopped outside, all busy doing something, whether searching a bag for cigarettes or lipstick, or keying in a number on a mobile and raising it expectantly to one ear, scanning the street while waiting, or searching out one of the others in order to send a smile, nothing more than that, just a friendly smile.

‘Taxi to Regeringsgatan . . .’ I heard behind me. Along the road a line of cars slipped past, slowly and sombrely, the faces in them illuminated by the gleam from the street lamps, which lent them a mysterious glow, or in the case of the drivers, by the bluish light from the dashboards. Some throbbed with the sound of bass and drums. Across the street people were streaming out of NK, where soon there would be a loudspeaker announcement that the store was closing in fifteen minutes. Thick furs, small whimpering dogs, dark woollen coats, leather gloves, clusters of carrier bags. The occasional youthful Puffa jacket, the occasional drop-crotch trousers, the occasional woollen beanie. Then there was a woman running past, holding on to her hat with one hand, the tails of her coat flapping around her legs. Why was she in such a hurry? It seemed to be urgent and I turned my head to watch. But nothing happened, she disappeared round the corner towards Kungsträgården. Three tramps were sitting by the wall on some grating. One had a sheet of cardboard in front of him on which he had written in felt-tip that he needed money for a place to stay the night. A hat containing a few coins lay beside him. The other two were drinking. I looked away as I passed them, crossed the road by the Akademi bookshop, hurried along past the stern somehow faceless façades, thinking about Linda, who perhaps was cross, who perhaps was thinking the evening was ruined, thinking how I was not looking forward much to meeting her. Over another crossing, past the expensive Italian restaurant, a quick glance up at the Glen Miller Café, where two people were getting out of a taxi, and then over to Nalen, the jazz club. An enormous band bus with a trailer was parked there, a white Swedish Broadcasting Corporation bus right behind it. A thick bundle of cables ran from it across the pavement, and in vain I struggled to recall who was playing there tonight, before striding up the three steps in front of our door, tapping in the code and entering. As I started on the stairs I heard a door being opened and shut again on the floor above. From the slam I knew it was the Russian woman. But it was too late to take the lift, so I went on up, and sure enough, a moment later, there she was, on her way down. She pretended she hadn’t seen me. I greeted her anyway.

‘Hi!’ I said.

She mumbled something or other, but not until she had passed. The Russian woman was our neighbour from hell. For the first seven months we lived in the block her apartment was empty. But then one night at half past one we were awakened by a racket in the corridor – it was her front door being slammed shut – and straight afterwards music was played so loud we could not hear each other speak. Euro disco, with a bass and bass drum that made the floor vibrate and the windowpanes rattle. It was as though we had our stereo on at full blast. Linda, who was eight months’ pregnant, had problems sleeping anyway, but even I who was usually able to remain comatose through any sort of noise could forget all about sleeping. Between the songs we heard her shouting and yelling beneath us. We got up and went into the living room. Should we ring the hotline that had been set up for situations like this? I didn't want to. That was too Swedish for me. Shouldn't we just go downstairs and ring the bell and complain? Fine, but then I would have to do it. And I did, I rang, and when that didn't help I knocked, but no one came. Another half an hour in the living room. Perhaps it would stop of its own accord? But in the end Linda was so furious that she went down herself, and then all of a sudden the woman opened the door. And was full of understanding! She stepped forward and laid a hand on Linda's stomach, and there's you expecting a baby, she said in her Russian-sounding Swedish, I'm so sorry, apologies, but my husband has left me and I don't know what to do, do you understand? Music and a bit of wine, it helps me in cold, cold Sweden. But you're going to have a baby and you need your sleep, don't you, my dear.

Happy to have made progress, Linda came back up and told me what was said before we went into the bedroom and got into bed. Ten minutes later, just after I had fallen asleep, the infernal racket started again. The same music at the same crazy volume, with the same hollering between the songs.

We got up and went into the living room. It was getting on for half past three. What should we do? Linda wanted to ring the hotline, but I didn't, because even if in principle this was supposed to be anonymous, in the sense that the house-disturbance patrol was not allowed to say who had rung to complain, it was obvious the Russian woman would know, and with her as unstable as she evidently was, it would be asking for trouble later. So Linda suggested we should wait until it was all over this once and then write a friendly letter the day after in which it would emerge that we were understanding and tolerant, but this kind of volume late at night was in fact unacceptable. Linda lay down on the sofa, breathing heavily with her huge belly in the air, I went to bed, and an hour later, at almost five o'clock, the music finally stopped. The next day Linda wrote the letter, popped it through her letter box before going out in the morning, and everything was quiet until about six in the evening, when there was a terrible hammering and banging on our door. I went to open. It was the Russian woman. Her gritted alcohol-ravaged face was white with fury. In her hand she was clasping Linda’s letter.

‘What the hell is this!’ she shouted. ‘How *dare* you! In my own home! You’re not bloody telling me what to do in my own home!’

‘It’s a friendly letter—’ I said.

‘I don’t want to speak to you!’ she said. ‘I want to speak to the person in charge here!’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re not the man in your own home. You’re chased out when you want to smoke. You stand in the yard, you’re a laughing stock. Do you think I haven’t seen you? It’s her I want to talk to.’

She took a few steps forward and tried to pass me. She stank of alcohol.

My heart was pounding. Fury was the one emotion I was really afraid of. I never managed to ward off the feeling of weakness that flooded through my body in these circumstances. My legs went weak, my arms went weak and my voice trembled. But she didn’t need to notice.

‘You’ll have to speak to me,’ I said, advancing towards her.

‘No!’ she said. ‘She’s the one who wrote this letter. It’s her I want to talk to.’

‘Listen,’ I said. ‘You were playing unbelievably loud music late last night. It was impossible for us to sleep. You can’t do that. And you’ve got to understand.’

‘Don’t *you* tell me what to do!’

‘Well, it’s not me,’ I said. ‘We’ve got something called house rules. Everyone who lives in this place has to abide by them.’

‘Do you know how much rent I pay?’ she said. ‘Fifteen thousand kroner! And I’ve lived here for eight years. No one has ever complained before. Then you come along. You snobby little snobs. “Actually, I’m preeegnant.”’

As she said the latter she mimicked a snob, pursed her lips and stuck her nose in the air. Her hair was unkempt, her skin pale, cheeks plump, eyes staring.

She regarded me with that fiery gaze of hers. I looked down. She turned and went downstairs.

I closed the door and turned to face Linda, who was leaning against the hall wall.

‘Well, that was a clever move,’ I said.

‘You mean the letter?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Now we’re really in for it.’

‘You mean it’s my fault? It’s her, not me who’s gone completely off her rocker. That’s nothing to do with me.’

‘Relax,’ I said. ‘You and I are not at daggers drawn.’

In the flat below the music blared out, as loud as the previous night. Linda looked at me.

‘Shall we go out?’ she said.

‘I don’t really like the idea that we’re being driven out,’ I said.

‘But it’s impossible to stay here.’

‘True.’

As we were putting on our coats the music stopped. Perhaps it was too loud even for her. But we went out nevertheless, down to the harbour by Nybroplan, where the lights glittered on black water and great layers of brash ice collected in front of the bows of the Djurgården ferry as it slowly approached. The Royal Dramatic Theatre stood like a castle on the other side of the road. It was one of my favourite buildings in Stockholm. Not because it was beautiful, for it was not, but because it exuded its own special atmosphere, as did the area around it. Perhaps it was simply that the colour of the stone was so light, almost white, and the surface area so vast that the entire building shone, even on the darkest of rainy days. With the constant wind coming off the sea and the flags fluttering outside the entrance there was an openness about the space it stood in, and the oppressive monument-like status that buildings often have about them was not present. Was it not like a small mountain by the sea?

We walked hand in hand down Strandgatan. The surface of the water out to the island of Skeppsholmen was wreathed in darkness. Moreover, when only a few lights were on in the houses it created a singular rhythm in the town, it was as if it came to an end, merged into the periphery and nature, only to pick up again on the other side of the water where the Old Town, Slussen and all the sheer cliffs towards Södermalm lay glittering and twinkling in the murmuring wind and sea.

Linda told me some anecdotes about the Royal Dramatic Theatre, where she had practically grown up. While her mother had worked there she had sole responsibility for Linda and her brother, so they had often been with her to rehearsals and performances. For me this was mythological, for

Linda trivial, something she preferred not to talk about and quite definitely would not have done now had I not asked her directly. She knew everything about actors, their vanity and their tendency to burn themselves out, their angst and their intrigues, she laughed and said that the best of them were often the most stupid, the ones who understood least, that an intellectual actor was a contradiction in terms, but even though she despised the play-acting, despised their gesticulations and pomposity, their cheap, hollow, volatile lives and feelings, there was little to which she gave higher priority than their stage performances when they were at their best. She spoke, for example, with passion about Bergman's production of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, which she had seen countless times as she was working in the theatre wardrobe at that time, the fantastical and fairytale-like elements in it, and also the baroque and burlesque aspects. Or Wilson's production of Strindberg's *A Dream Play* at Stockholm City Theatre, where she worked on the dramaturgy, which of course was purer and more stylised but equally magical. She had wanted to be an actress herself once, reached the final round of auditions for the Theatre School two years in a row, but when they didn't take her the last time, that was fine, they would never take her, so she turned her attentions in a different direction, applied for the writer's course at Biskops-Arnö, and made her debut there with the poems she had written the year after.

Now she told me about a tour she had been on. The Royal Dramatic Theatre, Bergman's travelling company, they were stars wherever they went, and this time it was to Tokyo. Tall, noisy and drunk, the Swedish actors piled into one of the city's finer restaurants. There was no question of removing shoes or adapting to their surroundings in any other way, they swung their arms about, stubbed out their cigarettes in the sake cups and called loudly for the waiter. Linda, in short skirt, with red lipstick, black hair in a page cut, cigarette in hand, a little in love with Peter Stormare, was only fifteen years old and must have seemed grotesque to Japanese eyes, as she put it. But of course they didn't bat an eyelid, they just tripped quietly around them, not even when one of them burst through a paper partition and fell flat on his face.

She was laughing as she told me.

'When we were about to leave,' she said, glancing towards Djurgårdsbrunn, 'a waiter came over to me with a bag. It was a present from the chef, he said. I looked down into it. Do you know what it was?'

'No,' I said.

'It was full of small live crabs.'

'Crabs? What was that supposed to mean?'

She shrugged.

'I don't know.'

'What did you do with them?'

'I took them to the hotel. Mum was so drunk she had to be helped home. I caught a taxi on my own, with the bag of crabs by my feet. Back in my room I ran cold water into the bath tub and put the crabs in. They crawled around all night while I was asleep in the adjacent room. In the middle of Tokyo.'

'What happened then? What did you do with them?'

'The story ends there,' she said, squeezing my hand while looking up at me with a smile.

There was something about Japan and her. For her poetry collection she had been awarded a Japanese prize, of all things, a picture with Japanese characters, which until recently had hung above her desk. And wasn't there also something faintly Japanese about her wonderful small facial features?

We went up towards Karlaplan, with its circular pool, in the middle of which there was an enormous fountain during the summer months, but which was dry now, the bottom covered with withered leaves from the tall surrounding trees.

'Do you remember the time we went to see *Ghosts*?' I asked.

'Of course!' she said. 'I'll never forget that.'

I knew that – she had stuck the theatre ticket in the album she had started making when she became pregnant. *Ghosts* was Bergman's final production at the theatre, and we went to see it before we really got together, it was one of the first things we did, one of the first things we had shared. That was only eighteen months ago, but it felt like a whole lifetime.

She gazed at me with that look of affection that could make my heart melt. It was cold outside: a raw biting wind was blowing. It made me think how far east Stockholm actually was, a hint of something foreign, quite unlike where I came from, although I was unable to put my finger on what it was. We were in the richest district in Stockholm, and it was absolutely dead. No one went out here, the streets were never busy, yet they were broader than in any other part of the centre.

A man and a woman with a dog came towards us, him with his hands behind his back and a large leather hat on his head, her in a fur coat with the little terrier snuffling ahead.

‘Shall we go for a beer somewhere?’ I asked.

‘Let’s,’ she answered. ‘I’m hungry too. What about the bar in Zita?’

‘Good idea.’

A shiver ran through me, and I drew the coat lapels tighter around my neck.

‘Brass monkeys tonight,’ I said. ‘Are you cold?’

She shook her head. She was wearing the enormous Puffa jacket she had borrowed from her best friend, Helena, who last winter had been as pregnant as Linda was now, and the fur hat I had bought for her when we were in Paris, with two furry pompoms dangling from it.

‘Is it kicking?’

Linda placed both hands on her stomach.

‘No, the baby’s sleeping,’ she said. ‘It invariably does when I go for a walk.’

‘The baby,’ I said. ‘A tingle goes through me when you say that. Most of the time it’s as if I haven’t quite clicked that there’s a human being inside you.’

‘But there is,’ Linda said. ‘I already know the baby, or so it seems. Do you remember how angry it got when they did that diabetes test?’

I nodded. Linda was at risk as her father had diabetes, so she had been given a kind of sugary mixture, the most nauseating and foulest medicine she’d ever had, she said, and the baby in her belly had kicked like crazy for more than an hour.

‘That must have given him or her a jolt,’ I said with a smile, glancing towards Humlegården, which started on the other side of the street. There was something bewitching about the atmosphere here at night, with domes of light illuminating in some places the trees with their heavy trunks and spread branches, and in others the wet yellowing grass carpet, in between which it was pitch black. But it was not bewitching as in a forest, more like the bewitching atmosphere of a theatre. We followed one of the paths. In some places there were still small piles of leaves, otherwise the lawns and paths through them were bare, much like the wooden floor in a sitting room. A jogger shuffled around the statue of Linné, another came sprinting down the gentle slope. Beneath us, I knew, lay the enormous storehouses belonging to the Royal Library, which towered up before us. A block further on was Stureplan with the most exclusive nightclubs in the city. We lived a stone's throw from Stureplan, but it might just as well have been in another part of the world. People were shot in the streets down there without us knowing anything about it until it was in the newspapers the day after; international stars dropped by when they were in town; the whole of Sweden's business and celebrity elite put in an appearance there, which the whole country read about in the evening papers. People didn't queue up to get in, they stood in a line, and then the security guards walked round and pointed at those who were allowed to enter. I hadn't seen this cold hard side of the town anywhere before, and I had never experienced such a clear cultural divide. In Norway almost all distance is geographical, and since the population is so small, the way to the top, or to the centre, is short everywhere. In every class at school there is always someone who reaches the top within some field, or at least in every school. Everyone knows someone who knows someone. In Sweden the social distance is much greater, and since the countryside has been depopulated and almost everyone lives in towns, and anyone who wants to be someone goes to Stockholm where *everything* of any significance happens, this is extremely conspicuous: so near, yet so far.

'Do you sometimes think about where I come from?' I asked, looking at her.

She shook her head.

'No, not really. You're Karl Ove. My handsome husband. That's what you are for me.'

'A housing estate on the island of Tromøya. Nothing has less in common with your world than that. I know nothing about life here. Everything is *deeply* alien. Do you remember what my mother said when she came into our flat for the first time? No? "Grandad should have seen this, Karl Ove," she said.'

'That's great, isn't it,' Linda said.

'But do you understand? For you this apartment is nothing special. For my mother it was like a little ballroom, wasn't it?'

‘And for you?’

‘Yes, for me too. But *that*’s not what I mean. Whether it’s nice or not. But the fact that I come from something quite different. Something incredibly unsophisticated, right? I don’t give a shit, and I don’t give a shit about this either, the point is that it isn’t mine, and it can never be mine however long I live here.’

We crossed the road and went down the narrow street in the residential quarter close to where Linda had grown up, past Saturnus Café and down Birger Jarlsgatan, where Zita cinema was. My face was stiff with cold. My thighs were frozen.

‘You’re lucky to be in this situation,’ she said. ‘Just think how much good it has done you. To have a place to go to. To have an outside where you’ve come from and an inside where you are going.’

‘I know what you’re getting at,’ I said.

‘Everything was here for me. I grew up in it. And I can barely separate it from myself. And there are also expectations. No one expected anything from you, did they? Except of course that you would study and get a job?’

I shrugged.

‘I’ve never thought about it in that way.’

‘No,’ she said.

There was a pause.

‘I’ve always lived in the middle of it. Perhaps *mummy* didn’t wish anything else of me than that I should be all right . . .’ She looked at me. ‘That’s why she loves you.’

‘Does she?’

‘Haven’t you noticed? You must have noticed!’

‘Yes, I suppose I have.’

I recalled the first time I had met her mother. A little house on an old smallholding in the forest. Autumn outside. We sat down to eat the moment we arrived. Hot meat broth, freshly baked bread, candles on the table. I could occasionally feel her eyes on me. They were curious and warm.

‘But there were other people than mummy where I grew up,’ Linda continued. ‘Johan Nordenfalk the Twelfth, do you think he became a schoolteacher? So much money and culture. Everyone had to be a success. I had three friends who took their own lives. I daren’t even think about how many of them have, or have had, anorexia.’

‘Yes, what a bloody mess that is,’ I said. ‘Why can’t people just take it easy?’

‘I don’t want our children to grow up here,’ Linda said.

‘Children now, is it?’

She smiled.

‘And?’

‘It’ll have to be Tromøya then,’ I said. ‘I only know of one person who committed suicide there.’

‘Don’t joke about it.’

‘OK.’

A woman in high heels and a long red dress click-clacked past. She was holding a black bag in one hand and clutching a black net shawl around her chest with the other. Behind her were two bearded young men in parkas and climbing boots, one with a cigarette in his hand. After them three women, friends by the look of them, also dressed up, with pretty little bags in their hands, but at least with windbreakers covering their dresses. Compared with the streets in Östermalm this was nothing less than a carnival. On both sides of the street, lights shone from restaurants, all packed with people. Outside Zita, which was one of two alternative cinemas in the district, a small shivering crowd was assembled.

‘Honestly though,’ Linda said. ‘Perhaps not Tromøya, but Norway by all means. People are friendlier there.’

‘That’s true.’

I pulled at the heavy door and held it open for her. Took off my gloves and hat, unbuttoned my coat, loosened my scarf.

‘But I don’t want to go to Norway,’ I said. ‘That’s the whole point.’

She didn’t say anything, she was on her way to the posters in the showcases. She turned to me.

‘*Modern Times* is on!’ she said.

‘Shall we see it?’

‘Yes, let’s! But I have to get a bite to eat first. What’s the time?’

I searched for a clock. And found a small chunky one on the wall behind the box office.

‘Twenty to nine.’

‘It starts at nine. So we can make it. If you buy the tickets, I’ll go and see if I can get something in the bar.’

‘OK,’ I said. Dug out a dog-eared hundred-krone note from my pocket and went to the ticket window.

‘Have you got any tickets for *Modern Times*?’ I asked in Norwegian.

A woman who could not have been any older than twenty, with plaits and glasses, looked down her nose at me.

‘*Ursäkta?*’ she said. Excuse me.

‘Have – you – got – tickets – for – *Modern – Times*?’ I asked in Swedish.

‘Yes.’

‘Two please. At the back, in the middle. *Två*.’

To be on the safe side, I held two fingers in the air.

She printed the tickets, placed them without a word on the counter in front of me, straightened the hundred-krone note and put it in the till. I went into the bar, which was jam-packed, spotted Linda and squeezed in beside her.

‘I love you,’ I said.

I hardly ever said that, and her eyes beamed as she looked up at me.

‘Do you?’ she said.

We kissed. The bartender set down a small basket of taco chips in front of us and what looked like a guacamole dip.

‘Do you want a beer?’ she asked.

I shook my head.

‘Maybe afterwards. But by then you’ll probably be too tired.’

‘Probably. Did you get the tickets?’

‘Yes.’

I saw *Modern Times* for the first time at the film club in Bergen when I was twenty. There was one scene where I couldn’t stop laughing. Most people can’t remember when they last laughed, but I remember when I laughed twenty years ago, because of course it doesn’t happen that often. I remember both the shame of losing control and the pleasure of letting myself go. What started me off is still crystal clear in my memory. Chaplin has to perform in a kind of variety show. It’s an important performance, there’s a lot at stake, he is nervous and jots down the lyrics as an aide-memoire and slips them up his jacket sleeves before he goes on. As he steps onto the dance floor he welcomes the audience with a broad, sweeping flourish and the scraps of paper are sent flying. Then he is left standing there without the lyrics while the orchestra strikes up behind him. What should he do? Yes, he chases after them, improvising a dance to cover the fact that something has gone wrong, while the band plays the intro again and again. I laughed until I cried. But the scene moves into a different phase because he can't retrieve the pieces of paper, however much he dances around, and in the end he *has* to start singing. He stands there in total silence, and when he does begin it is with words that do not exist, but they are similar because although the meaning has gone, the notes and the melody remain, and I was filled with joy, I remember, not only for me but for the whole of humanity, as there was such warmth there and it was one of our own who had produced it.

When I took my seat in the auditorium beside Linda this evening I was unsure what was awaiting us. *Chaplin*, well, yes. Something someone like Fosnes Hansen writes an essay about when the topic is humour. And would I still find what I had laughed at fifteen years ago funny?

I would. And in exactly the same place. He comes on, greets the audience, his crib sheets fly out of his sleeves, he dances round the floor, with his feet somehow *behind* him, in tow, he doesn't lose contact with the audience for one second; the whole time he's dancing and searching he nods politely to them. A tear ran down my cheek at the ensuing pantomime. Everything was so wonderful that evening, I thought. We were giggling as we left the cinema, Linda was happy that I was so happy, I imagined, but also for her own part. We walked hand in hand up the stone steps beside the Finnish Cultural Institute, laughing as we regaled each other with scenes from the film. Then it was along Regeringsgatan, past the bakery, the furniture shop and US Video, unlock the door and up the stairs to our flat. It was a few minutes after half past ten, and Linda could barely keep her eyes open, so we went straight to bed.

Ten minutes later the music blared out beneath us again. I had completely forgotten about the Russian, and sat up in bed with a start.

'For Christ's sake,' Linda said. 'This can't be true.'

I could hardly hear what she was saying.

'It's not even eleven o'clock yet,' I said. 'And it's Friday evening. So we won't get anywhere.'

'I don't care,' Linda said. 'I'm going to ring. This is damn well not on.'

She had barely got up and left the room when the music stopped. We went back to bed. This time I was asleep when it started. At the same unbelievable volume. I looked at the clock. Half past eleven.

‘Will you ring?’ Linda asked. ‘I haven’t had a wink of sleep.’

But the same thing happened. After a few minutes she switched it off and there was silence below.

‘I’ll sleep in the living room,’ Linda said

That night she turned on the music full blast twice more. The last time she had the audacity to play it for a full half-hour before switching off. It was ridiculous but also unpleasant. She was out of her mind, and had apparently developed a hatred for us. Anything could happen, we felt. But more than a week passed before the next incident occurred. We were putting some potted plants on the windowsill in the stairwell outside our door, this was a communal area and strictly speaking not any concern of ours, but on the floor above they had done the same, and surely no one could object to the cold staircase being brightened up a bit? Two days later the plants were gone. That didn’t matter so much, but the pots had once belonged to my great-grandmother, some of the few items I had brought with me from the house in Kristiansand when my father’s mother died – they were from the early 1900s, and so it was quite irritating that *they* had gone. Or had someone stolen them? But who would steal flower pots? Or had someone removed them because they took exception to our initiative? We decided to put a notice on the board asking if anyone had seen them. That same evening the notice was adorned with expletives and accusations written in blue ink and bad Swedish. Were we accusing the residents of stealing? If so, we could move out this minute. Who the hell did we think we were? A few days later I was assembling a nappy-changing table we had bought at Ikea, a bit of hammering was required, but as it was only seven in the evening I didn’t think this would be a problem. But it was: after the first bangs with the hammer there was a wild pounding on the pipes below, it was our Russian neighbour’s way of protesting about what she clearly regarded as a violation of house rules. But I couldn’t let her stop me finishing, so I continued. A minute later the door below slammed and she was outside ours. I opened up. How could we complain about her when we made such a racket ourselves? I tried to explain to her the difference between playing loud music in the middle of the night and assembling a table at seven in the evening, but this fell on deaf ears. With the same wild eyes and indignant gestures she stuck to her guns. She had been asleep; we had woken her up. We thought we were better than her, but we were not . . .

From that day on she had a set strategy. Whenever a sound carried down to her, even if it was only me walking heavily across the floor, she banged on the pipes. The reverberation was penetrating, and since the sender was not visible, like a kind of bad conscience in the room. I hated it; it was as though I wasn't allowed to have any peace anywhere, not even in my own home.

Then, in the days before Christmas, all went quiet downstairs. We bought a Christmas tree from a stall in Humlegården; it had been dark, the air was laden with snow, and the typical pre-Christmas chaos reigned in the streets, with people racing past, oblivious to one another and the world. We chose one, the overalls-clad salesman pulled a net over it for ease of transport, I paid and lugged it over my shoulder. Only then did it strike me it might have been a trifle on the large side. Half an hour later, after innumerable stops on the way, I dragged it into our flat. We laughed when we saw it upright in the living room. It was enormous. We had bought a gigantic Christmas tree. But perhaps that was not so stupid, as this was the last Christmas we would be celebrating on our own. On Christmas Eve we ate the Swedish festive fare Linda's mother had brought us, unwrapped presents and watched Chaplin's *Circus* because we had bought ourselves a box set of all his films. We worked our way through the lot over the Christmas period, went for long walks in the holiday-empty streets, waited and waited. We forgot about the Russian, the outside world didn't exist for the whole of the Christmas weekend. We went to see Linda's mother, stayed there a few days, and on our return we started to prepare for a New Year's Eve dinner with Geir and Christina and Anders and Helena.

I cleaned the whole flat that morning, went shopping for dinner, ironed the big white tablecloth, inserted the extra leaf in the dining room table and laid it, polished the silverware and candlesticks, folded the serviettes and placed bowls of fruit on the table, such that by the time the guests arrived at seven the place was sparkling and glittering with bourgeois respectability. The first to arrive were Anders and Helena and their daughter. Helena and Linda had got to know each other when Helena took lessons with Linda's mother, and even though Helena was seven years older than Linda they had become the best of friends. Anders had been with her for the last three years. She was an actress; he was . . . well, a kind of criminal.

Faces flushed with the cold, they stood in the stairwell smiling when I opened the door.

‘Hi there, old boy!’ Anders said. He was wearing a brown leather cap with ear flaps, a large blue Puffa jacket and smart black shoes. Elegant he was not, but in some bizarre way he still blended in with Helena, who with her white coat, black boots and white fur hat most definitely was.

Beside them sat their daughter in her buggy, examining me with a serious gaze.

‘Hi,’ I said, looking her in the eye.

Not a muscle moved in her face.

‘Come in!’ I said, retreating a few steps.

‘Can we bring the buggy in?’ Helena asked.

‘Of course,’ I answered. ‘Will it fit, do you think? Or should I open the second door?’

While Helena pushed the buggy forward and coaxed it into position between the door frames, Anders removed his outdoor clothing in the hall.

‘Where’s the señorita?’ he asked.

‘She’s having a lie-down,’ I said.

‘Everything OK?’

‘Yes, fine.’

‘Good!’ he said, rubbing his hands. ‘So bloody cold outside!’

Helena came through the door, her hands gripping the buggy handle tightly. She activated the brake and lifted her daughter out, took off her hat and unzipped the red romper suit while her daughter stood stock still on the floor. Underneath, the little girl wore a dark blue dress, white tights and white shoes.

Linda came in from the bedroom. Her face was beaming. First of all, she hugged Helena, they held the embrace for a long time and looked each other in the eye.

‘How pretty you look!’ Helena said. ‘How do you do it? I remember when I was in the ninth month . . .’

‘It’s just an old maternity dress,’ Linda said.

‘Yes, but all of *you* looks so nice!’

Linda smiled with pleasure, then leaned forward and gave Anders a hug.

‘What a spread!’ Helena exclaimed as she entered the living room. ‘Wow!’

I didn’t quite know what to do with myself so I went into the kitchen as if to check something or other while waiting for them to come down to earth. The next moment there was another ring at the door.

‘So?’ Geir said as I opened the door. ‘Have you finished cleaning the place up?’

‘Didn’t know you two were coming,’ I said. ‘Thought we said Monday, didn’t we? We’re having a New Year’s party here, so I’m afraid it’s not very convenient right now. But, well, perhaps we can squeeze you in . . .’

‘Hi, Karl Ove,’ Christina said, giving me a hug. ‘Everything all right with you?’

‘Yes,’ I said, stepping back to give them more room as Linda came through to welcome them. More hugs, more coats and shoes removed, everyone went into the living room, where Anders and Helena’s daughter, who had begun to crawl around, was a welcome focus of attention for the first few minutes until the situation settled.

‘You keep up the Christmas traditions, I see,’ Anders said, nodding towards the enormous tree in the corner.

‘It cost eight hundred kroner,’ I said. ‘It’s going to stand there for as long as there is any life in it. We don’t chuck money around in this house.’

Anders laughed.

‘The boss has started to crack jokes!’

‘I crack jokes all the time,’ I said. ‘It’s just you Swedes who don’t understand what I say.’

‘Well,’ he said. ‘At the beginning at any rate I understood nothing of what you said.’

‘So you bought yourselves a nouveau riche Christmas tree, did you?’ Geir said while Anders started speaking pidgin Norwegian in the way that is so common in Sweden and which consists of a high-pitched *kjempe*, meaning huge, an occasional *gutt*, boy, which to Swedish ears sounds so comical, all pronounced in an enthusiastic tone that rises at the end of every sentence. It had nothing to do with my dialect, which they therefore assumed was *nynorsk*.

‘It wasn’t planned,’ I said with a smile. ‘It’s a bit embarrassing to have such a big Christmas tree, I have to confess. But it seemed small when we bought it. It was only when we got it here that it became clear how enormous it was. But then I've always had problems with my sense of proportion.'

'Do you know what *kjempe* means, Anders?' Linda asked.

He shook his head.

'I know *avis*, newspaper. And *gutt*. And *vindu*, window.'

'It's the same as *jätte* in Swedish, big, huge.'

Did Linda think I was offended, or what?

'It took me six months to understand that,' she continued. 'It's used in exactly the same way. There must be loads of words I think I understand, but I don't. It hardly bears thinking about that I translated Sæterbakken's book two years ago. At that time I couldn't understand Norwegian at all.'

'Could Gilda?' Helena asked.

'Her? No. She knew even less than me. But I had a look at it not so long ago, the first pages, and it seemed fine. Apart from one word that is. I blush whenever I think about it. I translated *stue*, living room, with *stuga* . . . so he was sitting in a *stuga* when the text said he was in a living room.'

'What's *stuga* in Norwegian then?' Anders asked.

'*Hytte,*' I said.

'Oh, it's a *hytte*, a cabin! Yes, there's certainly a difference then . . .' he said.

'But no one has remarked on it,' Linda said. She laughed.

'Anyone fancy some champagne?' I asked.

‘I’ll fetch it,’ Linda said.

On her return she gathered the five glasses together and started to loosen the wire holding the cork in place. Her face was slightly averted and her eyes were narrowed, as though anticipating a huge explosion. In the end the cork came off into her hand with a wet plop, and then she held the bottle, with the champagne pouring out, over the glasses.

‘You managed that well,’ Anders said.

‘I worked in a restaurant a long time ago,’ Linda said. ‘But this was the one thing I could never do. I have no sense of depth anyway, so when I had to fill customers’ glasses, it was hit and miss.’

She straightened up and passed the sparkling, bubbly champagne to us one by one. For herself she poured a non-alcoholic variant.

‘*Skål*, then, and nice to see you!’

We toasted. When the champagne was finished I went into the kitchen to get the lobsters ready. Geir followed me and sat down at the table.

‘Lobster,’ he said. ‘It’s unbelievable how quickly you’ve adapted to Swedish society. I come to your place on New Year’s Eve two years after you moved here and you serve traditional Swedish New Year fare.’

‘I’m not exactly on my own,’ I said.

‘No, I know,’ he said with a smile. ‘We had a Mexican Christmas at home once, Christina and I did. Have I told you about it?’

‘Yes,’ I said and split the first lobster into two, placed it on a dish and started on the next. Geir began to talk about his manuscript. I listened with half an ear. Oh yes? I said now and then to signal that I was following even though my attention was elsewhere. He was unable to talk about his manuscript with everyone so it was only here he had the chance, and when I went out for a smoke, he saw his opportunity. He had written a rough draft, spent eighteen months on it, which I had read and commented on. The comments were comprehensive and detailed, they extended over ninety pages, and sadly the tone of the criticism was often sarcastic. I had imagined that Geir could take anything, but I should have known better, no one can take anything, and few things are as difficult to swallow as sarcasm when your own work is the target. But I couldn’t stop myself, it was the same when I wrote reader reports, irony was never far away. The problem with Geir’s manuscript, as he knew and admitted, was that the narrative was often too far removed from events, and a lot was often left unsaid. Only a fresh pair of eyes could remedy it. And that was what he got. But I was always ironic, much too ironic . . . was it perhaps caused by a subconscious desire on my part to get one over on him, the man who otherwise always reigned supreme.

No.

No?

'I'm terribly sorry about that,' I said now, placing the third lobster on its back and cutting through the shell on the stomach. It was softer than crab shell, and something about the consistency made me think it was artificial, like plastic. The red colour, wasn't there something unnatural about that too? And all the attractive, intricate details, like the grooves in the claws or the armour-like tail shell: didn't they look as if they had been forged in the workshop of a Renaissance craftsman?

'And so you should be,' Geir said. 'Ten Hail Marys for your evil, sinful soul. Can you imagine what it is like to pore over your comments and voluntarily allow yourself to be mocked by them every single day? "Are you an absolute idiot or what?" Ye-es, I suppose I am . . .'

'It's just a technical point,' I said, glancing at him while I sawed through the shell with the knife

'Technical? Technical? Easy for you to say, that is. You can spend twenty pages describing a trip to the loo and hold your readers spellbound. How many people do you think can do that? How many writers would not have done that if only they could? Why do you think people spend their time touching up their modernist poems, with three words on each page? It's because they have no other option. After all these years surely you must understand that, for Christ's sake. If they could have done, they would have done. You can, and you don't appreciate it. It means nothing to you, and you would rather be clever and write in essayistic style. But everyone can write essays! It's the easiest thing in the world.'

I looked at the white flesh with the red fibres which appeared as soon as the shell was pierced. Recognised the faint tang of seawater.

'You say you don't see the letters when you write, don't you?' he continued. 'I don't see anything but bloody letters. They intertwine like damn spiders' webs in front of my eyes. Nothing can force its way out through that, you understand, everything is turned inwards like some ingrowing toenail.'

‘How long have you been working on it?’ I asked. ‘A year? That’s nothing. I’ve been writing for six years now, and all I have to show for it is a stupid essay of a hundred and thirty pages about angels. Come back in 2009 and I’ll be more likely to feel sorry for you then. Besides, it was good, the bit I read. Fantastic story, great interviews. All it needs is to be checked over.’

‘Ha!’ Geir said.

I put two halves of lobster on the dish, shell up.

‘You know that this is in fact the only hold I have over you?’ I said, grabbing the last lobster.

‘Not sure about that,’ he said. ‘There are at least a couple of other things you know about me that are best kept quiet.’

‘Oh that,’ I said. ‘That’s a completely different matter.’

He laughed loud hearty laughter.

Then a few seconds passed without a word being said.

Was he sulking?

I started to part the lobster with the knife.

It was impossible to say. If I hurt his feelings, he had once said, I would never know. He was as proud as he was haughty, as arrogant as he was loyal. He lost friends one after the other, perhaps because he so seldom backed down and was never afraid to say what he thought. And there was no one, or virtually no one, who liked what he thought. Last winter, a year ago, a very bad atmosphere had developed between us: whenever we went out we generally sat in silence on our bar stools, and if anything was said at all it was usually him making some acid remark about me or mine, with me trying to give as good as I got. Then I heard nothing from him. Two weeks later Christina rang to say he had gone to Turkey to do some fieldwork and would be away for several months. I was surprised, it was an unexpected development, and a little offended too, as he hadn’t said anything about this to me. A few weeks later I heard from a friend in Norway that Geir had been interviewed by *Dagsrevyen* in Baghdad, where he had volunteered as a human shield. I smiled to myself, this was typical of him, although I was unable to understand why he had kept this a secret from me. Later it transpired that I had in fact upset him in some way. I never found out what had caused him to take umbrage. But when he came back to Stockholm four months later, loaded down with micro-cassettes of interviews, after having been under attack by bombs for several weeks, he seemed to be reinvigorated. All of the autumn and winter's crisis-like despondency had gone, and when we resumed our friendship it was where it had been when it started.

Geir and I were born in the same year, we had grown up a few kilometres from each other, on our separate islands outside Arendal – Hisøya and Tromøya – but without knowing each other as the initial natural point of contact would have come with *gymnas*, by which time I had long left for Kristiansand. The first time I met him was at a party in Bergen, where we both studied. He was on the periphery of the Arendal set, with whom I was also loosely connected through Yngve, and when I spoke to him I felt he might be the friend I was missing, for at that time, my first year in Bergen, I didn't have one and clung to Yngve. We went out some nights, he laughed all the time and had a devil-may-care attitude I liked, and he was genuinely interested in people around him and had something to say about them. He was the kind to cut through to the essence, and thus someone who made a difference. I had found a new friend; that was the good feeling I went around with during the spring of 1989. But then it transpired he was going to move on. Bergen was no place to set roots for him, he packed up as soon as the exams were over and went to Uppsala in Sweden. I wrote a letter to him that summer, never posted it however, and then he disappeared from my life and my thoughts.

Eleven years later he sent me a book in the post. It was about boxing and entitled *The Aesthetics of a Broken Nose*. After reading a few pages I was able to confirm that both his devil-may-care attitude and ability to cut through to the essence were intact, and also that a lot had been added since our student days. He had boxed at a club in Stockholm for three years in order to gain first-hand experience of the milieu he described. There the values that the welfare state had otherwise subverted, such as masculinity, honour, violence and pain, were upheld, and the interest for me lay in how different society looked when viewed from that angle, with the set of values they had retained. The art was to confront this world without everything you had from the other world – to try and see it as it was, on its own terms, that is – and then, with that as a platform, look outwards again. Then everything looked different. In his book Geir linked what he saw and described with the great classical anti-liberal cultures, in a line extending from Nietzsche and Jünger to Mishima and Cioran. There nothing was for sale, nothing could be measured in terms of monetary value, and therein, or seen from this perspective, I discovered to what great extent things I had always assumed were nature-given were in fact the opposite, namely relative and random. In this sense, Geir's book became as important to me as *Statues* by Michel Serres had been, where the archaic past in which we are and always have been steeped is thrown into relief with alarming clarity, and as *The Order of Things* by Michel Foucault had once been, where the grip that present time and contemporary language have on our notions and concepts of reality is made patently clear, and we see how one conceptual world, in which we are all completely immersed, is succeeded by another. What all these books had in common was that they established a reference point outside the present, either on its periphery, such as in the boxing club, which was a kind of enclave where some of the most important values from the recent past lived on, or in the depths of history, from where what we were, or imagined we were, became totally transformed. Presumably I had moved towards this point by small degrees, groping my way almost imperceptibly and more or less invisibly to my thinking, and then these books came into my life, they were virtually banged down on the table in front of me, and something new became clear to me. As is always the case with books that seem to be ground-breaking, they put into words what for me had been suspicions, feelings, hunches. A vague discomfort, a vague displeasure, a vague, untargeted anger. But no direction, no clarity, no exactitude. The reason Geir's book was so important to me also had to do with the fact that our backgrounds were so similar – we were exactly the same age, we knew the same people from the same places, we had both spent our adult lives reading and writing and studying – so how could it be that he had ended up in such a radically different place? Ever since I went to my first school I, and everyone around me, had been urged to think critically and independently. It had not occurred to me until I was well over thirty that this critical thinking was only of benefit up to a certain point and that beyond this it was transformed into its own opposite and became an evil, or evil itself. Why so late in life? one might wonder. Partly it was a result of my loyal-follower naïvety, which in its country-cousin gullibility might well cast doubt on opinions but never on the premises of those opinions, and hence never asked whether ‘the critical’ really was critical, whether ‘the radical’ really was radical, whether ‘the good’ really was good, things which all intelligent people do as soon as they escape the clutches of the self-intoxicated and emotion-laden views of youth; and partly it was because I had been trained, like so many of my generation, to think abstractly, in other words to acquire knowledge of various schools of thought in various fields, to reproduce them in a more or less critical manner, preferably contrasted with other schools of thought, and then to be judged on that, but sometimes it was for the sake of my own insight, my own intellectual curiosity, not that this gave my mind cause to abandon abstractions, such that thinking was in the end wholly an activity played out among secondary phenomena, the world as it appeared in philosophy, literature, social science, politics, whereas the world in which I lived, slept, ate, spoke, made love and ran, the one that had a smell, a taste, a sound, where it rained and the wind blew, the world that you could feel on your skin, was excluded, was not deemed a topic for thought. Actually, I did think there too, but in a different way, a more practical, phenomenon-by-phenomenon-orientated way, and for other reasons: while I thought in abstract reality in order to understand it, I thought in concrete reality in order to deal with it. In abstract reality I could create an identity, an identity made from opinions; in concrete reality I was who I was, a body, a gaze, a voice. That is where all independence is rooted. Including independent thought. Geir’s book was not only about independence, it was also enacted within its terms of reference. He described only what he saw with his own eyes, what he heard with his own ears, and when he tried to describe what he saw and heard, it was by becoming a part of it. It was also the form of reflection that came closest to the life he was describing. A boxer was never judged by what he said or thought but by what he did.

Misology, the distrust of words, as was the case with Phyrros, Phyrromania; was that a way to go for a writer? Everything that can be said with words can be contradicted with words, so what’s the point of dissertations, novels, literature? Or put another way: whatever we say is true we can also always say is untrue. It is a zero point and the place from which the zero value begins to spread. However, it is not a dead point, not for literature either, for literature is not just words, literature is what words evoke in the reader. It is this transcendence that validates literature, not the formal transcendence in itself, as many believe. Paul Celan’s mysterious cypher-like language has nothing to do with inaccessibility or closed-ness, quite the contrary, it is about opening up what language normally does not have access to but which we still, somewhere deep inside us, know or recognise, or if we don’t, allows us to discover. Paul Celan’s words cannot be contradicted with words. What they possess cannot be transformed either, the word only exists there, and in each and every single person who absorbs it.

The fact that paintings and, to some extent, photographs were so important for me had something to do with this. They contained no words, no concepts, and when I looked at them what I experienced, what made them so important was also non-conceptual. There was something stupid in this, an area that was completely devoid of intelligence, which I had difficulty acknowledging or accepting, yet which perhaps was the most important single element of what I wanted to do.

Six months after I had read Geir’s book, I emailed him and asked if he would like to write an essay for *Vagant*, where I was on the editorial staff. He said he would, we emailed back and forth, all in formal and factual terms. A year later, when from one day to the next I left Tonje and my life with her in Bergen, I emailed to ask if he knew of anywhere to live in Stockholm; he didn’t, but I could stay at his place while I was looking for something. Sounds good, I wrote. Fine, he wrote, when are you coming? Tomorrow, I wrote. Tomorrow? he wrote.

Some hours later, after a night on the train from Bergen to Oslo, and a morning on the train from Oslo to Stockholm, I schlepped my bags from the platform down to the corridors beneath Stockholm Central in search of a left-luggage locker big enough to take them both. I had spent the whole journey reading to avoid thinking about what had happened in the preceding days, all of which was the reason for my departure, but now in the midst of the thronging crowds of people heading to or from commuter trains it was impossible to suppress my unease any longer. Feeling cold to the depths of my soul, I walked down the corridor. After stowing the two bags in separate lockers and putting the two keys in the pocket where I normally kept my house keys, I entered the toilet and washed my face with cold water to make myself feel more alive. I studied myself in the mirror for a few seconds. My face was pale and slightly bloated, hair unkempt and eyes . . . yes, my eyes . . . staring, but not in an active outward-facing fashion, as though they were looking for something, more as if what they saw was drawn into them, as if they sucked everything in.

Since when had I had such eyes?

I turned on the hot-water tap and held my hands underneath it for a while, until the heat began to spread through them, tore off a sheet of paper from the dispenser and dried them, threw it in the bin beside the sink. I weighed 101 kilos and had no hopes for the future, but now I was here, that was something, I thought, and then went out, up the steps and into the concourse, where I stood in the middle, surrounded by people on all sides while I tried to devise some kind of plan. It was just past two o'clock. I was due to meet Geir here at five. So I had three hours to kill. I had to eat. I needed a scarf. And I ought to have a haircut.

I walked out of the station and stopped at the taxi stand. The sky was grey and cold, the air damp. To the right was a jumble of roads and concrete bridges, behind them a lake, behind that a line of monument-like buildings. To the left, a broad street full of traffic; directly in front of me a street which some way off swung left alongside a filthy wall, beyond that a church.

Which way to go?

I placed one foot on a bench, rolled a cigarette, lit it and started walking down to the left. After a hundred metres or so I stopped. It didn't look promising, everything here had been built with the cars which whizzed past in mind, and I turned and went back, tried the road ahead instead, which led into a wide avenue with an enormous brick department store on the other side. Beyond that was a kind of square, sunk into the ground as it were, from which rose a large glass construction on the right. KULTURHUSET it said in red letters, and I went in, took the escalator up to the first floor on which there happened to be a café, bought a baguette with meatballs and red cabbage salad and sat down by a window from where I had a view of the square and the street in front of the department store.

Was I going to live here? Was this where I lived now?

Yesterday morning I had been at home in Bergen.

Yesterday, that was yesterday.

Tonje had accompanied me to the train. The artificial light above the platforms, the passengers outside the carriages, who were already prepared for the night and talking in hushed voices, the rolling of suitcase wheels over the tarmac. She cried. I didn't, just hugged her, brushed the tears from her cheeks, she smiled through the tears and I boarded the train, thinking I didn't want to see her walk away, didn't want to see her back, but I couldn't stop myself, peered out of the window and watched her walk down the platform and disappear through the exit.

Would she stay there?

In our house?

I took a bite of the baguette and looked down at the black and white checked square to divert my thoughts. The line of shops on the other side was black with people. In and out of the doors to the Metro they went, in and out of the tunnel to the gallery, up and down the escalators. Umbrellas, coats, jackets, bags, plastic carrier bags, rucksacks, hats, buggies. Above them cars and buses.

The clock on the department store wall said ten minutes to three. Perhaps it would be best to have a haircut now to avoid having to rush it at the end, I thought. Going down the escalator, I took out my mobile phone and perused the names saved under contacts, but I didn't feel I could ring any of them, there was too much that would have to be explained, too much that would have to be said, too little in return, so emerging into the dreary March afternoon again with a few heavy snowflakes falling, I switched it off and put it back in my pocket before heading down Drottninggatan on the lookout for a hairdresser's. Outside the department store a man was playing the harmonica. Or rather, he wasn't playing, he was just blowing into the instrument with all his might while jerking his body backwards and forwards. His hair was long, his face ravaged. The immense aggression he radiated flowed straight into me. As I passed him fear pounded in my veins. Behind him, by the entrance to a shoe shop, a young woman was bending down over a buggy and lifting up a child. It was swathed in a kind of fur-lined bag, with its head wreathed by a fur-lined hat, and staring straight ahead, seemingly unaffected by what was happening to it. She squeezed it to her chest with one hand and opened the shoe-shop door with the other. The snow that was falling melted as it hit the ground. A man was sitting on a folding chair holding a large sign proclaiming that fifty metres to the left there was a restaurant where you could buy a planked steak for the sum of 109 kroner. Planked steak? I wondered. Many of the women passing by looked alike: they were in their fifties, wore glasses, coats, were plump and carrying bags inscribed with Åhléns, Lindex, NK, Coop or Hemköp. There were fewer men of the same age, but many of them looked alike too, albeit in different ways. Glasses, sandy hair, pallid eyes, greenish or greyish jackets with a touch of casualness about them, more often thin than fat. I longed to be alone, but there was no chance of that, and I wandered up the street. All the faces I saw were of strangers, and would continue to be so for weeks and months as I didn't know a soul here, but that didn't prevent me from feeling that I was being watched. Even when I lived on a tiny island far out into the sea with only three inhabitants I felt I was being watched. Was there something wrong with my coat? My collar, shouldn't it be turned up like that? My shoes, did they look the way shoes should? Was I walking a bit oddly? Leaning too far forward maybe? Oh, I was an idiot, what an idiot. The flame of stupidity burned bright inside me. Oh, such an idiot I was. What a stupid, idiotic bloody idiot. My shoes. My coat. Stupid, stupid, stupid. My mouth, shapeless, my thoughts, shapeless, my feelings, shapeless. Everything was spongy. There was nothing firm anywhere. Nothing solid, nothing vital. Soft, spongy and stupid. Oh fuck. Oh fuck, fuck, fuck, how stupid I was. I couldn't find any peace in a café, within a second I had taken in everyone there, and I continued to do so, and every glance that came my way penetrated into my innermost self, jangled about inside me, and every movement I made, even if only flicking through a book, was likewise transmitted outwards to them, as a sign of my stupidity, every movement I made said, 'This is an idiot sitting here.' So it was better to walk, for then the looks disappeared one by one, admittedly they were replaced by others, but they never had time to establish themselves, they just glided past, there goes an idiot, there goes an idiot, there goes an idiot. That was the chorus as I walked. And I knew it didn't make sense, this was of my own making, inside myself, but it didn't help, because they still got inside, into my inner self, they rumbled around inside me, and even the most maladjusted of these people, even the ugliest, the fattest and the shabbiest of them, even that woman with the drooping jaw and the vacant idiot-eyes, even she could look at me and then say there was something wrong with me. Even her. That was how things were. There I was, walking through the crowds beneath the darkening sky, through falling snowflakes, past shop after shop with illuminated interiors, alone in my new town, without a thought as to how things would be here, because that made no difference, it really didn’t make any difference, all I was thinking about was that I had to get through this. ‘This’ was life. Getting through it, that was what I was doing.

I found a hairdresser’s I hadn’t seen when I passed by the first time, in a passage beside the big department store. I just had to take a seat. No wash, my hair was moistened with water from a spray. The hairdresser, an immigrant, a Kurd I guessed, asked how I wanted it, I said short, indicated with my thumb and first finger how short I had in mind, he asked what I did, I said I was a student, he asked where I came from, I said Norway, he asked if I was here on holiday, I said yes, and that was it. My locks fell on the floor around the chair. They were almost completely black. That was strange because when I looked in the mirror I had fair hair. It had always been like that. Even though I knew my hair was dark I couldn’t see it. I saw fair hair, as it had been in my boyhood and teens. Even in photos I saw fair hair. Only when it had been cut and I saw it separately, against white floor tiles for example, as here, could I see it was dark, almost black.

In the street half an hour later, the cold air gathered around my shorn head like a helmet. It was almost four o’clock, the sky almost pitch black. I went into an H&M shop I had spotted earlier to buy a scarf. The men’s department was in the basement. As I was unable to find the scarves after searching around for a while I went to the counter and asked the young girl standing there where they were.

‘*Ursäkta*?’ she said in Swedish.

‘Where do you keep the scarves?’ I repeated in Norwegian.

‘*Jag fattar tyvärr inte vad du säger*,’ she answered, before saying, in English: ‘I’m sorry. What did you say?’

‘The scarves,’ I said in Norwegian, holding my neck. ‘Where are they?’

‘Do you speak English?’ she said. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘Scarves,’ I said in English. ‘Do you have any scarves?’

‘Oh, scarves,’ she said. ‘We call them *halsduk*. No, I’m sorry. It’s not the season for them any more.’

Back in the street, I wondered for a second whether to go into Åhléns, as the large department store was called, to look for a scarf there, but rejected the idea, I had been through enough idiocy for one day, and instead started to walk up the street again, towards the boarding house where I had stayed two years previously, for no other reason than that it was better to walk with a goal than without. On the way I passed a second-hand bookshop. The shelves inside were tall and so close to each other that there was barely room to turn around. After casting an indifferent glance at the spines of the books I was about to leave when I caught sight of a Hölderlin on the top of a pile at the corner of the counter.

'Is this for sale?' I asked the assistant, a man of my own age who had already been eyeing me for a while.

'Of course,' he said blankly.

Sånger it was called. Was that perhaps a translation of *Die vaterländischen Gesänge*?

I flicked through to the colophon page. The year of publication was 2002. So it was quite new. But there was nothing about the title there, so I skimmed through the afterword, stopping at every word in italics. And yes. There it was: *Die vaterländischen Gesänge. Hymns of the Fatherland*. But why on earth had they translated the title as *Sånger*?

It didn't matter.

'I'll take it,' I said, again in Norwegian. 'How much do you want for it?'

'Excuse me?'

'How much does it cost?'

'Let me have a look and I'll check . . . A hundred and fifty kroner, please.'

I paid, he put the book in a little bag and handed it to me with the receipt, which I shoved into my back pocket before opening the door and leaving with the bag dangling from my hand. Outside it was raining. I stopped, took off the rucksack, stuffed the bag in it, put the rucksack back on and continued along the brightly illuminated shopping street, where the snow which had been falling for several hours had no left no trace other than a grey slushy layer on all surfaces above ground level: roof projections, windowsills, the heads on the statues, floors of verandas, awnings, which sagged making the canvas bulge close to the outer frame, tops of walls, dustbin lids, hydrants. But not the street. It lay black and wet, glistening in the lights from windows and street lamps.

The rain caused some of the gel the hairdresser had rubbed into my hair to run down my forehead. I wiped it away with my hand, wiped it on the thighs of my trousers, spotted a small gateway on the right-hand side of the street and went there to light up. Inside, there was a long garden with at least two different restaurant terraces. With a small pool in the middle. On the wall beside the entrance was the name of the Swedish Writers' Association. That boded well. The association was one of the places I had intended to ring to enquire about somewhere to live.

I lit the cigarette, took out the book I had bought, leaned back against the wall and somewhat half-heartedly started to flick through it.

Hölderlin had long been a familiar name to me. Not that I had read him systematically, not at all, a couple of sporadic poems in Olav Hauge's collection of translations was the sum total, apart from knowing, in the most superficial of ways, about the fate that befell him, the years of madness in the tower in Tübingen; nevertheless his name had been with me for a long time, roughly since the age of sixteen, when my uncle Kjartan, my mother's ten-year-younger brother, first started talking about him. He was the only sibling to live in his childhood home, a modest smallholding in Sørbøvåg in Ytre Sogn, with his parents: grandad, my mother's father, who at that time was approaching eighty but was still active and full of vitality, and grandma, who was in the latter stages of Parkinson's disease and therefore needed help to do virtually everything. As well as running the smallholding, which, though it was no bigger than five acres, demanded considerable time and energy, and caring for his mother, which, in effect, was a twenty-four-hour job, he also worked as a ship's plumber at a yard over twenty kilometres away. He was an unusually sensitive man, as delicate as the most delicate of plants, with absolutely no interest in or talent for the practical sides of life, so everything he did, what constituted the basis of his everyday life, he must have had to force himself to do. Day in, day out, month in, month out, year in, year out. Sheer unmitigated willpower. That he had come to this was not necessarily due to the fact that he had never succeeded in breaking out of the conditions he was born into, as one might perhaps imagine, just staying in his familiar environment because it was familiar, it was more likely a consequence of his sensitive nature. For where could a young man with a proclivity for ideals and perfection turn in the mid-1970s? Had he been young in the 1920s, like his father, maybe he would have sought out and felt at home in the vital nature-loving late romantic current that swept through our culture, at least in the *nynorsk*-writing section of it, the one within which Olav Nygard, Olav Duun, Kristoffer Uppdal and Olav Aukrust wrote and which Olav Hauge was later to carry over into our own age; had he been young in the 1950s it might perhaps have been the notions and theories of cultural radicalism he would have absorbed, unless, that is, its opposite, the slowly dying forces of cultural conservativism had caught hold of him first. His youth, however, had been spent neither in the 1920s nor the 1950s, but in the early 1970s, so he became a member of the (Marxist–Leninist) Communist Workers' Party and proletarianised himself, as the expression went in those days. Started working as a pipe fitter on ships because he believed in a better world than this. Not only for a few months or years, as was the case for most of his party colleagues, but for nigh on two decades. He was one of the very few who didn't give up his ideals when times changed, but clung to them even though the cost, both social and private, increased as time passed. Being a communist in a rural community was a different matter from being a communist in an urban setting. In a town you were not alone, there were other, like-minded people, there was a community spirit, in addition to which your convictions were not visible in all contexts. In the country you were 'the communist'. That was his identity, his life. Being communist at the beginning of the 70s, being borne on the wave, was also quite a different matter from being a communist in the 1980s, when all the rats had long since left the ship. A lonely communist sounds like a paradox, but that was how it was for Kjartan. I remember my father having discussions with him those summers when we visited my grandparents, their loud voices coming from the living room below when we were trying to sleep, and even though I couldn't articulate it, nor think it, I could sense there was a difference between them, and that the difference was fundamental. For my father the discussions had limited scope, their sole function was to point out to Kjartan how he was deluding himself, for Kjartan they were a question of life and death, all or nothing. Hence the irritation in my father's voice, the fervour in Kjartan's. It was also apparent, or so it seemed to me at any rate, that my father’s words were grounded in the real world, that what he said and thought belonged here, was related to us, to our schooldays and football matches, our comics and fishing trips, our snow-shovelling and Saturday porridge, while Kjartan spoke of something else, something related to another place. Of course he could not accept that what he believed in, and in a way had dedicated his life to, had nothing to do with reality, as my father, along with everyone else, asserted on every occasion. That reality was not as Kjartan described it and never would be. That would have implied he was a dreamer. And a dreamer was precisely what he was not! Concrete, material, physical, down-to-earth reality was precisely what he was talking about! The situation was highly ironic. There he was defending theories about sticking together and solidarity, yet he was the one who had been ostracised and stood alone. He was the one who observed the world through idealistic abstract eyes, who had a more refined soul than any of the others, he was the one who lifted and carried, hammered and pounded, welded and screwed, scrabbled and crawled round ship after ship, who milked the cows and fed them, who shovelled muck into the muck cellar and in the spring spread it over the fields, who mowed the grass and dried the hay, maintained buildings and looked after his mother, who needed more and more help as the years passed. That became his life. The fact that communism began to wane at the beginning of the 1980s, and that the intense discussions he’d had on all sides imperceptibly abated until one day they were completely gone might have changed the meaning of it, but not the content. It continued as before, along the same course: up at the crack of dawn to milk and feed the cows, catch the bus to the shipyard, work all day, come home and see to his parents, walk his mother around the living room, if she was capable of it, or sit bending and massaging her legs, help her to the toilet, maybe get her clothes ready for the following day, do whatever had to be done outdoors, whether it be bringing in the cows and milking them or something else, then back to his place, have supper and sleep until the next morning – unless grandma was taken so ill that grandad had to fetch him in the course of the night. This was Kjartan’s life, as it appeared from the outside. When his communist phase started I was only a couple of years old, and when it ended, at least the active, rhetorical part, I had just finished first school, so all of it was no more than a vague backdrop to the image I had of him when I turned sixteen and started taking an interest in who people ‘were’. More significant by far for my image of him was the fact that he wrote poetry. Not because I was fond of poetry, but because it ‘said’ more about him. You didn’t write poems if you didn’t have to, that is, unless you were a poet. He didn’t talk to us about it, but made no secret of it either. At any rate, we knew about it. One year some poems were published by *Dag og Tid*, another year in *Klassekampen*, small simple pictures of an industrial worker’s reality which despite their modest proportions had gained a certain prestige in the Hatløy family, where books enjoyed great popularity. When he had a poem published on the back page of the literary journal *Vinduet* beside a small photograph of himself, and then a few years later his poems covered two whole pages of the same publication he was, in our eyes, a fully blown poet. It was at this time he started reading philosophy. Of an evening he sat in the house high above the fjord fighting his way through Heidegger’s incredibly intricate German in *Sein und Zeit* – presumably word by word, because to my knowledge he had not read or spoken German since his schooldays – and the poets Heidegger wrote about, especially Hölderlin and the pre-Socratic writers he referred to, and Nietzsche. Nietzsche. He later described reading Heidegger as like a homecoming. It is no exaggeration to say that it filled him to the brim. And that it was a kind of religious experience. An awakening, a conversion, an old world was filled with new meaning. At that time my father had left the family, so Yngve, my mother and I had begun to celebrate Christmas at our grandparents’ where Kjartan, now in his mid-thirties, still lived and worked. The four or five Christmas Eves we were there are without doubt the most memorable I have experienced. Grandma was ill and sat huddled at the table, shivering. Her hands shook, her arms shook, her head, her feet. Now and then she had bouts of cramp and had to be taken to a chair where her legs had to be practically forced into a bent position and then massaged. But her mind was clear, her eyes were clear; she saw us and she was happy to see us. Grandad, small and rotund and lively, told us stories whenever he could, and when he laughed, as he always did at his own stories, the tears rolled down his cheeks. But this didn’t happen as often as it could have done because Kjartan was there, and Kjartan had sat for a whole year reading Heidegger, had been filled with Heidegger amid the grinding pointless working life of his without a soul to share it with, because no one within a radius of several kilometres had even heard of Heidegger, and no one wanted to either, although I had an inkling he had tried various people, he must have done, so taken with him was he, but it led nowhere, no one understood, no one wanted to understand, he was on his own with this, and then in we walked, his sister Sissel, who was a nursing teacher, interested in politics, literature and philosophy, her son Yngve, who went to university, something Kjartan had always dreamed of doing, more and more so in recent years, and her son Karl Ove. I was seventeen years old, at *gymnas*, and even though I didn't understand a word of his poems he knew I read books. That was enough for him. We came in the door and his sluice gates opened. All the thoughts that had accumulated over the last year came flooding out. It didn't matter that we didn't understand, it didn't matter that it was Christmas Eve, that the mutton ribs, potatoes, mashed swede, Christmas ale and aquavit were on the table; he talked about Heidegger from within, without a single communicative link to the outside world, it was *Dasein* and *Das Man*, it was Trakl and Hölderlin, the great poet Hölderlin, it was Heraclitus and Socrates, Nietzsche and Plato, it was the birds in the trees and the waves in the fjord, it was man's *Dasein* and the advent of existence, it was the sun in the sky and the rain in the air, the cat's eyes and the plummeting waterfall. With his hair sticking out in all directions, his suit askew and his tie full of stains he sat there talking, his eyes aglow, they were really glowing, and I will always remember it, for it was pitch dark outside, the rain was beating against the windows, it was Christmas Eve in Norway 1986, our Christmas Eve, the presents were under the tree, everyone was dressed up, and the sole topic of conversation was Heidegger. Grandma was shivering, grandad gnawing at a bone, mum listening attentively, Yngve had stopped listening. As for me, I was indifferent to everything, and above all happy it was Christmas. But even though I didn't understand a word of what Kjartan said, and nothing of what he wrote, nor anything of the poems he praised with such passion, I did understand intuitively that he was right, that there was such a thing as a supreme philosophy and a supreme poetry, and that even if you didn't understand it, were unable to partake in it, you only had yourself to blame. Since then, whenever I have thought about the supreme, I have thought about Hölderlin, and when I've thought about Hölderlin it has always been associated with mountains and fjords, night and rain, the sky and the earth and my uncle's glowing eyes.

Although much had changed in my life since then my attitude to poetry was basically the same. I could read it, but poems never opened themselves to me, and that was because I had no ‘right’ to them: they were not for me. When I approached them I felt like a fraud, and I was indeed always unmasked, because what they always said as well, these poems, was, Who do you think you are, coming in here? That was what Osip Mandelstam’s poems said, that was what Ezra Pound’s poems said, that was what Gottfried Benn’s poems said, that was what Johannes Bobrowski’s poems said. You had to earn the right to read them.

How?

It was simple. You opened a book, read, and if the poems opened themselves to you, you had the right, if not, you didn’t. In my early twenties and still full of notions of what I could be, it bothered me a lot that I was one of those for whom the poems did not open. For the consequences of this were serious, much more so than merely being excluded from a literary genre. It also passed judgment on me. The poems looked into another reality, or saw reality in a different way, one which was truer than the way I knew, and the fact that it was not possible to acquire the ability to see and that it was something you either had or you didn’t condemned me to a life on a lower plane, indeed, it made me one of the lowly. The pain of that insight was immense. And strictly speaking there were only three ways of reacting. The first was to admit it to yourself and accept it for what it was. I was an ordinary man who would live an ordinary life and find meaning where I was, nowhere else. In practice that was the way it looked too. I liked watching football and played too whenever I had the chance, I liked pop music and played drums in a band a couple of times a week, I attended lectures at university, went out a fair amount or lay on the sofa at home watching TV in the evenings with the woman I was with at the time. The second way was to deny everything, by telling yourself that it existed inside you but it had not yet come to fruition, and then live a life in the world of literature, perhaps as a critic, perhaps as a university lecturer, perhaps as an author, because it was entirely possible to stay afloat in that world without literature ever opening up to you. You could write a whole dissertation about Hölderlin, for example, by describing the poems, discussing what they dealt with and in what ways the themes found expression, through the syntax, the choice of words, the use of imagery; you could write about the relationship between Hellenic and Christian modes, about the role of the countryside in his poems, about the role of the weather, or how the poems relate to the actual politico-historical reality in which they had arisen, independent of whether the main emphasis was on the biographical, for example his German Protestant background, or on the enormous influence of the French Revolution. You could write about his relationship to other German idealists, Goethe, Schiller, Hegel, Novalis, or the relationship to Pindar in the late poems. You could write about his unorthodox translations of Sophocles, or read the poems in the light of what he says about writing in his letters. You could also read Hölderlin's poetry with reference to Heidegger's understanding of it, or go one step further and write about the clash between Heidegger and Adorno over Hölderlin. You could also write about the whole history of his work's reception, or of his works in translation. It was possible to do all of this without Hölderlin's poems ever opening themselves. The same could be done with all poets, and of course it has been. You could also, if you were willing to put in the hard work, write poems yourself if you were one of those for whom poems did not open themselves; after all, only a poet would see the difference between poetry and poetry that resembles poetry. Of these two methods the first, accepting the fact, was the better, but also the more difficult option. The second method, denying it, was easier but also more unpleasant because you were constantly on the verge of the insight that what you were doing actually had no value. And if you lived in the world of literature it was precisely value you were seeking. The third method, which was based on rejecting the whole issue, was therefore the best. There is nothing higher. There is no such thing as privileged insight. Nothing is better or truer than anything else. The poems did not open themselves for me, but that did not necessarily mean I was inferior to them, or that what I wrote necessarily had less value. Both of them, the poems that did not open themselves and what I wrote, were basically the same, namely text. If mine proved to be worse, which of course it was, this was not the result of an irremediable condition – I didn't have it in me – but was something that could be changed through hard work and increasing experience. Up to a certain limit, of course, concepts such as talent and quality were still indispensable; not everyone was able to write well. The crux was that there was no barrier, nothing insuperable, between those who had it and those who did not; those who saw and those who did not. Rather, it was a question of degrees within the same scale. This was a gratifying thought, and not hard to justify, after all this way of thinking had been dominant in all spheres of art and criticism, as well as at universities from the middle of the 1960s until now. The ideas I had nurtured, and which had been such a natural part of me that I didn't even realise they were ideas, and accordingly had never articulated, only felt, but which nonetheless had had a controlling influence over me, were Romanticism in its purest form, in other words antiquated. The few who engaged seriously with Romanticism were preoccupied with those aspects that fitted into the contemporary world of ideas, such as the fragmentary or the ironic. But for me Romanticism was not the point – if I felt an affinity to any era, it was the Baroque period. I was attracted to its sense of space, its dizzying heights and depths, its notions about life and theatre, mirrors and bodies, light and dark, art and science – it was more my sense of standing outside the essence, standing outside what was most meaningful, outside what constituted existence. Whether this sense was Romantic or not was beside the point. To dull the pain it caused I had over the years defended myself using all three of the above-mentioned methods, and for long periods believed in them, especially the last. My notion that art was the place where the flames of truth and beauty burned, the last remaining place where life could show its true face, was crazy. But now and then this notion broke through, not as a thought, for it could be argued out of existence, but as a feeling. I knew with my whole being that the notion was a lie, that I was deceiving myself. This was what was in my mind as I stood there in the gateway outside the Swedish Writers' Association in Stockholm one afternoon in March 2002 flicking through Fioreto's translation of Hölderlin's last great hymns.

Oh, wretched me.

A constant stream of new people walked past the gateway. The light from the lamps hanging from cables above the street glinted on padded jackets and carrier bags, tarmac and metal. A faint hum of footsteps and voices traversed the space between the lines of houses. Two pigeons stood motionless on a first-floor window ledge. Water collected in heavy drops at the end of the rail on the awning projecting from the wall and every so often detached themselves and fell to the ground. I had put the book into my rucksack, and now I took out my mobile phone from my jacket pocket to see what the time was. The display was dark, so I turned it on as I began to walk. A message came in. It was from Tonje.

Have you arrived? Thinking about you.

Those two sentences made her feel close. The image of her, the woman she was for me, completely overcame me for a moment. Not just her face and manner, the way it is when you think about someone you know, but everything her face could be, all the indefinable features, incredibly clear nonetheless, which a person radiates to those who love them. But I wasn't going to answer. The whole point of leaving was to get away from her, so as a wave of sorrow at everything washed through me I deleted the message and clicked back to the clock screen.

16.21.

I had just over half an hour before I was to meet Geir.

Unless we had said half past four?

Had we?

Shit, we had! We were meeting at half past four, not five.

I turned and set off at a run. After a couple of blocks I stopped to regain my breath. The man sitting with the arrow-shaped board in his hands looked at me with listless eyes. I took that as a sign, and turned into the street where the arrow was pointing. When I reached the crossroads at the other end, sure enough the railway station was right in front of me, and on a wall down a short side street I spotted a yellow sign saying Arlanda Express. The train to the airport. It was 16.26. If I was going to be punctual I would have to run the last stretch as well. Across the street, into the airport train terminal, along the platform, into the entrance hall, past the kiosks and cafés, benches and left luggage lockers and into the main concourse, where I stopped so out of breath that I had to lean forward and support myself with my hands on my knees.

We had agreed to meet by the circular railings in the middle of the concourse, where you could look down at the lower floor. When I straightened up to look for the railings, I saw the clock on the wall stood at exactly half past.

There.

I chose a somewhat circuitous route, right over by the line of kiosks, and waited by the wall some distance away so that I could see Geir before he saw me. It was twelve years since I had seen him, and even then maybe only four or five times over two months, so from the moment he had answered my email and said I could stay with him, I had feared I wouldn’t be able to recognise him. ‘Recognise’ is perhaps an inappropriate term in that I didn’t have a single picture of him. When I thought about Geir it was not his face I visualised but the letters in his name – Geir that is – and a vague memory of someone laughing. The only scene I remember with him was in the bar at Fekterloftet in Bergen. Him laughing and saying, ‘You’re an existentialist!’ Why I should remember that of all things I had no idea. Perhaps because I didn’t know what an existentialist was? And was flattered because my opinions fitted into a well-known philosophical category?

I still didn’t know what an existentialist was. I knew the concept, could cite a few names and a time, but was unable to recall the precise definition.

The king of approximation, that was me.

I took off my rucksack and placed it on the floor between my feet, rolled my shoulders as I watched the people at the railing. None of them could be Geir. If anyone appeared answering to the vague description I had remembered I would go over to him and hope he recognised me. At worst I could ask, ‘Are you Geir?’

I looked up at the clock at the end of the concourse. Five minutes late.

Had we said five after all?

For some reason I was sure he was the punctual type. In that case it must have been five we had arranged. I had seen an Internet café in the entrance hall, and after waiting a bit longer I went there to confirm my suspicions. I also felt a need to read his email again, gauge the tone, then perhaps the impending situation would seem slightly less unfamiliar.

The language problems I’d encountered so far resulted in my confining what I said to the girl behind the counter to: *Internet?* She nodded and pointed to one of the computers. I sat down, logged into my email site and saw there were five new messages, which I skimmed. All of them from the editorial staff at *Vagant*. Even though it had not been more than twenty-four hours since I was sitting in Bergen, it felt as though the discussion between Preben, Eirik, Finn and Jørgen on screen was taking place in another world where I no longer belonged. As though I had crossed a line, as though in fact *I could not return*.

I was there yesterday, I told myself. And I still haven't decided how long I will be staying here. I can return in a week if I like. Or tomorrow.

But that was not how it felt. It felt as if I would never return.

I turned my head and looked towards the Burger King. On the nearest table a paper cup of Coke had been knocked over. The black liquid had formed a long oval puddle and was still dripping from the table edge onto the floor. At the table behind, a man was sitting with his knees pinched together and eating as if it were a punishment: for a few seconds his hand sped between the carton of chips, the small tub of ketchup and the chewing mouth, then he swallowed, grabbed the hamburger with both hands, put it to his lips and took a large bite. While he munched he held the hamburger as if at the ready, a few centimetres from his mouth, and then took another bite, wiped his lips with the back of one hand and lifted the beaker of Coke with the other, glancing at the three black-haired teenage girls chatting round the adjacent table. One of them looked in my direction, and I glanced first at the entrance, where two uniformed flight attendants came through the door into the concourse, each with a roller bag in tow, and then back at the computer screen, with the sharp, rapidly fading click-clacking sounds of their heels in my ears.

What if I never returned? I had after all been longing for this. To be here, alone, in a foreign town. No ties, no one else, just me, free to do what I wanted.

So why this feeling of heaviness?

I clicked on Geir's emails and began to read.

> Dear Karl Ove,
>
> An altogether excellent idea. Uppsala is, as you say, a university town, very much so. The town can be compared with Sørland at the turn of the century, a place to send your children so that they can learn how to roll their 'r's properly. Stockholm is one of the world's most beautiful capital cities, anything but relaxed though. Sweden as such is a fantastic paradox, on the one hand known far and wide for its open borders, on the other Europe's most segregated country. If you don't fancy Uppsala, I would recommend you live in Stockholm. (Whatever you choose they're only 40–50 minutes apart by train and one goes every half an hour).
>
> As for flats, bedsits and rooms for rent, they are by no means easy to get hold of. It's worse if anything in Uppsala because of all the new students. Difficult, though not impossible. Off the top of my head I can't think of anyone with a room to rent, but I'll ask around. Since you, if I've understood correctly, are not moving for good, but to begin with only until the end of the year it should be possible to get hold of what is known here as a 'second-hand flat'. There are agencies that specialise in them. Have you contacted SFF, the

> Swedish Writers' Union, by the way? It is not inconceivable that they have flats for foreign writers or at least that they know someone who does. If you want I can ring round to agencies, associations, etc.
>
> Today is Saturday 16 March. Would you like to come over one weekend, or perhaps better midweek when everything's open, just to see whether you like it here? Or have you already decided? In which case, next week I'll start to enquire about available flats at the beginning of next week. At all events, you're welcome to stay here whether you're on holiday or flat hunting.
>
> Looking forward to seeing you,
>
> Geir

> Karl Ove,
>
> Unless you're already on the train, give me a ring as soon as you're in Oslo or Stockholm! Don't waste your money on a hotel, and don't be shy. I have selfish reasons for this – you speak fluent Norwegian. My vocabulary is shrinking. Incidentally, Uppsala University was founded in 1477.
>
> My number in Stockholm is 708 96 93
>
> Geir

> So you don't like phones, eh? Let's say the main railway station then (where your train arrives) at five this afternoon. There's a circular railing (in local parlance, the poof ring) in the middle of the concourse. I'll meet you there. But call me if you get held up! (You can't object to phones that much.)
>
> Geir

That was the correspondence. I didn't doubt the sincerity of his offer to let me stay with them, but still I found it hard to accept. Meeting somewhere for a cup of coffee would have been more appropriate for the circumstances. On the other hand, I didn't have anything to lose. And he did come from the island of Hisøya.

I closed the email and cast a glance at the table where the three girls were, before grabbing my rucksack and getting to my feet. The one doing the talking spoke with a kind of aggrieved passion, immensely self-assertive, and was applauded with the same passion. If they hadn't been speaking I would have thought they were around nineteen. Now I knew they were closer to fifteen.

The nearest of them turned her head and met my stare again. Not to offer me anything – it was not an open look – but to confirm that I was looking at her. Nevertheless it opened up something. A flash of something like happiness. Then, as I went to the cash desk to pay, the thunder of consciousness followed. I was thirty-three years old. A grown man. Why was I thinking as if I was still twenty? When would these youthful fancies leave me? When my father was thirty-three he had a son of thirteen and one of nine, he had a house and a car and a job, and in photos of him from that time he looked like a man, and from what I could remember he also behaved like a man, I thought as I stepped up to the counter. Placed a warm hand on the cool marble surface. The assistant rose from a chair and came over to take payment.

'How much is it?' I asked in Norwegian.

'*Ursäkta?*'

I sighed.

'What does it cost?'

She glanced at the screen in front of her.

'Ten,' she said.

I handed her a creased twenty-krone note.

'That's fine,' I said, walking away before she had a chance to answer with another *Ursäkta?*, which this country seemed to be awash with. The clock on the wall in the main concourse said six minutes to five. I took up my old position and watched the people hanging around the rail. As none of them fitted the little I had to go on I allowed my gaze to wander among those walking through the station. From the kiosk on the other side came a short man with a large head and an appearance so unusual I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was in his fifties, his hair was a yellowish colour, his face broad, nose large, mouth slightly askew and his eyes were small. He looked like a gnome. But he was dressed in a suit and coat, in one hand he held an elegant leather briefcase, tucked under his arm he had a newspaper, and perhaps another personality was thrusting forth beneath the metropolitan exterior, which meant that my eyes were glued to him until he disappeared down the stairs to the platforms where the commuter trains departed. Suddenly, again, I saw how old everything was. Backs, hands, feet, heads, ears, hair, nails: every single part of the bodies streaming through the concourse was old. The buzz of voices rising from them was old. Even their pleasure was old, even the wishes and expectations of what the future would bring were old. Yet new, for us the future was new, for us it belonged to our time, belonged to the queue of waiting taxis outside, belonged to the coffee machines on the tables in the cafés, belonged to the shelves of magazines in the kiosks, belonged to the mobiles and iPods, the Goretex coats and laptops carried in their bags through the station and into trains, belonged to the trains and automatic doors, to the ticket machines and illuminated boards with changing destinations. Old age had no place here. Yet it completely dominated everything.

What a terrible thought that was.

I stuck a hand in my pocket to check the locker keys were there. They were. Then I patted my chest to feel for my credit card. It was there.

In the thronging masses before me a familiar face appeared. My heart beat faster. But it wasn't Geir, it was someone else. An even more remote acquaintance. A friend of a friend? Someone I had gone to school with?

I grinned as it clicked. It was the man from Burger King. He stopped and looked at the departures board. Between the thumb and first finger of the hand carrying the briefcase he was holding a ticket. As he checked the time on the board with the time on his ticket he raised the whole briefcase towards his face.

I glanced at the clock at the end of the concourse. Two minutes to. If Geir was as punctual as I assumed, he should be somewhere in the station by now, and I systematically scanned all the figures in the approaching crowd. First left, then right.

There.

Surely that had to be Geir?

Yes. It was. I remembered the face when I saw it. And he was not only walking towards me, he also had his eyes fixed on me.

I smiled, wiped my palm over my thigh as discreetly as I could, and reached out as he stopped in front of me.

'Hi, Geir,' I said. 'Long time.'

He smiled too. Let go of my hand almost before he held it.

'You can say that again,' he said. 'And you haven't changed in the slightest.'

'Haven't I?' I said.

'No. It's just like meeting you in Bergen. Tall, serious, wearing a coat.'

He laughed.

'Shall we go?' he suggested. Where are your bags, by the way?'

'In a locker downstairs,' I answered. 'Perhaps we could have a coffee first?'

'Certainly can,' he said. 'Where?'

'Makes no odds,' I said. 'There's a café by the entrance.'

'OK. Let's go there.'

He led the way, stopped at a table, asked without looking at me if I wanted milk or sugar, and went to the counter while I removed my rucksack, sat down and took out my tobacco. Watched him exchange a few words with the waitress, saw him hand her a note. Even though I had recognised him, and the buried image I must have had of him therefore fitted, his aura was different from what I expected. It was much less physical, almost completely lacking the bodily weight I had ascribed to him. Presumably I had done that because I knew he had been a boxer.

I felt a strong desire to sleep, to lie down in an empty room, switch off the light and disappear from the world. That was what I was longing for, while what awaited me, hours of social obligations and small talk, seemed unbearable.

I sighed. The electric light in the ceiling, which spread its lustre over everything in the station concourse, and here and there was reflected in a glass pane, on a piece of metal, a marble tile or a coffee cup, should have been sufficient to make me happy that I was here and able to see it. All the hundreds of people drifting to and fro across the floor of the station hall in such a shadowy fashion should have been sufficient to make me happy. Tonje, who I had been with for eight years, sharing my life with her, as wonderful as she was, should have made me happy. Meeting my brother Yngve with his children should have made me happy. All the music around me, all the literature around me, all the art around me, it should have made me happy, happy, happy. All the beauty in the world, which should have been unbearable to behold, left me cold. My friends left me cold. My life left me cold. That was how it was, and that was how it had been for so long that I could no longer stand it and had decided to do something about it. I wanted to be happy again. It sounded stupid, I couldn’t say it to anyone, but that was how it was.

I lifted the half-rolled cigarette to my lips and licked the glue, pressed it down with my thumbs so that it stuck against the paper, pinched off the loose tobacco at each end and dropped it into the gleaming white insides of the pouch, straightened the flap so that it slipped down into the light brown tangled mass of tobacco, closed the pouch, stuffed it in the pocket of the coat hanging over the chair, poked the cigarette in my mouth and lit it with the tall quivering yellow flame from the lighter. Geir had taken two cups and stood pouring coffee while the waitress placed his change on the counter and turned to the next customer, a long-haired man in his fifties wearing a hat and boots and a cape-like poncho-style garment.

No, Geir didn’t radiate any aura of physical presence. The aura he gave off, which had been obvious from the moment he no longer had eye contact with me, from when he let go of my hand and his eyes began to roam, was more one of restlessness. He seemed to want constant motion.

He came across the floor with a cup in each hand. I couldn’t help but smile.

‘So,’ he said, putting the cups down on the table, pulling out a chair, ‘you’re moving to Stockholm?’

‘Looks like it,’ I said.

‘In which case my prayers have been answered,’ he said without looking at me. He was studying the table, his hand round the handle of the cup. ‘I don’t know how many times I’ve told Christina I wished a Norwegian with literary interests would move here. And then you appear.’

He lifted the cup to his mouth and blew over the surface before drinking.

‘I wrote you a letter the summer you went to Uppsala,’ I said. ‘A long letter. But I never sent it. It’s still at my mother’s unopened. I haven’t a clue what’s in it.’

‘You’re joking!’ he said, staring at me.

‘Do you want it?’

‘Of course I want it! And don’t even think about opening it. It has to stay at your mother’s. That’s a piece of sealed time!’

‘Perhaps it is,’ I said. ‘I don’t remember a thing from then. And I’ve burned all the diaries and manuscripts I wrote in those days.’

‘Burned?’ Geir asked. ‘Not thrown away but burned?’

I nodded.

‘Dramatic,’ he said. ‘But then you were like that when you were in Bergen too.’

‘Was I?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘But you weren’t?’

‘Me? No. No, I wasn’t.’

He laughed. Twisted his head and watched the crowd going past. Twisted it back and surveyed the café’s other customers. I tapped the tip of the cigarette against the ashtray. The smoke rising from it billowed gently in the draught from the doors, which kept opening and closing. When I looked at him it was in brief, almost imperceptible, glances. In a way the impression he gave was independent of his face. His eyes were dark and sorrowful, but there was nothing dark or sorrowful about his aura. He seemed happy and diffident.

'Do you know Stockholm?' he asked.

I shook my head.

'Not very well. I've only been here for a few hours.'

'It's a fine town. But as cold as ice. You can live your whole life here without coming into close contact with anyone. Everything is set up in such a way that you don't get close to others. Look at the escalators,' he said, nodding towards the concourse where I presumed the escalators were. 'Those who stand, stand on the right-hand side, those who walk, walk on the left. When I'm in Oslo I'm amazed at all the times I bump into people. There's constant nudging and elbowing. All that business of going left first, then right, then left again when you're in someone's way in the street, you know, that just doesn't happen here. Everyone knows where they're going, everyone does what they are supposed to do. At the airport there's a yellow line by the baggage carousel and you mustn't cross it. And no one does. Baggage distribution is a nice orderly process. And that's the way conversations are organised in this country as well. There's a yellow line you mustn't cross. Everyone's polite, everyone's well mannered, everyone says what they are supposed to say. It's all about avoiding offence. If you're used to this, it comes as a shock to read newspaper debates in Norway. What heated discussions they have! They shout at each other! That's inconceivable here. And if you see a Norwegian professor on TV here – it hardly ever happens, no one cares about Norway, Norway doesn't exist in Sweden – on the rare occasions they do appear, they look like wild men with unkempt hair and untidy or unorthodox clothes, and they say things they shouldn't. It's part of the Norwegian academic tradition, as you know, where education doesn't have or shouldn't have any outward manifestation . . . or where the outer manifestation of academia should reflect idiosyncrasies and individualism. Not the universal and the collective, as is the case here. But of course no one understands that. Here they see only wild men. In Sweden they all think the Swedish way is the only one. Any deviations from the Swedish way they regard as flaws and deficiencies. The thought of it is enough to drive you insane.'

Yes, that's right, it was Jon Bing, that's who I had seen just before I met Geir. He looked all wrong. Long hair and beard, and I think he was wearing a knitted cardigan.

'A Swedish academic looks neat and tidy, behaves tidily, says what everyone expects, in a manner everyone expects. *Everyone* behaves tidily here by the way. That is, everyone in the public eye. Things look a little different at street level. They released all the psychiatric patients in this country a few years ago. So you see them walking around and mumbling and shouting everywhere. They've arranged it so that the poor live in particular areas, the affluent in particular areas, those active in cultural circles in particular areas and immigrants in particular areas. You'll get to see what I mean.'

He raised his coffee cup to his lips and took a sip. I didn't know what to say. What he had said was not prompted by the situation, except that I had just arrived from Norway, and it was formulated in such a way, came in such a coherent flow, that it seemed prepared. This was something he *said*, I inferred, this was one of his favourite topics. My experience of the type of person who enjoys such topics was that it was important to wait until the worst pent-up emotion had passed because more often than not a different kind of attention and presence was waiting on the other side. Whether his assertions were right or not I didn't know, my intuition was they were driven by frustration, and he was actually expressing what was causing the frustration. It might have been Sweden. It might have been something in him. It didn't matter to me, he could talk about what he wanted, that wasn't why I was sitting here.

'Sport and academia go together in Norway, and beer drinking and academia,' he said. 'I remember that from Bergen. Sport was big among students. But here they are irreconcilable entities. I'm not talking about scientists but intellectuals. In academic circles here intellectuality is paramount, it's all that exists, everything is subservient to the intellect. The body, for example, is conspicuous by its absence. Whereas in Norway intellectuality is played down. Hence, in Norway the common touch is no problem for an academic. I suppose the idea is that the backdrop should allow the intellect to gleam like a diamond. In Sweden the intellect's surroundings also have to gleam. It's the same for culture with a capital C. In Norway it is downplayed. In fact, it is not allowed to exist. Elitist culture is not allowed to exist unless it's populist at the same time. In Sweden it is emphasised. Popular and elitist cultures are irreconcilable. One should be *here*, the other should be *there*, and there is supposed to be no interchange between the two. There are exceptions, there always are, but this is the rule. Another great difference between Norway and Sweden is to do with roles. The last time I went to Norway I caught the bus from Arendal to Kristiansand, and the bus driver was going on about how he wasn't a bus driver really, really he was something else, he was just doing this to help tide him over to Christmas. And then he said we should look after one another during the festive period. He said that over the loudspeakers! Unthinkable in Sweden. Here you identify with your work. You simply don't step out of your role. There are no gaps in this role, there is nowhere you can stick your head out and say, This is the real me.'

'So why do you live here?' I asked.

He directed a fleeting glance at me.

'It's a perfect country if you want to be left in peace,' he said, letting his eyes roam again. 'I don't object to coldness. I don't want it in my life, but I can easily live my life within it, if you understand the difference. It's nice to look at. And it's practical. I despise it, but I also benefit from it. So, shall we go?'

'Yes, let's,' I said, stubbing out the cigarette, drinking the last drop of coffee, unhitching my coat from the chair, putting it on, swinging the rucksack over my shoulder and following him into the concourse. When I was alongside him he turned to me.

'Can you walk on the other side? I'm a bit hard of hearing in that ear.'

I did as he asked. Noticed his feet were at ten to two, like duck feet. I had always reacted to this. Ballet dancers walk like this. Once I had a girlfriend who was a ballet dancer. It was one of the few things I didn't like about her, walking with her feet sticking out to the side.

'Where are your bags?' he asked.

'Down below,' I answered. 'Then to the right.'

'Let's go down then,' he said, motioning towards a staircase at the end of the station.

As far as I could see, there was no difference between how people behaved here and in Oslo Central Station. At least nothing obvious. The differences he had been talking about seemed minimal, presumably they had been ratcheted up after many years of exile.

‘Looks pretty much like Norway to me,’ I said. ‘Just as much bumping into one another.’

‘Just you wait,’ he said with a glance and a smile. It was a wry smile, a superior-knowledge smile. If there was something I couldn’t bear it was the profession of superior knowledge, in whatever form it came. It asserted I knew less.

‘Look there,’ I said, stopping and pointing to the electronic board above us.

‘What at?’ Geir asked.

‘The arrivals board,’ I said. ‘This is why I came here. For this very reason.’

‘What do you mean?’ Geir asked.

‘Look. Södertälje. Nynäshamn. Gävle. Arboga. Västerås. Örebro. Halmstad. Uppsala. Mora. Göteborg. Malmö. There’s something incredibly exotic about it. About Sweden. The language is almost the same, the towns are almost the same. If you look at Swedish rural districts they’re similar to the districts in Norway. Apart from minor details. And it’s these small divergences, these small differences that are *almost* familiar, *almost* the same, yet aren’t, that I find so unbelievably attractive.’

He stared at me in disbelief.

‘You’re crazy!’ he said.

Then he laughed.

We set off again. It was unlike me to say anything like this, out of the blue, but it had felt as if I should make my case, not allow him to dominate.

‘I’ve always felt that attraction,’ I continued. ‘Not for India or Burma or Africa, the big differences, that has never interested me. But Japan, for example. Not Tokyo or the cities, but the rural areas in Japan, the small coastal towns. Have you seen how similar the landscape is to ours in Norway? But the culture, their houses and their customs, are totally alien, totally incomprehensible. Or Maine in the USA? Have you seen the coast there? The terrain is so similar to Sørland, but everything man-made is American. Do you understand what I mean?’

‘No, but I’m listening.’

‘That was all,’ I said.

We descended into the underground hall, also packed with people on the move, went to the luggage lockers and I pulled out two bags. Geir took one and we made our way through the hall to the Metro platforms a few hundred metres away.

Half an hour later we were walking through the centre of a 1950s satellite town, which in the March street-lamp-illuminated darkness appeared to be fully intact. It was called Västertorp. All the buildings were square and made of brick, differing from one another only in size and surrounded on all sides by high-rise blocks. The buildings in the town centre were lower with a variety of shops on the ground floor. Pine trees stood motionless between the blocks. I could see the occasional hill and glimpse the occasional lake between the tree trunks in the light from the many front entrances and windows that seemed to have shot up from the ground. Geir talked without cease, as he had also done on the Metro journey here. For the main part he had been explaining whatever we saw. In between, there had been the sound of the station names, so wonderful and unfamiliar. Slussen, Mariatorget, Zinkensdamm, Hornstull, Liljeholmen, Midsommarkransen, Telefonplan . . .

‘There it is,’ he said, pointing to one of the houses by the road.

We went in one entrance, up a staircase, through a door. Books lined the wall, a compact row of jackets on clothes hangers, the aroma of someone else’s life.

‘Hi, Christina, aren’t you going to say hello to our Norwegian friend?’ he said, peering into the room on the left. I stepped forward. A woman sitting at a table inside, with a pencil in her hand and paper in front of her, looked up.

‘Hello, Karl Ove,’ she said. ‘*Trevligt* to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you.’

‘I haven’t heard anything about you, I’m afraid,’ I said. ‘Well, apart from the little that’s in Geir’s book.’

She smiled, we shook hands, she began to clear the table and put on some coffee. Geir showed me the flat, it didn’t take long. It consisted of two rooms, both covered with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. In one, the living room, there was a corner where Christina worked; Geir worked in the second, which was a bedroom. He opened some of the glass cabinets and showed me the books. They were so straight you would have thought he had used a spirit level, and they were organised according to series and authors, not alphabetically.

‘You’re organised, I can see,’ I said.

‘I’m organised in everything,’ he said. ‘Absolutely everything. There’s nothing in my life that I have not planned or allowed for.’

‘That sounds frightening,’ I said and looked at him.

He smiled.

‘For me it’s frightening to meet someone who moves to Stockholm at one day’s notice.’

‘I had to,’ I said.

‘To will is to have to will,’ he said. ‘As the mystic Maximos says in *Emperor and Galilean*. Or to be precise, “What is the value of living? Everything is sport and mockery. To *will* is to *have* to will.” That was the play in which Ibsen tried to be wise. Erudite, at any rate. He makes a stab at a huge damn synthesis there. “I defy necessity! I will not serve it. I am free, free, free.” It’s interesting. “A hell of a good play,” as Beckett says about *Waiting for Godot*. I was really taken by it when I read it. He communicates with a time that is past. All the learning, which is a prerequisite, has gone. It’s very interesting. Have you read it?’

I shook my head.

‘I haven’t read any of his historical plays.’

‘It was written at a time when everything was being re-evaluated. That’s what he does. Catilina, you know, was a symbol of treachery. But Ibsen gives him a makeover. It’s as though we should have done the same to Quisling almost. He had balls when he was writing it. But all the values he turns round come from antiquity, and that makes it almost impossible for us to understand. We don’t read Cicero, do we . . . We-ell, writing a play in which he attempts to unite emperors and Galileans! He fails, of course, but at least he fails big time. He’s too symbolic there. But also bold. You can see how much he wants the big time. I don’t think I believe Ibsen when he says he only read the Bible. Schiller gets a look-in here. *Die Räuber*. The Robbers. There’s also a kind of rebel figure. Like *Michael Kohlhaas* by

Heinrich von Kleist. By the way, there’s a parallel with Bjørnson. Is it *Sigurd Slembe*, can you remember?’

‘I don’t know anything about Bjørnson.’

‘I think it’s *Sigurd Slembe*. The time to act. To act or not to act. It’s classic Hamlet. To be an actor in your own life or a spectator.’

‘And you are?’

‘Good question.’ A silence arose. Then he said, ‘I’m probably a spectator, with elements of choreographed action. But I don’t really know. I think there’s a lot inside me that I can’t see. And so it doesn’t exist. And you?’

‘Spectator.’

‘But you’re here. And yesterday you were in Bergen.’

‘Yes. But this is not the result of any decision. It was forced.’

‘That’s perhaps another way of making a decision, hm? Letting whatever happens do it for you?’

‘Maybe.’

‘That’s strange, that is,’ he said. ‘The more unreflective you are, the more active you are. You know, the boxers I wrote about had an incredible presence. But that meant they weren’t spectators of themselves, so they didn’t remember anything. Not a thing! Share the moment with me here and now. That was their offer. And of course that works for them, they always have to enter the ring again, and if you’ve been given a pasting in the previous fight it’s best if you don’t remember it too well, otherwise you’ve had it. But their presence was absolutely amazing. It filled everything. *Vita contemplativa* or *vita activa*, I suppose they’re the two forms, aren’t they? It’s an old problem of course. Besets all spectators. But not actors. It’s a typical spectator problem . . .’

Behind us, Christina stuck her head through the door.

‘Would you two like some coffee?’

‘Please,’ I said.

We went into the kitchen and sat down round the table. From the window there was a view of the road, which lay deserted under the street lighting. I asked Christina what she had been drawing when we arrived and she said she was making models of shoes for a factory in the far north of the country. The absurdity of sitting in a kitchen in the middle of a Swedish satellite town with two people I didn’t know suddenly struck me. What was

I doing? What was I doing here? Christina started making dinner, I sat in the living room with Geir telling him about Tonje, how it had been, what had happened, how my life in Bergen had been. He summarised in a similar way what had happened in his life since he had left Bergen thirteen years before. What caught my attention most was a debate he'd had in *Svenska Dagbladet* with a Swedish professor who had made him so angry that one morning he had nailed up the last defamatory arguments on the castle door in Uppsala like a second Luther. He had also tried to piss on the door, but Christina had dragged him away.

We had lamb burgers, fried potatoes and Greek salad. I was starving, the plates were empty within seconds and Christina wore a guilty expression. I met her apologies with counter-apologies. She was clearly cut from the same cloth as me. We drank some wine, chatted about the differences between Sweden and Norway, and while I thought to myself, no, Sweden's not like that, and Norway's not like that, I nodded and played along. At around eleven I could barely keep my eyes open, Geir brought some bed linen, I would be sleeping on the living-room sofa, and while we stretched out the sheet his face suddenly changed. *His face was completely different*. Then it changed back, and I had to make an effort to keep it fixed, that was what he looked like, that was him.

It changed again.

I secured the last flap under the mattress and sat down on the sofa. My hands were shaking. What had happened?

He turned to me. His face was once more as it was when I had met him at Central Station.

'I haven't said anything about your novel yet,' he said, taking a seat on the other side of the table. 'But it made an indelible impression on me. I was deeply shaken after reading it.'

'Why's that?' I asked.

'Because you went so far. You went so unbelievably far. I was glad you did, I was sitting here, smiling, because you had brought it off. When we met you wanted to be a writer. No one else had had the idea. Only you. And then you achieved it. But that wasn't why I was shaken. It was because you went so far. Do you really have to go that far, I thought at the time. And it was frightening. Speaking for myself, I can't go that far.'

‘What do you mean? How do you mean I went so far? It’s just a standard novel.’

‘You say things about yourself it’s unheard of to say. Not least the story of the thirteen-year-old. I’d never have thought you would dare.’

A cold wind seemed to blow through me.

‘I don’t quite understand what you’re talking about,’ I said. ‘I made it up. It wasn’t so much of an effort, if that’s what you think.’

He smiled and looked me straight in the eye.

‘You told me about the relationship when we met in Bergen. You’d come from northern Norway the summer before, but you were still full of what had happened up north. That was what you talked about. Your father, and then falling in love when you were sixteen and you had identified with Hamsun’s Lieutenant Glahn, and you said you’d had a relationship with a thirteen-year-old when you were a teacher in northern Norway.’

‘Ha ha,’ I said. ‘That’s not very funny, in case you think it is.’

He wasn’t smiling any more.

‘Are you saying you don’t remember? She was in your class, you had fallen for her hook, line and sinker, I gathered, but everything was a mess; you said, among other things, you’d spoken to her mother at a party – and the scene is precisely in the novel as you’d described it to me. There’s nothing necessarily wrong with that though, if you know the desire is mutual, mind you. But how you know that is quite a different matter. That’s the problem. I’ve got an old school pal who impregnated a thirteen-year-old – he was seventeen I should add, while you were eighteen, but what the fuck, that part is irrelevant here. What’s relevant is that you wrote about it.’

He looked at me.

‘What is it? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost.’

‘You don’t mean it seriously, do you?’ I said. ‘That I said that?’

‘Yes, I do. You did say that. It’s etched into my memory.’

‘But it didn’t happen.’

‘You definitely said that it did.’

It felt like a hand was squeezing my heart. How could he say such a thing? Could I have repressed such a major event? Just shrugged it off and forgotten all about it, and then written it all down without thinking for a moment that it was true?’

No.

No, no, no.

It was unthinkable.

Absolutely, totally unthinkable.

So how could he say such a thing?

He got up.

‘I’m sorry, Karl Ove,’ he said. ‘But you did say it.’

‘I don’t understand,’ I said. ‘But I don’t have the impression you’re lying.’

He shook his head and smiled.

‘Sleep well then.’

‘Sleep well.’

Listening to the faint sounds of a couple settling down for the night in the bedroom on the other side of the door, I lay with my eyes open, staring into the room. It was filled with the weak moon-like light from the street lamps outside. My mind ran wild trying to find a solution to what Geir had said while my feelings had already condemned me: such a firm grip did they have on my innards that my whole body hurt. Now and then there was a low hum, coming, I supposed, from the Metro a few hundred metres away, in which I sought solace. Beneath it there was a kind of distant roar which, if I hadn’t known better, sounded like the sea. But I was in Stockholm, there had to be a big motorway nearby.

I rejected all of it, that I might have repressed anything so significant was out of the question. Yet there were large holes in my memory. I had drunk a lot in the days I lived in the north, like the young fishermen I hung around with at weekends, a bottle of spirits vanished in the course of an evening, at least one. Entire evenings and nights had disappeared from my memory, and were left like tunnels inside me, full of darkness and winds and my own skirling emotions. What had I done? What had I done? When I started studying in Bergen it continued, whole evenings and nights disappeared, I was on the loose in the town, that was how it felt, I could arrive home with the front of my jacket covered in blood. What had happened? I could arrive home in clothes that weren’t mine. Could wake up on a roof, could wake up under a bush in the park, and once I had woken up in the corridor of an institution. The police had come and taken me away. Questioning followed: someone had broken into a nearby house and stolen money, was it me? I didn’t know, but I said no, no, no. All these holes, all this unthinking darkness over so many years in which some mysterious almost ghostly event could be played out on the periphery of my memory had filled me with guilt, large tracts of guilt, and when Geir told me I had said I’d had a relationship with a thirteen-year-old in northern Norway, I could not, with my hand on my heart, say no, I hadn’t, for there was some doubt, so much had happened, why not this too?

Part of this burden was also what had happened between Tonje and me, and not least what was going to happen.

Had I left her? Was our life together over? Or was this just a break, a few months of separation for both of us to think things through, each from our own angle?

We had been together for eight years, married for six of them. She was still the person I was closest to, it was barely twenty-four hours since we had shared a bed, and if I didn’t turn away now, didn’t look in a different direction, it would remain like that because this, I intuited, was up to me.

What did I want?

I didn’t know.

I was lying on a sofa just outside Stockholm, knowing not a soul, and everything in me was chaos and unrest. The uncertainty penetrated to my core, through to that which defined who I was.

A face appeared in the glass door to the tiny balcony. It disappeared as I stared at it. My heart beat faster. I closed my eyes, and the same face appeared to me there. I saw it from the side, it turned to me and stared right at me. It changed. It changed again. It changed again. I had never seen any of these faces before, but all of them were profoundly realistic and significant. What kind of parade was this? Then the nose became a beak, the eyes predator eyes and suddenly a hawk was sitting inside me and staring.

I turned on my side.

All I wanted was to be a decent person. A good, honest, upright person who could look people in the eye and everyone knew they could trust.

But such was not the case. I was a deserter, and I had done terrible things. And now I had deserted again.

The next morning I was woken by Geir’s high-pitched voice. He sat on the end of the sofa holding a cup of burning hot coffee out for me.

‘Good morning!’ he said. ‘It’s seven o’clock! Don’t tell me you’re a night owl?’

I sat up and scowled at him.

‘I usually get up at one in the afternoon,’ I said. ‘And I can’t talk to anyone for the first hour.’

‘Worse luck you!’ Geir said. ‘Anyway, I’m not a spectator of my own life, that’s simply wrong. I see others, I’m good at that, but I don’t see myself. Not a hope. Besides, spectator is perhaps the wrong word in this context. It’s a kind of euphemism. The real question is whether you are capable of action or not. Do you want the coffee or not?’

‘I always drink tea in the morning,’ I said. ‘But I’ll take it as a favour to you.’

I took the coffee and sipped.

‘*Emperor and Galilean*, to finish the conversation,’ he said, ‘failed basically for the same reason that *Zarathustra* did. But the point is, and I didn’t get round to this yesterday, that what they say can only be said as a result of having failed. That’s important.’

He looked at me as if expecting an answer. I nodded a couple of times, took another sip of coffee.

‘And as far as your novel is concerned, it wasn’t primarily the story about the thirteen-year-old that shook me. It was the fact that you went so far, put so much of yourself into it. That requires courage.’

‘Not for me,’ I said. ‘I don’t give a shit about myself.’

‘And it’s noticeable! But how many are like you?’

I shrugged. I wanted to slump back on the sofa and go on sleeping, but Geir was almost jumping around on the arm.

‘How about a trip to town? So that I can show you around. Stockholm has no soul, but it’s fantastically beautiful. There’s no way of getting away from that.’

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Though perhaps not right this minute? What is the time actually?’

‘Ten past eight,’ he said, standing up. ‘Get your rags on and we’ll have some breakfast. Christina’s making bacon and eggs.’

No, I didn’t want to get up. And having forced myself to, I didn’t want to leave the flat. What I fancied was occupying the sofa for the rest of the day. After breakfast I tried to delay departure, but Geir’s energy and willpower were of the inflexible variety.

‘Bit of walking’ll do you good,’ he said. ‘In your depressed state staying indoors would be the death of you, surely you understand that. So, up you get! Come on! We’re going now!’

On the way to the Metro station, with him striding out and me lagging behind, he turned to me with a grimace which was probably meant to be a smile.

‘Have you retrieved the events in northern Norway from your subconscious now, or is it still just as black?’ he asked.

‘I sussed out what had happened just before I fell asleep,’ I said. ‘I don’t mind admitting it was a relief. For a while I thought you were right and I had in fact repressed the whole business. It was nothing special.’

‘And what’s the explanation then?’

‘You mixed up three different stories and made one, either then or when you read the book. I had a girlfriend up there, but she was sixteen and I was eighteen. No, hang on, she was fifteen. Or sixteen. I’m not sure. Not thirteen anyway.’

‘You said you were in love with one of your students.’

‘I could not have said that.’

‘You bloody well did. I’ve got the memory of an elephant.’

We stopped by the barriers, I bought a ticket and then we walked down the long concrete tunnel to the platform.

‘There was one girl in love with me, I remember. That must be what you can remember. And so you’ve mixed her up with the girlfriend I had and was actually in love with.’

‘It may have been like that,’ he said. ‘But that’s not what you told me.’

‘Pack it in now, for Christ’s sake. I haven’t come to Stockholm to find more problems. The whole point was to get away from them.’

‘You’ve come to the right man then,’ he said. ‘I won’t say another word.’

We caught the Metro to town, emerged from one station after the other all day, each time a new urban landscape revealed itself, all very beautiful. But I couldn’t fit it all together: in the four to five days we wandered around from early morning to late afternoon Stockholm was no more than unconnected fragments for me. We walked side by side, he pointed left and we went left, right and we went right, all the while talking in loud enthusiastic tones about what we saw and all his associations. Now and then I got tired of the unequal power distance, with him deciding everything, and then I said no, we won't go right, we're going left, and he smiled and said, OK, if that makes you happy, or fine, if that makes you feel better. We had lunch at a new place every day. In Norway I was used to something on bread, I dined out maybe twice a year; Geir and Christina did it every day, often both lunch and dinner, compared with Norway it cost nothing, and the choice was enormous. My instinct was the student cafés – in other words, those places that most resembled what I knew from Bergen – but Geir refused, he wasn't twenty any more, as he put it, and wanted nothing to do with youth culture. In the afternoons and evenings he forced me to contact all the Swedes I knew, all the Swedes I had dealt with during my time at *Vagant*, all the Swedes my editor knew, because he said it was nigh on impossible to find a place to live in this town, everything worked through contacts. I didn't want to, I wanted to sleep, lounge about, but he kept nudging me, this had to be done, there was no way out. We went to a big poetry slam – Danish, Norwegian, Swedish and Russian writers reading their works, among them Steffen Sørum, who opened by saying 'Hello, Stockholm!' as though he was some sodding rock star, and I blushed on behalf of our country. Inger Christensen read. A Russian staggered drunkenly around the stage shouting that no one liked poetry – YOU ALL HATE POETRY! he yelled – while his Swedish translator, a bashful man with a little rucksack on his back, tried to calm him down and finally, as the Russian paced the stage in silence, managed to read some poems. It ended with a warm reconciliation when the Russian first poked the translator in the back and then hugged him. Ingmar Lemhagen was in the audience, he knew everyone, and through him I managed to slip backstage and asked all the Swedish writers if they knew of anywhere to stay. Raattamaa had a flat, he said, I could move in next week in fact, no problem. We went out with them, first to Malmen, where the Swedish poet Marie Silkeberg leaned over to me and asked why especially she should read my novel, and the best reply that occurred to me was that perhaps it was the kind of book you were simply drawn into, to which she responded with a fleeting smile and subsequently, not so fast that it was offensive, nor so slowly that it was without significance, glanced round for someone else to talk to. She was a poet; I was a writer of light fiction. Afterwards everyone went back to hers for drinks. Geir was, unlike me, full of contempt for poets and poetry, he viewed them with hatred in his eyes and he ended up at odds with Silkeberg merely by implying that such a large flat in such a central location must have cost quite a packet. As we walked down towards Slussen in the early morning he spoke about the cultural middle class, all the privileges they had, how literature was merely a ticket into society, and he spoke about their manifold ideologies. He talked about their so-called solidarity with the worse off, their flirtations with the working class and their undermining of such entities as quality, and what a catastrophe it was that quality was subordinate to politics and ideology, not only in literature, but also in universities, and its logical conclusion, in the whole of society. I couldn't relate any of this to the reality I knew, I contradicted him occasionally, saying he was paranoid, that he was making sweeping statements, there was always a person behind an ideology, and sometimes I just let him prattle away. However, he said, as we were going through the station barriers and boarding the escalator, Inger Christensen was unique. She was utterly fantastic. In a league of her own. Although everyone says so, and you know what I think of consensuses, she was.

'Yes,' I said.

Beneath us the draught from the approaching train blew a plastic bag up from the platform. Like an animal with headlamps as eyes, the train appeared at the other end of the darkness.

'She was a different class,' Geir said. 'World class.'

I hadn't experienced anything special when she read. But before the reading I had wondered about her: a small plump elderly woman drinking at the bar with a handbag over her arm.

'*The Butterfly Valley* is a sonnet cycle,' I said, stepping onto the platform as the train came to a halt. 'It must be the most exacting form of all. The first line of all the sonnets has to form the final, concluding sonnet.'

'Yes, Hadle has tried to explain it to me several times,' Geir said. 'But I never remember.'

'Italo Calvino does something similar in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*,' I said. 'But it's not quite as strict of course. The title of each narrative in the end forms its own little narrative. Have you read it?'

The doors opened, we went in and sat opposite each other.

'Calvino, Borges, Cortázar, you can keep them,' he said. 'I don't like fantasy and I don't like constructs. For me it's only people that count.'

'But what about Christensen?' I said. 'You'd have to look far and wide for a writer who uses more constructs. What she does sometimes is more like maths.'

'Not from what I heard,' Geir said, and I looked out of the window as the train began to move.

'What you heard was the voice,' I said. 'It overrides all numbers and systems. And it's the same with Borges as well, at least when he's at his best.'

'Makes no difference,' Geir said.

'You don't want to read it?'

'No.'

'OK.'

We sat silent for a while, caught in the silence into which all the other passengers had also sunk. Vacant gazes, motionless bodies, the gently vibrating walls and floor of the train.

'Attending a poetry reading is like being in a hospital,' he said as we left the next station. 'Full of neuroses.'

'Not Christensen though?'

'No, precisely, that's what I was saying. She did something else.'

'Perhaps the tight construct you won't accept balanced it out? Objectivised it?'

'Possible,' he said. 'But for her the evening would have been a total waste of time.'

'And the guy with the flat,' I said. 'Rataajaama, was that his name?'

The next morning I rang the number I had been given by Raattamaa. No one answered. I rang again and again during the day and the next day. No answer. He never picked up the phone, so on the third day we went to another literary event in which he was supposed to be taking part, sat in a bar across the street and waited until it was over, and when he came out I went over to him, he looked down when he recognised me, sorry, it was too late, the flat had gone. Through Geir Gulliksen I managed to fix up a meeting with two editors at Norstedts. I had lunch with them and they gave me a list of writers I should contact – ‘They’re not necessarily the best, but they’re the nicest’ – and said I could stay in the company’s guest apartment for two weeks. I accepted their offer, and while staying there I received a positive reply from Joar Tiberg, one of whose poems we had published in *Vagant*, a long one, he knew a girl at *Ordfront Magasin* who would be away for a month: I could stay there.

At regular intervals I phoned Tonje, told her how I was and what I was doing, and she told me what was happening where she was. Neither of us asked what we were really doing.

I began to run. And I began to write again. Four years had already passed since the first novel, and I had nothing. Lying on the water bed in the conspicuously feminine room I was renting I decided on one of two options. Either I would begin writing about my life the way it was now, like a diary and open to the future, with everything that had happened over recent years as a dark undercurrent – in my mind I called it the *Stockholm Diary* – or I would continue with the story I had started three days before coming here, about a trip to the skerries one summer’s night when I was twelve, when dad caught crabs and I found a dead seagull. The atmosphere, the heat and the darkness, the crabs and the bonfire, all the screaming gulls defending their nests as Yngve, dad and I walked across the island, it had something, but not perhaps enough to carry a novel.

During the day I read in bed, once in a while Geir came down, then we went out for lunch, and in the evenings I wrote or I ran or I caught the train to Geir and Christina’s, to whom I had become quite attached in the course of these two weeks. Beside the conversation about literature and beside all the political and ideological topics Geir broached, we also talked continually about subjects that were closer to us. In my case the subject was inexhaustible, everything came up, from events in my childhood to my father’s death, from summers in Sørbøvåg to the winter I met Tonje. Geir was shrewd, he was on the outside and saw through everything, time after time. His story, which started to take form later, as though first of all he had to be sure I could be trusted, was the complete antithesis of mine. Whereas he came from a working-class home without any ambitions or as much as a single book on the shelves, I was from a middle-class home, with both my mother and my father having done courses as mature students to get on, and we had the whole of world literature at our fingertips. Whereas he was one of the boys who fought in the playground and was barred and sent to the school psychologist, I was one of the children who always tried to curry favour with the teacher by being as good as possible. Whereas he played with soldiers and dreamed of owning a gun one day, I played football and dreamed of turning professional one day. Whereas I ran for election as a school rep and wrote an essay about the revolution in Nicaragua, he was a member of a Home Guard cadet force and the youth wing of a conservative political party. Whereas I wrote a poem about the amputated hands of children and human cruelty after watching *Apocalypse Now,* he examined the possibility of becoming an American citizen to enlist in the US Army.

Despite all this, we were able to talk to each other. I understood him, he understood me, and for the first time in my adult life I could say what I thought to someone without reservations.

I decided to go for the crab and the seagull story, wrote twenty pages, wrote thirty, my short runs became longer and longer, and soon I ran all the way round Söder, while the kilos flowed off me and conversations with Tonje became fewer and fewer.

Then I met Linda and the sun rose.

I can't find a better way to express it. The sun rose in my life. At first, as dawn breaking on the horizon, almost as if to say, this is where you have to look. Then came the first rays of sunshine, everything became clearer, lighter, more alive, and I became happier and happier, and then it hung in the sky of my life and shone and shone and shone.

The first time I set eyes on Linda was in the summer of 1999 at a seminar for new Nordic writers at Biskops-Arnö Folk High School, outside Stockholm. Standing outside a building with the sun on her face. Wearing sunglasses, a white T-shirt with a stripe across the chest and green military fatigues. She was thin and beautiful. She had an aura which was dark, wild, erotic and destructive. I dropped everything I was holding.

When I saw her for the second time six months had passed. She was sitting at a table in an Oslo café and was wearing a leather jacket, blue jeans, black boots and was so fragile, overwrought and confused that all I wanted to do was hold her in my arms. I didn't.

When I came to Stockholm she was the only person I knew apart from Geir. I had her number, and the second day I was there I rang her from Geir and Christina’s flat. What had happened at Biskops-Arnö was dead and buried, there were no longer any feelings for her in me, but I needed contacts in town, she was a writer, she was bound to know many more, perhaps also someone with a place to live.

No one answered. I put the phone down and turned to Geir, who was pretending he hadn’t been following.

‘No one at home,’ I said.

‘Try again later then,’ he said.

I did. But no one ever answered.

With Christina’s help I put an advertisement in the Stockholm newspapers. Norwegian author seeks flat/place to write, it said, we had spoken for ages before arriving at this, they thought there were lots of culture vultures that would jump at the word ‘author’, and ‘Norwegian’ was synonymous with easy-going and harmless. They must have had a point because I was inundated with calls. Most of the flats I was offered were in the satellite towns outside Stockholm. I turned them down, there didn’t seem to be much point being stuck in a tower block somewhere in a forest, and while I waited for a better offer I moved into the Norstedts flat, then into the very feminine flat. After a week there an offer turned up: someone wanted to rent a flat in Söder, and I went there, waited outside the door, two women so similar they had to be twins, around fifty years old, stepped out of a car, I greeted them, they said they were from Poland and wanted to rent out the flat for at least a year, sounds very interesting, I said, come on up, they said, we can sign the contract straight away if you like it.

The flat was absolutely fine, one and a half rooms, around thirty square metres, kitchen and bathroom, acceptable standard, perfect location. I signed. But something nagged, something was wrong, I couldn’t work out what, walked slowly downstairs, stopped by the board with the list of the block’s occupants. First of all, I read the address, Brännkyrkgatan 92, there was something familiar about it, I had seen it somewhere, but where? Where? I wondered, scanning the list of names.

Oh, bugger it.

Linda Boström, it said.

A chill ran down my spine.

That was her address! Of course. I had written to her asking for a contribution for *Vagant*, and I had sent it to bloody Brännkyrkgatan 92.

What were the odds of that happening?

One and a half million people lived in this city. I knew one of them. I put an advertisement in the paper, get an interesting response from two complete strangers, Polish twins, and it turns out the flat is in the *same block*!

I sauntered down to the Metro station, squirmed nervously in my seat all the way home to my girly flat. What would Linda think if I moved into the floor above? That I was stalking her?

It was no good. I couldn't. Not after the terrible business at Biskops-Arnö.

The first thing I did when I came in the door was to ring the Poles and say I had changed my mind, I didn't want the flat after all, a better offer had come up, I was really sorry, I really was.

'That's fine,' she said.

Back to square one.

'Are you crazy?' Geir said when I told him. 'You've turned down a flat in the middle of Söder which, on top of everything else, was cheap, because you think someone you don't really know *might* feel she was being stalked? Do you realise how many years I've spent trying to get my hands on a flat in the centre? Do you know how difficult it is? It's *impossible*. Then you come along with a four-leaved clover up your arse and get one, then another, and then you say no!'

'That's how it is now anyway,' I said. 'Is it OK if I drop by occasionally? You feel a bit like my family. And if I come out here for Sunday lunch with you?'

'Apart from the fact that it's Monday, I have the same feeling. But I find it hard to make the father–son relationship fit. So it would have to be Caesar and Brutus.'

'Which of us is Caesar?'

'Don't ask such a silly question. Sooner or later you'll stab me in the back. But just come. We can continue talking out here.'

We ate, I went onto the tiny balcony to smoke and drink coffee, Geir joined me, we discussed the relativist attitude we both had to the world, how the world changed when culture changed, yet everything was always such that you couldn't see what was outside, and therefore it didn't exist, whether this view came from the fact that we had gone to university precisely when post-structuralism and postmodernism were at their zenith and everyone was reading Foucault and Derrida, or whether it actually *was* like that, and whether in that case it was the fixed, unchanging and non-relativist point we were denying. Geir told me about an acquaintance of his who wouldn't talk to him any more after a discussion they'd had about the real and the absolute. I thought it a strange point to invest so much in, but said nothing. For me society is everything, Geir said. Humanity. I'm not interested in anything beyond that. But I am, I said. Oh yes? Geir queried. What then? Trees, I answered. He laughed. Patterns in plants. Patterns in crystals. Patterns in stones. In rock formations. And in galaxies. Are you talking about fractals? Yes, for example. But everything that binds the living and the dead, all the dominant forms that exist. Clouds! Sand dunes! That interests me. Oh God, how boring, Geir said. No, it isn't, I said. Yes, it is, he said. Shall we go in? I said.

I poured myself another cup of coffee and asked Geir if I could use the phone.

'Of course,' he answered. 'Who are you phoning?'

'Linda. You know, the . . .'

'Yeah, yeah, yeah. The woman whose flat you turned down.'

I keyed in the number, probably for the fifteenth time. To my surprise she picked up.

'Linda here,' she said.

'Oh hi, this is Karl Ove Knausgaard speaking,' I said.

'Hi!' she said. 'Is it really you?'

'Yes. I'm in Stockholm.'

'Are you? On holiday?'

'We-ell, I'm not quite sure. I was thinking of living here for a bit.'

'Are you? Cool!'

'Yes. I've already been here a few weeks. I tried to call you, but didn't get an answer.'

'No, I've been away, in Visby.'

'Oh?'

'Yes, I was writing.'

'Sounds good.'

'Yes, it was great. I didn't get a lot done, but . . .'

'Right,' I said.

There was a pause.

‘Linda, I was wondering . . . if you fancied a cup of coffee one day?’

‘Very much. I’m here for the foreseeable.’

‘Tomorrow perhaps? Have you got time?’

‘Yes, think so. In the morning anyway.’

‘Perfect.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘By Nytorget.’

‘Oh great! Could we meet there then? Do you know where the pizza place is, on the corner? There’s a café opposite. There?’

‘OK. What time suits you best? Eleven? Twelve?’

‘Twelve’s fine.’

‘Brilliant. See you then.’

‘Yes. Bye.’

‘Bye.’

I rang off and went in to Geir, who was sitting on the sofa with a cup in his hand and looking at me.

‘So?’ he said. ‘Finally got a bite?’

‘Yes. I’m meeting her tomorrow.’

‘Good! I’ll drop by in the evening and you can tell me all about it.’

I went there an hour before I was supposed to meet her, carrying a manuscript I was doing a report on, the new novel by Kristine Næss, and sat working. Tiny quivers of anticipation ran through me whenever I thought about her. Not that I had any intentions, I had written them off once and for all, it was more the unknown, how things would turn out.

I spotted her as she jumped off her bike outside. She guided the front wheel into the stand and locked her bike, peered through the window, perhaps looking at herself, opened the door and came in. It was pretty full, but she saw me straight away and came over.

‘Hi,’ she said.

‘Hi,’ I said.

‘I’ll just go and order,’ she said. ‘Anything you want?’

‘No, thanks,’ I answered.

She was rounder than she had been, that was the first thing I noticed. The boyish leanness was gone.

She placed a hand on the counter, craned her head in the direction of the waiter standing behind the hissing coffee machine. There was a hollow in the pit of my stomach.

I lit a cigarette.

She returned, put a cup of tea on the table and sat down.

‘Hi,’ she repeated.

‘Hi,’ I said.

Her eyes were greyish-green and could widen all of a sudden, I recalled, for no apparent reason.

She removed the tea strainer, lifted the cup to her lips and blew on the surface.

‘It’s been a long time,’ I said. ‘Is everything going well?’

She took a small sip of the tea and set the cup down on the table.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It is. I’ve just been to Brazil with a girlfriend. And then I went to Visby straight afterwards. I’m still not really here yet.’

‘But you’re writing?’

She grimaced, looked down.

‘I’m trying. And you?’

‘Same here. I’m trying.’

She smiled.

‘Were you serious when you said you’re going to live in Stockholm?’

I shrugged.

‘For a while at any rate.’

‘Nice,’ she said. ‘We can meet then. I mean do something together.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you know anyone else here?’

‘Just one person. His name’s Geir. Norwegian. Otherwise no one.’

‘You know Mirja a little, don’t you? From Biskops-Arnö, I mean.’

‘Oh, very little. How is she, by the way?’

‘Fine, I think.’

We didn’t say anything for a few moments.

There was so much we could not talk about. There were so many subjects we could not touch on. But now we were here we had to talk about *something*.

‘It was very good, the short story you had in *Vagant,’* I said. ‘It was very good, really.’

She smiled, eyes downcast.

‘Thank you,’ she said.

‘The language was so unbelievably explosive. Well, just very beautiful. Like a . . . ah, it’s difficult to talk about, but . . . it was hypnotic I think I was trying to say.’

She was still looking down.

‘Do you write short stories now?’

‘Yes, I suppose I do. Prose anyway.’

‘Hm, that’s good.’

‘And you?’

‘Well, nothing. I’ve been trying to write a novel for four years, but just before I left I binned the lot.’

Another silence. I lit another cigarette.

‘It’s nice to see you again,’ I said.

‘And you too,’ she said.

‘I was reading a manuscript before you came,’ I said, nodding towards the pile beside me on the sofa. ‘Kristine Næss. Do you know her?’

‘Yes, in fact, I do. I haven’t read anything by her, but she was at Biskops-Arnö with two male writers when I went there.’

‘Is that right?’ I said. ‘That’s odd. You see she writes about Biskops-Arnö. About a Norwegian girl who goes there.’

What the hell was I doing? What was I blathering about?

Linda smiled.

‘I don’t read much,’ she said. ‘I don’t even know if I’m a real writer.’

‘Of course you are!’

‘But I can remember the writers from Norway. I thought they were so incredibly ambitious, especially the two men. And they knew so much about literature.’

‘What were their names?’

She took a deep breath.

‘One was called Tore, I’m sure of that. They were from *Vagant*.’

‘Oh, *that*’s who they were,’ I said. ‘Tore Renberg and Espen Stueland. I can remember they went there.’

‘Yes, that’s them.’

‘They’re two of my best friends.’

‘Are they?’

‘Yes, but they fight like cat and dog. You can’t have them in the same room any more.’

‘So you know them separately?’

‘Yes, you could put it like that.’

‘I was impressed by you as well,’ she said.

‘By me?’

‘Yes. Ingmar Lemhagen was talking about your book a long time before you came. And that was all he wanted to talk about when we were there.’

Another silence.

She got up and headed for the toilet.

It was hopeless, I thought. What idiotic things was I coming up with? But what else could you say?

What the hell did people talk about, actually?

The coffee machine hissed and sputtered. A long queue of people with impatient body language stood at the bar. It was grey outside. The grass in the park below was yellow and wet.

She returned and sat down.

‘What do you do during the day? Have you started to get to know the town?’

I shook my head.

‘Only a bit. No, I write. And then I swim in the pool at Medborgarplatsen every day.’

‘Do you? I swim there too. Not every day, but almost.’

We smiled at each other.

I took out my mobile and checked the time.

‘I’m afraid I’ll have to go soon,’ I said.

She nodded. ‘But we can meet again, can’t we?’

‘Yes, we can. When?’

She shrugged. ‘You can just ring me, can’t you?’

‘Yep.’

I put the manuscript and the mobile phone in my bag, and got up.

‘I’ll phone you then. Nice to see you again!’

‘*Hej då,’* she said. Bye.

Bag in hand, I strode down the street, alongside the park and into the broad avenue where the flat was. Nothing had changed, we hadn’t changed anything; when we took our leave it was all as it was before we met.

But what had I been expecting?

We weren’t going anywhere after all.

I hadn’t asked about flats, either. Or contacts. Nothing.

I was fat as well.

After arriving home I lay back on the water bed and studied the ceiling. She had been completely different. She was almost like a different person.

At Biskops-Arnö perhaps the most striking feature of her personality had been her determination to go as far as she had to, which I had sensed at once and was deeply attracted by. It had disappeared. The hardness, bordering on ruthlessness, yet as fragile as glass, was gone too. There was still something fragile about her, but in a different way, this time I hadn’t thought that she could be crushed or go to pieces, as I had then. Now her fragility was joined by a softness, and her indifferent side, which said you’ll never get close to me, had changed. She was shy but somehow also open. Hadn’t there been something open about her?

The autumn after we had been to Biskops-Arnö she had got together with Arve, and through him I had heard what happened to her in the winter and spring. She had gone through a manic-depressive phase, was eventually admitted to a psychiatric hospital, that was all I knew. During the manic periods she had rung me twice to ask if I could get hold of Arve. I did both times, asked his friends to tell him to call me, and when he did I could hear he was disappointed it was actually Linda trying to contact him. And once she rang just to talk to me, it was six o’clock in the morning, she told me she was about to begin a creative writing course, and was leaving for Gothenburg in an hour. Tonje was awake in the bedroom, wondering who would ring at this crazy hour, I said, Linda, you know, the Swede I met, who’s with Arne. Why would she ring you? Tonje asked, no idea, I said, think she’s going through a manic-depressive phase.

We couldn’t talk about any of this.

And if we couldn’t talk about this, we couldn’t talk about anything.

What was the point of sitting there and saying hi, hi, erm, erm, how are you?

I closed my eyes and tried to picture her.

Had I felt anything for her?

No.

Or yes, I liked her and perhaps I felt some tenderness for her, after all that had happened, but there was no more to it than that. The rest I had put behind me, quite definitely.

Best like that.

I got up, stuffed my trunks, a towel and some shampoo in a bag, put on my jacket and walked to Medborgarplatsen, into Forsgrénska Badet, which was almost empty at this time of day, changed, entered the swimming hall, onto the block and dived in. I swam a thousand metres beneath the pale March light that fell in through the large window at the end, to and fro, up and down, under the water, over the water, without thinking about anything but the number of metres, the number of minutes, all while trying to perform the strokes as perfectly as possible.

Afterwards I went to the sauna, thought about the time I tried to write short stories based on small ideas, like a man with a prosthetic limb in the swimming pool changing room, without knowing what, why or how.

What had been the big idea?

A man tied to a chair in a room, in a flat, somewhere in Bergen, in the end shot through the head, dead, but still alive in the text, an ego that lasted well into its funeral and the grave.

Gesticulating, that was what I had been doing.

And for so long.

I wiped the sweat from my brow with the towel, looked down at the rolls of fat sagging from my stomach. Pale and fat and stupid.

But in Stockholm!

I got up, went to the showers and stood under one.

I knew no one here. I was utterly free.

If I left Tonje, if this was the path I was to take, I could stay here for a month or two, perhaps all summer, and then go to . . . well, wherever I felt like going. Buenos Aires. Tokyo. New York. Go down to South Africa and take the train to Lake Victoria. Or Moscow, why not? That would be fantastic.

I closed my eyes and soaped my hair. Rinsed it, went in and opened my locker, dressed.

I was free if I wanted to be.

I didn’t *need* to write any more.

I put the towel and my wet shorts in the bag, went out into the grey chilly day, to Saluhallen, the food hall, where I had a ciabatta roll leaning against a counter. Went home, tried to write a little while hoping that Geir would come earlier than he had said. Went to bed and watched TV, an American soap, fell asleep.

When I woke it was dark outside. Someone was knocking at the door.

I opened up, it was Geir, we shook hands.

‘Well?’ he said. ‘How was it?’

‘Good,’ I said. ‘Where shall we go?’

Geir shrugged while walking round and inspecting all the ornaments inside, stopping in front of the bookshelves and turning.

‘Isn’t it strange that you find the same books everywhere you go? I mean, she’s around twenty-five, isn’t she? Works at *Ordfront,* lives in Söder? But these are the books she’s got and no others.’

‘Yes, very strange,’ I said. ‘Where shall we go? Guldapan? Kvarnen? Pelikanen?’

‘Not Kvarnen at any rate. Guldapan maybe? Are you hungry?’

I nodded.

‘Let’s go there. The food’s not bad. Good chicken.’

Outside, it felt as if it could start snowing at any moment. Cold and raw and damp.

‘Come on then,’ Geir said as we strode along. ‘Good in what way?’

‘We met, chatted and left. That’s pretty much how it was.’

‘Was she how you remembered her?’

‘We-ell, bit different maybe.’

‘In what way?’

‘How many times are you going to ask that?’

‘I really mean it. What did you feel when you saw her?’

‘Less than I thought I would.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Why? What sort of sodding question is that? How can I know? I feel what I feel. It’s not possible to identify every tiny fluctuation of the soul, if that’s what you believe.’

‘Isn’t that what you make your living from?’

‘No. I make my living from all the embarrassing situations I have been put in. That’s different.’

‘So there are fluctuations then?’ he said.

‘Here we are,’ I said. ‘We’re eating, isn’t that what you said?’

I opened the door and went in. The bar was in the first room, the dining room in the second.

‘Why not?’ Geir said, and walked through the café. I followed. We sat down, read the menus and ordered chicken and a beer when the waiter came.

‘Did I tell you I’ve been here with Arve?’ I said.

‘No.’

‘When we came to Stockholm we ended up here. Well, first of all we were up at what I gather now must have been Stureplan. Arve went in and asked if they knew where writers drank in Stockholm. They just laughed at him and answered in English. So we wandered round for a while, it was terrible actually, for I held Arve in great esteem, he was an intellectual, was at *Vagant* from the very start, and then we met at the airport and I couldn’t say a word. Next to nothing. Landed at Arlanda, couldn’t speak. Came into Stockholm, found the accommodation, said nothing. Went out to eat, *nada*. Not a word. My only chance, I knew, was to drink my way through the sound barrier. So I did. A beer in Drottninggatan, where we asked someone where it was good to go out, they said Söder, Guldapan, and so we took a taxi here. I drank spirits and started to open up. A few words here and there. Arve leaned over to me and said, that girl’s looking at you. Do you want me to go so that you can be alone with her? Which girl? I asked, that one, Arve said, and I looked at her, and shit, she was so good-looking! But it was Arve’s offer that had the most impact. Wasn’t it a bit odd?’

‘Yes, indeed.’

‘We got rat-arsed. So there was no longer any need to talk. We wandered round the streets here, it was getting light, I had barely a thought in my head, then we found a beer hall and went in, there was a great atmosphere, and I was out of my head, chucking beer down while Arve talked about his child. Suddenly he was in tears. I hadn’t even been listening. And then, there he was, with his hands in front of his face and his shoulders shaking. He was sobbing his heart out, I thought from somewhere deep inside me. Then they closed, we took a taxi to somewhere further up, they didn’t let us in and we found a large open area with a kiosk at the end, it might have been Kungsträdgården, could well have been. There were some chairs which had chains attached to them. We lifted them above our heads and hurled them at the wall, ran wild, completely out of our heads. Strange that the police didn't come. But they didn't. So we took a taxi to our lodgings. The following morning we woke up two hours after the train had departed. But we didn't give a shit anyway, so it didn't matter. We made our way to the station, caught the next train and I talked all the way back. I was unstoppable. It was as if everything that had been inside me for the last year came out. Something about Arve made it possible. I don't know quite what it was, or is. A kind of enormous tolerance in him. Nevertheless, he got the whole story. Dad dying, the hell it had been, the debut and everything that came with it, and after I had told him that, I just went on. I remember us waiting for a taxi at the station, not a soul around, just Arve and me, him looking at me, me talking and talking. Childhood, teenage years, I didn't leave a stone unturned. Just me, nothing else. Me, me, me. I ladled it all over him. Something about him made that possible, he understood everything I said and thought, I had never experienced that with anyone else before. There were always limitations, attitudes, assertion needs that halted what was being said at a certain point, or led it in a certain direction, so that what you said was always reshaped into something else, it could never exist in its own right. But Arve, it seemed to me on that day, was a truly open person, as well being curious and constantly striving to understand what he saw. But there was no ulterior motive about his openness, it was not a damned psychologist's openness, nor was there any ulterior motive about the curiosity. He had a shrewd eye for the world, so it appeared, and like all those who have accumulated experience, by and large what remained was laughter. Laughter was really the only appropriate way to confront human behaviour and notions.

'I understood that, and while taking advantage of it, for I was not strong enough to resist all that his openness gave me, it also frightened me.

'He knew something I didn't know, he understood something I didn't understand, he could see something I couldn't see.

'I told him.

'He smiled.

'"I'm forty years old, Karl Ove. You're thirty. That's a big difference. That's what you've noticed."

'"I don't think so," I said. "There's something else. You have some sort of insight into things, which I lack."

'"Tell me more! Tell me more!"

'He laughed.

'His aura was centred around his dark intense eyes, but he was not himself dark, he laughed a lot, the smile barely left his slightly twisted lips. His aura was strong, he was the kind of person whose presence you noticed, but it wasn't a physical presence because you simply didn't notice his light slim body. At least I didn't. Arve, he was a shaven head, dark eyes, a permanent smile and a hearty laugh. His reasoning always led, for me, to unexpected conclusions. The fact that he had opened up for me was more than I could have hoped for. All of a sudden I could say everything that I had kept inside me so far, and more, for it was as if it had rubbed off on me. Now my reasoning set off on expected paths, and the feeling it gave me was one of hope. Perhaps I was a writer after all? Arve was. But me? With all my ordinariness? With my life of football and films?

'How I prattled on.

'The taxi arrived, I opened the boot lid and babbled away, hungover and the worse for wear. We put our two bags in, got in the car, I babbled the whole way through the Swedish countryside to Biskops-Arnö, where the seminar had long started. They'd just had lunch when we rolled out of the taxi.'

'And that was how it continued?' Geir asked.

'And that was how it continued,' I said.

A man stepped forward and introduced himself as Ingmar Lemhagen. He was the course director. He told me he had enjoyed my book and that it had reminded him of another Norwegian author. 'Who?' I asked, he smiled wryly, said it would have to wait until we went through my texts in the plenary.

I pondered. Had to be Finn Alnæs or Agnar Mykle.

I deposited my bags outside, went into the hall, shovelled some food onto a plate and devoured it. Everything swayed, I was still drunk, but not so much that I didn't feel my chest bursting with the excitement and pleasure of being there.

I was shown to a room, dropped off my luggage, went over to the building where the course was being held. That was when I saw her. She was leaning against the wall, I didn't say anything to her, there were lots of people around, but I looked at her, and there was something about her I wanted, the second I saw her, it was there.

A kind of explosion.

We were put in the same group. The group leader, a Finnish woman, said nothing as we took our places, it was some sort of teaching trick she was employing, but no one was taken in, everyone was silent for the first five minutes, until it became too unpleasant and someone took the initiative.

I was aware of her the whole time.

What she said, how she spoke, but most of all her presence, her body in the room.

Why I don't know. Perhaps the state I was in made me more receptive to what she had or the person she was.

She introduced herself. Linda Boström. Her debut had been a collection of poems called *Gör mig behaglig för såret*, she lived in Stockholm and was twenty-five years old.

The course lasted five days. I circled round her the whole time. In the evenings I got drunk, as drunk as I could, I hardly slept. One night I followed Arve into a crypt-like cellar, down there he danced round and round, it was impossible to communicate with him, and when we left and I realised he was beyond reach I cried. He saw. You're crying, he said. Yes, I said. But you'll have forgotten by tomorrow. One night I didn't sleep a wink. When the last ones left for bed at five, I went out for a long walk in the forest, the sun was up, I saw deer leaping between the old deciduous trees and was happy in a mysterious way I didn't recognise. The writing I did during the course was unusually good, it was as if I was in touch with a spring, something all of my own and yet foreign to me gushed up, clear and fresh. Or perhaps it was just the euphoria that caused me to misinterpret. We had classes together, I sat beside Linda, she asked me if I remembered the scene in *Blade Runner* where the light through the window fades. I said I did, and that the moment when the owl turns is the most beautiful in the whole film. She looked at me. A questioning look, not acknowledgement. The course directors went through the texts we had written. They came to mine. Lemhagen started to talk about it, and it was as though what he said elevated itself higher and higher, I had never heard anyone talk about a text in that way, elevate what was actually the bare essence, and he didn't deal with characters or themes or what lay on the surface, he dealt with the metaphors and the unseen function they performed, bringing everything together, uniting them in an almost organic fashion. I had never known that was what I did, but now he said it I knew, and for me it was trees and leaves, grass and clouds and a glowing sun, that was all, I understood everything in the light of this, also Lemhagen's interpretation.

He looked at me.

'What this reminds me of, above all else, is Tor Ulven's prose. Are you familiar with his work, Karl Ove?'

I nodded and looked down.

No one was allowed to see the blood foaming in my veins, trumpets blaring and knights galloping in my insides. Tor Ulven, that was the summit.

Oh, but I knew he was mistaken, he was exaggerating, he was Swedish and probably didn't understand the finer points of the Norwegian language very well. But the mere mention of Ulven's name . . . *Wasn't* I a pulp fiction writer? *Was* there anything in my writing that had *resonances* of Tor Ulven?

My blood roared, my elation rushed screaming along my nerve channels.

I looked down, wishing intensely that he would stop and go on to the next person, and when he did I slumped back with relief.

That night all the drinking continued in my room, Linda said we could smoke if we took down the fire alarm, I did, we drank, I played Wilco's *Summerteeth*, she didn't seem to be interested in it, from what I could see, I showed her a Roman cookery book I had bought on an excursion to Uppsala the day before, so wonderful to cook the way the Romans did, I thought, but she didn't agree, quite the contrary, she turned abruptly away from me and her eyes sought something else. People began to drift off to their rooms, I hoped Linda would not follow suit, but then she was gone too, and I went into the forest again, roamed around until seven, and when I returned an angry man came running after me. 'Knausgaard, are you Knausgaard?' he shouted. 'Yes, I am,' I said. He stopped in front of me and began to tear me off a strip. Fire alarm, dangerous, irresponsible, he yelled. I said yes, I'm sorry, wasn't thinking, apologies. He stood glowering at me with fury in his eyes, I swayed to and fro, I couldn’t care less, went to my room, slept for two hours. When I appeared for breakfast Lemhagen came over to me, he apologised profusely for what had happened, the caretaker had gone too far, it wouldn’t happen again.

I understood nothing. Was *he* apologising to me?

What had happened fitted all too well, in my view, with the person I had become in the course of these days: a sixteen-year-old. My feelings were the feelings of a sixteen-year-old, my actions the actions of a sixteen-year-old. All of a sudden I was as unsure of myself as I had ever been. Everyone assembled in one room, we were going to read our texts, one after the other, the idea being that all of us together would form a choir with individual voices chiming in. Lemhagen pointed to someone; he started reading. Then he pointed to me. I looked at him, disconcerted.

‘Shall I read now? While he’s reading?’ I asked.

Everyone laughed. I blushed scarlet. But as we got going I could hear how good my text was, so much better than the others, rooted in something quite different and more vital.

When we were outside on the gravel talking, I said that to Arve.

He just smiled, said nothing.

Every evening two or three people read to the others. I looked forward to my turn, Linda would be there, I would show her who I was. I read well, I usually got applause. But not this time, from the very first sentence I began to doubt the text, it was ridiculous and I felt myself becoming smaller and smaller, until, flushed with shame, I sat down. Then it was Arve’s turn.

Something happened when he read. He had us all spellbound. He was a magician.

‘That was in*cred*ible!’ Linda said to me after he had finished.

I nodded and smiled.

‘Yes, he really is good.’

Furious and desperate, I left, got a beer and sat down on the staircase outside the room. I thought, Linda, now leave the room and come here. Do you hear me! Leave and come here. Follow me. If you do that, if you come here now, we belong together. And that’s it.

I stared at the door.

It opened.

It was Linda!

My heart pounded.

It was Linda! It was Linda!

She walked across the square, and I trembled with happiness.

Then she turned off and walked towards the other building, raising her hand in greeting to me.

The next day everyone went for a walk in the forest, and I was beside Linda, first in the line, and those behind us fell away and I was alone with her in the forest. She twisted a blade of grass and occasionally glanced at me with a smile. I was unable to say anything. Nothing. I looked down, I looked through the forest, I looked at her.

Her eyes sparkled. There was nothing of the dark deep-set, alluring eyes now, she was all lightness and coquettishness, twisting and twirling the grass, smiling, looking at me, looking down.

What was this?

What did it mean?

I asked if we should exchange books, she said, yes, of course. She came over while I lay on the grass peering up at the clouds, passed me her book. *Biskops-Arnö, 01.07.99, To Karl Ove*, it said on the title page. I ran in and fetched a copy of mine, already dedicated, and passed it to her. After she had gone I went to my room and settled down to read. I ached with desire for her as I was reading, every word came from her, was her.

In the midst of all this, my unbridled yearning for her and my descent into teenager-hood, I saw everything differently. All the greenery that grew, I saw how wild and chaotic it was, yet how plain and clear the shapes were, and it evoked a sense of ecstasy in me, the old oak trees, the wind blowing through the foliage, the sun, the endless blue sky.

I didn’t sleep, barely ate, and I drank every night, nonetheless I was not tired or hungry and had no difficulty participating in the course. The conversation with Arve continued unabated, that is I continued to talk about myself to him, and as time progressed, more and more about Linda. He saw me, and he saw the others on the course, and then we talked about literature. My way of talking changed, I became freer and freer in my thoughts the more I was with him, and I considered it a gift. Between the lessons we lay on the lawn outside the buildings and chatted, then the others were there, and I became jealous of him, I saw the impact his words had on others, and I longed to have the same impact myself.

One evening, sitting on the grass drinking and chatting with everyone, he told us about an interview he'd had with Svein Jarvoll for *Vagant*, how everything had opened the evening they spoke, how precise everything that was said had been and how in some way it had opened the way for something extraordinary.

I talked about an interview I'd done with Rune Christiansen for *Vagant* in which the same thing had happened, I had been nervous before I met him, I knew nothing about poetry, but then there had been great openness, what it hadn't been possible to talk about, we were suddenly talking about. It was a really good interview, I concluded.

Arve laughed.

He could disqualify everything I said simply by laughing. Everyone present knew Arve had right on his side, all the authority was gathered there, in the hypnotic focal point formed by his face on that evening. Linda was with us, she saw that too.

Arve touched on boxing, Mike Tyson, his last fight when he bit off Holyfield's ear.

I said it wasn't so hard to understand, Tyson needed a way out, he knew he was going to lose, so he bit off an ear, it brought the fight to an end without him losing face. Arve laughed again and said he doubted that. That would have been a rational act. But there wasn't a single ounce of rationality in Tyson. And then he discussed the scene in a way that made me think about *Apocalypse Now,* where they cut off the bull's head. The darkness and the blood and the trance. Perhaps my thoughts were led in this direction because earlier in the day Arve had been talking about the determination the Vietnamese showed when they chopped off the arms of children who had been vaccinated, how this was impossible to confront or could only be confronted with a determination that was willing to go to the same lengths.

The next day I gathered a few of us together to play football, Ingmar Lemhagen found us a ball, we played for an hour, afterwards I sat down on the grass beside Linda with a Coke in my hand, and she said I had a footballer's gait. She had a brother who played football and hockey, and we had more or less the same way of standing and walking. But Arve, she said, have you seen how he walks? No, I said. He walks like a ballet dancer, she said. Light and ethereal. Haven't you noticed? No, I said, and smiled at her. She responded with a fleeting smile and got up. I lay full-length and stared up at the white clouds drifting slowly past, far into the blue expanse of sky.

After dinner I went for another long walk in the forest. Stopped in front of an oak and stared up into the foliage for a long time. Pulled off an acorn and walked on, turning it round and round in my hands, studying it from all angles. All the small, regular patterns in the tiny, gnarled basket-like section in which the nut rested. Along the smooth surface, the lighter stripes in the dark green. The perfect form. Could be an airship, could be an egg. It's oval, I mused with a smile. All the leaves were identical, they were spat out every spring, in grotesque quantities, the trees were factories, producing beautiful and intricately patterned leaves from sunlight and water. Once the thought was there the monotony was almost unbearable to think about. All this came from some texts I had read by Francis Ponge early in the summer – they had been recommended to me by Rune Christiansen – and his view had changed trees and leaves for me for ever. They surged forth from a well, the well of life, which was inexhaustible.

Oh, the instinctiveness of it.

It was frightening to walk there, surrounded by the blind potency of everything that grew, under the light of the sun which shone and shone, also blindly.

It was a strident tone that resonated in me. At the same time there was another tone in me, one of yearning, and this yearning no longer had an abstract goal, as had been the case over recent years, no, this was palpable and specific, she was moving around below, only a few kilometres away, at this very moment.

What sort of madness was this? I thought as I walked. I was married, we were fine, soon we would be buying a flat together. Then I came here and wanted to wreck everything?

I did.

I wandered beneath the sun-dappled shade from the trees, surrounded by the warm fragrances of the forest, thinking that I was in the middle of my life. Not life as an age, not halfway along life's path, but *in the middle of my existence*.

My heart trembled.

The last night came. We were assembled in the largest room, wine and beer had been set out, it was a kind of end-of-course party. I suddenly found myself beside Linda, she was opening a bottle of wine and placed her hand over mine, gently stroking it while looking into my eyes. It was obvious, it was decided, she wanted me. I thought about that for the rest of the evening as I slowly drank myself more and more senseless. I was getting together with Linda. Didn't need to return to Bergen, could just leave everything there and stay here with her.

At three in the morning, when I was as drunk as I had seldom been, I left with her. I said there was something I had to tell her. And then I told her. Exactly what I felt and what I had planned.

She said, ‘I like you well enough. You’re a great guy. But I’m not interested in you. I’m sorry. But your friend, he’s really fantastic. I’m interested in him. Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

I turned and crossed the square, aware that behind me she was walking in the opposite direction, back to the party. A crowd of people had gathered around the front door beneath the trees. Arve wasn’t there, so I went back, found him, told him what Linda had said to me, that she was interested in him, now they could be together. But I’m not interested in her, you see, he said. I’ve *got* a wonderful girlfriend. Shame for you, though, he said, I said it wasn’t a shame for me, and crossed the square again, as though in a tunnel where nothing existed except myself, passed the crowd standing outside the house, through the hallway and into my room where the screen of my computer was lit. I pulled out the plug, switched it off, went into the bathroom, grabbed the glass on the sink and hurled it at the wall with all the strength I could muster. I waited to hear if there was any reaction. Then I took the biggest shard I could find and started cutting my face. I did it methodically, making the cuts as deep as I could, and covered my whole face. The chin, cheeks, forehead, nose, underneath the chin. At regular intervals I wiped away the blood with a towel. Kept cutting. Wiped the blood away. By the time I was satisfied with my handiwork there was hardly room for one more cut, and I went to bed.

Long before I woke I knew something terrible had taken place. My face stung and ached. The second I woke I remembered what had happened.

I won’t survive this, I thought.

I had to go home, meet Tonje at the Quartfestival, we had booked a room six months before, with Yngve and Kari Anne. This was our holiday. She loved me. And now I had done this.

I smacked my fist against the mattress.

And then there were all the people here.

They would see the ignominy.

I couldn’t hide it. Everyone would see. I was marked, I had marked myself.

I looked at the pillow. It was covered in blood. I felt my face. It was ridged all over.

And I was still drunk, I could barely stand up.

I pulled the heavy curtain aside. Light flooded into the room. There was a group of people sitting outside, surrounded by rucksacks and suitcases, it would soon be time for farewells.

I smashed my fist against the bedhead.

I had to face the music. There was no way out. I had to face the music.

I packed my things in my case, with my face smarting, and inside I was smarting as well, I had never experienced such shame before.

I was marked.

I grabbed the case and walked out. At first no one looked at me. Then someone cried out. Then everyone looked at me. I stopped.

'I apologise for this,' I said. 'Sorry.'

Linda sat there. She looked at me with wide-open eyes. Then she started to cry. Others cried as well. Someone came over and placed a hand on my shoulder.

'It'll be all right,' I said. 'I was just very drunk yesterday. I'm sorry.'

Complete silence. I showed myself as I was, and there was silence.

How would I survive this?

I sat down and smoked a cigarette.

Arve looked at me. I essayed a smile.

He came over.

'What the hell have you been up to?' he asked.

'I just had a skinful. I can tell you about it later. But not right now.'

A bus arrived, it took us to the station and we boarded the train. The plane didn't depart until next day. I didn't know how I would cope until then. On the streets of Stockholm everyone stared at me, and they gave me a wide berth. The shame burned inside me, it burned and burned and there was no way out, I had to endure it, hold on, hold on, and then one day it would be over.

We walked down to Söder. The others had arranged to meet Linda, we thought in the square I now know is called Medborgarplatsen, whereas at that time it was just a square, and there we stood, she cycled up, surprised to see us, we had arranged to meet at Nytorget, hadn't we, that's over there, she said, and didn't look at me, she didn't look at me, and that was fine, her stare in particular would have been more than I could have stood. We had pizzas, the atmosphere was strange, afterwards we sat on the grass with flocks of birds hopping around us, and Arve said he didn't believe in the theory of evolution, in the sense that it wasn't survival of the fittest, just look at the birds, they don't do what they have to do, they do what they feel like doing, what gives them pleasure. Pleasure is undervalued, Arve said, and I knew he was talking to Linda because I had told him what she said, I had done what she asked me to do, they would get together the two of them, I knew that.

I went back to the lodgings, the others stayed to drink. I watched TV, it was unbearable, but I got through the evening, and fell asleep at last, with the bed beside me empty, Arve didn't come back that night, in the morning I found him asleep in the stairwell. I asked if he had been to Linda's, he said no, she had gone home early.

'She sat crying and only wanted to talk about you,' he said. 'I drank with Thøger. That's what I did.'

'I don't believe you,' I said. 'You can tell me, it doesn't matter. It's you two now.

'No,' he said. 'You're wrong.'

When we landed in Oslo the following morning, people continued to stare at me although I wore sunglasses and kept my face lowered as far as possible. A long time ago I had agreed to do an interview for the Norwegian Broadcasting Company with Alf van der Hagen, I was to go to his house, it would be a long interview and we would spend a bit of time on it. So, I had to go there. On the way I decided I wouldn't give a damn and would say exactly what I thought to all his questions.

'My God,' he said when he opened the door. 'What happened to you?'

'It's not as bad as it looks,' I said. 'I just got very drunk. It's the sort of thing that can happen.'

'Are you still up for an interview?' he asked.

'Yes, yes. I'm fine. I just don't look so good.'

'No, you certainly don't.'

When Tonje saw me she burst into tears. I said I had got terribly drunk and that was all that happened. Which was true. People stopped and stared at the festival as well, and Tonje cried a lot, but it improved, whatever had been holding me tight, not letting go of me, started to slacken its grip. We saw Garbage, it was a fantastic concert, Tonje said she loved me, I said I loved her and decided I would put all the past events behind me. I wouldn't look back, wouldn't think about it, wouldn't let it have a place in my life.

Early that autumn Arve rang to say he had got together with Linda. I told you it would be the two of you, didn't I, I said.

'But it didn't happen there. It happened later. She wrote me a letter and then she came here. I hope we can still be friends. I know it's difficult, but I hope we can.'

'Of course we can be friends,' I said.

And it was true, I didn't bear any grudges, why should I?

I met him in Oslo a month later, I was back to square one, couldn't bring myself to say a word to him. Barely a word passed my lips, not even if I drank. He said Linda talked a lot about me, and she often said I was so good-looking. With regard to that, I thought 'good-looking' was not a parameter that was relevant to us, it was more like a curious fact, approximately the same as if she had said I was lame or a hunchback. Besides, it was Arve who told me, why would he pass on this comment? Once I met him at Kunsternes Hus and he was so drunk it was hardly possible to talk to him, he took my hand and led me to a table and said, look, everyone, isn't he good-looking? I fled, bumped into him an hour later, we sat down, I said I had told him so much about myself while he had never told me anything about himself, I mean, intimate details, and he said, now you disappoint me, you sound like a psychologist in *Dagbladet*'s Saturday supplement or something, I said, OK. He was right, of course, he was always right, or always situated somewhere above arguments about right and wrong. He had given me a lot, but I had to put this behind me as well, I couldn't live with it and at the same time live the life I had in Bergen. That didn't work.

In the winter I met him again, when Linda was there, she wanted to meet me, and Arve led her to where I was sitting, left us in peace for half an hour, then came to collect her.

She sat huddled in a large leather jacket, weak and trembling, there was almost nothing left of her, and I thought, it's gone, it no longer exists.

While I told the story to Geir he looked down at the table in front of him. After I had finished he met my gaze.

'Interesting!' he said. 'You turn *everything* inwards. All the pain, all the aggression, all the emotions, all the shame, everything. Inwards. You hurt yourself, not anyone else out there.'

‘That’s what any teenage girl would do,’ I said.

‘No, they don’t!’ he said. ‘You cut your face to ribbons. No girl would ever cut her face. I’ve never heard of *anyone* doing it in fact.’

‘They weren’t deep cuts,’ I said. ‘They looked bad. But it wasn’t so bad.’

‘Who would do that kind of thing to themselves?’

I shrugged.

‘It was everything together building up into one climax. Dad’s death, all the media attention around the book, life with Tonje. And of course Linda.’

‘But you didn’t feel anything for her today?’

‘Nothing strong at any rate.’

‘Are you going to see her again?’

‘Maybe. Probably. Just to have a friend here, if so.’

‘*Another* friend.’

‘Yes, exactly,’ I said, raising my finger in the air to attract the waiter’s attention.

The next day the woman I was renting from rang. She had a girlfriend who needed to sublet her flat to reduce the rent.

‘What do you mean *sublet*?’

‘You get your room and then you share the rest of the flat with her.’

‘Doesn’t sound like anything for me,’ I said.

‘But it’s a fantastic flat, you know,’ she said. ‘It’s in Bastugatan. It’s one of the best addresses in the whole of Stockholm.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘I can go and talk to her anyway.’

‘She’s very interested in Norwegian literature.’

I took her name and telephone number, rang, she picked up at once, just pop round, she said.

The flat really was fantastic. She was young, younger than me, and the walls were plastered with photographs of one man. It was her husband, she said, he was dead.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ I said.

She turned and walked through the flat.

‘This is your room,’ she said. ‘If you want it, that is. You’ve got your own bathroom, own kitchen, and then there’s a room with a bed, as you can see.’

‘Looks great,’ I said.

‘You’ve got your own entrance as well. And if you want to write, you just have to close the door here.’

‘I’ll take it,’ I said. ‘When can I move in?’

‘Now, if you like.’

‘So quickly? Right, I’ll bring my things over this afternoon then.’

Geir just laughed when I told him.

‘It’s impossible to come here without knowing a soul and get a flat in Bastugatan,’ he said. ‘It’s impossible! Do you understand? The gods like you, Karl Ove, that’s for sure.’

‘But Caesar doesn’t,’ I said.

‘Oh yes, Caesar does too. He’s just a little envious, that’s all.’

Three days later I rang Linda, told her I had moved, did she fancy a coffee? Yes, she did, and within an hour we were sitting in a café on the ‘hump’ overlooking Hornsgatan. She seemed happier, that was my first thought as she sat down. She asked if I had been swimming today, I smiled and said no, but *she* had, at the crack of dawn, it had been fantastic.

So we sat there stirring our cappuccinos. I lit a cigarette, couldn’t think of anything to say, thinking this would have to be the last time.

‘Do you like the theatre?’ she asked.

I shook my head and told her the only plays I had seen were traditional performances at the National in Bergen, which had been about as captivating as watching fish in the aquarium, and a couple at Bergen International Theatre Festival, among them a production of *Faust* in which actors wandered across the stage mumbling and sporting big black noses. When I said that, she said we would have to go and see Bergman’s production of *Ghosts*, and I said OK, I’ll give it a go.

‘Have we got a date then?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Sounds amusing.’

‘Do bring your Norwegian friend along,’ she said. ‘And I can meet him as well.’

‘Right, I’m sure he’d love to come,’ I said.

We stayed for another quarter of an hour, but the silences were long, and she was probably dying to leave as much as I was. In the end, I put my cigarettes in my pocket and got up.

‘Shall we buy the tickets together?’ she asked.

‘Can do,’ I answered.

‘Tomorrow?’

‘Yes.’

‘Half past eleven here?’

‘Yes, that’s fine.’

For the twenty minutes it took to go from the hump to the Royal Dramatic Theatre we barely exchanged a word. It felt as though I could say everything to her or nothing. Now it was nothing, and presumably that was the way it would stay.

I let her order the tickets, and once it was done we started on the way back. The sun flooded the town in light, the first buds had appeared on the trees, there were people everywhere, most of them happy, as you are on the first decent days of spring.

As we crossed Kungsträdgården she squinted into the bright low rays of the sun at me.

‘I saw something odd on TV a few weeks ago,’ she said. ‘They were showing CCTV footage from inside a large newspaper kiosk. Suddenly one of the shelves started smoking. At first there were a few small flames. The assistant was unsighted where he stood. But the customer by the counter could see. He must have known something was going on because while he was waiting for his purchases to be rung up he turned to the shelf. He couldn’t help but see the flames. Then he turned back, took his change and left. While there was a fire burning behind him!’

She looked at me again and smiled.

‘Another customer came in and stood by the counter. By now the fire was well alight. He turned and looked straight at the flames. Then he turned back, finished what he had to do and went out. But he looked straight at the flames! Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Do you think he didn’t want to be involved?’

‘No, no, not at all. That wasn’t the point. It was that he saw the flames but couldn’t believe what he was seeing, flames in a shop, and so he trusted his brain more than his vision.’

‘What happened after that?’

‘The third person, who came in straight afterwards, shouted, “Fire!” as soon as he saw it. By then the whole stand was ablaze. By then it was impossible not to see it. Odd, eh?'

'Yes,' I said.

We had reached the bridge leading to the island where the Royal Palace was and zigzagged through the tourists and immigrants standing and fishing off it. Now and then over the following days I thought about the story she had told, gradually it detached itself from her and became a phenomenon in itself. I didn't know her, knew as good as nothing about her and the fact that she was Swedish meant that I couldn't interpret anything from the way she spoke or the clothes she wore. An image from her poetry collection, which I hadn't read since that time at Biskop-Arnö and had taken out only once, when showing her photo to Yngve, was still imprinted on my brain, the one of the first-person narrator clinging to a man like a *baby chimpanzee* and seeing this in the mirror. Why that of all images had made an impression I didn't know. When I arrived home I took out the collection again. Whales and land and huge animals thundering around a sharp-witted and vulnerable narrator.

Was that her?

Some days later we went to the theatre. Linda, Geir and I. The first act was terrible, truly wretched, and in the interval, sitting at a terrace table with a view of the harbour, Geir and Linda chatted away about quite how terrible it had been, and why. I was more sympathetic, for despite the small, cramped feel of the act, which coloured the play and the visions it was supposed to be depicting, there was an anticipation of something else, as if it was lying in wait. Perhaps not in the play, perhaps more in the combination of Bergman and Ibsen, which ultimately *had* to produce something? Or else it was the splendour of the auditorium that fooled me into believing there had to be something else. And there was. Everything was raised, higher and higher, the intensity increased, and within the tightly set framework, which in the end comprised only mother and son, a kind of boundlessness arose, something wild and reckless. Into it disappeared plot and space, what was left was emotion, and it was stark, you were looking straight into the essence of human existence, the very nucleus of life, and thus you found yourself in a place where it no longer mattered what was actually happening. Everything known as aesthetics and taste was eliminated. Wasn't there an enormous red sun shining at the back of the stage? Wasn't that Osvald rolling naked across the stage? I'm not sure any more what I saw, the details disappeared into the state they evoked, which was one of total presence, burning hot and ice-cold at once. However, if you hadn’t allowed yourself to be transported, everything that happened would have appeared exaggerated, perhaps even banal or kitsch. The master stroke was the first act, everything was done there, and only someone who had spent a whole lifetime creating, with an enormous list – more than fifty years’ worth – of productions behind them, could have had the skill, the coolness, the courage, the intuition and the insight to fashion something like this. Bright ideas alone could not have brought this off, it was impossible. Hardly anything I had seen or read had even been close to approaching the essence in this way. As we followed the audience streaming out into the foyer and onto the street, not one of us said a word, but from their distant expressions I could see they had also been carried away into the terrible but real and therefore beautiful place Bergman had seen in Ibsen and then succeeded in shaping. We decided we would have a beer at KB, and as we made our way there the trance-like state wore off to be replaced by an elated, euphoric mood. The shyness I would normally have felt at being so near such an attractive woman, which was further complicated by the events of three years ago, was suddenly gone. She talked about the time she had accidentally nudged a floodlight stand during one of Bergman’s tests and got to feel the sharp edge of his tongue. We discussed the difference between *Ghosts* and *Peer Gynt*, which were at opposite ends of a spectrum, one mere surface, the other mere depth, both equally true. She parodied the dialogue between Max von Sydow and Death and talked about individual Bergman films with Geir, who had gone on his own to see the Cinemathek performances, all of them, and had consequently seen the classic films that were worth seeing, while I sat and listened, happy about everything. Happy to have seen the play, happy to have moved to Stockholm, happy to be with Linda and Geir.

After we parted company and I was trudging up the hills to my bedsit in Mariaberget I realised two things.

The first was that I wanted to see her again as soon as possible.

The second was that was where I had to go, to what I had seen that evening. Nothing else was good enough, nothing else did it. That was where I had to go, to the essence, to the inner core of human existence. If it took forty years, so be it, it took forty years. But I should never lose sight of it, never forget it, that was where I was going.

There, there, there.

Two days later Linda rang and invited me to a Walpurgis night party she was going to throw with two girlfriends. It was fine if I brought along my friend Geir. Which I did. One Friday in May 2002 we walked across Söder to the flat where the party was to take place, and soon found ourselves ensconced on a sofa, each with a glass of punch in our hands, surrounded by young Stockholmers who all had some connection with cultural life: jazz musicians, theatre people, literary critics, authors, actors. Linda, Mikaela and Öllegård, who were the party organisers, had met when they were working at Stockholm City Theatre. At the time the Royal Dramatic Theatre was performing *Romeo and Juliet* together with Circus Cirkör, so apart from actors the room was full of jugglers, fire-eaters and trapeze artists. I couldn't get through the evening without speaking, even if I wanted to, so I heaved my body round from one group to another, exchanging civilities and, after I'd had a few gin and tonics, the odd sentence beyond what was strictly necessary. I particularly wanted to talk to the theatre people. I would never have expected to feel that, and it made my enthusiasm for theatre soar on this evening. I stood with two actors and said how fantastic Bergman was. They just snorted and said, *That old sod! He's so bloody traditional it makes you want to puke.*

How stupid could you be! Of course they loathed Bergman. Firstly, he had been the master all their lives and the whole of their parents' lives as well. Secondly, they were for the new, the great, Shakespeare as circus, the play everyone should see, which, with its torches and trapezes, stilts and clowns, was so refreshing. They had gone as far from Bergman as it was possible to go. Then a podgy clearly depressed Norwegian stands there hailing Bergman as the new man.

Meanwhile I confirmed that Linda and Geir were *still* chatting on the sofa, both with excited smiles, the stab in the heart that gave me, was she going to fall for another of my friends? I mingled, bumped into some jazz fans, who asked me if I knew anything about Norwegian jazz, to which I responded with a half-nod, which of course meant they wanted some names. Norwegian jazz musicians? Was there anyone apart from Jan

Garbarek? Fortunately I realised that wasn’t exactly what they meant and remembered Bugge Wesseltoft, whom Espen had talked about once, and had also invited to play at a *Vagant* party where I had given a reading. They nodded, he was good, I breathed out with relief and went off to sit on my own. Then a dark-haired woman with a broad face, large mouth, intense brown eyes, wearing a flowery dress, came over to me and asked if I was the writer from Norway. Yes, I was. What did I think about Jan Kjærstad, John Erik Riley and Ole Robert Sunde?

I gave my opinions.

‘Do you mean that?’ she queried.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Stay where you are,’ she said. ‘I’ll just get my husband. He writes about literature. Very interested in Riley. Wait a moment. I’ll be back.’

I watched her push past people towards the kitchen. What did she say her name was? Hilda? No. Wilda? Shit. No, Gilda. Shouldn’t be impossible to remember.

Then she reappeared through the throng, this time with a man in tow. Oh, as soon as I saw him I knew the type. He had university written all over his face from a long distance.

‘Now you can say what you told me!’ Gilda said.

I did. But her passion was wasted on both him and me, so when the conversation tailed off, and it didn’t take long, I made my apologies and went to the kitchen to get some food, now that the queues were shorter. Geir stood chatting with someone by the window and Linda was with a small group by the bookshelves. I sat down on the sofa and began to gnaw at a chicken thigh when I met the eyes of a dark-haired woman, who took this as an invitation, because the very next moment she was standing in front of me.

‘Who are you?’ she asked.

I swallowed and put the chicken down on the paper plate as I looked up at her. Tried to sit up straight on the deep soft sofa, unsuccessfully, I felt as though I was falling to one side. And my cheeks, they must have glistened with chicken fat.

‘Karl Ove,’ I said. ‘I’m from Norway. I’ve just moved here. A few weeks ago. And you?’

‘Melinda.’

‘And what do you do?’

‘I’m an actor.’

‘Oh yes!’ I said with what was left of the Bergman euphoria in my voice. ‘Are you in *Romeo and Juliet* then?’

She nodded.

‘Who do you play?’

‘Juliet.’

‘Ah!’

‘That’s Romeo over there,’ she said.

A good-looking muscular man came over to join her. He kissed her on the cheeks and looked at me.

Damn the bloody sofa. I felt like a dwarf from where I was sitting.

I nodded and smiled. He nodded back.

‘Have you had some food?’ he asked.

‘No,’ she said, and then they were gone. I lifted the chicken back to my mouth. There was nothing for it but to drink.

The last thing I did before I left that evening was to look at a photo album belonging to an equine homeopath with a plunging neckline. The alcohol had not made me soar, as it was wont to do, into a mood where everything was great and there were no obstacles; it made me sink into a spiritual well, from which nothing I had inside could raise me. All that happened was that everything became foggier and more unclear. The day after, I was profoundly grateful I’d had the presence of mind to go home, and not sit there until everyone had gone in the hope that something interesting might happen of its own accord. I assumed Linda was a lost cause – we had hardly exchanged a word all evening, which for the most part I had spent slumped in the chair I had begun to consider as ‘mine’ – and the little I said, which could have been written on a postcard, no woman in the world would have found interesting. Nonetheless, I rang her the following evening, politeness demanded I thank her. And then, while I was standing with my mobile to my ear surveying Stockholm spread out beneath me, illuminated by the broad red light from the setting sun, a pregnant moment arose. I had said hi, thanked her, said it had been a nice party, she had thanked me, said she thought it had been nice too, and she added she hoped I’d had a *trevlig* time. I had, I said. And then there was a silence. She didn’t say anything; I didn’t say anything. Should I wrap up the conversation? That was my natural instinct. I had taught myself in such situations to say as little as possible. In that way I wouldn't say anything foolish. Or should I go on? The seconds ticked. If I had said, yes, well, I just wanted to thank you and had rung off, that would have probably been that. Such a mess I'd made of everything the night before. But what the hell, what did I have to lose?

'What are you doing?' I asked after this long silence, by any criteria.

'Watching ice hockey on TV,' she said.

'Ice hockey?' I said. And then we chatted for a quarter of an hour. And decided we would meet again.

We did, but nothing happened, there was no excitement, or rather the excitement was so great it didn't allow us to move, it was as if we were caught in it, all the things we wanted to say to each other, but couldn't.

Polite phrases. Little openings, leading elsewhere, her everyday life, she had a mother in Stockholm, and a brother, and all her friends. Apart from six months in Florence she had lived in Stockholm all her life. Where had I lived?

Arendal, Kristiansand, Bergen. Six months in Iceland, four months in Norwich.

Did I have any brothers or sisters?

A brother, a half-sister.

You were married, weren't you?

Yes. In a way I still am.

Oh.

Early one evening, in the middle of April, she rang. Did I feel like meeting her? Of course. I was out with Geir and Christina, I said, we were in Guldapan, you could join us if you like.

Half an hour later she was there.

She was beaming.

'I've been accepted by the Dramatiska Institut today,' she said. 'I'm so happy, it's just wonderful. And then I suddenly felt like meeting you,' she said, looking at me.

I smiled at her.

We were out all evening, got drunk, walked back to my place together, I gave her a hug outside the gate and went up to the flat.

The next day Geir rang.

'She's in love with you, man,' he said. 'You can see it miles off. That was the first thing Christina said when we left. She's almost luminous with it. Unbelievably in love with Karl Ove.'

'I don't think so,' I said. 'She was happy she's got into the Dramatiska Institut.'

'Why would she ring you if that was all it was?'

'How should I know? Why don't you ring her and ask?'

'And what's the situation with your feelings?'

'Fine.'

Linda and I went to the cinema. For some idiotic reason we saw the new Star Wars film, it was for children, and having confirmed that, we went to Folkoperan and sat without saying much.

I was depressed as I left, I was so incredibly sick of having everything inside me, being unable to say the simplest thing to anyone.

It passed. I was fine on my own, Stockholm was still new to me, spring had arrived, every second day at twelve I put on my trainers and ran around Söder, it was ten kilometres, on the days between I swam a thousand metres. I had lost ten kilos, and I had started to write again. I got up at five, had a cigarette and a couple of coffees on the roof terrace, from which there was a view of the whole of Stockholm, then I worked until twelve, ran or swam, and afterwards went into town and sat in a café reading, or just drifted around, unless I met Geir. At half past eight, as the sun was setting and colouring the wall blood-red above the bed, I lay down to read. I started *The Karinhall Hunters* by Carl Henning Wijkmark, Geir had recommended it, I read in the glow of the sinking sun, and suddenly, out of nowhere, I was imbued with a wild, dizzy feeling of happiness. I was free, completely free, and life was fantastic. I could on occasion be seized by this feeling, perhaps once every six months, it was strong, it lasted for a few minutes, and then it passed. The oddity this time was that it didn't pass. I woke up and was happy, buggered if I could remember that happening since I was a little boy. I sat on the terrace and sang in the pale sunlight, and when I wrote I didn't care if it was bad, there were other, better things in the world than writing novels, and when I ran my body was as light as a feather, while my brain, which was usually focused on surviving and not much else on my runs, looked around and enjoyed the dense leafy greenery, the blue water of the many canals, the crowds of people everywhere, the beautiful and less beautiful buildings. After returning home and taking a shower I had some soup and crispbread, and then I went to the park to read some more of Wijkmark's debut novel, about the Norwegian marathon runner who slips into Goering's hunting castle during the Berlin Olympics in 1936, rang Espen or Tore or Eirik or mum or Yngve or Tonje, whom I was still with, nothing else had been said, went to bed early, got up in the middle of the night and ate plums or apples without knowing until I woke and found the remains on the floor beside the bed. At the beginning of May I went to Biskops-Arnö, six months ago I had agreed to give a talk there, phoned Lemhagen when I came to Stockholm and said I would have to cancel, I had nothing to talk about, he had said I could go anyway, listen to the other talks, perhaps participate in the discussions and do a reading or two in the evening, if I had anything new.

He met me outside the main building, told me without delay that he had never experienced anything like the time I had been at the seminar for debut writers, nothing even remotely near it. I understood what he meant, the atmosphere had been so special then, not only for me.

The lectures were boring and the discussions tedious, or else it was just that I was too happy to show any interest. A couple of older Icelandic men were the only ones with anything original to say, so they were also the ones who had to face the strongest arguments. At night we drank, Henrik Hovland was there and entertained us with stories of life under canvas, one he told us was about how after a certain number of days the smell of your shit became so strong and individual that you could smell your way to each other in the dark, like animals, which no one believed, but everyone laughed, while I described the fantastic scene from one of Arild Rein's books where the protagonist shits such a large turd that it can't be flushed, so he takes it, puts it into the pocket of his suit jacket and goes out wearing it.

The next day two Danes arrived, Jeppe and Lars; Jeppe's talk was good, and they were great drinking company. They travelled back with me to Stockholm, we went on the booze, I texted Linda, she met us at Kvarnen, embraced me when she arrived, we laughed and chatted, but suddenly my spirits sank, for Jeppe was charismatic, more than usually intelligent and had a strong masculine presence, by which Linda was not unaffected, I sensed. Perhaps that was why I started a discussion with her. Of all the subjects to choose I chose abortion. It didn't seem to bother her, but she went home afterwards, while we continued, ending up going to a nightclub where Jeppe was refused admittance, it must have been something to do with the plastic bag he was carrying, his worn appearance and the fact that he was very drunk. We went back to my place instead, Lars fell asleep, Jeppe and I sat up, the sun rose, he told me about his father, a good person in all ways, and when he said he was dead, a tear ran down his cheek. It was one of those moments that will live long in the memory, perhaps because the confidence came without warning. There was just his head resting against the wall, illuminated by the first soft light of morning, the tear running down his cheek.

The following day we had breakfast in a café, they left for Arlanda Airport, I went back to sleep, left the window open, it rained, the computer, without any form of back-up, was soaked.

I switched it on the next day and it worked fine. Nothing could go wrong any more. Geir called, it was 17 May, Norwegian Independence Day, should we go out for a meal? Him, Christina, Linda and me? I told him about our discussion, he said there were very few topics you should never discuss with women, abortion was one of them. Bloody hell, Karl Ove, almost all of them have had an abortion at some point. How can you wade out into such deep waters? Call her and ask her out, it may not mean anything. She probably hasn't given it a thought.

'I can't ring her after that.'

'What's the worst that can happen? If she's angry with you, she'll just say no. If she isn't she'll say yes. You'll have to suss it out. You can't stop meeting her because you *suspect* she doesn't want to know about you.'

I rang.

Yes, she would like to go out.

We went to Creperiet, talked mostly about the relationship between Norway and Sweden, Geir's showpiece. Linda kept looking at me, she didn't seem to be offended, but I couldn't be sure until we were on our own and I could apologise. Well, there's nothing to apologise for, she said, you have the opinions you have. No big deal. What about Jeppe then? I thought, but said nothing of course.

We went to Folkoperan. It was Linda's favourite place. Every night when they closed they played the Russian national anthem, and she loved all things Russian, especially Chekhov.

'Have you read Chekhov?' she asked.

'No,' I said.

'Haven't you? You *must*.'

Her lips parted over her teeth when she became enthusiastic, before she was on the point of saying something, and I sat watching her talking. She had such beautiful lips. And her eyes, greyish-green and sparkly, they were so stunning it hurt to look into them.

'My favourite film's Russian as well. *Burned by the Sun*. Have you seen it?'

'Afraid not, no.'

'We'll have to see it one day. There's a fantastic girl in it. She's in the Pioneers, a fantastic political movement for children.'

She laughed.

'It's like I've got a lot to show you,' she said. 'By the way, there's a book reading at Kvarnen in . . . five days. I'm going to read. Do you fancy going?'

'Of course. What are you going to read?'

'Stig Sæterbakken.'

'Why's that?'

'I've translated him into Swedish.'

'Have you now? Why didn't you say?'

'You didn't ask,' she said with a smile. 'He's coming too. I'm a bit nervous about that. My Norwegian's not quite as good as I thought. But he's read the book anyway and didn't have any comments about the language. Do you like him?'

'I like *Siamese* very much.'

'That's the one I translated. With Gilda. Do you remember her?'

I nodded.

'But we can meet before. Are you busy tomorrow?'

'No. It'll be fine.'

Over the tannoys came the first notes of the Russian national anthem. Linda got up, put on her jacket and looked at me.

'Here then? Eight?'

'OK,' I said.

We stopped outside. The shortest route to hers was along Hornsgatan while my place lay in the opposite direction.

'I'll walk you home,' she said. 'May I?'

'Of course,' I said.

We walked in silence.

'It's strange,' I said as we turned into one of the diagonal streets towards Mariaberget. 'I'm so happy to be with you, yet I'm unable to say anything. It's as if you rob me of the power of speech.'

'I've noticed that,' she said, taking a swift glance at me. 'It doesn't matter. Not for me at any rate.'

Why not? I thought. What can you do with a man who says nothing?

We fell into silence again. Our footsteps on the cobbled stones were amplified by the brick houses on either side.

'It was a nice evening,' she said.

'Bit strange,' I said. 'It's 17 May, a date that is evidently in my blood, and I've felt there has been something missing all the time. Why is no one celebrating?'

She stroked my upper arm softly.

As if to tell me it didn't matter if I came out with stupidities?

We stopped in the street beneath my flat. We looked at each other. I stepped forward and gave her a hug.

'See you tomorrow then,' I said.

'Yes,' she said. 'Goodnight.'

I stopped inside the door and went back out a moment later. I wanted to see her for a last time.

She was walking down the hill alone.

I was in love with her.

So what the hell was it that was so painful?

The next day I wrote as usual, ran as usual, sat outdoors reading as usual, this time at Lasse in the Park, across from Långholmen Island. But I couldn't concentrate, I couldn't stop thinking about Linda. I was looking forward to seeing her, there was nothing I wanted more, but a shadow hung over these thoughts unlike all the others I'd had that day.

Why?

Because of what had happened that time?

Of course. But I didn't know what, it was just a feeling I had, and I couldn't hold it to shape it into a clear thought.

The conversation this evening was as tough going as before, and now it was dragging her down too, the enthusiasm and cheeriness of the previous day was almost totally gone.

After an hour we got up and left. In the street she asked me if I wanted a cup of tea at her place.

'Very much,' I said.

Ascending the stairs, I suddenly remembered the incident with the Polish twins. It was a good story, but I couldn't tell it. Too much of the complexity of my feelings for her would be revealed.

'This is where I live,' she said. 'Grab a chair and I'll make us some tea.'

It was a one-room flat: at the far end there was a bed, at the other a dining table. I removed my shoes but kept my jacket on and perched on the edge of the chair.

She was humming in the kitchen.

As she placed a cup of tea in front of me, she said, 'I think I'm becoming fond of you, Karl Ove.'

'Fond'? Was that all? And she said that to my face?

'I like you a lot as well,' I said.

'Do you?' she asked.

There was a pause.

'Do you think we could become anything other than friends?' she asked after a while.

'I want us to be friends,' I said.

She looked at me. Then she looked down, seemed to discover her cup and raised it to her lips.

I got up.

'Have you got any female friends?' she asked. 'I mean ones who are only friends.'

I shook my head.

‘Or rather yes. When I went to *gymnas* I had some. But that’s a long time ago of course.’

She looked at me again.

‘I think I should go,’ I said. ‘Thanks for the tea.’

She got up and accompanied me to the door. I stepped into the corridor before turning, so that she would not be able to give me a hug.

‘Bye,’ I said.

‘Bye,’ she said.

The next morning I went to Lasse in the Park. Laid a pad on the table and started writing her a letter. I wrote down what she meant to me. I wrote what she had been for me when I saw her for the first time, and what she was now. I wrote about her lips sliding over her teeth when she got excited, I wrote about her eyes, when they sparkled and when they opened their darkness and seemed to absorb light. I wrote about the way she walked, the little, almost mannequin-like, waggle of her backside. I wrote about her tiny Japanese features. I wrote about her laughter, which could sometimes wash over everything, how I loved her then. I wrote about the words she used most often, how I loved the way she said ‘stars’ and the way she flung around the word ‘fantastic’. I wrote that all this was what I had seen, and that I didn’t know her at all, had no idea what ran through her mind and very little about how she saw the world and the people in it, but that what I could see was enough, I knew I loved her and always would.

‘Karl Ove?’ someone said. I looked up.

There she was.

I turned the pad over.

How was that possible?

‘Hi, Linda,’ I said. ‘Thanks for the tea yesterday.’

‘It was nice to see you. I’m here with a friend. Would you prefer to be on your own?’

‘Yes, if you don’t mind. I’m working, you see.’

‘Of course, I understand.’

We looked at each other. I nodded.

A woman of her age came out holding two cups. Linda turned to her, they went off to the other end and sat down.

I wrote that she had just sat down at the back.

If only I could bridge this distance, I wrote. I would give everything in the world for that. But I can’t. I love you, and perhaps you think you love me, but you don’t. I believe you like me, I’m fairly sure of that, but I’m not enough for you, and you know that deepest down. Perhaps you need someone now, and then along I came, and you thought, well he might do. But I don’t want to be someone who might do, that’s not good enough for me, it has to be all or nothing, you have to be ablaze, the way I am ablaze. To want the way I want. Do you understand? Oh, I know you do. I have seen how strong you can be, I have seen how weak you can be and I have seen you open up to the world. I love you, but that isn’t enough. Being friends is meaningless. I can’t even talk to you! What kind of friendship would that be? I hope you don’t take this amiss. I’m just trying to say it as it is. I love you. That is how it is. And somewhere I always will, regardless of what happens to us.

I signed my name, got up, glanced at them, only the girlfriend was in a position to see me, and she didn’t know who I was, so I escaped unnoticed, hastened home, tucked the letter into an envelope, changed into running gear and did my route round Söder.

Over the next days it was as though the speed I had within me increased. I ran, I swam, I did everything I could to keep my unease, which consisted of as much happiness as sorrow, at bay, but I failed, I was shaking with an agitation that never seemed to abate, I went on endless walks around the town, ran, swam, lay awake at night, couldn’t eat. I had said no, it was over, it would ease.

The reading was on a Saturday, and by the time it arrived I had decided not to go. I rang Geir to see if he wanted to meet me in town, he did, four o’clock at KB, we agreed, I ran to Eriksdal Baths, swam for more than an hour, to and fro in the outdoor pool, it was wonderful, the air was cold, the water warm, the sky grey with light rain, and not a soul around. Up and down I swam. When I got out I was hot with exhaustion. I changed, stood outside for a while smoking, then made a move towards the centre with my bag over my shoulder.

Geir wasn’t there when I arrived. I sat down at a window table and ordered a beer. A few minutes later he was in front of me and holding out his hand.

‘Anything new?’ he asked, sitting down.

‘Yes and no,’ I said, and told him what had happened over recent days.

‘You always have to be so dramatic,’ he said. ‘Can’t you calm down a bit? It doesn’t have to be all or nothing.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘In this particular case it’s exactly that.’

‘Have you sent the letter?’

‘No. Not yet.’

At that moment I received a text message. It was from Linda.

‘*Didn’t see you at the reading. Were you there?*’

I started to answer.

‘Can’t you do that afterwards?’ Geir said.

‘No,’ I said.

‘Couldn’t make it. Did it go well?’

I sent the message and raised my glass to Geir.

‘*Skål,’* I said.

‘*Skål,’* he said.

Another message.

‘*Missed you. Where are you now?*’

Missed me?

My heart pounded in my chest. I started a new answer.

‘Pack it in,’ Geir said. ‘If you don’t, I’m off.’

‘I’ll be quick,’ I said. ‘Hang on.’

‘*I miss you too. I’m at KB.*’

‘It’s Linda, isn’t it,’ Geir said.

‘It is,’ I answered.

‘You’re all over the place,’ he said. ‘Do you realise? I almost felt like turning round in the door when I saw you.’

New message.

‘*You come to me, Karl Ove. At Folkoperan. Waiting.*’

I got up.

‘Sorry, Geir, but I’ve got to go.’

‘Now?’

‘Yes.’

‘Come on, man. Surely she can bloody well wait half an hour? I caught the Metro all the way here, and I didn’t do that to sit and have a drink on my own. I can do that at home.’

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I’ll call you.’

I ran into the street, flagged down a taxi, could have screamed with impatience at the lights, but then it pulled over by Folkoperan, I paid and went in.

She was sitting on the ground floor. As soon as I saw her I knew there was no hurry.

She smiled.

‘How quick you were!’ she said.

‘I had the impression it was urgent.’

‘No, no, no, not at all.’

I gave her a hug and sat down.

‘Do you want a drink?’ I asked.

‘What are you going to have?’

‘I don’t know. Red wine?’

‘That sounds good.’

We shared a bottle of red, chatted about this and that, nothing of any significance, it was all between us, every time our eyes met a quiver ran through me, and then there was a heavy thud, that was my heart.

‘There’s a party at Vertigo now,’ she said. ‘Feel like coming along?’

‘OK, sounds good.’

‘Stig Sæterbakken’s there.’

‘That’s perhaps not so good. I panned him once. And then I read an interview in which he said he had kept all the reviews which had panned him. The one I wrote must be one of the worst. A whole page in *Morgenbladet*. And then he went after me and Tore in a debate once. Called us Faldbakken and Faldbakken. But I don’t suppose that means much to you.’

She shook her head.

‘We can go somewhere else?’

‘No, no, God, no. Let’s go to the party.’

As we left Folkoperan it had started to grow dark. The cloud cover that had been there all day was thickening.

We caught a taxi. Vertigo was situated in a cellar, it was jam-packed, the air was hot and dense with smoke, I turned to Linda and said perhaps we didn’t need to stay so long.

‘Isn’t that Knausgaard?’ a voice said. I turned. It was Sæterbakken. He smiled. ‘Knausgaard and I are foes,’ he said, and added, ‘aren’t we?’ with a look up at me.

‘I’m not,’ I said.

‘Don’t chicken out now,’ he said. ‘But you’re right. We’ve put it behind us. I’m writing a new novel, and I’m trying to do as you’ve done. Write a bit more in your style.’

Jesus, I thought. That was quite a compliment!

‘You don’t say,’ I said. ‘Sounds interesting.’

‘Yes, it is very interesting. You wait and see!’

‘Talk to you later,’ I said.

‘Right.’

We went to the bar, ordered gin and tonics, found two unoccupied chairs and sat down. Linda knew lots of people here, mingled and kept coming back to me. I became more and more drunk, but the congenial, relaxed mood I had when I saw Linda at Folkoperan continued. We looked at each other. We were a couple. She placed her hand on my shoulder. We were a couple. She met my gaze through the room in the middle of a conversation with someone and smiled. We were a couple.

After we had been there for a few hours and had settled down in two armchairs in a little room at the back of the club Sæterbakken joined us and asked if he could give us a foot massage. He was good at it, he claimed. I said no, not for me. Linda removed her shoes and put her feet in his lap. He started to knead and stroke while looking into her eyes.

‘I am good at it, aren’t I?’ he said.

‘Yes, that’s wonderful,’ Linda said.

‘But now it’s your turn, Knausgaard.’

‘Not for me.’

‘Don’t be a coward. Come on, take off your shoes.’

In the end I did as he asked, took off my shoes and rested my feet in his lap. In itself it was pleasant, but the fact that it was Stig Sæterbakken sitting there and squeezing my feet with a fixed smile on his face it was difficult to interpret as anything other than devilish, gave the situation a certain ambivalence, to put it mildly.

After he had finished I asked him about his last collection of essays, dealing with evil, then went for a little wander, drank one glass after another, and caught a glimpse of Linda, she was leaning against a wall with a girl I had seen at Valborg, Hilda, Wilda? Shit. No, Gilda.

Linda was so beautiful.

And so unbelievably alive.

Could she really be mine?

Hardly had I articulated the thought when her gaze brushed mine.

She smiled and waved to me.

I walked over.

The time was ripe.

It was now or never.

I swallowed, put my hand on her shoulder.

‘This is Gilda,’ she said.

‘We’ve met before,’ Gilda said with a smile.

‘Come here,’ I said.

She sent me a quizzical look.

Her eyes were dark.

‘Now?’ she said.

I didn’t answer, just took her hand.

Without a word, we walked through the room. Opened the door, went up the steps. The rain was pelting down.

‘I’ve taken you aside once before,’ I said. ‘That time it didn’t go very well. And maybe this will go belly up too. In which case, so be it. But there is something I want to say. About you.’

‘About me?’ she said, standing in front of me and looking up, her hair already wet, her face shiny with raindrops.

‘Yes,’ I said.

And then I began to tell her what she was to me. Everything I had written in the letter I told her. I described her lips, her eyes, the way she walked, the words she used. I said I loved her even though I didn’t know her. I said I wanted to be with her. It was all I wanted.

She stretched up onto the tips of her toes, raised her face to me, I bent forward and kissed her.

Then everything went black.

I woke up with two men dragging me by the feet across the tarmac into a gate entrance. One was talking on his mobile, he said, might be drugs, we don’t know. They stopped, leaned towards me.

‘Are you conscious?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Where am I?’

‘Outside Vertigo. Have you been taking drugs?’

‘No.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Karl Ove Knausgaard. I think I fainted. There’s no problem. I’m absolutely fine.’

I saw Linda coming towards me.

‘Is he conscious?’ she asked.

‘Hi, Linda,’ I said. ‘What happened?’

‘You don’t need to come,’ the man said on the phone. ‘It’s fine here. He’s conscious and appears to be coping all right.’

‘You fainted, I think,’ Linda said. ‘You suddenly collapsed.’

‘Oh Christ,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry about that.’

‘Nothing to be sorry about,’ she said. ‘What you said. No one has ever said anything as nice to me.’

‘Are you OK?’ one of the men asked.

I nodded and they left.

‘It was when you kissed me,’ I said. ‘It was like I felt something black come *shooting* up. And then I woke up over here.’

I got up, staggered a few steps.

‘It’s probably best to go home,’ I said. ‘But you can stay if you want.’

She laughed.

‘We’ll go to my place. I’ll take care of you.’

‘I love the idea of you taking care of me,’ I said.

She smiled and took a mobile phone from her jacket pocket. Her hair was plastered to her forehead. I surveyed my clothes. My trousers were dark with rain. I ran a hand through my hair.

‘Strangely enough, I’m not drunk any more,’ I said. ‘But I am hellishly hungry.’

‘When did you last eat?’

‘Yesterday some time, I think. In the morning.’

At that moment she got through to the taxi rank, rolled her eyes at me, gave the address and ten minutes later we were in a taxi on our way through the night and the rain.

When I first woke up I didn’t know where I was. But then I saw Linda and remembered everything. I snuggled up to her, she opened her eyes, we made love again, and it was so right, was so good I knew with the whole of my being it was her and me, and I told her.

‘We must have children together,’ I said. ‘Anything else would be a crime against nature.’

She laughed.

‘It’s meant to be,’ I said. ‘I’m absolutely sure. I’ve never felt like this ever.’

She stopped laughing and looked at me.

‘Do you really mean that?’ she asked.

‘Yes, I do,’ I replied. ‘If you don’t feel the same then that’s something else. But you don’t, do you. I can feel that too.’

‘Is this real?’ she said. ‘Are you lying here in my bed? And saying you want children with me?’

‘Yes, you do feel the same, don’t you?’

She nodded.

‘But I would never have said so.’

For the first time in my life I was completely happy. For the first time there was nothing in my life that could overshadow the happiness I felt. We were together constantly, suddenly reaching for each other at traffic lights, across a restaurant table, on buses, in parks, there were no demands or desires except for each other. I felt utterly free, but only with her, the moment we were apart I began to have yearnings. It was strange, the forces were so strange, and they were good. Geir and Christina said we were impossible to be with, we had eyes only for each other, and it was true, there was no world beyond the one we had built. On Midsummer’s night we went to the island of Runmarö, where Mikaela had rented a cabin, I found myself laughing and singing through a Swedish night, a happy chuntering idiot, for everything gave meaning, everything was laden with meaning, it was as if a new light had been cast over the world. In Stockholm we went swimming, we lay in parks reading, we ate in restaurants, it didn’t matter what we did, it was the fact that we did it that was important. I read Hölderlin, and his poems flowed into me like water, there was nothing I didn’t understand, the ecstasy in the poems and the ecstasy in me were the same, and above all this, every single day throughout June, July and August, the sun shone. We told each other everything about ourselves, the way lovers do, and even though we knew it couldn't last, and the thought that in fact it might was frightening because there was also something unbearable about it, all this happiness, so we lived in it as if we didn't know. The fall had to come, but we didn't bother ourselves about it – how could we when everything was so great?

One morning when I was in the shower, she called me, I went into the bedroom, she was lying naked on the bed, it was by the window now, so that we could see the sky.

'Look,' she said. 'Can you see the cloud?'

I lay down beside her. The sky was perfectly blue, there were no clouds apart from the one which was drifting slowly closer. It was shaped like a heart.

'Yes,' I said, squeezing her hand.

She laughed.

'Everything's perfect,' she said. 'I've never ever been like this. I'm so happy with you. I'm so happy!'

'Me too,' I said.

We took a boat to the skerries. Rented a cabin in the forest outside a youth hostel. We walked round the island for hours, delved deep into the forest, everything smelt of pine and heather, suddenly we encountered a steep rock face: beneath us was the sea. We went on, came to a meadow, stopped and watched the cows, they watched us, we laughed, took pictures of each other, climbed up a tree, sat in it chattering like two children.

'Once,' I said, 'I had to buy cigarettes for my father at a petrol station. It was a couple of kilometres from home. I must have been about seven or eight years old. The path there went through a forest. I knew it like the palm of my hand. I still know it like the palm of my hand. Suddenly I heard a rustling in the bushes. I stopped and looked over. There I saw an absolutely fantastic bird, you know, big and multicoloured. I had never seen anything like it before, it was more like a visitor from some distant exotic continent. Africa or Asia. It scampered off and then flew away and disappeared. I've never seen that kind of bird since and I've never found out what it might have been.'

‘Is that true?’ Linda asked. ‘I had exactly the same experience once. At a girlfriend’s summer house. I was sitting in a tree, yes, like now, waiting for my friends to return. I got impatient and jumped down. Strolled around aimlessly and suddenly saw a fantastic multicoloured bird. I’ve never seen it since either.’

‘Is that true?’

‘Yes.’

That was how it was, everything gave meaning and our lives were interwoven. On the way home from the island we discussed the name of our first child.

‘If it’s a boy,’ I said, ‘I would prefer a simple name. Ola, I’ve always liked that. What do you think?’

‘It’s good,’ she said. ‘Very Norwegian. I like that.’

‘Yes,’ I said, looking out of the window.

A little boat bobbed up and down on its way across. The registration plate on the side said OLA.

‘Look there,’ I said.

Linda leaned forward.

‘Then it’s decided,’ she said. ‘Ola it is!’

Late one evening we had been walking up the hill towards my flat, still in the first, feverish phase of the relationship and, after quite a silence, she had said, ‘Karl Ove, there’s something I have to tell you.’

‘Oh yes?’ I said.

‘I tried to take my life once.’

‘What did you say?’ I said.

She didn’t answer and looked down at the ground in front of her.

‘Was that a long time ago?’ I asked.

‘Two years ago maybe. It was when I was in the clinic.’

I looked at her, she didn’t want to meet my eyes, I went up to her and hugged her. We stood like that for a long time. Then we went up the stairs and into the lift, I unlocked the flat, she sat down on the bed, I opened the window and the sounds of a late summer night rose to meet us.

‘Would you like some tea?’ I asked.

‘Please,’ she said.

I went to the kitchenette, switched on the kettle, took out two cups and put a teabag in each. After I had passed her one and stationed myself by the open window, sipping at the other cup, she began to tell me what had happened. Her mother had collected her from the hospital, they were on their way to her flat to pick something up. As they got closer Linda set off at a run. Her mother ran after her. Linda ran as fast as she could, through the door, up the stairs, into the flat, to the window. By the time her mother arrived, a few seconds later, Linda had opened the window and clambered up onto the ledge. Her mother sprinted to the window as Linda was about to jump, grabbed her and pulled her back in.

‘I went ballistic,’ she said. ‘I think I wanted to kill her. I pummelled away at her. We fought for maybe ten minutes. I tipped the fridge over her. But she was stronger. Of course she was stronger. In the end she sat astride my chest and I gave up. She rang the police and they came to take me back to hospital.’

There was a pause. I looked at her, she met my gaze, quickly, like a bird.

‘I’m ashamed about this,’ she said. ‘But I thought you should know at some point.’

I didn’t know what to say. There was an abyss between the place she had been then and where we were now. At least that was how it felt. Perhaps not for her though?

‘Why did you do it?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. I don’t think it was clear in my mind then, either. But I remember the process. I had been manic for several weeks at the end of the summer. One evening Mikaela came to my place, I was crouching on the worktop reciting numbers. She and Öllegård took me to the acute psychiatry clinic. They gave me some sleeping tablets and asked me if Mikaela would have me at home for a few days. Afterwards, over the autumn, one phase alternated with another. And then I hit the buffers in a depression that was so vast I didn’t know if there was a way out. I avoided everyone I knew because I didn’t want anyone to be the last person to see me alive. The therapist who attended me asked if I had suicidal thoughts, I just burst into tears and she said she couldn’t be responsible for me between therapy sessions and so I was admitted to the clinic. I’ve seen the papers of the admission meeting. Several minutes pass between my being asked a question and my answering, it says, and I can remember that. It was almost impossible for me to speak, impossible to say anything, the words were so far away. Everything was so far away. My face was a stiff mask. There was no expression in it.’

She looked up at me. I sat down on the bed. She put the cup down on the table and lay back. I lay beside her. There was a heaviness in the darkness outside, a kind of body to it that was alien to a midsummer night. A train rattled across the bridge by Ridderfjärden.

‘I was dead,’ she said. ‘It wasn’t that I wanted to leave my life. I had already left it. When the therapist said I was going to be admitted to the clinic I felt relief that someone wanted to take care of me. But when I got there it was all totally impossible. I couldn’t stay. And that was when I began to hatch a plan. My sole chance of getting out was a day permit to fetch clothes and so on from my flat. Someone had to be with me, the only person I could think of was my mother.’

She fell silent.

‘But if I’d *really* wanted it I would have succeeded. That’s what I think now. I wouldn’t have needed to open the window; I could have thrown myself through it. It wouldn’t exactly have made much of a difference. But the care I took . . . Yes, if I had really wanted to, with all my heart, it would have worked.’

‘I’m happy it didn’t,’ I said, running my hand through her hair. ‘But are you afraid it will happen again?’

‘Yes.’

There was a silence.

The woman I rented the bedsit from was making a noise on the other side of the door. Someone coughed on the roof terrace above us.

‘I’m not,’ I said.

She turned her face to me.

‘Aren’t you?’

‘No. I know you.’

‘Not all of me.’

‘Of course not,’ I said, and kissed her. ‘But it will never happen again, I’m sure of that.’

‘Then I’m sure too,’ she said with a smile, and put her arms around me.

The endless summer nights, so light and open, with us drifting between a selection of bars and cafés in various parts of town in black taxis, alone or with others, the drinking not menacing, not destructive, but a wave raising us higher and higher, it started slowly and darkened imperceptibly, it was as though the sky was attached to the earth, and the light airiness had less and less room, something filled it and held it firm, until at last the night was still, a wall of darkness descended in the evening and rose in the morning, and the light eddying summer night was no longer imaginable, like a dream you try in vain to recapture on waking.

Linda started at the Dramatiska Institut. The introductory course was hard, they were thrown into all kinds of difficult situations. I suppose the idea was that it was best to learn from their experience under pressure as they went along. When she cycled up to the school in the morning I went to the flat to write. I had woven the story of the angels into a story about a woman in a maternity ward in 1944, she had just given birth, her mind drifted hither and thither, but it didn't work, the text was too remote, the distance too great. Nevertheless I continued, slogged through page after page, it didn't matter, the most important, no, the only focus in my life was Linda.

One Sunday we were having lunch at an Östermalm café called Oscar near Karlaplan, we were sitting outside, Linda with a blanket over her legs, me eating a club sandwich, Linda a chicken salad, the street was Sunday-still, the bells below us had just pealed for the church service. Three girls sat at a table behind us, two men a little way behind them. Some sparrows were hopping on the tables closest to the road. They seemed quite tame, approached the plates left behind with small hops, nodding their whole heads as they poked their beaks into the food.

Suddenly a shadow plummets through the air, I look up, it is an enormous bird, it screams towards us, brushes the table of small birds, grabs one of them in its claws and soars upward again.

I turned to Linda. She was staring into the air with her mouth agape.

'Did a bird of prey just take one of the sparrows or was I dreaming?' I asked.

'I've never seen anything like that before. It was horrible,' Linda said. 'In the middle of town? What was it? An eagle? A hawk? Poor little bird!'

‘It must have been a hawk,’ I said, laughing. The sight had excited me. Linda looked at me with smiling eyes.

‘My grandfather on my mum’s side was bald,’ I said. ‘He had only a corona of white hair left. When I was small he used to say the chicken hawk had taken it. Then he demonstrated how the hawk had set its claws in his hair and flown off with it. The proof was the corona that was left. And for a while I believed him. I squinted into the sky looking for it. But I never saw it.’

‘Not until now,’ Linda said.

‘I’m not sure it was the same one,’ I said.

‘No,’ she said with a smile. ‘When I was five I kept a little hamster in a cage. In the summer we went to our summer house, where I used to let it free. I put the cage on the lawn and let it potter around in the grass. One morning while I was on the terrace watching it, a bird of prey dived down, and whoosh, my hamster was on its way up through the air.’

‘Is that true?’

‘Yes.’

‘How terrible!’ I laughed, pushed my plate away, lit a cigarette and leaned back. ‘Grandad had a gun, I remember. Sometimes he used to shoot crows. He injured one of them – that is, he shot off a leg. It survived and it’s still at the farm now. At least, according to Kjartan, it is. A one-legged crow with staring eyes.’

‘Fantastic,’ Linda said.

‘A kind of avian Captain Ahab,’ I said. ‘And grandad patrolling the ground like the great white whale.’

I looked at her.

‘What a shame it is you never met him. You would have liked him.’

‘And you would have liked mine.’

‘You were there when he died, weren’t you?’

She nodded.

‘He had a stroke, and I went up to Norrland. But he died before I arrived.’

She grabbed my cigarette pack, looked at me, I nodded and she took one.

‘But it was my grandma I was close to,’ she said. ‘She used to come down to Stockholm to see us and took charge of everything. The first thing she did was to clean the whole house. She baked and cooked and was with us. She was really strong.'

'Your mother is too.'

'Yes. In fact, she is becoming more and more like her. I mean, after she stopped at the Royal Dramatic Theatre and moved into the country it's as if she's resumed her life from those days. She grows her own vegetables, makes all her own food, has *four* freezers full of food and produce she's bought on offer. And now she doesn't care what she looks like, at least not compared with how she was before.'

She looked at me.

'Have I told you about the time my grandma saw red northern lights?'

I shook my head.

'She saw them when she was out walking. The whole sky was red, the light billowed backwards and forwards, it must have been beautiful, but also a bit doomsday-like. When she came back and told us no one believed her. She barely believed it herself, red northern lights, who's ever heard of that? Have you?'

'No.'

'But then, many, many years later, I was out with my mother in Humlegården late one night. And we saw the same thing! We have the northern lights here now and then, it's rare, but it does happen. That night they were red! Mummy rang grandma as soon as she was home. Grandma cried. Later I read about it and discovered it was a rare meteorological phenomenon.'

I leaned across the table and kissed her.

'Would you like a coffee?'

She nodded and I went in and ordered two coffees. When I returned and put her cup in front of her she was looking up at me.

'I remembered another strange story,' she said. 'Or perhaps it isn't so strange. But it seemed like it was. I was on one of the islands outside Stockholm. Walking in the forest on my own. Above me – and it wasn't far above either, directly above the trees – I saw an airship gliding through the air. It was quite magical. It came from nowhere and floated above the forest and was gone. An airship!'

'I've always been fascinated by airships,' I said. 'Ever since I was little. For me, it's as close to fantasy as I can imagine. A world of airships! Oh, it does something to me, that does, but I'm damned if I know what. What do you think it is?'

'If I've understood you correctly you used to be fascinated by divers, sailing boats, space travel and airships when you were a boy. You said once that you made drawings of divers, astronauts and sailing boats, didn't you? Was that all?'

'Yes, more or less.'

'Well, what can one say about that? An insatiable travel bug? Divers, that's as far down as you can go. Astronauts, that's as high as you can go. Sailing boats, that's a long way back in our history. And airships, that's the world that never materialised.'

'I suppose that's right. Not as a big, dominant mode of transport anyway. It was more on the periphery, if you know what I mean. When you're small you're full of the world, that's what life's all about. It's impossible to resist. And you don't have to, either. At least not always.'

'Well then?' she said.

'Well what?'

'Do you long to get away now?'

'Are you crazy? This summer must be the first since I was sixteen that I haven't.'

We got up and headed towards Djurgården Bridge.

'Did you know that the first airships couldn't be steered, and so to solve the problem they tried to train birds of prey, falcons I suppose, but perhaps eagles as well, to fly with long cables in their beaks?'

'No,' I said. 'All I know is that I love you.'

Even during these new days, which in quite a different way from previously were filled with routines, there was a great feeling of freedom for me. We got up early, Linda cycled off to school, I sat writing all day, unless I popped up to Filmhuset and had lunch with her, and then we met again early in the evening and were together until we went to bed. At the weekends we ate out and got drunk at night, in the bar at Folkoperan, which was our local, or at Guldapan, another favourite haunt, at Folkhemmet or the big bar in Odenplan.

Everything was as it had been, yet it wasn't, for imperceptibly, so imperceptibly that it seemed as if it wasn't happening, something in our lives lost its lustre. The fire that drove us towards each other and into the world no longer burned as bright. Atmospheres could spring up. One Saturday I awoke thinking how nice it would be to have some time for myself, visit some second-hand bookshops, go to a café and read the papers . . . We got up, went to the nearest café, ordered breakfast – porridge, yoghurt, toast, eggs, juice and coffee – I read the papers, Linda stared down at the table or into the room, said at length, do you have to read, couldn't we talk? Yes, of course, I said, closing the newspaper, and we chatted, it was fine, the tiny black spot in my heart was barely noticeable, a little hankering to be alone and read in peace without anyone demanding anything of me was forgotten in a flash. But then came the time when it wasn't, when on the contrary it led to ensuing atmospheres and actions. If you really love me, you have to come to me without demands, I thought but didn't say, I wanted her to notice on her own.

One evening Yngve called, he was wondering if I wanted to go with him and Asbjørn to London, I said, yes, of course, perfect. As I rang off Linda was watching me from the other side of the room.

'Who was that?' she asked.

'Yngve. He wanted me to go to London with him.'

'I hope you didn't say yes?'

'I did. Shouldn't I have done?'

'But we were going to travel together. You can't travel with him before you travel with me!'

'What are you talking about? This has nothing to do with you.'

She looked down at the book she was reading. Her eyes were black. I didn't want her to lose her temper. But to have the disagreement hanging in the air was intolerable for me, I needed clarity.

'I haven't spent a moment with Yngve for an incredibly long time. You have to remember I don't know anyone here except your friends. Mine live in Norway.'

'Yngve has just been here, hasn't he.'

'Oh, come on.'

'Just go then,' she said.

'OK,' I said.

Afterwards, when we were in bed, she apologised for having been so uncharitable. It didn't matter, I said. It was nothing.

‘We haven’t been apart since we got together,’ she said.

‘No,’ I said. ‘Perhaps it’s time we were.’

‘What do you mean?’ she said.

‘We can’t live on top of each other for the rest of our lives,’ I said.

‘I think we’re fine,’ she said.

‘Yes, we are fine,’ I said. ‘You know what I mean.’

‘Of course I do,’ she said. ‘But I’m not sure I agree.’

From London I rang her twice every day, and spent almost all my money on a present for her, it was her thirtieth a few weeks later. At the same time I realised, presumably because I saw our Stockholm life from a distance for the first time, that I would have to knuckle down when I got home, start working harder, for not only had the whole of the long summer disappeared in happiness, and inner and outer extravagance, but September had also passed without my having achieved anything. It was four years since I had made my debut, and a second book was nowhere in sight, apart from the 800 pages with a variety of beginnings I had accumulated since then. I had written my debut novel at night, got up at eight in the evening and worked right through until the next morning, and the freedom that lay in it, in the space the night opened, was perhaps what was necessary to find a way into something new. I had been close in recent weeks in Bergen and the first few in Stockholm, with the story that had aroused my interest about a father who went crabbing one summer’s night with his two sons, one obviously me, I found a dead seagull I showed dad, he told me seagulls had once been angels, and we left in the boat with live crabs crawling inside a bucket on the deck. Geir Gulliksen had said, ‘There’s your opening,’ and he had been right, but I didn’t know where it would lead, and I had been grappling with it for the last few months. I had written about a woman in a maternity ward in the 1940s, the child she gave birth to was Henrik Vankel’s father, and the house waiting for her return with the baby was originally an old hovel, full of bottles, which they had demolished to build a new house. But the story wasn’t genuine, everything sounded false, I was going nowhere. So I tried another tack, in the same house, where two brothers are asleep at night, their father is dead, one lies looking at the other sleeping. That sounded equally false, and my despair grew, would I ever be able to write another novel?

The first Monday after I had returned from London I told Linda we couldn’t meet the next evening because I had to work through the night. Yes, fine, no problem. At nine she texted me, I answered, she sent another message, she was out with Cora, they were at a place nearby having a beer, I texted, have a good time, said I loved her, a couple more texts went to and fro, then all went quiet and I thought she had gone back to her place. But she hadn’t, at around twelve she knocked on my door.

‘Are you here?’ I said. ‘I told you I was going to write.’

‘Yes, but your texts were so warm and loving. I thought you would want me to come.’

‘I have to work,’ I said. ‘I’m serious.’

‘I understand,’ she said, already out of her jacket and shoes. ‘But can’t I sleep here while you’re working?’

‘You know I won’t be able to. I can’t even write with a cat in the room.’

‘You’ve never tried with me in the room. I may have a good effect.’

Even though I was angry I couldn’t bring myself to say no. I had no right to be because what I was implying was that the miserable manuscript I was writing was more important than her. At that moment it was, but I couldn’t say that.

‘OK,’ I said.

We drank tea and smoked in front of the open window, then she undressed and went to bed. The room was small, the desk was barely a metre away, it was impossible to concentrate with her in the room, and the fact that she had come despite knowing I didn’t want her to gave me a feeling of suffocation. But I didn’t want to go to bed either, to let her win, so after half an hour I got up and told her I was going out. This was a demonstration, it was my way of saying I couldn’t put up with this, and so I went into the misty streets of Söder, bought a grilled sausage at a petrol station, sat in the park below the flat and smoked five cigarettes in quick succession while surveying the glittering town beneath me and wondering what the hell was going on. How the hell had I ended up in this situation?

The next night I worked through till the morning, slept all day, spent a couple of hours at hers, came back and wrote all night, slept and was woken by Linda in the afternoon, she wanted to speak. We went for a walk.

‘Don’t you want to be with me any more?’ she asked.

‘Yes, of course I do,’ I said.

‘But we aren’t together. We don’t see each other.’

‘Yes, but I have to work. Surely you understand that.’

‘Well, not that you have to work at night. I love you, so I want to be with you.’

‘But I have to work,’ I repeated.

‘OK,’ she said. ‘If you keep doing this, it’s over.’

‘You can’t mean that.’

She eyed me.

‘I damn well do. Just you try me.’

‘You can’t control me like that,’ I said.

‘I’m not controlling you. It’s a reasonable request. We’re in a relationship, and I don’t want to be on my own the whole time.’

‘The whole time?’

‘Yes. I’ll leave you if you don’t stop.’

I sighed.

‘It’s not that bloody important,’ I said. ‘I’ll stop.’

‘Fine,’ she said.

I mentioned this on the telephone to Geir next day, he said, Shit, man, are you out of your mind? You’re a writer, for Christ’s sake! You can’t let someone tell you what to do! No, I said, but that’s not exactly what this is about. It’s what it costs. What what costs? he asked. The relationship, I said. I don’t understand, he said. This is where you have to be hard. You can compromise on anything else, but not this. But I’m soft, as you know, I said. Tall and soft, he said with a laugh. But it’s your life.

September passed, the leaves on the trees turned yellow, turned red and fell off. The blue of the sky deepened, the sun sank, the air was clear and cold. In mid-October Linda gathered all her friends at an Italian restaurant in Söder. She was thirty and filled with an inner light that made her beam and me proud: *I* was in a relationship with her. Proud and grateful, those were my feelings. The town sparkled around us as we walked home, Linda in the white jacket I had given her as a present that morning, and walking there, hand in hand with her, in the midst of this beautiful and, for me, still foreign town, sent wave after wave of pleasure through me. We were still full of ardour and desire, for our lives had turned, not just on the breath of a passing wind, but fundamentally. We planned to have children. We had no sense of anything awaiting us except happiness. At least I didn’t. I never give a thought to issues which are only about life, the way it is lived, inside me and around me and which are not about philosophy, literature, art or politics. I feel, and my feelings determine my actions. The same applies to Linda, perhaps even more so.

At this time I was asked if I would teach at the writers' school in Bø, this was not my normal fare, but Thure Erik Lund was going to hold a two-week course and had been asked to choose a writer he would like to work with. Linda considered two weeks a long time, she didn't want me to be away from her for so long, and I thought, yes, it *is* a long time, she *can't* stay here in Stockholm while I am in Norway. Yet I wanted to accept the offer. My writing wasn't making progress, I needed to do something different, Thure Erik was one of the writers I admired most. I mentioned this to my mother on the telephone one night, and she said we didn't have any children, why couldn't she be alone for a couple of weeks? It's your job, she said. And she was right. A little step to the side, and everything would be fine. But I hardly ever took that step, Linda and I lived so close together in more ways than one: Linda's flat in Zinkensdamm was dark and cramped, one and a half rooms was all we had, and it was as if life was slowly swallowing us up. The previous openness had closed in, our lives had been as one for so long they were beginning to stiffen and chafe against each other. There were little episodes, insignificant in themselves, but together they formed a pattern, a new system beginning to settle.

Late one evening while I was accompanying her to drama practice she suddenly turned to me at a petrol station by Slussen, and gave me an earful over some tiny matter, told me to go to hell, I asked her what was up, she didn't answer and was already ten metres ahead of me. I followed.

One afternoon we were at the food hall, Saluhallen, in Hötorget, to do some shopping for a meal we were going to have with two of her friends, Gilda and Kettil, and I suggested making pancakes. She eyed me with obvious scorn. Pancakes are for children, she said. We're not having a children's party. OK, I said, let's call them crêpes then. Is that good enough for you? She turned her back on me.

We walked round this beautiful town at weekends, everything was great, but then all of a sudden it wasn't great any more, a darkness opened inside her, and I didn't know what to do. For the first time since I had come to Stockholm the feeling that I was on my own reappeared.

She fell into a pit that autumn. And she reached out for me. I didn't understand what was happening. But it was so claustrophobic that I turned away from her, tried to maintain a distance, which she tried to close.

I went to Venice, wrote in a flat my publishing house had at its disposal, Linda was supposed to follow and stay for just under a week, then I would work for a few more days and return. She was so black, she was so heavy, kept saying I didn't love her, I didn't really love her, I didn't want her, I didn't really want her, this wasn't working, it would never work, I didn't want it to, I didn't want her.

'But I do!' I said as we walked in the autumn chill in Murano with eyes hidden behind sunglasses. However, when she said I didn't really love her, I didn't really want to be with her, I wanted to be alone all the time, on my own, it became a little truer.

Where did her despair come from?

Had I brought it with me?

Was I cold?

Did I only think of myself?

I no longer knew what it would be like when my working day was over and I went to her place. Would she be happy, would it be a nice evening? Would she be angry about something, if for example we no longer made love every night, and so I didn't love her as much as before? Would we sit in bed watching TV? Go for a walk to Långholmen? And once there, would I be devoured by her demands to have all of me, making me keep her at a distance and have thoughts shooting to and fro in my brain that this had to come to an end, it wasn't working, thus rendering any conversation or attempts to get closer impossible, which of course she noticed and took as proof of her main thesis, that I didn't want her?

Or would we simply have a good time together?

I became more and more closed, and the more closed I became the more she attacked me. And the more she attacked me, the more aware I became of her mood swings. Like a meteorologist of the mind I followed her, not so much consciously as with my emotions, which, almost uncannily fine-tuned, tracked her various moods. If she was angry her presence was all that existed in me. It was like having a bloody great dog in the room growling, and I had to take care of it. Sometimes, when we were sitting and chatting, I could feel her strength, the depth of her experience, and I felt inferior.

Sometimes when she approached me and I held her, or when I lay embracing her, or when we chatted and she was all insecurity and unease, I felt so much stronger that everything else became irrelevant. These fluctuations, without anything to hold on to, and the constant threat of some kind of outburst, followed by the unfailing reconciliation and smoothing of feathers, continued unabated, there was no let-up, and the feeling that I was alone, also with her, grew stronger and stronger.

In the short time we had known each other we had never done anything half-heartedly, and this was no exception.

One evening we'd had a row and after we had made up, we began to talk about children. We had decided to have a child while Linda was at the Dramatiska Institut, she could drop out for six months, and then I could take over while she finished her training. For it to work she would have to stop the medication, so she had to set this up; the doctors were reluctant, but the therapist supported her and, when it came to the crunch, the final decision was hers.

We discussed this nearly every day.

Now I said perhaps we should postpone it.

Apart from the light from the television, which was on in the corner, with the sound turned down, the flat was in total darkness. The autumnal darkness was like an ocean outside the windows.

'Perhaps we should put it off for a while,' I said.

'What did you say?' Linda said, staring at me.

'We can wait a bit, see how things go. You can finish your course . . .'

She got up and slapped my face with the palm of her hand as hard as she could.

'Never!' she shouted.

'What are you doing?' I said. 'Have you gone mad? *Hitting me like that!'*

My cheek stung. She had hit me really hard.

'I'm off,' I said. 'And I'm never coming back. So you can forget that.'

I turned and went into the hall, took my coat from the hook.

Behind me she was crying, bitter tears.

'Don't go, Karl Ove,' she said. 'Don't leave me now.'

I turned.

'Do you think you can do as you like? Is that what you think?'

'Forgive me,' she said. 'But stay. Just tonight.'

I stood motionless in the darkness by the door and looked at her, vacillating.

‘OK,’ I said. ‘I’ll stay here tonight. But then I’m going.’

‘Thank you,’ she said.

At seven next morning I woke and left the flat without breakfast, went to my earlier flat, which I still had. Took a cup of coffee with me to the roof terrace, sat smoking and looking out over the town wondering what to do next.

I couldn’t stay with her. It was impossible.

I rang Geir on my mobile, did he feel like a trip to Djurgården, it was quite important, I had to talk to someone. Yes, he did, just had to finish off a few jobs first, we could meet by the bridge outside the Nordic Museum, and then walk right to the end, where there was a restaurant in which we could have lunch. And that was what we did, we walked under the masonry-grey sky, between the leafless trees, on a path gaily strewn with yellow, red and brown leaves. I said nothing about what had happened, it was too humiliating, I couldn’t tell anyone she had slapped me because what would that make me? I said only that we had quarrelled and that I didn’t know what to do any more. He said I should listen to my heart. I said I didn’t know what I felt. He said he was sure I did.

But I didn’t. I had two different sets of feelings for her. One said you have to get out, she wants too much from you, you’re going to lose all your freedom, waste all your time on her, and what will happen to all you hold dear, your independence and your writing? The other set said, you love her, she gives you something others can’t and she knows who you are. Exactly who you are. Both sets were equally right, but they were incompatible, one excluded the other.

On this day thoughts of leaving were uppermost in my mind.

When Geir and I were in the Metro carriage coming out of Västertorp, she rang. Asked if I wanted to eat with her in the evening, she had bought crabs, my favourite food. I said yes, we would have to talk anyway.

I rang the doorbell even though I had a key, she opened and studied me with a careful smile.

‘Hi,’ she said.

She was wearing the white blouse I liked so much.

‘Hi,’ I said.

One hand moved forward as though intending to embrace me, but it stopped and she took a step back instead.

‘Come in,’ she said.

‘Thank you,’ I replied. Hung my jacket on the hook, body angled slightly away from her. As I turned she reached up and we gave each other a hug.

‘Are you hungry?’ she asked.

‘Yes, quite,’ I said.

‘Then let’s eat straight away.’

I followed her to the table, which was under the window on the other side of the room from the bed. She had laid a white cloth. Between the two plates and glasses, plus two bottles of beer, there was a candlestick with three candles, and three small flames flickered in the draught. A dish of crabs, a basket of white bread, butter, lemon and mayonnaise as well.

‘I’m not so skilled with crabs, it transpired,’ she said. ‘I didn’t know how to open them. Perhaps you do?’

‘Sort of,’ I said.

I broke off the legs, opened the shells and removed the stomachs while she flipped off the bottle tops.

‘What have you been doing today?’ I said, passing her a shell which was almost completely full.

‘I couldn’t even think of going to class, so I rang Mikaela and had lunch with her.’

‘Did you tell her what happened?’

She nodded.

‘That you slapped me?’

‘Yes.’

‘What did she say?’

‘Not much. She listened.’

She looked at me.

‘Can you forgive me?’

‘Of course. I just don’t understand why you did it. How can you lose control of yourself like that? I assume you hadn’t intended to do it? I mean, on reflection?’

‘Karl Ove,’ she said.

‘Yes?’ I said.

‘I’m very sorry. Terribly sorry. But it was what you said that hit me so hard. Before I met you I hadn’t even dared imagine that I might have children one day. I didn’t dare. Even when I fell in love with you I didn’t. And then you said what you said. It was you who brought up the subject, do you remember? The very first morning. I want to have children with you. And I was so happy. I was so utterly, insanely happy. Just the fact that there was a possibility. It was you who gave me that possibility. And then . . . yesterday . . . well, it was like you were withdrawing the possibility. You said perhaps we should put off having children. That hit me so hard, it was so crushing, and then . . . well . . . I completely lost control.’

Her eyes were moist as she held the crab shell over the slice of bread and tried to lever out the firm flesh along the edge with the knife.

‘Do you understand?’ she said.

I nodded.

‘Of course I do. But you can’t do as you please, however strong your emotions are. That’s no good. I mean, for Christ’s sake. That just won’t do. I can’t live like that. The feeling that you might turn on me and start slapping me. It won’t do, I can’t live with that. We’re supposed to be together, aren’t we. We can’t be enemies, I couldn’t stand that, I don’t have the energy. It’s no good, Linda.’

‘No, it isn’t,’ she said. ‘I’ll pull myself together. I promise you.’

We sat quietly for a while, eating. The moment one of us changed the topic of conversation to something more usual and humdrum, what had happened would also be over.

I wanted to and didn’t want to.

The crab meat on the bread was both smooth and uneven, reddish-brown like the leaves on the field, and the salty, almost bitter taste of sea, softened by the sweetness of the mayonnaise, yet sharpened by the lemon juice, overtook all my senses for a few seconds.

‘Is it good?’ she asked with a smile.

‘Yes, it’s really good,’ I replied.

What I had said to her on the first morning we had woken up together had not been just something I said but something I felt with all my heart and soul. I wanted to have children with her. I had never felt that before. And this feeling made me certain it was right, that this was right.

But at any price?

My mother came to Stockholm, I introduced her to Linda at a restaurant, it seemed to go well, Linda shone, shy and extrovert at the same time, while I watched mum and her reactions. She was staying in my flat, I said goodnight to her at the gate, she went in and I jogged back to Linda’s flat, which was ten minutes away. The next day, when I collected her to have breakfast at a café, mum told me she hadn’t been able to put the light on in the hallway and so it had taken her almost an hour to get into the flat.

‘The light turned itself off while I was on the stairs,’ she said. ‘Automatically. I couldn’t see a metre in front of me.’

‘That’s the Swedes saving energy,’ I said. ‘They never leave a room without switching off the light. And in communal areas there are automatic time switches. But why didn't you turn it back on, if I might ask?'

'It was too dark to see the switches.'

'But the switches are luminous.'

'So *that* was what was shining!' she said. 'I thought they were the fire alarms or something.'

'What about your lighter?' I said.

'Yes, I remembered that eventually. I was so desperate that I fumbled my way downstairs to have a cigarette and that was when I found it. So then I went back up, flicked it on, opened the door and went in.'

'That's so typical of you,' I said.

'Maybe,' she said. 'But this is a different country, that's why. The little details are different.'

'What do you think about Linda?'

'She's a lovely girl,' she said.

'Yes, isn't she,' I said.

She didn't have to say that, of course. Well, I wasn't in any doubt that she would like Linda, it was more that I had just been in such a long, established relationship. Married even. Tonje had been part of the family, it was as simple as that. Even though the relationship was over, the feelings they had for her were not. Yngve was sorry she was no longer around, and perhaps mum was too. At the end of the summer, after Tonje and I had divided all our possessions without any trauma – we were good to each other – the only time a semblance of sorrow came over me was when I was in the cellar fetching something and was suddenly brought up with a sob – we'd had a life together, now it was over. After the days there, which passed without any conflict, I went to mum's place in Jølster with our cat, which she was going to keep. I told her about Linda then. It was obvious she wasn't best pleased, but she didn't say anything. Half an hour later a sentence crossed her lips which caused me to take stock of her. It was so unlike mum to say that sort of thing. She said I couldn't see other people. I was completely blind, I saw only myself everywhere. Your father, she said, he looked straight into people. He saw immediately who they were. You've never done that. No, I said, perhaps I haven't.

I'm sure she was right, but that wasn't so important, the significant issue was partly that she had ranked dad, that terrible human being, above me, and partly that she had done it because she was angry with me. And that was new, mum was never angry with me.

At that time Linda and I were still in the glow zone, and she must have seen that I was glowing with love and *joie de vivre*.

In Stockholm a little more than six months later everything was different. I was full of grudges, the relationship was so claustrophobic and dark that I wanted to leave, but I couldn’t, I was too weak, I thought about her, I pitied her, without me she would be lost, I was too weak, I loved her.

Then came the lunches at Filmhuset, where we sat chatting about everything under the sun, gesticulating enthusiastically, or at home in the flat or at cafés, there was so much to say, there was so much to cover, not just my life and hers, as it had been, but also our lives, as they were now, with all the people who populated them. Before, I had always been deep inside myself, observing people from there, like from the back of a garden. Linda brought me out, right to the edge of myself, where everything was near and everything seemed stronger. Then came the films at Cinemateket, the nights out on the town, the weekends with her mother in Gnesta, the stillness of the forest, in which she sometimes looked like a little girl and showed how vulnerable she was. Then there was the trip to Venice, she *shouted* that I didn’t love her, she kept shouting it again and again. In the evenings we got drunk and made love with a wildness that was new and alien and also frightening, not at the time, but the next day, when I reflected on it, it was as though we wanted to hurt each other. After she had left I could hardly be bothered to go out, I tried to write in the loft of the flat, I could barely drag myself the few hundred metres to the grocer’s and back. The walls were cold, the alleyways empty, the canals full of coffin-like gondolas. What I saw was dead, what I wrote of no value.

One day, sitting like this, alone in the cold Italian apartment, I happened to recall what Stig Sæterbakken had said the evening I got together with Linda. That in his next novel he would try to write a little more like me.

Suddenly my face burned with shame.

The comment had been sarcastic and I hadn’t understood.

I thought he had MEANT it.

Oh, how conceited do you have to be to believe that sort of comment? How utterly stupid can you be? Were there no limits?

I got up quickly, hurried down the stairs, put on my clothes and dashed round the alleyways along the canals for an hour trying to find the beauty in the filthy deep green water, the ancient stone walls, the splendour in the whole of this crooked and crumbling world, to stem the enormous bitterness against myself that the recognition of Sæterbakken's sarcasm caused to flood over me time and time again.

In a large piazza I entered without warning I sat down and ordered a coffee, lit a cigarette and considered at length that perhaps this was not a matter of much import.

I raised the tiny cup to my lips with my index and middle fingers, which seemed monstrously large by comparison, leaned back in the chair and peered up at the sky. I never paid any attention to it inside the labyrinthine network of streets and canals, it was a bit like wandering through underground passages. When the narrow streets opened up into piazzas, and the sky stretched across the rooftops and church spires it always came as a surprise. That was how it was, yes: the sky did exist! The sun did exist! It felt as though I also became more open, lighter in colour and weight.

For all I knew, Sæterbakken might have thought my enthusiastic response was *also* sarcastic.

Later that autumn the temperature plummeted, all the water and the canals in Stockholm froze, one Sunday we walked on the ice from Söder to Stockholm Old Town, I hobbled along like the hunchback of Notre Dame, she laughed and took photos of me, I took photos of her, everything was sharp and clear, including my feelings for her. We clicked on the photos and looked at them in a café, ran home to make love, rented two films, bought a pizza, lay in bed all evening. It was one of the days I will always remember, perhaps precisely because it comprised normal frivolous activities that became overlaid with gold.

The winter came and with it snow whirling in the air above the town. White streets, white roofs, all sounds softened. One evening while we were out wandering aimlessly in all the whiteness and, perhaps from force of habit, approaching the mountain along which Bastugatan ran, she asked me where I was planning to spend Christmas. I said at home, with my mother in Jølster. She wanted to join me. I said that wasn't appropriate, it was too early. Why was it too early? Surely you know. No, I don't. Right.

It developed into a row. We sat in the Bishop’s Arms with a beer in front of us without saying a word, incensed. To compensate, my Christmas present to her was a surprise trip; when I returned on the 27th we went to Arlanda Airport and she didn’t know our destination until I gave her the ticket: Paris. We were there for a week. But Linda had an attack of nerves, the city stressed her, she lost her temper over nothing and was constantly unreasonable. When we were eating dinner on the first evening and I was flustered with the waiter because I didn’t know quite how to behave in fine surroundings, she sent me a glare full of disdain. Oh, it was hopeless. What had I got myself caught up in? Where was my life going? I wanted to do some shopping but could see that was not on, she already disliked Paris and hated it now, and as she hated being alone most, I dropped the idea. The days could begin well, such as when we went to the Eiffel Tower, the building with the most intense nineteenth-century aura I had seen, and then collapse into black, unreasonable moods, or they could start badly and end well, such as when we called on a girlfriend of Linda’s who lived in Paris, next to the cemetery where Marcel Proust was buried and which we visited afterwards. And on New Year’s Eve, which we spent in an elegant intimate restaurant thanks to a tip from my Francophile friend in Bergen, Johannes, and were spoilt in every conceivable manner, we sat there glowing as in the old days, that is, six months previously, until, an hour into the New Year, we walked hand in hand along the Seine to our hotel. And whatever it was that oppressed her in Paris, it was gone the instant we arrived at the airport heading for home.

The owner of the flat I was renting was going to sell it, so I moved all my possessions, that is all my books, to a warehouse outside town on one of the first days in January, cleaned up, handed over the keys, and Linda enquired around her friends to see if they knew of an office somewhere, and yes, Cora had heard about some sort of collective for freelancers, they had a place at the top of the palace-like construction towering over the peak of the small mountain on one side of Slussen, only a hundred metres from the flat I’d had, I got a room and started working there during the day. It was a new beginning, I added the last hundred pages to the already long file of beginnings, and recommenced. This time I tackled the little angel theme. I bought one of those cheap art books, full of pictures of angels, and one of them attracted my interest: it was of three angels out walking in the Italian countryside, wearing sixteenth-century clothes. I wrote about someone who saw them walking, a boy who was keeping an eye on some sheep, one had gone missing and while looking for it, through some trees, he saw the angels. It was a rare sight, but not so very unusual, angels were to be found in forests and on the margins of human activity and had been for as long as people could remember. That was as far as I got. What was the story?

This had nothing to do with me, nothing of my life was in it, consciously or unconsciously, and that meant I couldn't get involved in it, couldn't drive it forward. I might just as well have been writing about the Phantom and the Skull Cave.

Where was the story?

One meaningless day's work followed another. I had no alternative but to keep going, there was nothing else. The people I shared office space with were nice enough, but so full of radical-left goodness that I was left speechless when – having used the word 'negro' and immediately been corrected in conversation by one of them while waiting for the coffee machine to brew – I discovered that the man who cleaned the offices, the kitchen and the toilet for them was black. They observed solidarity, equality and consideration towards others in their language and spread a kind of net over a reality which continued on its unjust and discriminating path below them. I couldn't say this. Twice there had been break-ins; one morning when I arrived the police were on the premises asking questions. Computer and photography equipment had been stolen. Since the main front door had not been broken, only the one into our offices, they concluded the culprit had to be someone with a key. Afterwards we sat discussing the matter. I said this was not a hard nut to crack. After all, there were several nameless drug addicts on the floor below. One of them must have got hold of the key. Everyone stared at me. You can't say that, one of them declared. I looked at him in surprise. That's prejudice, he said. We don't know who did it. It could have been anyone. Just because they're drug addicts and have a troubled past, it doesn't mean they broke in here! We have to give them a chance! I nodded and said he was right, we couldn't know for certain. But inwardly I was shaken. I had seen the bunch of them hanging around the staircase before and after the meetings they held, they were the types that would do anything for money, it wasn’t bloody prejudice, it was bleeding obvious.

This was the Sweden Geir had told me about. And now I missed him. This story was grist to the mill. But he was in Baghdad.

During this period I was still getting visits from Norway, one after the other they made their way over to Stockholm, I showed them around, they met Linda, we ate out, drifted, got drunk. One weekend in late winter Thure Erik was supposed to come over, driving the old banger he had once crossed the Sahara in, according to what he told me, never more to return to Norway. He did though, and had written a novel that meant a lot to me, it was entitled *Zalep*, which I liked so much, the thinking in it was so radical, so different from everything else in Norwegian novels because it was so uncompromising and because the language was so unique, so all of its own. The oddity was how much of the language turned out to be part of his character, or in harmony with it, which I did not pick up the first time I met him, for it was an extremely superficial evening at Kunsternes Hus, but I did on the second, third and fourth times, and not least during the weeks we stayed in two cabins on a wintry and deserted campsite in Telemark with a rushing river nearby and a starry night sky arched above us. He was a large man with enormous fists and a gnarled face, his eyes were alive and always freely revealed his mood. As I admired the novels he wrote I found it difficult to talk to him, everything I said was obviously stupid, could not hold a candle to what he was doing, but there, in Telemark, having breakfast together, trudging the two kilometres to the school together, teaching together, having dinner and drinking coffee or beer together in the evenings, there was nowhere to hide. You had to speak. He told me that the station before Bø was called Juksebø, and we laughed long and hard about that. *Bø* was the word for a settlement and *jukse* meant to cheat. I told him my jacket wasn’t a jacket, it was a *skinn* jacket, punning on the word for leather and make-believe. He laughed even louder, it was as easy as that. His brain raced, everything caught his interest and was refracted in him, which took it further, because everything in him moved towards a horizon beyond, he had such a great thirst for the extreme, and this made the world around him appear in a constantly new light, a thure-erik-lund light, yet it didn’t only apply to him, because the idiosyncratic nature of this was *also* refracted in him, in a tradition, in his reading.

Not many people approach the world with the same energy.

He was kind to me, I felt like a kind of younger brother, someone he took under his wing and showed things while curious to know what I was getting out of being here, or *herrre*, as he said. One evening he asked if I wanted to read something he had written, I said, yes, of course, he passed me two sheets, I began to read, it was an absolutely fantastic introduction, an apocalyptic explosion of dynamite in an old rural world, a child running out of school and into the forest, it was magical, but when I happened to glance up at him he was sitting with his head hidden in his great hands like an ashamed child.

'Ooooh, it's so embarrassing,' he said. 'So damned embarrassing.'

What?

Had he gone mad?

This man, with all of his character, as obstinate as he was generous, as movable as he was irrepressible, was going to visit Linda and me in Stockholm.

Two days before, we had to go to a birthday party. Mikaela was thirty. She lived in a one-room flat in Söder, not far from Långholmen, it was jam-packed with people, we found some room in a corner, talked to a woman who was the director of some kind of peace organisation, from what I could glean, and her husband, who was a computer engineer and worked for a telephone company. They were good company, I had a couple of beers, felt like something stronger, found a bottle of aquavit and started drinking from it. I got more and more drunk, night fell, people started going home, we stayed, in the end I was so plastered that I was making paper balls from the serviettes and throwing them at people nearby. There was only the hard core left, Linda's closest friends, and if I wasn't having fun and throwing balls at their heads I was babbling away about whatever occurred to me and laughing a lot. Tried to say something nice about everyone, failed, but at least my intention had been clear. In the end Linda dragged me out, I objected, now that everything was so cosy, but she tugged at me, I put on my coat, and then we were suddenly on our way down the street far below the flat. Linda was furious with me. I didn't understand, what was the matter now? I was so drunk. No one else was drunk, hadn’t I noticed? Only me. The other twenty-five guests had been sober. That was how it was in Sweden: one aim of a successful evening was that everyone left the party in the same state as they arrived. I was used to people drinking until the ceiling lifted. Wasn’t this a thirtieth-birthday party? No, I had disgraced her, she had never been so embarrassed, these were her best friends, and there I was, her man, about whom she had said such incredibly nice things, there he was talking drivel and tossing paper balls at people and insulting them, completely out of control.

I lost my temper. She had crossed the line. Or else I was so drunk there was no line. I swore at her, shouted that she was terrible, all she ever thought about was making me toe lines, putting obstacles in my way, clinging to me as tightly as possible. It was sick, I yelled, you are sick. Now I’m going to fucking leave you. You’ll never see me again.

I walked away as fast as I could. She came running after me.

You’re drunk, she said. Calm down. We can talk about this tomorrow. You can’t go to town in that state.

Why the hell not? I said, pulling her hand off me. We had reached the tiny patch of grass between her street and mine. I never want to see you again, I shouted, strode across the street and went down towards Zinkensdamm Station. Linda stopped outside her flat and called after me. I didn’t turn. Crossed Söder, through the Old Town to Central Station, still fuming the whole way. My plan was simple: I would get on the train to Oslo and leave this shit town and never go back. Never. Never ever. It was snowing, it was cold, but the anger was keeping me warm. Inside the station I could barely distinguish the letters on the departures board, but after some intense concentration, which I also had to apply in order to keep my balance, I saw that there was a train between nine and ten in the morning. It was four o’clock now.

What should I do in the meantime?

I found a bench at the back and settled down to sleep. The last thought I had before falling asleep was that I mustn’t waver when I woke up, I had to stick to my decision, Stockholm was the past, irrespective of how sober I was.

A station guard shook my shoulder; I opened my eyes.

‘You can’t sleep here,’ he said.

‘I’m waiting for a train,’ I said, sitting up slowly.

‘Fine. But you can’t sleep here.’

‘Can I sit?’ I asked.

‘Hardly,’ he said. ‘You’re drunk, aren’t you. Perhaps the best would be to go home.’

‘OK,’ I said. Got up.

Whoops. Yes, still drunk.

It was just after eight. The station was crowded. All I wanted was to sleep. My head was terribly heavy, it burned in a kind of fever, such that nothing I saw took root, everything glanced off, I trudged down through the Metro corridors, got on a train, got off at Zinkensdamm, up to the flat, no key, so I had to bang on the door.

I had to sleep. Couldn’t give a toss about anything else.

Linda came running into the hall on the opposite side of the glass door.

‘Oh, there you are,’ she said, wrapping her arms around me. ‘I’ve been so afraid. I’ve rung every hospital in town. Has a tall Norwegian been brought in . . . ? Where have you been?’

‘At Central Station,’ I said. ‘I was going to catch the train to Norway. But now I have to sleep. Leave me be, and don’t wake me.’

‘OK,’ she said. ‘Do you want anything when you wake up? Coke, bacon?’

‘Couldn’t care less,’ I said, and stormed into the flat, tore off my clothes, got under the duvet and was asleep in an instant.

When I woke it was dark outside. Linda was sitting on the chair in the kitchen and reading beneath the lamp, which, like a wading bird standing on one leg, long and thin, with its head slightly slanted, was lit above her.

‘Hi,’ she said. ‘How are you?’

I poured myself a glass of water and drank it in one swig.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Apart from the angst.’

‘I’m very sorry about last night,’ she said, putting the book on the armrest and getting up.

‘Me too,’ I said.

‘Is it true that you were going to leave?’

I nodded.

‘I was. I’d had enough.’

She put her arms around me.

‘I understand,’ she said.

‘It wasn’t just what happened at the party. It’s much more.’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Come on. Let’s go into the sitting room,’ I said. Refilled my glass and sat down at the table. Linda followed and switched on the ceiling light.

‘Do you remember the first time I came here?’ I said. ‘To this room, I mean.’

She nodded.

‘You said you thought you were becoming *kjær*, fond, of me.’

‘It was an understatement.’

‘Yes, I know that now. But in fact I was offended. *Kjær* sounds very weak in Norwegian. You can be fond of an aunt. I didn’t know that *kjær* in Swedish was the same as *forelsket* in Norwegian. In love. I thought you said you were beginning to like me a little, and it might become something, given time. That was how I interpreted you.’

She gave a faint smile and looked down at the table.

‘I plunged in with both feet,’ she said. ‘Got you up here and told you what I felt for you. And then you were so cold. You said we could be friends, do you remember? I had invested everything and lost everything. I was so desperate after you’d left.’

‘But now we’re here.’

‘Yes.’

‘You can’t tell me what to do, Linda. That won’t wash. I’ll leave you. And I don’t mean about drinking. I mean about everything. You can’t do that.’

‘I know.’

There was a silence.

‘Didn’t we have some meatballs in the fridge?’ I asked. ‘I’m bloody famished.’

She nodded.

I went into the kitchen, shook the meatballs into a frying pan and put the water on for spaghetti. I heard Linda come in behind me.

‘There was nothing wrong this summer,’ I said. ‘I mean with the drinking. You didn’t mind then, did you?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘And it was fantastic. I am frightened of crossing lines, but I wasn’t then, not with you, it felt very secure. It never felt as if it was going to tip over and become manic or simply ugly. It felt very safe. And I’ve never felt that before. But now it’s different. We’ve moved on.’

‘Right,’ I said, and turned as the butter began to melt among the meatballs in the pan. ‘Where are we now then?’

She shrugged.

‘I don’t know. But it feels as if we’ve lost something. Something is finished. And I’m frightened the rest will disappear.’

‘But you can’t force me. That’s the best way to make it disappear.’

‘Of course. I know that.’

I sprinkled salt into the water for the spaghetti.

‘Are you going to have some?’ I asked.

She nodded, wiping away tears with her thumbs.

Thure Erik arrived at around two the next day, filled the whole of the tiny flat with his personality the second he stepped inside. We went to some second-hand bookshops, he perused what they had of old natural history, and then we went to Pelikanen, had dinner and drank beer until they closed. I told him about the night on the railway station and my decision to catch the train back to Norway.

‘But *I* was coming!’ he said. ‘Was I supposed to turn round and go back?’

‘That was exactly what I was thinking about when I woke up,’ I said. ‘Thure Erik Lund is coming. I can’t bloody go home now.’

He laughed, and began to tell me about a relationship that was so stormy that mine and Linda’s seemed like a midsummer comedy by comparison. I drank twenty beers that night, and all I can remember from the last hours is an old drunk with whom Thure Erik had struck up a conversation, who sat down at our table and kept saying I was so good-looking, such a good-looking lad. Thure Erik laughed and nudged me in the shoulder between his attempts to draw the man out about his life. And then I remember us standing outside the flat and him clambering into the back of his car to sleep as light snowflakes swirled around beneath the cold grey sky.

One room and a kitchen: that was our arena. We cooked there, we ate, slept, made love, chatted, watched TV, read books, quarrelled and received all our visitors there. It was small and cramped, but it was enough, we managed, we kept our heads above water. But if we wanted children, which we talked about non-stop, we would have to find ourselves a bigger flat. Linda’s mother had one in the city centre, it had only two rooms, but was more than eighty square metres, a football pitch in comparison with what we had now. She no longer used the flat, but she rented it out and said we could have it. Not quite like that, because it wasn’t legal – in Sweden rental contracts are personal and for life – but exchanges are possible: Linda’s mother would take Linda’s and we would take hers.

One day we went to see it.

It was the most bourgeois apartment I had ever seen. An enormous Russian-style stove from the previous century at one end of the room, with a massive marble front; another one, just as tall, slightly less massive, in the bedroom. White, beautifully carved panels on all the walls, stucco work on the ceilings, which were more than four metres tall. Fantastic herringbone parquet floors from the end of the nineteenth century. Her mother’s furniture was in the same style: heavy, artistic, late nineteenth-century.

‘Can we live here?’ I said as we walked round looking.

‘No, of course we can’t,’ Linda said. ‘Shouldn’t we swap with a flat in Skärholmen or somewhere like that? It’s dead here.’

Skärholmen was one of the immigrant-occupied satellite towns, we had been to a market there one Saturday and been struck by the life and the diversity.

‘I agree,’ I said. ‘It would be almost impossible to make this *ours*.’

At the same time the thought of moving in here had some appeal. Spacious, beautiful, central location. Did it matter that we would be lost in the rooms? Or perhaps we could fight them, control them, make the bourgeois style part of us?

I have always wanted the bourgeois lifestyle. Always wanted the properness. Always wanted the stiff forms and strict rules to be there to keep the inner in place, to regulate it, to mould it into something you can live with, not allow it to tear up your life again and again. But whenever I had been in a middle-class setting, for example with my father’s parents or with Tonje’s father, the opposite happened, it was as if it made all the otherness in me visible, all that did not fit, that fell outside the forms and structures, all that I hated about myself.

But here? Linda and I and a child? A new life, a new town, a new flat, a new happiness?

This notion overshadowed the sombre, lifeless first impression the flat had made, we warmed to it and became enthusiastic after making love on the bed; as we lay with a pillow beneath our heads afterwards, smoking, we were in no doubt that our new life would begin here.

At the end of April Geir returned from Iraq, we had dinner at an expensive American restaurant in the Old Town, he was so excited and full of life in a way I had never seen before, and it took several weeks for all his experiences, all the people he had met there, whom gradually I became utterly familiar with, to begin to fade so that other matters could occupy his mind and his conversation. At the beginning of May Linda and I moved our possessions across, with help from Anders, and when we had done that we cleaned the flat. We spent the afternoon and all the evening, and when we still hadn't finished at eleven, Linda suddenly slumped back against the wall.

'I've had it!' she called. 'I can't do any more!'

'One more hour,' I said. 'An hour and a half tops. You can manage that.'

She had tears in her eyes.

'Let's ring mummy,' she said. 'We don't have to finish. She'll drop by tomorrow and do it. It's not a problem. I know it isn't.'

'Would you let someone clean your apartment?' I asked. 'Clean up your mess? You can't shout for your mother every time you've got problems. You're thirty years old for Christ's sake!'

She sighed.

'Yes, I know,' she said. 'I'm just worn out. And she *can* do it. It's not a problem for her.'

'But it is for me. And it should be for you too.'

She grabbed a cloth, got up and resumed wiping the bathroom door frame.

'I can do the rest,' I said. 'Off you go, and I'll follow you later.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I am. It's fine.'

'OK.'

She put on her outdoor clothes and went out in the darkness, I finished the cleaning and it was true what I had said: it didn't matter to me. The next day we moved my things, that is to say all my books, which had now grown to number two and a half thousand titles, a fact which Anders and Geir, who were helping me with the move, cursed from the bottom of their hearts as we shifted the boxes from the lift into the flat. Geir compared it of course with unloading ammunition cases alongside the US Marines, an activity which for him was only a few weeks ago but for me was as alien as Wells Fargo stagecoaches or bison hunting. When the removal goods were stacked in two enormous piles in the two rooms I started painting the walls while Linda went to Norway to make a radio programme about 17 May. She was going to stay with my mother, whom she had only met once for a few hours in Stockholm. After she was on the train I rang my mother, something was bothering me, all the signs of Tonje's presence, especially the photograph of the wedding, which was still hanging on the wall when I had been there for Christmas, and the wedding album. I didn't want Linda to be subjected to that, I didn't want her to feel she was on the periphery of my life, a replacement, and after a short preamble, catching up on news since we last met, I began to zero in on the topic. I knew it was stupid, and actually humiliating, for Linda, her and me, but I couldn't stop myself, I couldn't bear the thought that it might hurt Linda, so in the end I said it. Would she mind taking down the wedding photo, or at least putting it in a more discreet position? Not at all, in fact, it was already down. After all we were no longer married. What about the album then? I asked. You know, of the wedding. You couldn't tuck it away somewhere, could you? Oh no, Karl Ove, mum said. That's my photo album. It represents a phase of my life. I don't want to hide it. Linda will be fine with it; she knows you've been married. You're both adults. OK, I said, you're right, it's your photo album. I just don't want to hurt her. You won't, mum said, it'll be fine.

It was a brave decision of Linda's to stay with her, a reaching out of her hand, and it went fine, we spoke on the phone several times a day, she said she was stunned by the Vestland landscape, all the green and the blue and the white, all the high mountains and the deep fjords, almost completely deserted, the sun shining in the sky all the time, she felt transported into a dream-like state. She phoned from a little boarding house in Balestrand, described the view from her window, the lapping of the waves she could hear when she leaned out, and her voice was laden with the future. Whatever she said, it was us she was talking about, that was my interpretation. The world was so beautiful, that was about us, for we were in it together, indeed, it was almost as if we were the world. I told her how nice the large rooms were now that they were no longer grey but white. I was laden with the future as well. I was looking forward to her returning home to see what I had done, and I was looking forward to living here, in the city centre, and to the child we had decided we would have. We rang off, I went on painting, the following day was 17 May, and in the afternoon Espen and Eirik were going to drop by. They had been to a critics' seminar at Biskops-Arnö. We went out to eat, I introduced them to Geir, he got on well with Eirik, in the sense that they talked without inhibition about a variety of topics, but Geir didn't get on so well with Espen. Geir uttered a few truisms, Espen challenged them, and when Geir noticed he froze, and that was that. As usual I tried to mediate – give Espen something with one hand and Geir something with the other – but it was too late, they were never going to be able to talk, like or respect each other. I liked both of them, all three of them in fact, but my life had always been like this, there were heavy bulkheads between the various parts, and I behaved in such different ways with each of them that I felt caught when they came together and I couldn't behave in one way or the other, but had to keep mixing the styles, in other words behave oddly or keep my mouth shut. I liked Espen a lot precisely because he was Espen, and Geir a lot precisely because he was Geir, and this character trait of mine, actually pleasantness, at least in my eyes, always brought with it a sense of hypocrisy.

Linda had been with my family all day, she told me the following morning; she and mum had gone to Dale where mum's sister Kjellaug and her husband Magne lived on their farm high above the village and celebrated 17 May in traditional manner. She had been interviewing people, and from what she told me, she found the whole affair truly exotic. The speeches, the costumes, the band, the children's procession. In the morning they had seen deer on the edge of the forest, and on the way home there were porpoises frolicking in the fjord. Mum had said that was a good omen, they brought luck.

There weren't often porpoises in the fjord, I had seen them only a couple of times, the first time close up, in a boat with grandad, it had been misty and perfectly still, and then they swam up, at first it was only a noise, like the bow of a yacht ploughing through the water, and then there they were, smooth, glistening, dark grey bodies. Up and down, up and down, they swam. Grandma had said, like mum, that they brought good luck. Linda was excited but tired at the same time, which she had been throughout the trip, and going round all the hairpin bends had made her carsick, so she had gone to bed early, she told me. The previous evening she had been up with grandma's youngest sister, Alvdis, ten years older than mum, and her husband Anfinn, a small but powerful man with a cheery disposition and a strong personality, whom Linda loved, and the feeling appeared to be mutual because he had taken out all his souvenirs from the time when he used to go whaling, and talked about his experiences from those days, probably further motivated by the microphone Linda held between them. They made pancakes with penguin eggs, he told her with a laugh, although she was a little concerned about the recording. Anfinn spoke in broad Jølster dialect, which would doubtless be incomprehensible to Swedes.

Espen left in the morning, but Eirik stayed and went to town while I put the final books on shelves and got rid of the last boxes, so that everything would be finished for when Linda came back the next morning. That evening we went out again and afterwards we sat at home drinking duty-free spirits through the night. Linda and I kept texting each other because she had felt sick, she had been tired, surely that could mean only one thing, couldn't it? The texts became more passionate and loving the later it got, but in the end she wrote goodnight, my prince, perhaps tomorrow is going to be a big day!

When I went to bed at seven the clear flame of alcohol was burning in me so strongly that I could no longer see my surroundings, it was as if my inner self was everything, the way it was when I drank myself senseless. Yet I had enough presence of mind to set the clock for nine. I had to collect Linda off the train.

At nine I was still drunk. It was only by mobilising all the willpower I possessed that I managed to stagger to my feet. I dragged myself into the bathroom, showered, put on some clean clothes, shouted to Eirik that I was going, he was lying on the sofa fully dressed, and forced himself up and said he was going out for breakfast, I said we could meet at around twelve in the restaurant where we had been the previous day, he nodded, I swayed down the stairs and made it to the street, where the sun was glaringly bright and the tarmac smelt of spring.

I stopped on the way to buy a Coke, guzzled it down and bought another. Inspected my face in a shop window. It didn't look good. Narrow red eyes. Tired features.

I would have given everything I had to postpone the meeting by three hours. But that was impossible, her train would be arriving at the station in thirteen minutes and I would have to get my skates on.

As she came down the platform she was happy and light of foot, she looked around for me with a smile on her lips, I waved, she waved back and walked towards me trundling her suitcase after her with one hand.

She looked at me.

'Hi,' I said.

'What's up? Are you drunk?' she asked.

I stepped forward and put my arms around her.

'Hi,' I repeated. 'It got a bit late last night, but nothing special. I was at home with Eirik.'

'You reek of alcohol,' she said, wriggling free. 'How could you do that to me? Today of all days?'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'But it's no big deal, is it?'

She didn't answer, began to walk. Didn't say a word as we left the station. On the escalator up to Klarabergsviadukten she started to swear at me. She shook the door of the chemist at the top, but it was Sunday and closed. We continued down to the chemist on the other side of NK. She was furious the whole way. I walked beside her like a dog. The second chemist was open. I'm so bloody sick of you, she said. I don't understand why I live with you. You only think about yourself. Doesn't what we said yesterday mean anything? she said, and then it was her turn, she wanted a pregnancy test, was given one, paid for it, we left, up Regeringsgatan, she continued to hurl abuse at me, it came in one long stream, passers-by sent us looks, but she didn't care, her fury, which I had always feared, had her in its grip. I felt like asking her to stop, asking her to be nice, I had apologised, and it wasn't as though I had done anything, there was no connection between our texts and the fact that I had been drinking with a guest from Norway, nor between the fact that I had got drunk and the pregnancy test she was holding in her hand, but she didn't see it like that, for her this was all the same, she was a romantic, she had a dream about the two of us, about love and our child, and my behaviour smashed that dream, or reminded her that it was a dream. I was a bad person, an irresponsible person, how could I even imagine becoming a father? How could I subject her to this? I walked beside her, burning with shame because people were looking at us, burning with guilt because I had been drinking and burning with terror because, in her unbridled rage, she went straight for me and the person I was. This was humiliating, but for as long as she was in the right, for as long as what she said was true – that this was the day we might find out if we were going to have a child and I had met her off the train drunk – I couldn't ask her to stop or tell her to go to hell. She was right, or she was within her rights, I would have to bow my head and put up with this.

It struck me that Eirik might be close by and bowed my head even lower, this was almost the worst thought, that someone I knew would see me like this.

We went up the stairs, into the flat. Fresh coat of paint, everything in its place: this was our home.

She didn't even grace it with a glance.

I stopped in the middle of the floor.

She had hit out at me in her anger, the way a boxer hits a punchbag. As though I were an object. As though I had no feelings, yes, as though I had no inner life, as though I were just this empty body that wandered around in her life.

I knew she was pregnant, of that I was absolutely certain, and I had been from the moment we made love. That's it, I had thought, now we are going to have a baby.

And so it was.

Suddenly, while I was standing there everything inside me opened. My defences fell. I had no resistance to muster. I started crying. The type of crying where I lose control of everything and everything is distorted to the point of being grotesque.

Linda stopped, turned and looked at me.

She had never seen me cry before. I hadn't done it since dad died, and that would soon be five years ago.

She looked terrified.

I turned away, I didn't want her to see, that made the humiliation ten times worse, it wasn't just that I wasn't a person, I wasn't a man either.

But turning away didn’t help. It didn’t help to cover my face with my hands. It didn’t help to walk towards the hall. It was so overwhelming, I was sobbing with such abandon, all the sluices were open.

‘But Karl Ove,’ she said behind me. ‘Nice Karl Ove. I don’t mean anything. I was just so disappointed. It doesn’t matter though. It doesn’t matter. Dear Karl Ove. Don’t cry. Don’t cry.’

Well, I didn’t want to either, of course. The last thing I wanted was her to see me crying.

But I couldn’t help myself.

She tried to put her arms around me, but I pushed her away. I tried to draw breath. It became a pathetic trembling sob.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.’

‘I’m sorry too,’ she said.

‘Well, here we are again,’ I said, smiling through the tears.

Her eyes were also full of tears, and she was smiling as well.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said.

I went to the bathroom, another sob shook me, another tremble as I took a deep breath, but then, after I had washed my face with cold water a few times, it relented.

Linda was still standing in the hall when I came out.

‘Is that better?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘That was plain ridiculous. It must be the drinking from last night. Suddenly my defences were gone. Everything seemed so desperate.’

‘It doesn’t matter that you cried,’ she said.

‘Not to you it doesn’t, no. But I don’t like it. I’d rather you hadn’t seen. But you did. Now you know. That’s the way I am.’

‘Yes, you’re a good person.’

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘That’s enough. Let’s move on. What do you think of the flat?’

She smiled.

‘Fantastic.’

‘Good.’

We hugged each other.

‘Linda,’ I said. ‘Aren’t you going to check?’

‘Now?’

‘Yes.’

‘OK. Just hold me a bit longer.’

I did.

‘Now?’ I asked.

She laughed.

‘OK.’

Then she went into the bathroom and came out again with the white test stick in her hand.

‘It’ll take a few more minutes,’ she said.

‘What do you reckon?’

‘I don’t know.’

She went into the kitchen and I followed. She stared at the white stick.

‘Anything happening?’

‘No, nothing. Oh, perhaps it’s nothing. I was so sure there was something.’

‘Well, there have been signs. You’ve been sick. Tired. How many more do you need?’

‘One.’

‘Look there. That’s blue, isn’t it?’

She didn’t say anything.

Then she looked up at me. Her eyes were dark and serious, like an animal’s.

‘Yes, it is.’

We couldn’t wait the three obligatory months before we told anyone. Three weeks later Linda called her mother, who burst into tears of joy at the other end. My mother’s reaction was more reserved, she said it was nice, lovely, but a little later it came out, she also wondered if we were ready for it. Linda had her training, I had my writing. Time will tell, I said, we’ll find out in January. I knew mum always was slow to assimilate change, she had to give it some thought first, and then she moved and adapted to the new situation. Yngve, whom I called as soon as mum had rung off, said, Oh, that’s good news. Yes, I said, standing and smoking in the backyard. When’s it due? Yngve asked. In January, I said. Congratulations, he said. Thanks, I replied. Karl Ove, he said, I’m a bit caught up here actually, I’m at a football match with Ylva. Can we talk later? Course, I said, and we rang off.

I lit another cigarette and noticed I was not completely satisfied with their reactions. We were going to have a BABY, for Christ's sake! This was an ENORMOUS event!

But something had happened when I moved to Sweden. We had as much contact as before, it wasn't that, yet something was different, and I pondered on whether the change had taken place in me or them. I was further away from them, and my life, so fundamentally changed from one moment to the next, with new places, new people and new emotions, I couldn't communicate this with the same natural ease as before, when we had lived in the same environment, in the continuity that began in Tybakken and continued first with Tveit and then Bergen.

No, I was probably reading too much into it, I thought. Yngve's reaction had not been so different from the one seven years earlier when I had rung to tell him that the novel I was writing had been accepted. Is that right? had been his laconic response. Mm, that's good. For me it had been the greatest thing that had ever happened, I had been stunned by the news and assumed everyone in my circle would be as well.

Naturally enough, it hadn't been like that.

And it is never easy to confront life-changing news, especially when you are deeply embroiled in the everyday and the banal, which we always are. They absorb almost everything, make almost everything small, apart from the few events that are so immense they lay waste to all the everyday trivia around you. Big news is like that and it is not possible to live inside it.

I stubbed out my cigarette and went upstairs to Linda, who looked at me with raised eyebrows as I entered.

'What did they say?' she asked.

'They were incredibly happy,' I said. 'Best wishes and congratul-ations.'

'Thanks,' she said. 'Mummy was out of herself with joy. However, she gets excited about absolutely everything.'

Yngve rang later that evening; we could have all the baby clothes and gear we wanted. Buggy, changing mat, rompers, bodices, bibs, pants, sweaters and shoes, they had kept the lot. Linda was touched when I passed that on, and I laughed at her, her sensitivities had changed over the last few weeks and reacted to the strangest things. She laughed as well. Her mother often dropped by, bringing the most sensational meals, which we put in the freezer, several bin bags of baby clothes she had been given by her partner's children and boxes of toys. She bought us a washing machine; Vidar, her partner, plumbed it in.

Linda continued with her course, I continued in my collective office at the tower, started reading the Bible, found a Catholic bookshop and bought all the angel-related literature I could get my hands on, read Thomas Aquinas and Augustine, Basilius and Hieronymus, Hobbes and Burton. I bought Spengler and a biography of Isaac Newton, reference works about the Enlightenment and Baroque periods, which lay in piles around where I was writing and trying to get all these different systems and schools of thought to tie up in some way or other, or to push something, I didn't know what, in the same direction.

Linda was happy, but there were always these feelings of abyss inside her which made her afraid of everything. Would she be able to take care of the baby when it came? And would it come? She could lose it – that happened – and nothing I said or did could stem the fear that was roaming loose inside her, out of her control, but fortunately that too passed.

At the end of June we went on holiday to Norway, first of all to Tromøya, where we spent a couple of days, then to Espen and Anne's in Larkollen, who had lent us a cabin to stay in, and finally to mum's in Jølster. Neither of us had a driving licence, so I dragged our cases round onto planes, trains, buses and taxis with Linda, who couldn't carry anything heavier than an apple, by my side. Arvid met us in Arendal, he was a few years older than me, from Tromøya, and initially he was one of Yngve's friends, but we saw quite a bit of one another in Bergen, where he had also studied, and not so many months ago he had visited us in Stockholm. Now he wanted to drive us back to his place. I knew Linda was tired and wanted to go to the cabin we had rented, and to get the point across I told Arvid straight away Linda was expecting a baby.

This came as a bolt from the blue in the sunlit Arendal street.

'Oh, congratulations!' Arvid said.

'So it would be best if we went to the cabin first, to have a rest . . .'

'We can arrange that,' Arvid said. 'I'll drive you there. Then I can pick you up by boat later.'

It was a log cabin, low quality, I regretted it the moment I saw it. The idea had been I would show her where I came from. That was nice for me. This was not.

She slept for a couple of hours, we walked out on the mole, and Arvid arrived, skimming across the water in his boat. We would go to the island of Hisøya, where Arvid lived. Passed small white houses on rocks, reddish in the afternoon sun, surrounded by green trees, in the midst of the blue arch of sea and sky, and I thought to myself, my God, this is wonderful here. And then the wind that came with the sunset every afternoon. It made the landscape alien, I could see that now, and I had seen it when I was growing up here. Alien because what unified all the elements of the landscape fell apart like a rock struck by a sledgehammer when the wind gusted in.

We went ashore, up to the house and sat around a table in the garden. Linda was shut inside herself in a way that appeared unfriendly, and I suffered, we sat there with his family and friends, it was the first time they had met her, of course I wanted to show them what a wonderful partner I had, and then she was so unwilling. I held her arm under the table and squeezed it. She looked at me without a smile. I felt like shouting she should pull herself together. I knew how charming she could be, how talented she was at exactly this, sitting around a table with other people and chatting, telling stories and laughing. On the other hand, I remembered how I used to be when I was with some of Linda's friends I didn't know so well. Silent, stiff and shy, someone who could go through an entire dinner without saying more than what was absolutely necessary.

What was she thinking?

What had put her out?

Arvid? The slightly boastful manner that could occasionally steal over him?

Anna?

Atle?

Or was it me?

Had I said something during the afternoon?

Or was it inside her? Something which had nothing to do with this at all?

After eating we went for a boat ride, around Hisøya and out to Mærdø, and as we came into open water Arvid hit the accelerator. The swift slim boat skimmed across the surface, the waves were crashing into and bouncing off the bows. Linda’s face was white, she was three months pregnant, perhaps these violent movements would be enough to cause her to lose the baby, that was what she was thinking, I could see.

‘Tell him to slow down!’ she hissed. ‘This is dangerous for me!’

I looked at Arvid, who sat behind the wheel with a smile on his face, his eyes scrunched up against the fresh salty air streaming towards us. I didn’t think this was dangerous and could not bring myself to interfere and tell Arvid to slow down, it was too stupid. At the same time Linda sat there burning with fear and anger. For her sake surely I could step in, even if I made a fool of myself?

‘It’s fine,’ I said to Linda. ‘It’s not dangerous.’

‘Karl Ove!’ she hissed. ‘Tell him to slow down. This is extremely dangerous. Don’t you understand?’

I straightened up and moved closer to Arvid. The island of Mærdø was approaching at a furious pace. He looked at me and smiled.

‘She runs well, doesn’t she.’

I nodded and smiled back. I was on the point of asking him to slow down, but I held back, sat down beside Linda.

‘It’s not dangerous,’ I said.

She said nothing, sat there with her arms wrapped around her, face tense and white.

We strolled around Mærdø, a rug was spread out on a field, coffee was drunk, biscuits were eaten and then we went back to the boat. On the way along the quay I sidled up to Arvid.

‘Linda was a bit scared when you throttled up. She’s pregnant, you know, so the movements . . . well, you understand. Could you take it a bit easier going back?’

‘No problem,’ he said.

He piloted the boat all the way to Hove at a snail’s pace. I wondered if he was trying to tell us something or was being especially considerate. Whatever it was, it was embarrassing. Both the fact that I had spoken to him and that I hadn’t been able to intervene on the way there. Surely it should have been the easiest thing in the world to do, shouldn’t it, to tell someone to slow down, my girlfriend was pregnant?

Especially because Linda’s fears and unease came from a different source than most people’s. It was barely three years since she had been discharged after suffering from manic depression for two years. Having a baby after that kind of experience was not without its risks. She had no idea how she would react. Perhaps she would be plunged into a further bout of manic depression? Maybe so serious that she would be readmitted to hospital. And what would happen to the child then? However, she was out of it and anchored in the world in quite a different way from how she had been before the breakdown and, having seen her every day for almost a year, I knew she would be fine. I viewed what had happened as a crisis. It had been lengthy and all-embracing, but it was over. She was healthy; the mood swings that still existed in her life were all within normal behaviour.

We caught the train to Moss, Espen picked us up at the station and we drove to their home in Larkollen. Linda had a slight temperature and went to bed, Espen and I walked to a nearby pitch to kick around a football, in the evening we had a barbecue, I sat up with Espen and Anne, later only Espen. Linda was asleep. The next day Espen drove us to the cabin on the island of Jeløya, where we stayed for a week while they travelled to Stockholm and occupied our flat. I got up at around five and worked on my novel, for this was what the manuscript had become, until Linda got up at around ten. We had breakfast, now and then I read bits of what I had written aloud, she invariably said it was very good, we went swimming on a beach a few kilometres away, did some shopping and made lunch, I went fishing in the afternoons while she slept, in the evenings we lit the fire and we talked or read or made love. When the week was up we caught the train from Moss to Oslo and took the Bergen line on to Flåm, whence we went by boat to Balestrand and stayed at Kvikne’s Hotel and then caught the ferry to Fjærland the next day. Where we met Tomas Espedal – he was on a walking trip with a friend, heading for a place he had in Sunnfjord. I hadn’t met him since I lived in Bergen and just the sight of him cheered me up, he was one of the best people I had ever met. Mum was waiting on the quay in Fjærland, and we drove past the glacier, which shone greyish white against the blue sky, through the long tunnel into the long dark narrow valley where so often there were avalanches, and into Skei, where the gentle luxuriant Jølster countryside opened out.

This was the third time Linda and mum had met, and for the rest of the stay I tried, in vain, to bridge the gap I perceived at once. There was always some obstacle, almost nothing seemed to run smoothly. When something did and I saw Linda perk up and react in a way which mum latched on to, I became happy out of all proportion, realised why and longed to move on.

Then Linda started bleeding. She was terrified, truly terrified, wanted to leave at once, rang Stockholm and spoke to the midwife, who couldn't comment without examining her. That made Linda even more frightened, and my saying it'll be fine, it's bound to be fine and it's nothing did not do a lot to help because how could I know? What authority did I have? She wanted to leave, I said we were staying and in the end, when she agreed, everything became my responsibility, so if things went wrong, or if they had already gone wrong, I was the one who had insisted we shouldn't bother with an examination, we should wait and see.

Linda's entire energy was focused on this, I could see it was all she thought about, fear gnawed at her, she no longer spoke when we were eating or were together in the evening, and when she came downstairs after sleeping on the first floor and found mum and me sitting in the garden and chatting she turned and left, her eyes dark with fury, and I understood why: we were talking as though nothing had happened, as though what she felt did not matter. And that was both true and not true. I thought everything would be fine, but I was not sure, and at the same time we were guests there, I hadn't seen my mother for more than six months, we had a lot to talk about, and what purpose was served by saying nothing, by simply wandering around mute, in constant, agonising, all-encompassing fear? I put my arms around her, I comforted her, tried to tell her that everything was bound to be fine, but she wasn't receptive and didn't want to be there. When mum asked her something she barely answered. On our walks through the valley she criticised my mother and everything about her. I defended her, we screamed at each other, she turned and went off on her own, I ran after her, it was a nightmare, but as with all nightmares there was an awakening from this too. But first there was a final scene: mum drove us to Florø, where we would catch the boat. We arrived early, decided to have lunch, found a restaurant on a kind of pontoon, sat down and ordered fish soup. It arrived, and it tasted terrible, of butter and almost nothing else.

'I can't eat this,' Linda said.

'No, it isn't very good,' I said.

'We'd better tell the waiter and ask him to bring something else,' Linda said.

I could not imagine anything more embarrassing than sending food back to the kitchen. And this was only Florø, not Stockholm or Paris. At the same time I couldn’t put up with any more moods and so I beckoned to the waitress.

‘I’m afraid this isn’t very good,’ I said. ‘Do you think we could have something else instead?’

The robust middle-aged waitress with badly dyed blonde hair gave me a disapproving glare.

‘There shouldn’t be anything wrong with the food,’ she said. ‘But if you say there is I’ll go and ask the chef.’

We sat around the table, my mother, Linda and I, with three full bowls of soup, saying nothing.

The waitress returned, shaking her head.

‘My apologies,’ she said. ‘The chef says there’s nothing wrong with the soup. It tastes the way it is supposed to.’

What should we do?

The only time in my life I send back food to the kitchen and they don’t accept what I say. Anywhere else on earth they would have given us an alternative dish, but not on Florø. My face was red with shame and annoyance. If I had been alone I would have eaten the bloody soup, no matter how bad it was. Now I had complained, however embarrassing and unnecessary I thought that was, and they met my complaint with resistance?!

I got to my feet.

‘I’ll go in and have a few words with the chef,’ I said.

‘You do that,’ said the waitress.

I walked along the pontoon and into the kitchen, which was on land, poked my head over a counter and caught the attention, not of a little fatso, as I had imagined, but a tall well-built man of my own age.

‘We ordered fish soup,’ I said. ‘There’s too much butter in it. I’m afraid it’s almost impossible to eat. Do you think we could have something else instead?’

‘It tastes exactly as it is supposed to,’ he said. ‘You ordered fish soup and that’s what you got. Can’t help you there.’

I walked back. Linda and mum looked up at me. I shook my head.

‘Wouldn’t budge,’ I said.

‘Perhaps I should have a go,’ mum said. ‘After all, I’m an elderly lady. That might help a bit.’

If it was against my nature to complain in restaurants it was definitely against hers.

‘You don’t need to,’ I said. ‘We’d better just leave.’

‘I’ll try,’ she said.

A few minutes later she came back. She too shook her head.

‘Oh well,’ I said. ‘I’m hungry but after all this we really can’t eat the soup.’

We got up, put the money on the table and left.

‘We’ll have to eat on the boat,’ I said to Linda, who just nodded, her eyes black.

It arrived with propellers whirling. I loaded the baggage on board, waved to mum and found a seat at the very front.

We each ate a soft vaguely wet pizza, a potato pancake and a yoghurt. Linda lay back and fell asleep. When she woke up everything that had been in her head was gone. Bright and open, she sat beside me chatting away. I studied her, profoundly astonished. Had all of this been about my mother? Or about being in an unfamiliar place? Or about visiting my life before she became a part of it? And not the fear of losing the baby? Because surely that was just as acute now?

We flew home from Bergen, she was examined the following day and everything was in perfect order. The tiny heart was beating, the tiny body was growing and all the tests that could be done gave the right results.

After the examination, which was carried out at a clinic in the Old Town, we went to a nearby cake shop and talked about what happened during the check-up. We always did that. After an hour I took the Metro the whole way out to Åkeshov, where I had been given a new office. In the end I couldn’t stand being in the old one in the tower, and Linda’s author friend, the film director Maria Zennström, had offered me a shabby room for next to nothing out there. It was in the basement of a block of flats, no one was around during the day, I sat all alone between concrete walls and wrote, read or stared into the forest where Metro carriages careered through the trees every five minutes or so. I had read Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, and while a lot could be said about his theories on civilisation, what he wrote about the Baroque period and his Faustian concept, about the Age of Enlightenment and his concept of the cyclical nature of civilisation, was original and masterful; some of it I put straight into the novel, so to speak, which I had realised would have to have the seventeenth century as a kind of centre. Everything sprang from there, it was when the world separated: on one side there was the old and useless, the whole magical, irrational, dogmatic and authoritarian tradition; on the other what developed into the world we inhabited.

Autumn passed, the belly grew, Linda fiddled around with all sorts of bits and bobs, she seemed to be like a magnet for everything, there were lit candles and hot baths, piles of baby clothes in the cupboard, photo albums were collated and books about pregnancy and the baby's first year were read. I was so glad to see it, but couldn't go there myself, not even close, I had to write. I could be together with her, make love to her, talk to her, go for walks with her, but I could not feel or do as she did.

Now and then there were angry outbursts. One morning I spilt water on the kitchen carpet, went off to the Metro without mopping up and when I returned home there was a big yellow stain. I asked what had happened, she looked at me sheepishly, well, she had seen the stain I had left on the carpet when she entered the kitchen and she had been so angry she poured juice over it. But then the water dried out and she realised what she had done.

We had to throw the carpet away.

One evening she gouged the dining-room table she had been given by her mother, part of a small suite she had paid a fortune for, because I had not shown enough interest in the letter Linda was writing to the maternity department. It had been about her wishes and preferences. When she read out a suggestion I nodded, but without the necessary conviction, evidently, for all of a sudden she jabbed her pen into the table and scored the top with as much force as she could apply, again and again. What are you doing? I said. You don't care, she said. Oh, for Christ's sake, of course I care. And now you've ruined the table.

One evening I got so mad at her that I threw a glass at the stove with all my might. Strangely enough, it didn't break. Typical, I thought afterwards, I couldn't even perform the classic act of smashing a glass during a row.

We went to the antenatal classes together, the room was packed and the audience sensitive to every word spoken from the rostrum; if there was anything remotely controversial from a biological point of view, a low sucking of breath ran through the rows, for this was taking place in a country where gender was a social construct, and for the body, outside what everyone agreed was common sense, there was no place. Instinct, came a voice from the rostrum. No, no, no! the angry women in the room whispered. How could you say such a thing! I saw a woman sobbing on a bench – her husband was ten minutes late for the course – and I thought, I am not alone. When he did finally arrive she pummelled his stomach with her fists while he, as carefully as he could, tried to get her out of this state and into a more controlled and dignified one.

This was how we lived, in abrupt mood swings between being calm and peaceful, optimistic and affectionate and sudden explosions of fury. Every morning I caught the Metro to Åkeshov, and the moment I walked down into the underground everything that had gone on at home was eradicated from my mind. I looked at the crowd in the subterranean station, inhaled the atmosphere, got on the train and read, looked at the suburban houses we glided past after we had left the tunnels, read, surveyed the town as we crossed the big bridge, read, loved, really loved, all the stops at the small stations, got off at Åkeshov, almost the only passenger travelling in this direction to work, walked roughly a kilometre to the office and worked all day. Soon the manuscript would amount to a hundred pages, and it was becoming stranger and stranger; after the introduction about crabbing it shifted into a purely essayistic style, and presented some theories about the divine that I had never considered before, but in some peculiar manner, from the premises they set, in their way, they were right. I had come across a Russian Orthodox bookshop, it really was a find, all manner of remarkable writings were there, I bought them, took notes and could barely restrain my glee when yet another element of the pseudo-theory fell into place, until I went home in the afternoon, when the life awaiting me there slowly returned as the train approached the station in Hötorget. Now and then I went to town earlier, when we had to go for a check-up at the Mother Care Centre, as it was called in Swedish, where I sat on a chair watching Linda being examined, blood pressure and blood samples, listening for the heartbeat and measuring the belly, which was growing as it should, everything was in order, all the test results were excellent, for if there was one thing Linda had it was physical strength and rude health, which I told her as often as I could. Compared with the body's weight and certainties, worry was nothing, a buzzing fly, a swirling feather, a cloud of dust.

We went to Ikea and bought a baby-changing table, which we loaded with piles of cloths and towels, and on the wall above I stuck a sequence of postcards of seals, whales, fish, turtles, lions, monkeys and the Beatles during their psychedelic period, so that the baby could see what a wonderful world it had been born into. Yngve and Kari Anne sent us their baby cast-offs, but the buggy he had promised was a little time in coming, to Linda's increasing annoyance. One evening she exploded: the buggy was never going to come, we couldn't rely on that brother of mine, we should have bought our own, which she had said from day one. There were still two months to the due date. I called Yngve, dropped a hint about the buggy and mumbled something about the irrationality of pregnant women, he said it was on its way, I said I knew it was, but nevertheless I had to ask. How I hated doing it. How I hated going against my nature to satisfy her. But, I told myself, there was a purpose, there was a goal, and as long as that remained uppermost in my mind I would just have to put up with all the creeping and crawling. The buggy didn't arrive. Another outburst. We bought some contraption to put in the bathtub for when the baby had to be bathed, we bought bodices and tiny shoes, rompers and a sleeping bag for the buggy. We borrowed a cradle from Helena with a little duvet and pillow, which Linda regarded with moist eyes. And we discussed a name. Almost every night we sat talking about it, batting an enormous variety of names to and fro, always with a shortlist of four or five, always changing it. One night Linda suggested Vanja, and with that we had the name for a girl. We were suddenly decided. We liked the Russianness of it and its associations, something strong and wild, and Vanja was derived from Ivan, which was the same as Johannes in Norwegian, which was Linda's father's name. If it was a boy he would be Bjørn.

One morning, going down the stairs to the Metro platform under Sveavägen, I found my eyes drawn towards two men brawling. Their aggression alongside all the weary passengers was dreadful, they shouted, no, screeched at each other, my heart beat faster and then they pounced on each other with such ferocity as a train drew in to the platform. One of them wrestled himself free to get space to kick the other. I went closer. They were locked in combat again. I thought, I will have to intervene. The boxer incident, when I hadn’t dared to kick in the door, and the boat incident, when I hadn’t dared to ask Arvid to slow down, as well as Linda’s concern about my failure to act, had played on my mind so much that now there was no doubt in my mind. I could not stand by and watch. I had to intervene. The very thought made my knees go weak and my arms tremble. Nonetheless, I put down my bag, this was a test, I thought, shit, now I would have to give a shit, and went straight over to the two brawlers and wrapped my arms around the closest one. I squeezed as hard as I could. As I did, another man stepped forward between them, and a third, and the fight was over. I picked up my bag, got into the train on the other side and sat there until we got to Åskehov, drained, with my heart pounding in my chest. No one could claim I had been slow to act, nor that I had been very smart, they could have had knives, anything, and the fight had absolutely nothing to do with me.

What was odd about these months was the way in which we came closer to each other and grew apart. Linda did not bear grudges, and after something had happened, it had happened, it was over. For me it was different. I held grudges, and every single one of these incidents over the last year lay somehow stored inside me. At the same time I understood what had happened, the sparks of anger that had begun to fly in our lives that first autumn, they were linked with what had been lost in our relationship, Linda was afraid of losing the rest, she was trying to bind me and my shying away from these bonds increased the distance, and that was precisely what she feared. When she became pregnant everything changed, now there was a horizon beyond the one the two of us formed, something greater than us, and it was there the whole time, in my thoughts and hers. Her unease may have been great, but even in its midst there was always a wholeness and security in her. Everything would fall into place, it would be fine, I knew it would.

In mid-December Yngve and the children came to visit. With them they brought the long-awaited buggy. They stayed for a few days. Linda was friendly on the first day and a few hours into the second, but then she turned her back, assumed the hostile air that could drive me insane. Not when it was only me subjected to it because I was used to this and knew how to counter it, but when others were. Then I had to step in, try to mollify Linda, try to mollify Yngve and keep channels open. Six weeks left to the big day, she wanted peace and quiet and considered she was entitled to that, and perhaps she was, what did I know, but surely it didn't mean you no longer needed to be amiable with your guests? Being hospitable, having people over to stay for as long as they liked, was important to me, and I didn't understand how it was possible for Linda to behave as she was doing. Or, yes, I did: she would soon be giving birth and she didn't want crowds of people in the house, also, she and Yngve were light years apart. Yngve had had a good close relationship with Tonje, he didn't have the same with Linda, she noticed that of course, but why the hell did she have to act on it? Why couldn't she hide all her emotions and play the game? Be friendly to my family? Wasn't I friendly to hers? Had I ever said they came round too much and endlessly stuck their noses into matters that did not concern them? Linda's family and friends were with us a thousand times more than mine, the ratio was a thousand to one, and yet, even though the disparity was immense, she could not and would not adapt, she turned her back. Why? Because she was acting on emotions. But emotions are there to be repressed.

I said nothing, held all my reproaches and my anger in check, and when Yngve and the children had left and Linda was happy, light-hearted and excited again, I didn't punish her by keeping my distance and being sullen, which would have been my natural response, no, on the contrary, I dropped the matter, let unreasonable bygones be unreasonable bygones, and the run-up to Christmas and the days afterwards were wonderful.

On the last evening of 2003, with me running to and fro in the kitchen and sorting out the food while Geir sat in a chair chatting away and watching, there was no longer a trace of the life I had left in Bergen. Everything I had around me now was somehow connected with two people I hadn't actually known at all then. Mostly Linda, of course, with whom I now shared all of my life, but also Geir. I had been influenced by him, and not in a small way either, and that could be an unpleasant thought, that I was so easy to influence, that my views could so easily be affected by others. Occasionally

I mused that he was like one of those childhood friends you weren’t allowed to play with. Keep your distance from him, Karl Ove, he’s a bad influence.

I placed the last half-lobster on the dish, put down the knife and wiped the sweat from my forehead.

‘There we are,’ I said. ‘Just the garnish left.’

‘If only people knew what you do,’ Geir said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘The general perception of writers’ lives is that they are exciting and desirable. But you generally spend most of your time cooking and cleaning.’

‘True enough,’ I said. ‘But now look how well it’s turned out!’

I cut the lemons into four and placed them between the lobsters, tore off some sprigs of parsley and laid them alongside.

‘People like scandalous writers, you see. You should go to the Theatercafé with a harem of young women running round you. That’s what’s expected. Not standing here and languishing over your bloody buckets of water . . . The biggest disappointment in Norwegian literature must be Tor Ulven, by the way. He didn’t even go out! Ha ha ha!’

His laughter was infectious. I laughed as well.

‘And on top of all that he committed suicide!’ he added. ‘Ha ha ha!’

‘Ha ha ha!’

‘Ha ha ha! But you have to say Ibsen was also a disappointment. Though not the top hat with the mirror, by the way. That deserves respect. And the live scorpion he kept on his desk. Bjørnson wasn’t a disappointment. And definitely not Hamsun. In fact, you can divide up Norwegian literature like this. And I’m afraid you don’t come out very well.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘But at least it’s clean here. There we are. Now there’s just the bread left.’

‘Incidentally, you should write that essay on Olav H. Hauge you’ve been talking about. Soon.’

‘The bad man of Hardanger?’ I said, taking a loaf of bread out of its brown paper bag.

‘Yes, that one.’

‘I’ll do it one day,’ I said, rinsing the knife under a jet of hot water and drying it on the kitchen cloth before cutting. ‘In fact, I do think about it now and then. Him lying naked in the coal cellar after smashing all the furniture in the living room. Or the village boys throwing stones at him. Hell, there were some years when he must have been completely off his trolley.'

'Not least the little matter of him writing that Hitler was a great man, and then removing what he had written during the war from his diary,' Geir said.

'Yes, not least,' I said. 'But the most significant part of the whole diary is what he writes when his periods of illness begin. You can read how everything starts going faster and faster as his inhibitions disappear. Suddenly there he is, writing what he *really* thinks about writers and their books. Normally he's *so* punctilious about saying something nice about everyone. Polite and considerate and friendly and nice. And then there's the breakdown. It's strange that no one has written about it, isn't it. I mean the way his judgements of Jan Erik Vold changed so radically.'

'No one dares write about it of course,' Geir said. 'It's crazy. They hardly dare poke a finger in the periods when he lost it.'

'There is a reason for it,' I said, putting the slices of bread in the basket and starting on the next loaf.

'And that would be?'

'Decency. Manners. Consideration.'

'Ah, think I can feel a sleep coming on. It just got so boring in here.'

'I'm serious. I mean it.'

'Of course you do. Listen to me. It *is* in the diary, is it?'

'Yes, it is.'

'And you can't understand Hauge without it?'

'No.'

'And you consider Hauge a great poet?'

'Yes.'

'So what conclusion do you draw from that? That we should ignore an important part of a great poet and diarist's life for the sake of decency? Forget the unpleasantness?'

'What does it matter whether Hauge believed powers from outer space shone lights on him or not? I mean, as far as the poems themselves are concerned. Besides, who knows where his brutish directness stopped and his sensitive politeness started? I mean, where do you *really* draw the line?'

‘What? Which bat has taken up residency in your belfry now? You’re the one who told me about Hauge’s more eccentric side, and in fact you were obsessed by it! You said the image of the wise man of Hardanger cannot go uncontested when you know that he was mad and anything but wise for protracted periods. Or, to be more precise, that the wisdom, whatever *that* might be, cannot be understood without the misery in his life.’

‘No bats without fire, as the Chinese say,’ I responded. ‘Perhaps our laughing at Tor Ulven has had some influence here. My conscience was pricking me.’

‘Ha ha ha! Is that so? You can’t be that sensitive and cautious. He is dead after all. And I don’t think he was much of a party animal, was he? He drove cranes, didn’t he? Ha ha ha!’

I cut the last slices and laughed, though not without a tinge of unease.

‘Well, that’s enough now,’ I said, as I put them in the basket. ‘If you take the basket of bread, the butter and the mayonnaise we can join the others.’

‘Oh, how wonderful!’ Helena said as I put the dish on the table.

‘You’ve done us proud, Karl Ove,’ Linda said.

‘Help yourselves,’ I said. Poured what was left of the champagne and opened a bottle of white wine, then sat down and put one of the lobster halves on my plate. Cracked the large claw with the pliers from the seafood set I had been given as a present by Gunnar and Tove some time ago. The meat that grew in such tasty profusion around the tiny flat white cartilage, or whatever it was. The space between the flesh and the outer shell where there was often water: What kind of feeling would *that* have been when the lobster was walking around on the seabed?

‘Now we’re having a grand time!’ I said in Norwegian dialect, and raised my glass. ‘*Skål!*’

Geir smiled. The others ignored what they didn’t understand and raised their glasses.

‘*Skål!* And thank you for inviting us!’ Anders said.

More often than not it was me who cooked when we had guests. Not so much because I liked doing it but because it gave me something to hide behind. I could stay in the kitchen when they arrived, poke my head in and say hello, carry on cooking in the kitchen, hidden, until the food was ready to serve and I had to appear. But even then I could hide behind something: a glass had to be filled with wine, another with water, I could take care of that and the instant the first course was finished I could clear the table and set it for the next.

That is what I did on this evening as well. As fascinated as I was by Anders, I was unable to talk to him. I liked Helena, but I couldn’t talk to her. I could talk to Linda, but now we were responsible for making sure the others were having a good time and therefore we couldn’t have a conversation. I could also talk to Geir, but when he was with others another side of his personality took over; he was talking to Anders about criminal acquaintances, they laughed and carried on, he entertained Helena with his shocking honesty, she reacted with a mixture of gasps and laughter. Beneath this there were also other tensions. Linda and Geir were like two magnets, they repelled each other. Helena was never quite happy with Anders when they were out, it was not uncommon for him to make comments with which she disagreed or which she considered foolish; this tension affected me. Christina could go for long periods without speaking, this too affected me, why was it, wasn’t she having a good time, was it us, Geir or herself?

There were almost no similarities between us, there were constant undercurrents of sympathies and antipathies beneath the surface, that is beneath what was said and done, but despite that, or perhaps because of it, it was a memorable evening, most of all because we suddenly reached a point where it felt as if no one had anything to lose and we could tell any story from our lives, even one we usually kept to ourselves.

The conversation stuttered into life, as most do between people who don’t know each other but about each other.

I raised the thick smooth flesh from the shell, divided it, forked a mouthful, ran it through the mayonnaise and lifted it to my lips.

Outside there was an enormous bang, like an exploding bomb. The windowpanes rattled.

‘That one wasn’t legal,’ Anders said.

‘Ah yes, you’re an expert on that, I gather,’ Geir said.

‘We’ve brought a sky lantern with us,’ Helena said. ‘You light it and then the lantern fills with hot air and just climbs into the sky. Higher and higher. And there’s no bang. It rises without a sound. It’s fantastic.’

‘Is it safe to let it off in a town?’ Linda asked. ‘I mean, what if it lands on a roof and it’s alight?’

‘Anything goes on New Year’s Eve,’ Anders said.

There was a silence. I wondered if I should tell them about the time a friend and I collected all the burned-out rockets on the first of January, removed all the powder, tamped it into a cartridge case and lit it. The image was still vivid in my brain: Geir Håkon turning towards me, his face black with soot. The horror that struck me when I realised that dad could have heard the bang and that the soot might not come off completely and that dad would be able to see. But the story didn't have a point, I thought, so I got up and poured more wine, met Helena's smiling gaze, sat down, glanced over at Geir, who had launched into the differences between Sweden and Norway, a theme he resorted to when conversation round the table was flagging. It was one on which everyone had something to say.

'But why compare Sweden and Norway?' Anders asked after a while. 'Nothing happens here. It's cold and horrible as well.'

'Anders wants to go back to Spain,' Helena said.

'What's wrong with that?' Anders retorted. 'We should have moved. All of us. What actually keeps us here? Is there anything?'

'What is it about Spain then?' Linda asked.

He opened his palms.

'You can do what you like. No one bothers. And it's so lovely and hot. There are some wonderful towns down there. Sevilla. Valencia. Barcelona. Madrid.'

He looked at me.

'And there's a slight difference in the level of football. The two of us should go down and see *El Clásico*. Stay overnight. I can fix the tickets. No problem. What do you say?'

'Sounds good to me,' I said.

'Sounds good to me,' he snorted. 'Let's go, man.'

Linda looked at me and smiled. 'You go, I'd be pleased for you,' her look said. But there were other looks and moods, I knew, which would appear sooner or later. You go and enjoy yourself while I sit at home alone, they said. You only think about yourself. If you go anywhere it should be with me. All of this was in her eyes. A boundless love and a boundless anxiety. Fighting for domination all the time. Something new had appeared in recent months, it was tied up with the imminent arrival of the baby, and lay inside her, a mutedness. The anxiety was delicate, ethereal, flickering through her consciousness like the northern lights across a winter's sky or lightning across an August sky, and the darkness that accompanied it was weightless too, in the sense that it was an absence of light, and absence has no weight. What filled her now was something else, I thought it had something to do with earth, it was earthy, a taking root. At the same time I considered it a stupid mythologising thought.

Nevertheless. Earth.

‘When is *El Clásico* then?’ I asked, leaning across the table to fill Anders’ glass.

‘I don’t know. But we don’t have to go and see that match. Any of them will do. I just want to see Barcelona.’

I filled my glass and poked out the meat from the back of the claw.

‘Yes, that would be good,’ I said. ‘But at any rate we’ll have to wait for a week after the birth. After all, we’re not men from the 1950s.’

‘I am,’ Geir said.

‘Me too,’ Anders said. ‘Or at least on the fringes. If I could have done it, I would have paced the corridor during the birth.’

‘Why didn’t you?’ Geir asked.

Anders looked at him, and they laughed.

‘Has everyone got something to drink?’ I asked. After they had nodded and thanked me, I collected their plates and carried them into the kitchen. Christina followed me with the two serving platters.

‘Can I help you with anything?’ she asked.

I shook my head and briefly met her eyes before looking down.

‘No,’ I said. ‘But thank you for offering.’

She went back, I filled a pan with water and put it on the stove. Outside, rockets were making fizzing sounds and exploding. The little patch of sky I could see was occasionally illuminated with glittering lights, which showered across it and extinguished themselves as they fell. From the living room came laughter.

I placed two black cast-iron pots on hotplates and turned the temperature setting to maximum. Opened the window, and the voices of passing pedestrians below rose in volume at once. Went into the living room, put on some music, the latest Cardigans’ CD, good background ambience.

‘I won’t even ask if you need help,’ Anders said.

‘Such nice manners,’ Helena said, turning to me. ‘*Do* you need any help?’

‘No, no, everything’s fine.’

I stood behind Linda and rested my hands on her shoulders.

‘How nice,’ she said.

Silence. I thought I should wait until the conversation got going again.

‘I had lunch with a few people at Filmhuset just before Christmas,’ Linda said after a while. ‘One of them had just seen an albino snake. Think it was a python or a boa constrictor, one of the two. Completely white with a yellow pattern. Then someone else said she *used* to have a boa. At home in her flat, as a pet. An *enormous* snake. Then one day she had a shock because it was lying beside her in bed, stretched out to its full length. She had always seen it coiled up, you see, but now it was as straight as a ruler. She was petrified, and so she rang Skansen Zoo to talk to someone who dealt with snakes. Do you know what he said? Well, good job she rang. In the nick of time. Because big snakes stretch out like that when they’re measuring up their prey. To see if they can swallow it.’

‘Ugh, oh, Christ!’ I said. ‘Ugh, shit!’

The others laughed.

‘Karl Ove’s afraid of snakes,’ Linda said.

‘That’s the nastiest story I’ve ever heard!’

Linda turned to me.

‘He dreams about snakes. He can hurl the duvet on the floor and trample on it in the middle of the night. Once he sat up and *leaped* out of bed. Stood absolutely still, as if paralysed, and stared. What is it, Karl Ove? You’re dreaming. Come to bed, I said. There’s a *slange* there, he said. A snake in Norwegian. There isn’t an *orm*, I said. A snake in Swedish. Come to bed. And then he said, full of contempt, “When you say *orm* it doesn’t sound quite so dangerous!”’

They laughed. Geir explained to Anders and Helena the difference between *orm* and *slange* in Norwegian – the former was a worm. I said that I knew what was coming, the Freudian interpretation of dreaming about snakes, and I didn’t want to hear, and so I went back into the kitchen. The water was boiling, and I added the tagliatelle. The oil in the two pots was spitting in the heat. I sliced some garlic and put it in, took the mussels from the sink, dropped them in and placed the lid on top. Soon it began to rumble and roar. I poured in white wine, chopped some parsley and sprinkled it in, took the mussels off the hotplate after a few minutes, put the tagliatelle in a colander, fetched the pesto and everything was ready.

‘Oh, how lovely that looks,’ Helena said as I entered with the plates.

‘It’s not exactly difficult,’ I said. ‘I found the recipe in Jamie Oliver’s cookery book. But it’s good.’

‘It smells fantastic,’ Christina said.

‘Is there anything you can’t do?’ Anders said, staring at me.

I looked down, forked out the soft content of a mussel, it was dark brown with an orange stripe along the top, and when I bit, it crunched like sand between your teeth.

‘Has Linda told you about our *pinnekjøtt* meal?’ I asked, looking up at him.

‘*Pinnekjøtt*? What’s that?’

‘Traditional Norwegian Christmas food,’ Geir said.

‘Sheep’s ribs,’ I said. ‘You salt them and hang them up to dry for a few months. My mother posted me some.’

‘Mutton in the post?’ Anders queried. ‘Is that another Norwegian tradition?’

‘How else would I get it? Anyway, my mother salts them and hangs them up in our loft at home. It tastes fantastic. She promised to send me some for Christmas. We were going to have them on Christmas Eve, Linda hasn’t tried them, and for me it is unthinkable to celebrate Christmas without ribs, but they didn’t arrive until the 27th. So I unpacked them, we decided to have another Christmas dinner that evening, and in the afternoon I went to work steaming the meat. We set the table, white cloth and candles and aquavit and everything. But the meat never cooked, we didn’t have a pot you could close tightly enough, so all that happened was that the whole flat reeked of sheep. In the end Linda and I went to bed.’

‘Then he woke me up at one!’ Linda said. ‘And we sat here, on our own, in the middle of the night eating Norwegian Christmas food.’

‘That was great, wasn’t it?’ I said.

‘Yes, it was,’ she said with a smile.

‘*Was* it good?’ Helena asked.

‘Yes. It might not have looked good, but it was.’

‘I thought you were going to tell us a story about something you couldn’t do,’ Anders said. ‘But this was nothing short of an idyll.’

‘Cut the man a bit of slack,’ Geir said. ‘He’s made a career of telling people what a failure he is. One wretched tragic episode after another. Shame and remorse all down the line. This is a party! Let him talk about how clever he is for a change!’

‘I’d like you to talk about a defeat, Anders,’ Helena said.

‘Remember who you’re talking to!’ Anders said. ‘You’re talking to someone who was rich once. I mean really rich. I had two cars, an apartment in Östermalm, an account heaving with money. I could go on holiday anywhere I wanted, when I wanted. I even had some horses! And what am I doing now? Making ends meet with a bacon snacks factory in Dalarne! But I don’t sit around bloody moaning like you do!’

‘Like who do?’ Helena asked.

‘Like you and Linda, for example! I come home and you’re sitting there with your cups of tea on the sofa whinging about everything under the sun. Every conceivable and inconceivable feeling you have to struggle with all the time. It’s not that complicated. Either things go well or they don’t. And that’s good too, because if they don’t then they can only go better.’

‘The strange thing about you is that you never want to know where you are,’ Helena said. ‘But it’s not a question of a lack of insight. It’s that you don’t want to see. Sometimes I envy you. I really do. I struggle so much trying to understand who I am and why what happens to me actually happens.’

‘Your story’s not so different from Anders’, is it?’ Geir said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, you also had everything. You were employed at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, you got the main roles in big productions, great film roles, and then you dropped everything and left. And that was also a pretty optimistic act, if you ask me. To marry an American New Age guru and go to Hawaii.’

‘Well, it wasn’t a great career move,’ Helena said. ‘You’re right about that. But I followed my heart. And I don’t regret anything. Nothing, really!’

She smiled and looked around.

‘And Christina has the same story,’ Geir said.

‘What’s your story then?’ Anders asked, looking at Christina.

She smiled and raised her head, swallowing the food she had in her mouth.

‘I was at the top almost before I had begun. I had my own clothes brand and was chosen as the best designer one year. I was selected to represent Sweden at the London Fashion Fair. I was in Paris with a collection—’

‘A TV crew came to our house,’ Geir said. ‘And Christina’s face was on some enormous drapes, no, enormous bloody *sails* at the front of the Culture House. There was a six-page feature article about her in *Dagens Nyheter* . . . We were at receptions where the women serving were dressed as elves. Champagne flowing everywhere. We were so unbelievably happy.’

‘What happened then?’ Linda asked.

Christina shrugged.

‘No money came in. The success had no base. Or not where it should have been. So I went bankrupt.’

‘But at least you went with a bang,’ Geir said.

‘Yes,’ Christina agreed.

‘The last collection was the nail in the coffin,’ Geir said. ‘Christina had hired a giant marquee and had it erected in Gärdet. The tent was a copy of the Sydney Opera House. The models were supposed to arrive on horseback across the open field. She had got them from the Royal Life Guards and the mounted police. Everything was on a grand scale and costly. She hadn’t cut any corners. Huge punchbowls of burning ice, you know, drifting smoke, and everyone was there. All the TV channels, all the major newspapers. It looked like the set of a blockbuster movie.

‘And then it began to rain. And I mean *rain*. It pelted down, it was insane.’

Christina laughed and put her hand to her mouth.

‘You should have seen the models!’ Geir went on. ‘The men’s hair plastered to their skulls. All their clothes drenched and bedraggled. It was a total fiasco. But there was something stylish about it too. Not everyone can fail in *such* a glorious manner.’

Everyone laughed.

‘That was why she was designing slippers when you first came to our place,’ Geir said, looking at me.

‘They weren’t slippers,’ Christina said.

‘Well, whatever,’ Geir said. ‘One of their old models of a shoe suddenly became a sales hit because Christina wore them at a fashion show in

London. She earned nothing. So the design was a small consolation. That was all that was left of the dream.’

‘I haven’t been at the *top* exactly,’ Linda said. ‘But the little success I’ve had follows exactly the same curve.’

‘Straight down?’ Anders asked.

‘Straight down, yes. I made my literary debut, and that was of course a fantastic event in itself, not that it was sensational for others in any way, but it was big, and wonderful for me, and then I was awarded a Japanese prize, of all things. I’ve always loved Japan. I was supposed to go there to receive it. I’d bought a Japanese phrasebook and so on. Then I fell ill. I was incapable of coping with anything, and certainly not a trip to Japan . . . I’d written another series of poems and at first it was accepted. I went out to celebrate after they told me, but then the acceptance was withdrawn. I went to another publisher’s with it and *exactly* the same happened there. At first the editor rang and said it was fantastic and they would publish it. It was so embarrassing, I told everyone about it . . . then he rang to say they wouldn’t be publishing it after all. And that was that.’

‘That’s just so sad,’ Anders said.

‘Oh, it didn’t matter,’ Linda said. ‘Now I’m pleased it wasn’t published. It’s not a big deal.’

‘What about you then, Geir?’ Helena asked.

‘Do you mean, am I a beautiful loser as well?’

‘Yes.’

‘We-ell, I suppose I could say that. I was an academic wonderboy.’

‘Even though you say so yourself?’ I said.

‘No one else will. And I *was*. But I wrote a thesis in Norwegian based on fieldwork in Sweden. That was not a clever move. It meant that no Swedish publisher was interested, nor were any Norwegian ones. Nor did it help that I wrote about boxers, without looking for social explanations or excuses for what they did, I mean, that they were poor or underprivileged or criminals or some such thing. On the contrary, I thought that their culture was relevant and appropriate, much more relevant and appropriate than the feminised middle-class academic culture. That was not a clever move either. It was still turned down by several Norwegian and Swedish publishers. I got it published in the end by paying for it myself. No one read it. The marketing, do you know what it was? I spoke to a woman at a publishing house one day and she told me that she read my book every morning and afternoon on the Nesodden-to-Oslo ferry and she thought that someone was bound to see the cover and become curious!'

He laughed.

'And now I've stopped teaching, I don't write any academic articles any more, I don't take part in seminars, I sit all on my own writing a book it will take me five years to finish and which I presume no one will want.'

'You should have had a word with me,' Anders said. 'I could have got you on TV at any rate. Where you could have spoken about your book.'

'And how would you have managed that?' Helena enquired. 'An offer you can't refuse?'

'Not even you would've had good enough contacts for that,' Geir said. 'But thanks for the thought.'

'So that's just you left,' Anders said, looking at me.

'Karl Ove?' Geir said. 'He sheds his tears in a limousine. I've said that ever since he came to Stockholm.'

'I don't agree,' I said. 'It'll soon be five years since I made my debut. Journalists still ring now and then, that's true. But what do they ask about? Hey, Knausgaard, I'm writing an article here about authors with writers' block. And I was wondering if I could have a chat with you. Or even worse: Listen up, we're doing a feature on writers who've done only one book. There are quite a few, you know. And you, well, you've written just one book. I was wondering if you had any time to chat to me about that. How it feels. Yeah, you know. Are you writing now? Has the flow dried up a bit?'

'Hear what I said?' Geir said. 'He sheds his tears in a limousine.'

'But I've got nothing! I've been writing for four years and there's nothing! Nothing!'

'*All* my friends are failures,' Geir said. 'Not like the usual mainstream failures, though, these are really beyond the pale. One of them, when he puts dating ads on the Net, he says he loves forests and fields and grilling sausages over an open fire and so on simply because he can't afford to take someone to a restaurant or a café. He hasn't got a button to his name. Absolutely *nada*. One of my colleagues at university became obsessed with a prostitute, he spent all his money on her, more than 200,000 kroner, he even paid for her to have her breasts enlarged so that they were the way he liked them. Another friend has started up a vineyard. In Uppsala! A third has been writing a doctoral thesis for fourteen years. He'll never finish because there's always a new theory, or a new book appears he hasn't read and he has to include. He never stops writing. He's of normal intelligence, but he's stuck in a dead-end street. And then there was a friend in Arendal who impregnated a thirteen-year-old.'

He looked at me and laughed.

'Relax, it wasn't Karl Ove. Not as far as I know anyway. Then there's my friend, the painter,' Geir went on. 'He's gifted, a talent, but all he paints is Viking longboats and swords and he has gone so far to the right that there's no way back for him now, and certainly no way in. I mean to say, Viking boats are no admission ticket to a life in the arts.'

'Don't drag me into this collection,' Anders said.

'No, no one present belongs there,' Geir said. 'Not yet at any rate. I have a feeling we are all on the slide. We're sitting on a wreck. Well, the situation's fine now, the sky's black and full of stars and the water's warm, but we have started to slip.'

'That was very poetic,' Linda said. 'But it's not how I feel.'

She was sitting with both hands over her belly. I met her gaze. I'm happy, it said. I smiled to her.

My God. In two weeks we would have a baby here.

I was going to be a father.

The table had gone quiet. Everyone had finished. They were reclining in their chairs, Anders with a glass of wine in his hands. I took the bottle, got up and refilled glasses.

'We've been so open,' Helena said. 'That never happens, I was thinking.'

'It's a competition,' I said, putting down the bottle and catching the drop running down the neck with my thumb. 'Who's worst off? Me!'

'No, me!' Geir said.

'I find it difficult to visualise my parents sitting and talking about this with friends,' Helena said. 'But they really *were* up the creek without a paddle. We aren't.'

'How do you mean?' Christina asked.

'My father's Örebro's wig king. He makes toupees. His first wife, my mother, is an alcoholic. She's so repugnant I can hardly visit her. And if I do, I'm in a state for several weeks afterwards. But when dad remarried he chose another alcoholic.'

She pulled a face and followed up with a few tics, which captured her father's wife to perfection. I had met her once, at the christening of their child; she was both utterly self-controlled and utterly at the end of her tether. Helena often laughed at her.

'When I was small they injected syringes into those small fruit-drink cartons, you know the ones, and filled them with alcohol. So that they would look quite innocent. Ha ha ha! And once when I was alone on holiday with mum she gave me a sleeping tablet, locked the door from the outside and went on the town.'

Everyone laughed.

'But she's much worse now. She's a sort of monster. Devours us if we visit her. Just thinks of herself, there's nothing else. She drinks and is foul all the time.'

She looked at me.

'Your father drank as well, didn't he?'

'Yes, he did,' I said. 'Not when I was a boy. He started when I was sixteen. And died when I was thirty. So he stuck at it for fourteen years. He literally drank himself to death. And I think perhaps that was what he was trying to do.'

'Haven't you got a funny story about him?' Anders asked.

'I'm not sure Karl Ove has the same relish for his own misfortunes as you have for those of others,' Helena said.

'Don't worry. It's fine,' I said. 'I don't have any feelings about this any longer. I don't know if this is funny, but, well, here we go. In the end he was living in his mother's house. Drank non-stop of course. One day he fell down the step into the living room. I think he broke his leg. It may have been only a bad sprain. But at any rate he couldn't move – he just lay on the floor. My grandmother wanted to ring for an ambulance, but he wouldn't have it. So he lay there, on the living-room floor, while she looked after him. Ate and drank where he was. I've no idea for how long. A few days perhaps. My uncle found him. He was still lying there.'

Everyone laughed. I did too.

'What was he like when he didn't drink?' Anders asked. 'The first sixteen years?'

'He was a bastard. I was scared to death of him. Absolutely pissing in my pants. I remember once . . . well, I used to like swimming when I was a boy, going to the baths in the winter, it was the high point of the week. Once I lost a sock there. I couldn't find it. I searched and searched, but it was nowhere to be seen. And then I got so frightened. It was a total nightmare.'

'Why was that?' Helena asked.

'Because my life would have been a living hell if he found out.'

'That you'd lost a sock?'

'Yes, exactly. The chances of him finding out were minimal of course, I could just sneak into the house and take another pair of socks as soon as I was home, but I was still terrified all the way home. Opened the door. No one there. Started taking off my shoes. And who should come in but my father? And what does he do? Stand there and watch me take off my things.'

'What happened?' Helena asked.

'He slapped me and told me I could never go to the swimming baths again.' I smiled.

'Ha ha ha!' Geir laughed. 'There's a man after my own heart! Consistent to the last.'

'Did your father hit *you* then?' Helena asked.

Geir hesitated.

'There were some features of a traditional Norwegian upbringing. You know, over my knees and down with your pants. But he never hit me in the face and he never hit me on the spur of the moment, like Karl Ove's father did. It was a punishment, nothing more, nothing less. I considered it just. But he didn't like doing it. I think he saw it as a duty he was obliged to fulfil. He's very kind, my father is. A good person. I don't harbour any ill will against him at all. Not even for the beatings. It was a very different culture from what we have today.'

'I can't say the same about my father,' Anders said. 'Well, I don't want to go into my childhood and all that psychological crap. But when I was growing up we were rich, as I said, and when I finished school I joined his company, as a kind of companion. I lived a wonderful upper-class life. Then he suddenly went bust. It transpired he had been cooking the books and had committed fraud. And I had signed everything he gave me. I was let off prison, but I owe the tax authorities such enormous sums of money that everything I earn for the rest of my life has to go towards paying them off.

That’s why I don’t have a proper job any more. There’s no point, they take the lot.’

‘What happened to your father then?’ I asked.

‘He legged it. I haven’t seen him since. I don’t know where he is. Abroad somewhere. I don’t want to see him, either.’

‘But your mother stayed here,’ Linda said.

‘You could say that, yes,’ Anders said. ‘Embittered, abandoned and broke.’

He smiled.

‘Yes, I’ve met her once,’ I said. ‘No, twice. She’s very funny. She sits on a stool in the corner and peppers her conversation with sarcasm for anyone who wants to hear. There’s lots of humour.’

‘Humour?’ Anders queried, and began to imitate her, the cracked old-lady voice calling his name and criticising him for everything under the sun.

‘My mother is frightened,’ Geir said. ‘And one fact sabotages everything else in her life or overshadows it. She wants to have everyone close to her all the time. It was hell when I was growing up, it cost me so much to break free. Her technique for holding me was to make me feel guilty. I refused to accept it. That was how I escaped. The price is that we hardly talk. It’s a high price, but it’s worth paying.’

‘What’s she frightened of?’ Anders asked.

‘You mean how it manifested itself?’

Anders nodded.

‘She’s not frightened of people. With them she can be very direct, she’s fearless. It’s space she’s afraid of. For example, she always had a cushion with her when we went out in the car. On her lap. Whenever we went into a tunnel she would lean forward and put it over her head.’

‘Is that true?’ Helena asked.

‘Certainly. Every single time. Then we had to say when we were out of the tunnel. From there it developed further: all of a sudden she couldn’t be on roads with more than one lane, she couldn’t bear to have cars passing us so close. And then she couldn’t be alongside water. Our holidays became a virtual impossibility. I remember my father standing over the map like a general before a battle while he tried to figure out a route without motorways, water and tunnels.’

‘And my mother’s diametrically the opposite,’ Linda said. ‘She’s not afraid of anything. I think she’s the most fearless person I know. I remember cycling with her through the town to the theatre. She pedals like a lunatic, onto the pavement, between people, onto the road. Once she was stopped by the police. She didn’t nod, listen and apologise, it won’t happen again, officer – not her. No, she was indignant. It was up to her where she cycled. That’s how she was all my childhood. If any of the teachers complained about me she would reciprocate in kind. There was never anything wrong with me. I was always right. When I was six she let me go on holiday to Greece alone.’

‘Alone?’ Christine repeated. ‘Just you?’

‘No, I was with a girlfriend and her family. But I was six years old, and two weeks alone with a family of strangers in a foreign country was probably a bit much, don’t you think?’

‘It was the 70s,’ Geir said again. ‘Everything was allowed then.’

‘I was so embarrassed by my mother on so many occasions. She is the kind of person who has no sense of shame, she can do the most incredible things, and if it was to protect me, I used to wish the floor would swallow me up.’

‘And your father?’ Geir asked.

‘That’s a completely different kettle of fish. He was totally unpredictable. Anything could happen when he fell ill. We were just waiting for him to do something awful so that the police could come and take him away. Often we had to run away, my mother and my brother and I. Flee from him, no less.’

‘What did he do then?’ I asked, looking at her. She had told me about her father before, but only in broad strokes, with very little detail.

‘Oh, anything was possible. He could climb up the drainpipe or throw himself through a window. He could be violent. Blood and smashed glass and violence. But then the police came. And everything was fine again. When he was at home I was constantly expecting a catastrophe. But as soon as it came I was always calm. It’s almost a relief for me when the worst happens. I *know* I can handle it. It’s the way there that’s difficult.’

There was a pause.

‘Now I can remember a story!’ Linda exclaimed. ‘It was when we had to flee from dad and go up to my grandmother’s in Norrland. I think I was five and my brother seven. On our return to Stockholm the flat was full of gas. Dad had opened the tap and left it on for several days. It felt like the door was forced open by the pressure when mummy unlocked it. She turned to us and told Mathias to take me down to the street and stay there. She waited until we had gone before going into the flat and turning off the gas. On the street, Mathias said, and I remember it so well, you realise that mummy can die now, don't you? Yes, I answered, I knew. Later that day I overheard mummy talking to him on the phone. "Were you trying to kill us?" she asked. Not as an exaggeration, but as a sober fact. "Do you actually want to kill us?"'

Linda smiled.

'Hard to top that one,' Anders said. And he turned to Christina. 'That leaves you. What are your parents like? They're alive, aren't they?'

'Yes,' Christina said. 'But they're old. They live in Uppsala. They're Pentecostalists. I grew up there and was riddled with guilt about everything, the tiniest little thing. But they're good people. It's their life's work. When the snow melts and sand is left on the tarmac after the winter do you know what they do?'

'No,' I said, since it was me she was looking at.

'They sweep it up and give it back to the Highways Department.'

'Is that true?' Anders asked. 'Ha ha ha!'

'They don't drink alcohol, that goes without saying. And my father doesn't drink tea or coffee either. If he wants a treat in the morning he drinks hot water.'

'I don't believe that,' Anders said.

'But it's true,' Geir said. 'He drinks hot water and they leave the sand by the gate for the Highways Department. They're so good it's almost impossible to be there. I'm sure having me as a son-in-law must be like the devil testing them.'

'What was it like growing up with them?' Helena asked.

'I thought for ages that their world was the world, that was what it was like. All my friends and all my parents' friends belonged to the movement. There was no life outside it. When I broke with it I also broke with all my friends.'

'How old were you then?'

'Twelve,' Christina said.

‘Twelve?’ Helena repeated. ‘How did you find the strength to do that? Or the maturity?’

‘I don’t know. I just did. And it was tough. It was. I did lose all my friends.’

‘Twelve years old?’ Linda said.

Christina nodded and smiled.

‘So now you drink coffee in the morning?’ Anders asked.

‘Yes,’ Christina answered. ‘But not when I’m there.’

We laughed. I got up and started collecting the plates. Geir got up as well, took his own plate and followed me into the kitchen.

‘Have you changed sides, Geir?’ Anders shouted after him.

I slid the empty mussel shells into the bin, rinsed the plates and put them in the dishwasher. Geir passed me his, retreated a few steps and leaned against the fridge.

‘Fascinating,’ he said.

‘What is?’ I asked.

‘What we’ve been talking about. Or *talking* about it at all. Peter Handke has a word for it. *Erzählnächte* I believe he calls them. Nights when people open up and everyone contributes a story.’

‘Yes,’ I said, turning round. ‘Coming for a walk? I need a smoke.’

‘All right,’ Geir said.

When we were ready with our coats on, Anders came out.

‘Are you going for a smoke? I’ll join you.’

Two minutes later we were in the middle of the yard, me with a glowing cigarette between my fingers, the other two with their hands in their pockets. It was cold and the wind was blowing. Everywhere fireworks were going off.

‘I had another story on the tip of my tongue upstairs,’ Anders said, running one hand through his hair. ‘About losing everything you have. But I thought it best to tell it here. It was in Spain. I had a restaurant with a pal. It was a fantastic life. Up all night, high on coke and booze, lying in the sun during the day, starting again at seven or eight in the evening. I think it was the best time in my life. I was absolutely free. Did exactly what I wanted.’

‘And?’ Geir said.

‘Then perhaps I did too much of what I wanted. We had an office on the floor above the bar, I screwed my companion’s wife there, I couldn’t keep my hands off her. Of course he caught us red-handed and that was that. No more working together. But one day I want to go back. It's just a question of getting Helena on board.'

'It might not be the life she's dreaming of?' I suggested.

Anders shrugged.

'But we can hire a summer house down there at some point. For a month every six months. Granada or something. What do you reckon?'

'Sounds good,' I said.

'I don't have any holidays,' Geir said.

'What do you mean?' Anders asked. 'This year?'

'No, ever. I work every day all week, Saturdays and Sundays included, and all the weeks in the year, apart from Christmas Eve perhaps.'

'Why?' Anders asked.

Geir laughed.

I threw down my cigarette end and stamped on the ground a few times.

'Shall we go up?' I said.

The first time I met Anders he picked Linda and me up from the railway station by Saltsjöbaden, where they were renting a little flat, and on the way he expressed his contempt for the rat race there, life was about more than money and status, but even though I had an inkling he was humouring us and just saying what he thought we, as 'arty people', wanted to hear, a lot of months were to pass before I understood that he actually meant the opposite: his *only* real interest was money and the life money bought. He was obsessed by the notion of becoming rich again, everything he did was to that end, and as he could not do this with the knowledge of the tax authorities, he moved into the world of illegal earnings. When Helena met him all his affairs were murky, but she, while fighting her love for him for as long as she could, although finally she did crumble on a grand scale, set some demands, because not long afterwards they had a baby together, and apparently he complied: the money he earned was still illegal but in a certain light nonetheless 'clean'. What exactly his work was I didn't know, except that he used his many contacts from the days when he was in clover to finance a quick succession of projects and these somehow lasted only a few months at a time. Ringing him was a waste of energy because he was forever changing mobile phones, the same applied to his cars, so-called company cars which he exchanged at regular intervals. When we visited them, one evening there might be an enormous flat-screen TV along one wall in the living room, or a new laptop on the desk in the hall, the next they could be gone. The line between what he owned and what he could lay his hands on was evidently fluid, and nor was there any clear link between what he did and the money he had at his disposal. All the money he made, and frequently it was not trivial amounts, he used to gamble. He would gamble on anything that moved. Since his powers of persuasion were impressive he had no problem getting hold of money, so he was stuck in a real quagmire. As a rule he kept all this to himself, but now and then his dealings surfaced, like the time someone rang Helena and said that Anders had emptied the till of the company where he had gone to renegotiate contracts, a little matter of 700,000 kroner, and it would be reported to the police. Anders didn't bat an eyelid when she confronted him with it; the company's finances were in a mess and dubious, now they were bent on a cover-up by blaming him. Even though he was supposed to have run off with the money and gambled it away, the money was illegal and therefore the police would be the last people they would contact, so in that respect he was safe. Presumably he kept a watchful eye on the people he swindled, but the situation was no less dangerous for that. Once they had been burgled while they were out, Helena told Linda; the burglars probably did it just to show that they could. Then he became the co-owner of a grandiose restaurant scheme, but that became history for him after some months, then there were some building sites he was suddenly running, then he was renting exclusive rooms to a hairdressing salon, then there was a bacon factory he had to save from bankruptcy. The problem, if you can call it a problem, was that it was impossible to dislike him. He could talk to anyone, which is a rare gift, and he was generous, which you noticed as soon as you met him. And he was always happy. He was the person who stood up at parties and thanked the hosts for the spread or congratulated them on whatever occasion it was or did whatever was required, and he had a kind word for everyone, however much or little they had in common with him. More often than not, he knew how to make them feel good. Yet there was nothing of the schemer about him, no subtlety, and perhaps that was the reason – despite his general duplicity, which is one of the few qualities I find hard to accept – I still liked him so much. Naturally enough, he couldn’t give a flying fart about me, but whenever we met he didn’t pretend to be interested, the way people sometimes do when duty compels and the fracture between thoughts and actions becomes visible in one of those tiny revealing gestures that very few can control, such as the quick glance to another side of the room, meaningless in itself, but when it is followed by a kind of ‘jolt’ as their attention refocuses on you, the ritual as ritual becomes obvious. The feeling that you have been subjected to a charade will of course be disastrous for someone whose life depends on winning people’s trust. Anders did not ‘play games’; that was his secret. However, he was not ‘genuine’ either, in the sense that everything he said necessarily fell in line with what he thought, what he did and what he wanted. But then who is? There is a type of person who consistently says what he means without adapting it to the situation in which he finds himself, but such individuals are few and far between, I have met only two, and what happens to them is that all these social situations become incredibly charged. Not because people disagree and start quarrelling, but because their conversational aim excludes all other aims and their totalitarian attitude automatically rebounds on them and they appear mean and pig-headed, irrespective of their real nature, which in both cases was, as far as I could judge, basically generous and friendly. The social unease I myself could provoke came from the opposite cause. I always let the situation determine events, either by saying nothing at all or playing up to others. Saying what you believe others want to hear is of a course a form of lying. Hence the difference between Anders’ and my social behaviour was only one of degree. Even though his corroded trust and mine corroded integrity, the result was basically the same: a slow erosion of the soul.

It was of course ironic, though not incomprehensible, that Helena, who was drawn to the spiritual side of life and was continually trying to understand herself, should have ended up with a man who swept all other values apart from money to the side with a smile on his face, for they shared an essential ingredient, a lightness and a *joie de vivre*. And they were an attractive couple. With her dark hair, warm eyes and strong facial features, Helena’s appearance was striking, her personality winning and her presence palpable. She was a talented actress. I had seen her in two TV series: in one, a crime programme, she played a widow, and the sombreness she radiated turned her into a stranger for me, it was like watching a different person with Helena's face. In the other, a comedy programme, she played a bitch of a wife, and I had the same impression, a different person with her features.

Anders was also good-looking, in a boyish kind of way, although whether it was his aura, the glint in his eye, the slim body or perhaps the hair – which would have been described as a mane in the 1950s – that did it, was hard to say because Anders was not an easy person to see. Once I had bumped into him in Sergels torg in the city centre, he seemed to be hanging around by a wall, hunched and very, very tired, I had barely recognised him, but when he caught sight of me, he straightened up, he seemed to lift himself and in the twinkling of an eye he transformed himself into the happy energetic man I was familiar with.

When we returned, Helena, Christina and Linda had cleared the table and were now chatting on the sofa. I went into the kitchen and put on the coffee. While waiting for it to brew I went into the adjacent room, which was completely quiet and empty, except for the breathing of Helena and Anders' child, who was asleep on our bed, clothed and with a blanket over him. In the half-light the empty cradle, the empty cot, the changing mat and the dresser with the baby's clothes beside it seemed a bit eerie. Everything was ready for our baby to arrive. There was even a pack of nappies we had bought on the shelf beneath the changing mat, with a pile of towels and clothes, and above it a mobile from which hung tiny planes, quivering in the draught from the window. It was eerie because there was no baby, and the line between what could have been and what was to come was so fluid in these matters.

From the living room came the sounds of laughter. I closed the door behind me, put a bottle of cognac, cognac glasses, coffee cups and dishes on a tray, poured the coffee from the machine into a vacuum flask and carried everything into the living room. Christina had a teddy bear on her lap, she seemed happy, her face was more open and calmer than usual, while Linda, sitting next to her, could scarcely keep her eyes open. At present she was going to bed at about nine. It was getting on for twelve now. Helena searched for some music among the CDs on the shelves while Anders and Geir were at the table continuing their conversation about mutual criminal acquaintances. A whole menagerie of criminals had obviously frequented the boxing club in the years Geir hung out there. I set the table and sat down.

‘You met Osman, didn’t you, Karl Ove?’ Geir asked.

I nodded.

Geir had once taken me up to Mosebacke to meet two of the boxers he knew. One, Paolo Roberto, who had boxed for the world championship title, was now a TV celebrity in Sweden, and was preparing for a new title fight in a kind of comeback. The other, Osman, was at the same level but not as well known. With them was an English trainer whom Geir introduced as a ‘doctor in boxing’. ‘He’s a doctor in boxing!’ I shook hands, didn’t say much, but carefully followed what went on because this was very different from what I knew. They were very relaxed, there were no tensions in the air, which, it occurred to me, I had always been used to. They ate pancakes, drank coffee, watched the crowds, squinted into the low but still hot sun and talked about the old days with Geir. Even though his body was as calm as theirs, it was filled with a different, lighter and more excited, almost nervous energy, it was apparent in his eyes, always looking for openings, and in the way he spoke – effusive, resourceful but also calculating – because he was adapting to them and their jargon while they just spoke as it came to them. The one called Osman was wearing a T-shirt, and even though his biceps were large, perhaps five times larger than mine, they were not disproportionately large but slim. The same was true for the whole of his upper body. He sat there, supple and relaxed, and every time my eyes rested on him it crossed my mind that he could smash me to pulp in seconds without my being able to do anything about it. The feeling it gave me was one of femininity. It was humiliating, but the humiliation was all my own, it could not be seen, nor could it be sensed. Yet it was still there, damn it.

‘Fleetingly,’ I said. ‘At Mosebacke last year. You introduced them to me as though they were a couple of chimps.’

‘We were more like the chimps, I imagine,’ Geir said. ‘Well, anyway. Osman. He attacked a Securicor van in Farsta with an accomplice. The place they chose was *fifty* metres from the main police HQ. So when they were a bit ham-fisted at the beginning and the crew managed to set off the alarm the police were there in seconds! Then they bundled themselves into their car and drove off without the money or anything. And ran out of petrol! Ha ha ha!’

‘Is that possible? It sounds like the Olsen band.’

‘Right. Ha ha ha!’

‘So how is Osman? Armed robbery is not exactly a minor offence.’

‘It wasn’t too bad. He was given a couple of years, that was all. But his pal had so much previous that he’ll be in for a long stretch.’

‘Has this just happened?’

‘No, no, no. It was a few years ago. A long time before he started a career as a boxer.’

‘I see,’ I said. ‘Some cognac?’

Both Geir and Anders nodded. I opened the bottle and filled three glasses.

‘Any of you like some?’ I asked, looking towards the sofa. A shaking of heads.

‘I might have a tiny drop, please,’ Helena said. As she walked across the floor towards us the music began to pour out of the ridiculously small speakers behind her. It was Damon Albarn’s *Mali* CD, which we had played earlier in the evening and she had utterly fallen for.

‘There you are,’ I said, passing her a glass with the golden-brown liquid just covering the bottom. The light from the lamp hanging above the table made it glow.

‘There’s one thing I’m happy about anyway,’ Christina said from the sofa. ‘And that’s being an adult. It’s sooo much better being thirty-two than twenty-two.’

‘You are aware you’ve got a teddy bear on your lap, Christina, are you?’ I said. ‘Somehow that undermines what you just said.’

She laughed. It was wonderful to see her laugh. There was something tight-lipped about her, not in a dark way, more as though she was using every ounce of strength to keep everything, also herself, together. She was tall and slim, always well dressed, of course, in a self-willed way, and beautiful with her pale skin and freckles, but after the first impressions had passed there was this slight closed-ness that emerged and etched itself in my thoughts about her, at least that was how it had been for me. And yet there was something childlike about her, especially when she laughed or became excited and her self-restraint was overcome. Not childlike as in immature, but childlike as in playful and unrestrained. I saw some of the same in my mother the rare times she let go and did something uninhibited or hasty, for in her too a natural response was indistinguishable from vulnerability. Once we had been up at Geir and Christina's for a meal. As usual Christina put all her energy and concentration into the cooking. I had been alone in the living room, in the dim light behind the bookshelves, when she came in to get something. She didn't know I was there. With the voices and the noise of the fans behind her in the kitchen, she smiled to herself. Her eyes were sparkling. Oh, I was so happy when I saw that, but sad too, because she had not intended anyone to see how much it meant to her that we were there.

On one of the mornings when I was staying with them Christina had been washing up in the kitchen while I sat at the table drinking coffee, and she suddenly pointed to the pile of plates and dishes in the cupboard.

'When we moved in together I bought eighteen of everything,' she said. 'I envisaged us having big parties here. Loads of friends and wonderful meals. But we've never used them. Not once!'

Geir laughed aloud from the bedroom. Christina smiled.

That was them. That was how they were.

'But I agree,' I said now. 'The twenties were hell. Adolescence was worse. But the thirties are OK.'

'What's changed then?' Helena asked.

'When I was twenty what I had, what made me me, was so little. I didn't know that of course because that was all there was at that time. But now I'm thirty-five there's more. Well, everything that existed in me when I was twenty is still there. But now it's surrounded by so much more. That's sort of how I think about it.'

'That's an incredibly optimistic view,' Helena said. 'That things get better the older you are.'

'Is it?' Geir said. 'Surely the less you have, the simpler it is to live?'

'Not for me at any rate,' I said. 'Now things don't mean as much as they did before. Trivialities could mean everything! They could be all-decisive!'

'That's true,' Geir said. 'But I still wouldn't call it optimistic. Fatalistic, yes.'

'What happens, happens,' I said. 'And now we're here. *Skål* to that, I say.'

'*Skål!*'

'Seven minutes till midnight,' Linda said. 'Shall we put on the TV and watch Jan Malmsjö's countdown?'

‘What’s that?’ I asked, going over and proffering my hand. She grabbed it and I pulled her to her feet.

‘He reads poems. The bells chime. It’s a Swedish tradition.’

‘Put it on then,’ I said.

While she was doing that I went over to open the windows. The noise of fireworks was growing steadily, now the bangs, crackles and whizzes were non-stop, a wall of sound above the rooftops. The streets were thick with people. Champagne bottles and sparklers in hand, warm coats and capes over festive outfits. No children, just happy, drunken adults.

Linda fetched the last bottle of champagne, opened it and filled the glasses full with effervescent foam. Holding them, we stood by the windows. I watched the others. They were happy, excited, talking, pointing, *skål*-ing.

Outside, sirens sounded.

‘Either war has broken out or 2004 has started,’ Geir said. I put out my arms and held Linda to me. We looked into each other’s eyes.

‘Happy New Year,’ I said and kissed her.

‘Happy New Year, my darling prince,’ she said. ‘This is our year.’

‘Yes, it is,’ I said.

After all the hugs and congratulations were over and people had started to withdraw from the streets, Anders and Helena remembered their sky lantern. We put on our coats and went down to the backyard. Anders lit the wick, the lantern slowly filled with hot air and when, at length, he let go it began to rise alongside the house, glowing and silent. We followed it until it vanished over Östermalm’s rooftops. Back upstairs, we sat round the table again. Conversation was more sporadic and less concentrated now, but occasionally it focused on one point, such as when Linda talked about the posh party she had been to when she was a pupil at *gymnas*, in a grand house with a large swimming pool behind which there was an enormous glass partition. During the course of the evening they had swum and as she kicked off from the partition to dive into the water it shattered and smashed into a million tinkling pieces.

‘I’ll never forget that sound,’ she said.

Anders talked about a trip to the Alps – he had been skiing off-piste and suddenly the ground had opened beneath him. Still wearing his skis, he had fallen down a crevasse in a glacier, perhaps six metres, and lost consciousness. He was rescued by a helicopter, he had broken his back, paralysis was feared and he was operated on at once; for weeks he lay in hospital while his father, he told us, sometimes sat in the chair next to him, as if in a dream, reeking of alcohol.

Then he got to his feet, leaned forward and pulled his shirt up so that we could see the long scar on his back from the operation.

When I was seventeen, I told them, we had been doing a hundred kilometres an hour in the frozen wastes of Telemark and a tyre had burst, we had bounced off a telephone pole, flown over a road and landed in a ditch, escaping serious injury by some miracle, but the car was a total write-off. However, the worst had not been the accident but the cold, it was minus twenty, the middle of the night, we were wearing T-shirts, jackets and trainers after an Imperiet gig and stood on the roadside for hours without getting a lift.

I refilled the glasses with cognac for Anders, Geir and myself, Linda yawned, Helena began a story about Los Angeles, then a shrill alarm went off somewhere in the building.

‘What the hell’s that?’ Anders said. ‘The fire alarm?’

‘Well, it is New Year’s Eve,’ Geir said.

‘Should we go out?’ Linda wondered, sitting up on the sofa.

‘I’ll go and check first,’ I said.

‘I’ll join you,’ Geir said.

We stepped into the corridor. There was no smoke anyway. The sound was coming from the ground floor so we hurried down the stairs. The light above the lift was flashing. I leaned forward and looked through the window in the door. Someone was lying on the floor inside. I opened the door. It was the Russian. She was on her back with one foot against the wall. She was in party clothes, a black dress with some sequins on the chest, skin-coloured tights and high heels. She laughed when she saw us. Instinctively, I looked at her thighs and the black panties between them before shifting my gaze to her face.

‘I can’t stand up!’ she said.

‘We’ll give you a hand,’ I said. I grabbed one arm and pulled her into a sitting position. Geir went to the other side and between us we managed to get her upright. She was laughing all the time. The stench of perfume and alcohol in the confined space was overpowering.

‘*Tack så mycket*,’ she said in Swedish. Then *Tusen, tusen takk*, in Norwegian.

She took my hands in hers, bent forward and kissed them, first one, then the other. Then she peered up at me.

‘Oh, what a good-looking man,’ she said.

‘Come on and we’ll help you to your flat,’ I said. Pressed the button for her floor and closed the door. Geir was grinning from ear to ear as he glanced from her to me. As the lift started its ascent she slumped against me.

‘So,’ I said. ‘Here we are. Have you got the key?’

She looked into the little bag she wore over her shoulder, swaying to and fro like a tree in the wind as her fingers rummaged through the contents.

‘Here it is!’ she exclaimed triumphantly, producing a bunch of keys.

Geir held an arm against her shoulder as she toppled forward with the key pointing to the lock.

‘Take a step forward,’ he said. ‘And you’ll be fine.’

She obeyed. After some fumbling she succeeded in getting the key into the lock.

‘*Tusen takk*!’ she thanked us again. ‘You’re two angels who have come to my aid this evening.’

‘Not at all,’ Geir said. ‘And good luck.’

On our way upstairs to the flat Geir sent me a quizzical look.

‘Was that your crazy neighbour? he asked.

I nodded.

‘She’s a prostitute, isn’t she?’

I shook my head.

‘Not as far as I know,’ I said.

‘She must be, you know. She couldn’t afford to live here otherwise. And her appearance . . . She didn’t look stupid though.’

‘That’s enough,’ I said, opening the door to the flat. ‘She’s like any woman. Just very unhappy, an alcoholic and Russian. With an impulse-control disorder.’

‘Yes, you can say that again.’ Geir laughed.

‘What was it?’ Helena asked from the living room.

‘That was our Russian neighbour,’ I said, going in. ‘She’d fallen over in the lift and was so drunk she couldn’t get up. So we helped her to her flat.’

‘She kissed Karl Ove’s hands,’ Geir said. ‘“Oh, what a good-looking man,” she said!’

Everyone laughed.

‘And that’s after she’s stood here swearing and cursing at me,’ I said. ‘And driven us mad.’

‘It’s a nightmare,’ Linda said. ‘She’s totally out of it. When I walk past her on the stairs I’m almost afraid she’ll pull out a knife and stab me. She glares at me with hatred in her eyes, doesn’t she? Deep hatred.’

‘Time’s slowly running out for her,’ Geir said. ‘Then you move in with a bulging belly and impending bliss.’

‘Is that it, do you think?’ I asked.

‘Of course,’ Linda said. ‘If only we’d kept our distance at the beginning. But we were open with her. Now she’s obsessed by us.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ I said. ‘Anyone up for some dessert? Linda’s made her famous tiramisu.’

‘Oh!’ said Helena.

‘If it’s famous it’s because it’s the only dessert I can make,’ Linda said.

I fetched it and the coffee, and we sat at the table again. No sooner had we done so than the music blared out from the flat below.

‘This is how we live,’ I said.

‘Can’t you get her thrown out?’ Anders asked. ‘If you want I can fix it for you.’

‘And how does that work?’ Helena asked.

‘I have my methods,’ Anders replied.

‘Oh yes?’ Helena said.

‘Report her to the police,’ Geir said. ‘Then she’ll realise it’s serious.’

‘Do you mean that?’ I said.

‘Of course. If you don’t do something drastic it’ll just go on and on.’

The music stopped as abruptly as it had started. The door below slammed. Heels click-clacked on the stairs.

‘Is she going to come here?’ I said.

Everyone sat still, listening. But the footsteps passed our door and continued up the stairs. Soon after, they returned and faded as they went down. I crossed to the window and looked below. Wearing only the dress and one shoe, she staggered into the white carriageway. She waved, a taxi was approaching. It stopped and she clambered in.

‘She’s taking a taxi,’ I said. ‘Wearing one shoe. Can’t fault her for effort, anyway.’

I sat down and the conversation drifted into other areas. At around two Anders and Helena made a move to go, wrapped themselves up in their thick winter clothes, hugged us and headed off into the night, Anders with his sleeping daughter in his arms. Geir and Christina left half an hour later, Geir, after returning with a high-heeled shoe in his hand.

‘Like a second Cinderella,’ he said. ‘What shall I do with it?’

‘Leave it outside her door,’ I said. ‘And be off with you now, we need to sleep.’

When I went into the bedroom, after tidying up the living room and putting on the dishwasher, Linda was asleep. But not so soundly that she was unable to open her eyes and send me a drowsy smile as I undressed.

‘That was a nice evening, wasn’t it,’ I said.

‘Yes, it was,’ she said.

‘Did they have a good time, do you think?’ I asked, getting into bed next to her.

‘Yes, I think so. Don’t you?’

‘Yes, I really do. I enjoyed it anyway.’

The light from the street lamps cast a faint glimmer across the floor. It was never properly dark in here. And never properly quiet. Fireworks were still exploding outside, voices rose and fell in the street, cars raced by, more now that New Year’s Eve was nearing its end.

‘But I’m beginning to get seriously worried about our neighbour,’ Linda said. ‘It doesn’t feel good having her there.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘There isn’t a lot we can do though.’

‘No.’

‘Geir reckoned she was a prostitute,’ I said.

‘She is, no question about it,’ Linda said. ‘She works for one of those escort companies.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘It’s obvious.’

‘Not to me,’ I said. ‘The thought would never have crossed my mind in a million years.’

‘That’s because you’re so naïve,’ Linda said.

‘Maybe I am.’

‘You are.’

She smiled, leaned over and kissed me.

‘Goodnight,’ she said.

‘Goodnight,’ I said.

It was difficult to comprehend that actually there were three of us in bed. But there were. The baby in Linda’s belly was fully developed; all that separated us was a centimetre-thin wall of flesh and skin. The baby could be born any day now and this defined Linda’s behaviour. She no longer started anything new, barely went out, kept calm, cosseted herself and her body, took long baths and watched films on the sofa, dozed and slept. Her state was like dormancy, but her disquiet had not entirely left her. Now it was particularly my role in the drama that concerned her. On the antenatal course we had been told that the relationship between the pregnant woman and the midwife was important, and if there were any disagreements, if there was a bad atmosphere of any kind, it was important to say so as early as possible in order that another, hopefully better-suited, midwife could take over. Furthermore, we were told that the man’s role during the birth was primarily that of a communicator; he knew his wife best of all, he would understand what she wanted and, as she was otherwise engaged, he would have to be the person to pass this on to the midwife. This was where I came in. I spoke Norwegian. Would the midwives and nurses even understand what I said? And, much worse, I avoided conflict and was always considerate to everyone in any situation. Would I be able to say no to a potentially awful midwife and demand a new one, with all the hurt feelings that might entail?

‘Relax, relax, it’ll be fine,’ I responded, ‘don’t think about it, everything will sort itself out,’ but she couldn’t settle, I had become the cause of her worry. Would I even be able to ring for a taxi when the moment came?

That she had a point did not make the matter any easier. Any form of pressure knocked me out. I wanted to please everyone, but sometimes there were situations where I had to make a decision and act upon it, and then I suffered dreadful agonies, these were among my most unpleasant experiences. Now I had lived through a series of them over a short period and she had been a witness. The incident with the locked door, the boat incident, the incident with my mother. And the time when I compensated for all this by intervening in a fight one morning on the Metro didn't do me much credit either, because what sort of judgement had I shown? And, more importantly, I knew it would be more difficult for me to show a midwife the door than to be stabbed with a knife in a Metro station.

Then, on my way home late one afternoon, putting down my laptop case and the two shopping bags to press the button on the outside lift up to Malmskillnadsgatan, I happened to glance at my phone and saw that Linda had rung eight times. As I was so close, I didn't ring back. I waited for the lift, which was taking an eternity to come down. I turned round and met the eyes of a tramp dozing against the wall in a sleeping bag. He was thin and his face was discoloured. There was no curiosity in his gaze, but nor was it one of apathy. It just registered my presence. Filled with concern about that and the uncertainty Linda's calls had created, I stood still in the lift as it slowly made its way up the shaft. As soon as it stopped, I tore open the door and ran along the pavement, down David Bagares gata, in the front door and up the stairs.

'Hello?' I called. 'Has something happened?'

No answer.

She must have gone to the hospital under her own steam. Had she?

'Hello?' I called again. 'Linda?'

I took off my boots, went into the kitchen and peeped inside the bedroom door. No one there. I realised the shopping bags were still hanging from my arms and put them on the worktop before going through the bedroom and opening the living-room door.

She was in the middle of the floor staring at me.

'What's up?' I asked. 'Has something happened?'

She didn't answer. I went over to her.

'What's happened, Linda?'

Her eyes were black.

'I haven't felt anything all day,' she said. 'It feels as if there's something wrong. I can't feel anything.'

I put my arm around her. She wriggled away.

'Everything's fine,' I said. 'I'm sure of it.'

'IT BLOODY WELL ISN'T FINE!' she yelled. 'Don't you understand anything? Don't you understand what has happened?'

I tried to hold her again, but she wormed away.

She started to cry.

'Linda, Linda,' I said.

'Don't you understand what's happened?' she repeated.

'Everything's fine,' I said. 'I'm sure of it.'

I waited for another shout. Instead she lowered her hands and looked at me with her eyes full of tears.

'How can you be so sure?'

I didn't reply at first. Her undeviating stare felt like an accusation.

'What do you want us to do?' I asked.

'We have to go to hospital.'

'Hospital?' I said. 'Everything is as it *should* be. Babies move less the closer you are to birth. Come on, everything's great. It's just . . .'

It was only then, as I met her expression of disbelief, that I realised this might be serious.

'Get your coat on,' I said. 'I'll ring for a taxi.'

'Ring and tell them we're coming first,' she said.

I shook my head and went to the telephone on the windowsill.

'We'll just go straight there,' I said, picking up the receiver and dialling the number for the central taxi switchboard. 'They'll help us when we arrive.'

While waiting to get through I watched her. Slowly, as though not present in her movements, putting on her coat, winding the scarf around her neck, putting first one then the other foot on the trunk to tie her shoelaces. In the hall, where she was standing, every detail stood out clearly against the dark living room. Tears were still running down her cheeks.

Beep followed beep as nothing happened.

She was watching me now.

'I haven't got through yet,' I said.

Then the beeps stopped.

'Stockholm Taxis,' said a woman's voice.

'Yes, hello, I need a taxi to come to Regeringsgatan 81.'

'Yes . . . and where are you going?'

'Danderyd Hospital.'

'Right.'

'How long will it be?'

‘About fifteen minutes.’

‘That’s no good,’ I said. ‘This is for a birth. We need a taxi immediately.’

‘What did you say it was for?’

‘A birth.’

I realised she didn’t understand the Norwegian word for birth, *fødsel*. A few seconds passed while I searched for the correct Swedish word.

‘*Förlossning*,’ I said at last. ‘We need a taxi right away.’

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ she said. ‘But I can’t promise anything.’

‘Thank you,’ I replied and rang off, checked I had my credit card in my inside jacket pocket, locked the door and joined Linda in the corridor. She didn’t meet my eyes once on the way down.

Outside, it was still snowing.

‘Was it supposed to be coming right away?’ Linda said on the pavement.

I nodded.

‘As fast as they could make it, they said.’

Even though there was a lot of traffic I saw the taxi from far off. It was coming at quite a speed. I waved and it pulled up beside us. I bent forward, opened the door, let Linda in first and got in after her.

The driver turned.

‘Are we in a hurry?’ he asked.

‘It’s not quite what you think,’ I said. ‘But we’re going to Danderyd.’

He pulled out and drove towards Birger Jarlsgatan. We sat at the back without speaking. I took her hand in mine. Fortunately, she allowed me to do that. The overhead motorway lights flashed through the car like narrow belts. The radio was playing ‘I Won’t Let the Sun Go Down on Me’.

‘Don’t be frightened,’ I said. ‘Everything’s as it should be.’

She didn’t answer. We drove up a gentle incline. There were detached houses between the trees on both sides of the road. The roofs were white with snow, the entrances yellow with light. The occasional orange sledge, the occasional dark expensive car. Then we turned off right and drove under the road we had been on into the hospital, which resembled an enormous box with lots of hatches because of all the lit windows. Piles of snow lay scattered around the buildings.

‘Do you know where it is?’ I asked. ‘I mean the *Förlossning* department?’

He nodded ahead, turned left and pointed to a sign saying *BB Stockholm*.’

‘In there,’ he said.

Another taxi with its engine running was by the entrance as we arrived. The driver pulled in behind it, I passed him my Visa card, got out, held Linda’s hand and helped her onto her feet as another couple hurried through the door. He was carrying a baby seat and a big bag.

I signed, put the receipt with my card in my inside pocket and followed Linda into the building.

The other couple were waiting by the lift. We stood a few metres behind them. I stroked Linda’s back. She was crying.

‘This isn’t how I imagined it would be,’ she said.

‘Everything’s fine,’ I said.

The lift came and we entered after the other couple. The woman suddenly doubled up, tightly squeezing the rail beneath the mirror. The man stood with his hands full looking down at the floor.

They alerted the staff by ringing the bell when we arrived. The nurse who came to meet us exchanged a few words with them first and told us someone would be coming for us, then accompanied them down the corridor.

Linda sat down on a chair. I stood looking down the corridor. The lighting was muted. There was a sign hanging from the ceiling outside every room. Some of them were lit up in red. Whenever a new sign lit up, a signal sounded, also muted, yet with an unmistakably institutional sound. Now and then a nurse appeared, on her way from one room to another. At the end of the corridor a father was rocking a bundle in his hands. He appeared to be singing.

‘Why didn’t you say this was urgent?’ Linda said. ‘I can’t sit here!’

I didn’t answer.

My mind was a blank.

She got up.

‘I’m going in,’ she said.

‘Wait a minute or two,’ I said. ‘They know we’re here.’

It was useless trying to stop her, so when she made a move I followed.

A nurse emerging from the office section came to meet us.

‘Are you being looked after?’ she asked.

‘No,’ Linda said. ‘Someone was supposed to be coming, but they haven’t come yet.’

She peered at Linda over her glasses.

'I haven't felt it stir all day,' Linda said. 'Nothing at all.'

'So you're worried,' said the nurse.

Linda nodded.

The nurse turned and looked up the corridor.

'Go into that room,' she said. 'It's free. Then someone will come and see to you at once.'

The room was so alien that all I saw was us two. Every single movement Linda made went right through me.

She took off her coat, hung it over the back of a chair and sat down on the sofa. I walked over to the window and stood there, looking down at the road, at the stream of cars passing. The snow fell as tiny vague shadows outside the window, seeming to be visible only when the snowflakes drifted into the circles of light from the lamps in the car park.

There was a gynaecological chair by one wall. Beside it, several instruments were organised on shelves on top of one other, like in a hi-fi rack. There was a CD player on a shelf on the other side.

'Did you hear that?' Linda said.

A low muffled howl came from the other side of the wall.

I turned and looked at her.

'Don't cry, Karl Ove,' she said.

'I don't know what else to do,' I said.

'It'll be fine,' she said.

'Are *you* comforting *me* now?' I said. 'How's *that* supposed to work?'

She smiled.

Then all went quiet again.

After some minutes there was a knock at the door, a nurse came in, she asked Linda to lie down on the bed and uncover her belly, she listened to it with a stethoscope and smiled.

'No problems there,' she said. 'But we'll do an ultrasound to make absolutely sure.'

When we left half an hour later Linda was relieved and happy. I was completely drained, and also a little embarrassed that we had bothered them unnecessarily. Judging by all the people going through the doors they had more than enough to deal with already.

Why is it we always believe the worst?

On the other hand, I thought as I lay alongside Linda in bed, with my hand on her belly, in which the baby was now so big it hardly had space to move, the worst could have happened, life could have ceased inside, for that does happen, and as long as the possibility existed, small though it might be, the only correct action was surely to take it seriously and not to allow yourself to be put off by feelings of *embarrassment*? Or fear of bothering other people?

The next day I went back to my office and continued to write the history of Ezekiel, which I had started in order to rework the angel material into a story, as Thure Erik had quite rightly suggested, and not just an essayistic account of them as a phenomenon. Ezekiel's visions were so grandiose and mysterious, and the Lord's command that he should eat the scroll so as to turn the words into flesh and blood were absolutely irresistible. At the same time Ezekiel himself became visible in the writing, the insane prophet with the doomsday images, surrounded by everyday lives of misery, with all that entailed of doubt and scepticism and sudden shifts between the interior of the visions, where angels are burned and humans slaughtered, and the exterior, where Ezekiel stands with a brick that is meant to represent Jerusalem and draws shapes that are meant to be armies, bulwarks and ramparts, all at the Lord's instructions, outside his house, before the eyes of the town's menfolk. The specific details of the resurrection: 'You dry bones, hear the words of the Lord!' Then the Lord God says to these bones, 'See, I shall put my spirit in you and you shall live again. I shall cover you with sinew and flesh and skin.' And then when it was done: 'They arose and stood. It was a vast army.'

The army of the dead.

This is what I was doing, I was trying to create a gestalt, although without much success – there were so few props, sandals, camels and sand, not much more, perhaps the odd sparse bush as well – and my knowledge of the culture was close to zero, while Linda waited at home, occupied in a very different way with what was going to happen. The due date passed, nothing happened, I rang her about once an hour, but no, nothing new. We talked of nothing else. Then, a week afterwards, at the end of January while we were watching TV her waters broke. I had always imagined this as a dramatic event, a dam bursting, but it wasn't like that, quite the contrary, there was so little water Linda was not entirely sure that that was what had happened. She rang the hospital, they were sceptical, there was not usually any doubt about whether waters had broken or not, but in the end they said we should go in, we grabbed the bag, got into a taxi and went to the hospital, which was surrounded by the same high piles of snow and as brightly lit as before. Linda was examined in the gynaecological chair; I looked out of the window, at the motorway, the rushing cars and the orange sky above. A little cry from Linda made me turn my head. It was the rest of her waters.

Since nothing else had happened and contractions had not started for the moment, we were sent home. If the situation stayed the same, they would induce labour with a drip two days later. So at least we had a deadline. Linda was too tense to sleep much when we came home; I slept like a log. The next day we watched a couple of films, went for a long walk in Humlegården, took photos of ourselves with the camera on my outstretched arm, our glowing faces close to each other, the park in the background white with snow. We warmed up one of the many meals Linda's mother had put in the freezer to be used during the first weeks, and after we had eaten, as I was putting on the coffee, I heard a protracted groan from the living room. I hurried out and found Linda doubled up with both hands on her belly. Ooohh, she said. But the face she lifted to me was smiling.

Slowly she straightened up.

'Now it's started,' she said. 'Can you write down the time so that we know how long it is between contractions?'

'Did it hurt?' I asked.

'Bit,' she said. 'But nothing much.'

I went to collect a pen and a pad. The time was a few minutes past five. The next contractions came exactly twenty-three minutes later. Then half an hour was to pass before the next came. And so it continued all evening, the gap between the contractions varied, while the pain evidently increased. When we went to bed at eleven she screamed when they came. I lay beside her and tried to help, but didn't know how. She had been given a piece of apparatus known as a TENS by the midwife, which was supposed to ease the pain and consisted of some electrodes you could put on the skin where it hurt. They were connected to a machine which regulated the strength, and we tried this for a while. There was a mass of wires and some buttons I fiddled with, but the sum total of my efforts was to give her a few electric shocks and cause her to scream out in pain and anger, Turn that crap off! No, no, I said, I'll have another go, there we are, now I think it's working. Ow, for Christ's sake! she shouted. Don't you understand? It's giving me shocks. Get rid of it! I put it away, tried massaging her instead, covered my hands with the oil I had bought for this purpose, but it was never right for her, either too high or too low or too soft or too hard. One of the things she had been looking forward to was the big bath they had in the ward, which, when it was full of hot water, was supposed to ease the pain before the birth started in earnest, but now the waters had broken she could no longer do that, nor use the bathtub at home. Instead she sat up in it and showered herself with boiling hot water as she groaned and whimpered whenever a new wave of pain washed through her. I stood there, grey with tiredness in the bright light, watching her, with no chance of reaching the place where she was, let alone helping her. We only managed to fall asleep at daybreak, and a couple of hours later we decided to go to hospital, even though there were still six hours to the appointment we had been given, and they had explained in no uncertain terms that the gap between contractions had to be down to three or four minutes if we were planning to go in before. Linda's contractions came at around every quarter of an hour, but she was in such pain there was no question of reminding her of that. Another taxi, this time in the grey morning light, another trip on the motorway to Danderyd. When Linda was examined they said the cervix was open only three centimetres, that wasn't much, I gathered, and was surprised after all Linda had been through, I thought it had to be over soon. But no, quite the opposite, actually we ought to go home again, they said; however, they happened to have a room free and we must have looked so tired and bedraggled they let us stay. Get some sleep, they said as they closed the door behind them.

'Well, at least we're here finally,' I said, putting the bag down on the floor. 'Are you hungry?'

She shook her head.

'I fancy a shower. Do you want to join me?'

I nodded.

When we stood under the shower, holding each other, there were new contractions, she leaned forward and hung onto a rail on the wall as the sound I had heard for the first time the night before was emitted again. I stroked her back, but it felt more like an insult than a comfort. She stood up and I met her eyes in the mirror. Our faces looked drained, completely vacant, and I thought, we’re in this all on our own.

We went into the room, Linda put on the garments she had been given, I lay down on the sofa. The next minute I was fast asleep.

A few hours later a little delegation came into our room and labour was induced. Linda didn’t want any chemical painkillers and instead was given something they called sterile water injections, that is water injected under the skin, on a pain-to-combat-pain principle. She stood in the middle of the floor, holding my hand, as the two nurses injected the water. She screamed and shouted SHIIIT! from the very bottom of her lungs while instinctively trying to wriggle away, and the two nurses held her tight with experienced hands. I had tears in my eyes from seeing her in such pain. Yet I had an inkling that this was nothing, and that worse was to come. And what would it be like now it was clear that Linda had such a low pain threshold?

Dressed in a white hospital smock, she sat in bed while they inserted a cannula into her arm, which from then on was connected to a transparent bag on a metal stand via a thin plastic pipe. Because of the drip they wanted to keep a close eye on the foetus, they said, and attached a small sonar device to its head, from which a wire ran out of Linda, across the bed to a machine next to her, where soon afterwards a number began to flash. It was the foetus’s pulse. As if that wasn’t enough, Linda had a strap tied around her, on which there were some sensors connected via a further wire to another monitor. A number flashed on it as well, and above it there was a wavy electronic line that rose sharply as the contractions started. In addition, a sheet of paper issued from this machine, showing the same graph.

It was as though they had decided to launch her to the moon.

When the probe was attached to the head of the foetus Linda screamed again and the midwife patted her on the cheek. Why do they treat her like a child? I wondered in my inactivity, standing and staring at all that was suddenly going on around me. Was it because of the letter she had sent them, which was probably somewhere in the nurses’ office now, where she had written that she needed a lot of support and encouragement despite being strong and looking forward to what was about to occur?

Linda’s eyes met mine through the confusion of hands and she smiled. I smiled back. A dark-haired stern-looking midwife showed me how to read the monitors, the baby’s heartbeat was especially important, if there was a dramatic rise or fall I was to call them by pressing a button. If the reading sank to zero I shouldn’t worry, contact had probably been lost. Are we really going to be left on our own in here? I wanted to ask, but I didn’t, nor how long this would take. Instead I nodded. She would come and see us every so often, she said, and then they were gone.

Not long afterwards the time between contractions shrank. And, judging by Linda’s reactions, they were a lot stronger. She screamed and began to move differently, as though she was searching for something. Again and again she shifted her position, she was restless, she screamed, and I realised she was looking for a way out of the pain. There was something animal about this.

The contractions passed, and she settled down.

‘I don’t think I can do this, Karl Ove,’ she said.

‘Yes, you can,’ I said. ‘It’s not a problem. It’s painful, but it’s not a problem.’

‘It hurts so much! So bloody much!’

‘I know.’

‘Can you massage me?’

‘Yes, of course.’

She sat up, holding on to the upright side-rails of the bed.

‘There?’ I asked.

‘Bit lower down,’ she said.

On the screen a curve began to rise.

‘Looks like one’s coming,’ I said.

‘Oh no,’ she said.

It rose like a tidal wave. Linda shouted, lower down! shifted position, groaned, shifted position again, wrapped her fingers around the side-rail as tightly as she could. As the curve began to fall and this pain retreated I saw the baby’s pulse had increased dramatically.

Linda slumped back.

‘Did the massage help?’ I asked.

‘No,’ she answered.

I decided to ring them if the pulse hadn’t gone down after the next contractions.

‘I can’t do this,’ she said.

‘Yes, you can,’ I said. ‘You’re managing just fine.’

‘Hold my forehead.’

I laid my hand on her forehead.

‘Here comes another,’ I said. She straightened up, whimpered, groaned, shouted, slumped back again. I pressed the button and a red sign began to flash above the door.

‘The pulse went very high,’ I said when the midwife was in front of me.

‘Hm,’ she said. ‘We’ll have to slow the drip a bit. Perhaps it was too high.’

She went over to Linda.

‘How are you doing?’ she asked.

‘It’s terribly painful,’ Linda said. ‘Is there a long way to go yet?’

She nodded.

‘Yes, there is.’

‘I’ve got to have something. I’m not coping. It’s no good. Can I have laughing gas, do you think?’

‘It’s too early for that,’ the midwife said. ‘The effect wears off after a while. It’s better to have it later.’

‘But that’s no good,’ Linda said. ‘I need it now! That’s no good!’

‘We’ll wait for a bit,’ she said. ‘OK?’

Linda nodded and the midwife went out again.

The next hour passed in much the same way. Linda searched for a way to deal with the pain, couldn’t, it was as though she were trying to escape it as the waves beat against and pounded her. It was awful to see. All I could do was wipe away her sweat, hold my hand on her forehead and make occasional half-hearted attempts at massage on her back. Outside, in the darkness which had fallen unobserved, it was snowing. It was four o’clock, one and a half hours since labour had been induced. It was nothing, I knew that. Hadn’t Kari Anne been in labour for twenty hours or something like that when Ylva was born?

There was a knock at the door. The cool dark-haired midwife came in.

‘How are you both doing?’ she asked.

Linda turned from her hunched position.

‘I want laughing gas!’ she shouted.

The midwife mulled this over. Then she nodded and went out, returning with a stand holding two bottles, which she positioned in front of the bed. After fiddling around for some minutes she had it ready and a mask was put in Linda’s hand.

‘I’d like to do something,’ I said. ‘Massage. Can you show me where it’s most effective?’

At that moment the contractions started, Linda pressed the mask over her face and greedily breathed in the gas as her lower body writhed. The midwife placed my hands at the bottom of her lumbar region.

‘There, I reckon,’ she said. ‘OK?’

‘OK,’ I said.

I rubbed in the oil, the midwife closed the door behind her, I put one hand on top of the other and pushed the heel of my hand against her spine.

‘Yes!’ she shouted! Her voice was muffled by the mask. ‘There! Yes, yes, yes!’

As the contractions subsided, she turned to me.

‘The laughing gas is fantastic,’ she said.

‘Good,’ I said.

The next times the contractions came something happened to her. She was no longer trying to escape, she wasn’t searching vainly for refuge from the pain, in the way that had been so heart-rending to watch, something new came over her, she seemed to be confronting the pain instead, acknowledging its presence and meeting it face to face, in an initially inquisitive manner, thereafter with more and more force, like an animal, I thought once again, but not in a light, frightened, nervous manner, for when the pain came now she stood up with both hands clenched round the bed rail, moving her hips to and fro as she howled into the gas mask, exactly the same procedure every time, it repeated itself and repeated itself and repeated itself. Pause, mask in hand, body on the mattress. Then came the wave, I always saw it slightly before her on the monitor, massaged as hard as I could, she got up, swayed to and fro, shouted until the wave retreated and she slumped back again. It was no longer possible to have any contact with her, she had totally disappeared into herself, she was oblivious to everything around her, it was all about meeting the pain, resting, meeting it, resting. When the midwife came in she spoke to me as though Linda wasn’t present, and in a strange way that was right, it did seem as if we were a long, long way from her. But not completely removed, suddenly she could shout in an incommensurately loud voice, WATER! or CLOTH! and when she was handed it, THANKS!

Oh, what a strange afternoon and evening it was. The darkness outside was dense and heavy with falling snowflakes. The room was filled with Linda’s wheezing as she breathed in the gas, the great roars when the contractions were at their peak, the electronic beeping of the monitors. I wasn’t thinking about the baby, I was hardly thinking about Linda, everything inside me was concentrated on massaging, lightly when Linda was lying down, harder and harder when the electronic waves began to rise, which was the signal for Linda to get up, and then I massaged as hard as I could until the wave sank again, while keeping a constant eye on the pulse. Numbers and graphs, massage oil and lumbar region, wheezing and howling, this was everything. Second after second, minute after minute, hour after hour, this was everything. The moment swallowed me up, it was as though time was not passing, but it was, whenever something outside the routine happened, I was dragged out of it. A nurse entered, asked if everything was going all right, and suddenly it was twenty past five. Another nurse came in, asked if I wanted any food and suddenly it was twenty-five to seven.

‘Food?’ I queried, as though I had never heard the word before.

‘Yes, you can choose between vegetarian lasagne and normal lasagne,’ she said.

‘Oh, that’s nice,’ I said. ‘Normal lasagne,’ I said.

Linda didn’t seem to notice that someone was there at all. A new wave came, the nurse closed the door behind her, I pressed my hands against Linda’s back as hard as I could, watched the curve subside and when Linda did not release the mask I carefully took it from her. She didn’t react, just stood there staring inside herself, her brow dripping with sweat. When the next contractions started, the cry she emitted continued dully inside the mask she held tight to her face. Then the door opened, the nurse put a plate on the table and it was seven o’clock. I asked Linda if it was OK with her if I ate, she nodded, but the second I took my hand away she shouted, no, don’t do that, and I continued, I pressed the button, the same nurse came in, could she take over the massaging? Of course, she said and carried on where I had left off. Linda shouted. No, it has to be Karl Ove! It has to be Karl Ove! That's too light! Meanwhile I gorged down the food as fast as possible, so that, two minutes later, I could resume the massaging, and Linda settled back into her rhythm.

Contractions, gas, massage, pause, contractions, massage, gas, pause. There was nothing else. Then the midwife came in, rolled Linda authoritatively onto her side, examined her to see how far she had dilated, Linda screamed and it was a different kind of scream, one she let out, she didn't meet halfway.

She got up again, fell into the rhythm, was gone from this world and the hours passed.

A sudden shout: 'Are we alone?'

'Yes,' I said.

'I LOVE YOU, KARL OVE!'

It seemed to come from deep inside her, from a place she never went, or for that matter had ever been. I had tears in my eyes.

'I love *you*,' I said, but she didn't hear, another wave was on its way.

Time ticked by: eight o'clock, nine o'clock, ten o'clock. I didn't have a thought in my head, I massaged her and kept my eye on the monitors until I had a sudden flash of insight: a child is being born. Our child is being born. Just a few hours more. Then we'll have a child.

The insight was gone, now it was all graphs and numbers, hands and back, rhythm and howls.

The door opened. Another midwife came in, an elderly woman. Behind her a young girl. The woman stood close to Linda, her face only a couple of centimetres away, and introduced herself. Said that Linda was doing well. Said she had a trainee with her, was that OK? Linda nodded and looked around for the trainee. Nodded when she saw her. The midwife said it would soon be over. And that she would have to examine her.

Linda nodded again, and looked at her like a child at her mother.

'That's great,' the midwife said. 'Good girl.'

This time she didn't scream. Lay there with big dark eyes looking into the air. I stroked her forehead, she wasn't aware of me. When the midwife took away her hand, Linda shouted, 'ARE WE THERE?'

‘Bit more yet,’ the midwife said. Linda patiently got up and resumed her position.

‘An hour, perhaps less,’ the midwife said to me.

I looked at my watch. Eleven.

Linda had been standing there for eight hours.

‘We can take this off you,’ the midwife said, removing all the straps and wires. Suddenly freed, she lay there, a body in a bed, and the pain she had resisted was no longer green waves and rising numbers on a screen I was watching, but something taking place inside her.

I hadn’t understood that before. It was inside her, and she was completely on her own with it.

That was how it was.

She was free. Everything that happened, happened inside her.

‘It’s coming now,’ she said, and it was from inside her it came. I pressed my hands as hard as I could against her back. There was just her and inside her. Not the hospital, not the monitors, not the books, not the medical courses, not the cassettes, not all these corridors that our thoughts had followed, nothing of that, just her and what was inside her.

Her body was slippery with sweat, her hair straggly, the white smock hanging loosely round her. The midwife said she would be back in a minute. The trainee stayed. Wiped Linda’s forehead, passed her water, fetched her a Marathon bar. Linda snatched it greedily. She was on the verge, she must have sensed it, she was almost impatient in the pauses, which lasted only brief instants now.

The midwife returned. She dimmed the light.

‘Lie down and rest,’ she said. Linda lay down. The midwife stroked her cheek. I went to the window. Not a car on the road below. The air around the lamps thick with snow. The room completely quiet. I turned. Linda appeared to be sleeping.

The midwife smiled at me.

Linda groaned. The midwife caught hold of her arm, and Linda sat up. Her eyes were as dark as a forest at night.

‘Now push,’ the midwife said.

Something new happened, something was different, I didn’t understand what it was, but moved behind her and began to massage her back again. The contractions lasted and lasted, Linda groped for the gas mask, inhaled greedily, but it didn’t seem to help, a protracted cry seemed to be torn from her, it went on and on.

Then it subsided. Linda slumped back. The midwife wiped the sweat from her forehead and praised her, good girl.

‘Would you like to feel the baby?’ she asked.

Linda looked up at her and nodded slowly. Got to her knees. The midwife took her hand and guided it between her legs.

‘That’s the head,’ she said. ‘Can you feel it?’

‘YES!’ Linda said.

‘Hold your hand there while you’re pushing. Can you do that?’

‘Come here,’ she said and led Linda onto the floor. ‘Stand here.’

The trainee took the stool that had been beside the wall.

Linda went onto her knees. I walked behind her even though I had a sense that the massage no longer made any difference.

She screamed at the top of her lungs, her whole body moved as she held the baby’s head with her hand.

‘The head’s out,’ the midwife said. ‘One more time. Push.’

‘Is the head out?!’ Linda asked. ‘Was that what you said?’

‘Yes, push now.’

Another cry, as though beyond everything, issued from her.

‘Would you like to hold her?’ the midwife asked, looking at me.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘Come here, stand here,’ she said.

I walked around the stool, stood in front of Linda, who watched me without seeing me.

‘One more time. Push now, my love. Push.’

My eyes were swimming with tears.

The baby slipped out of her like a little seal, straight into my hands.

‘Oooohhh!’ I yelled. ‘Oooohhh!’

The little body was hot and slippery, it almost slipped out of my hands, but the young trainee came to my aid.

‘Is she out? Is she out?’ Linda asked, yes, I said, lifting the little body up to her, and she put it to her chest, and I sobbed with joy, and Linda looked at me for the first time for several hours and smiled.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘A girl, Karl Ove,’ she said. ‘It’s a girl.’

She had long black hair stuck to her head. Her skin was greyish and waxen. She screamed, I had never heard such a sound before, it was my daughter's sound, and I was at the top of the world, I had never been there before, but now I was, we were there, at the top of the world. Around us everything was still, around us everything was dark, but we were there, the midwife, the trainee, Linda, me and the little baby, she was the light.

They helped Linda into bed, she found a comfortable position on her back, and the baby, her skin redder now, raised her head and looked at us.

Her eyes were like two black lamps.

'Hi . . .' said Linda. 'This is us . . .'

The child lifted one arm and lowered it again. The movement was reptilian, a crocodile's, a monitor lizard's. Then the other one. Up, out a bit, down.

The black eyes looked straight at Linda.

'Yes,' Linda said. 'I'm your mummy. And there's your daddy! Can you see?'

The two women began to tidy up around us as we watched this creature that was suddenly here. Linda had blood over her stomach and legs, the girl was covered with blood as well, and a sharp, somehow metallic, smell came from them both, which did not lose its unfamiliarity with every breath I took.

Linda put the girl to her breast, but she wasn't interested, she had enough to do looking at us. The midwife came in with a tray of food, a glass of apple juice and a Swedish flag. They took the child to measure and weigh while we ate, she screamed, but went quiet when she was put on Linda's chest. The way Linda opened up, the consummate care that was in her every movement; these were new experiences for me.

'Is this Vanja?' I said.

Linda looked at me.

'Yes, of course, can't you see?'

'Hiya, little Vanja,' I said. I looked at Linda. 'She looks like something we've found in the forest.'

Linda nodded.

'Our little troll.'

The midwife came to the bed.

‘It’s time for you both to go to your room,’ she said. ‘Perhaps put some clothes on her?’

Linda stared at me.

‘Would you?’

I nodded. Picked up the tiny slim body and laid her on the bed, took the pyjamas from the bag and started to dress her with infinite care while she cried with her strange little voice.

‘You really know how to give birth,’ the midwife said to Linda. ‘You should do it more often!’

‘Thank you,’ Linda said. ‘I think that’s the nicest compliment I’ve ever received.’

‘And think what a start she’s been given. She’ll carry that all the way through her life.’

‘Do you think so?’

‘Oh yes. There’s no doubt it has meaning. Well, goodnight both of you, and congratulations. I might pop by tomorrow morning, but it’s not certain.’

‘Thank you very, very much,’ Linda said. ‘You were all fantastic.’

A few minutes later Linda staggered through the corridor on her way to the room while I walked beside her with Vanja close to my chest. She was staring at the ceiling with wide-open eyes. Once inside the room we turned off the light and went to bed. For a long time we lay chatting about what had happened, while Linda kept putting Vanja to her breast, although she didn’t seem to be very interested.

‘Now you won’t ever need to be afraid of anything,’ I said.

‘That’s exactly how I feel,’ Linda said.

Eventually they fell asleep while I lay awake, brimming with restlessness and the urge to do something. I hadn’t done anything. Perhaps that was why. I took the lift down, sat outside in the cold, smoked a cigarette and called my mother.

‘Hi, it’s me, Karl Ove,’ I said.

‘How’s it going?’ she said quickly. ‘Are you at the hospital?’

‘Yes, we’ve got a girl,’ I said, and my voice broke.

‘Ooohh,’ mum said. ‘Just imagine, a girl! Did Linda get on OK?’

‘Yes, it went really well. Really well. Everything’s hunky-dory.’

‘Congratulations, Karl Ove,’ she said. ‘That’s great news.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘But I just wanted to let you know. We’ll talk again tomorrow. I’m . . . Yes . . . I’m not sure I can say much now.’

‘I understand,’ mum said. ‘Give Linda my love and congratulate her from me.’

‘Will do,’ I said and rang off. I called Linda’s mother. She cried when I told her. I lit another cigarette and told her the same. Rang off, called Yngve. Lit another cigarette, it was easier to talk to him, walked round the illuminated car park with the phone to my ear for several minutes, warm, even though it had to be minus ten and I was in a shirt, rang off, stared around me wildly, wanting what was around me to correspond in some way to what was inside me, but it didn’t, and I began to walk again, to and fro, lit another cigarette, threw it away after a couple of drags and ran to the front entrance, what was I thinking of, they were *upstairs*! Now! They were there now!

Linda was asleep with the little one on top of her. I watched them for a moment, took out my notebook, switched on a lamp, sat down in the chair and tried to write something about what had happened, but it was too stupid, it didn’t work, instead I went to the TV room, I suddenly remembered that you had to stick a pin in a chart with the date of every child born, pink for girls, blue for boys, did it, a pin for lovely Vanja, wandered up and down the corridor a couple of times, took the lift down for another cigarette, which soon became two, came back up, went to bed, couldn’t sleep, something inside me had opened, all of a sudden I was receptive to everything, and the world I found myself in was laden with meaning. How could you sleep?

Well, in the end I could.

This was all so new and fragile that just dressing her was a major project. While Helena, who had come to collect us in her car, waited down below it took us half an hour to get her ready, only to be met by Helena’s laughter as we emerged from the lift with ‘You’re not going to take her out into the cold wearing those clothes, are you?’

Ah, we hadn’t thought about that.

Helena wrapped her up in her Puffa jacket, and then we ran across the car park with me holding the car seat in one hand and Vanja swinging to and fro. Alone in the flat, Linda began to cry, she sat with Vanja in her arms crying for all the good and all the bad in her life now. I was filled with the same immense urge to be active, I couldn't sit still, had to do something, cook, wash up, run out and go shopping, anything, as long as there was movement involved. Linda, for her part, just wanted to sit still, motionless, with the baby at her breast. The light did not leave us, nor the silence, it was as though a zone of peace had sprung up around us.

It was fantastic.

I walked around for the next ten days full of peace and tranquillity, as well as the same uncontrollable urge to be active. Then I had to start work again. Drop everything that had happened in my life and was going on right now in the flat, and write about Ezekiel. Open the door in the afternoon to the little family and think that this was my little family.

Happiness.

Everyday life, with all the new demands the little child made, began to run its course. Linda was worried about being on her own with her, she didn't like it, but I had to work, the novel had to be out for the autumn, we needed the money.

But a novel about sandals and camels, that was no good.

Once I had written in a notebook, 'The Bible enacted in Norway' and 'Abraham in the Setesdal Hills'. It was an idiotic thought, both too small and too large for a novel, but now that it was suddenly back in my mind I needed it in a completely different way and thought, to hell with it, I'll start and see what happens. I had Cain hitting a rock with a sledgehammer in a Scandinavian landscape at dusk. Asked Linda if I could read it to her, she said yes, of course, I said, but it's so unbelievably stupid, you know, she said, that's often when you're good, well, I said, but not this time. Come on, read it! she said from the chair. I read it. She kept saying, that's fantastic, that's absolutely fantastic, you have to go on, and I did, kept writing until the day of Vanja's christening in May, which was held at my mother's in Jølster. When we returned we went to Idö in the archipelago outside Västervik, where Vidar, Ingrid's partner, had a summer house. While Linda and Ingrid were together with Vanja I sat writing, it was June, the novel had to be done and dusted in six weeks, but even though the Cain and Abel story was ready it was still too little. I lied to my editor for the first time, said I only had some fine-tuning to do, while in fact I launched into a story I knew would become the *real* novel. I wrote like a madman, this was never

ever going to work, I had lunch and dinner with Linda and the others, watched the European football championships with her in the evenings, otherwise I was in a small room hammering away at the keyboard. After we came home from Idö I realised that this was all or nothing, I told Linda I was moving into the office, I would have to write day and night. You can't do that, she said, that's not on, you've got a family, or have you forgotten? It's summer, or have you forgotten? Am I supposed to look after your daughter on my own? Yes, I said. That's the way it is. No, it isn't, she said, I won't let you. OK, I said, but I'll do it anyway. And I did. I was totally manic. I wrote all the time, sleeping two or three hours a day, the only thing that had any meaning was the novel I was writing. Linda went to her mother's and called me several times a day. She was so angry that she *screamed*, actually *screamed* down the phone. I just held it away from my ear and kept writing. She said she would leave me. Go, I said. I don't care, I have to write. And it was true. She would have to go if that was what she wanted. She said, I will. You'll never see us again. Fine, I said. I wrote twenty pages a day. I didn't see any letters or words, any sentences or shapes, just countryside and people, and Linda rang and screamed, said I was a sugar daddy, said I was a bastard, said I was an unfeeling monster, said I was the worst person in the world and that she cursed the day she had met me. Fine, I said, leave me then, I don't care, and I meant it, I didn't care, no one was going to stand in the way of this, she slammed down the phone, she rang two minutes later and continued to swear at me, I was on my own now, she would bring up Vanja alone, fine by me, I said, she cried, she begged, she pleaded, what I was doing to her was the worst thing anyone could do, leaving her alone. But I didn't care, I wrote night and day, and then out of the blue she rang and said she was coming home the following day, would I go to the station and meet them?

Yes, I would.

At the station she came towards me with Vanja asleep in the buggy, gave a terse greeting and asked how things were, fine, I said, she said she was sorry about everything. Two weeks later I rang to say the novel was finished, by some miracle on the exact day I had been given as a deadline by the publishing house, 1 August, and when I went home she was standing in the hallway with a glass of Prosecco for me, my favourite music playing in the living room and my favourite meal on the table. I had finished, the novel was written, but I was not finished with what I had experienced, that is, the place where I felt I had been. We went to Oslo, I went to the press conference, got so drunk at the dinner afterwards that I was flat on my belly spewing up in the hotel room all morning and only just managed to make it to the airport, where a delay was the last straw for Linda, at the airline counter she gave the staff a piece of her mind, I hid my head in my hands, were we back there again? The plane went to Bringelandsåsen, where mum was waiting for us, for the whole of the next week we went on long walks beneath the beautiful mountains, and everything was great, everything was as it should be, yet not good enough, I longed to be back where I had been, I ached for it, to the maniacal, the lonely, the happy place.

When we returned to Sweden, Linda started her second year at the Dramatiska Institut while I stayed at home looking after Vanja. She was pumped full of milk in the morning, I dropped by the DI at lunch, where she was pumped full again, and in the afternoon Linda cycled back as fast as she could. I couldn’t complain, everything was good, the book received good reviews, the rights were bought by foreign publishers, and while that went on I was pushing a buggy around the fine city of Stockholm with a daughter I loved above all else, while my true love was on her course, pining to be with us.

Autumn passed into winter, life with baby food and baby clothes, baby cries and baby vomit, utterly wasted mornings and empty afternoons began to take their toll, but I couldn’t complain, couldn’t say anything, I just had to keep my mouth shut and do what I had to do. In the block of flats the minor harassment continued, the events of New Year’s Eve had not changed the Russian’s attitude towards us. Any idea that she would no longer do her utmost to torment us proved to be naïve, the opposite occurred, the frequency increased. If, one morning, we switched on the bedroom radio, if I dropped a book on the floor, if I hammered a nail into the wall, the pipes reverberated straight afterwards. Once I left an Ikea bag of clean clothes in the cellar and someone had put it under the sink, loosened the down pipe so that all the water that ran through the plug – and it was mostly dirty water – ended up in the bag. One morning towards the end of the winter Linda received a phone call from the company that owned the block, they had received a letter of complaint about us, a whole list of serious points, would we be so kind as to explain them? First of all, we played loud music at unsociable hours. Secondly, we left bags of rubbish in the corridor outside our door. Thirdly, the buggy was always there. Fourthly, we smoked in the backyard and dropped cigarette ends everywhere. Fifthly, we left clothes in the cellar, didn’t clean up after us and washed at times other than those allocated to us. What could we say? That a neighbour had it in for us? It was our word against hers. And besides she was not the only person to sign the complaint, her girlfriend on the floor above had also signed. Furthermore, some of the points were factually correct. Since everyone else in the block put rubbish bags outside the door at night, we did too. Nor could we deny it; the two busybodies had taken a photo of our door with the bag outside. And we put the buggy outside the door as well, that was correct, did they imagine we would carry the baby and everything she needed from the cellar several times a day? It was quite possible that we forgot our washing times, but didn’t everyone? Well, we should be more attentive. They would let it go this once, but if there were any more complaints our contract would be reviewed. In Sweden you have a rental contract for life, they are hard to get, and for one like ours, in a city-centre location, you had to either work your way up over a long life or buy it for up to a million on the black market. We had got ours through Linda’s mother. If we lost this contract it would be like losing the only asset we had of any value. All we could do, from now on, was make sure that everything we did was by the book. For Swedes this is in their blood. Swedes who don’t pay their bills on the dot don’t exist because unless they pay, they get a reprimand, and if they get a reprimand, however small the sum involved, they cannot get a bank loan, they cannot get a mobile phone subscription and they cannot rent a car. For me, someone who was not so punctilious and who was used to incurring a couple of debts every six months, this was of course a different matter. I only appreciated the gravity of this a few years later when I needed a loan and was refused point blank. A loan, *you*! But the Swedes, they clenched their teeth, they had order in their lives and were contemptuous of those who didn’t. Oh, how I hated this shitty little country. And how smug they were! The way everything was in Sweden was normality; anything different was abnormal. And this at the same time as embracing all the multicultural and minority issues! The poor black people who came from Ghana or Ethiopia to the Swedish basement laundry room! Having to book a slot two weeks in advance and then getting your ears chewed off if you left a sock in the tumble drier. Or being subjected to a man appearing at the door with one of those bloody Ikea bags in his hand and sarcastically asking if by any chance it was yours! Sweden hasn’t had a war on its soil since the seventeenth century and how often did it cross my mind that someone ought to invade Sweden, bomb its buildings, starve the country, shoot down its men, rape its women, and then have some faraway country, Chile or Bolivia for example, embrace its refugees with kindness, tell them they love Scandinavia and dump them in a ghetto outside one of the cities there. Just to see what they would say.

Perhaps the worst aspect of all this was that Sweden was so admired in Norway. I had been the same when I lived there. I knew nothing of course. But now that I knew and tried to tell people at home in Norway, no one understood what I meant. It is impossible to describe exactly how conformist this country is. Also because the conformity is laid bare by an absence, opinions diverging from the norm do not in fact *exist* in public. It takes time for you to notice.

Such was the situation on that evening in February 2005 when, with a book by Dostoevsky in one hand and an NK carrier bag in the other, I passed the Russian on the stairs. For her to avoid my gaze was not so unusual. When we put the buggy in the cycle room in the afternoon, the following day we often found it pushed against the wall, with the hood pressed down on one side or the other, sometimes the duvet had been slung on the floor, all obviously done in haste and a bout of fury. Once the sporty little model we had bought second-hand was placed under the sign *grovsopor,* bulky rubbish, so the dustcart had taken it in the morning. It was hard to imagine anyone else could be behind that. But it was not impossible. None of the other neighbours exactly greeted us with warmth either.

I opened the door, went in, leaned forward and unlaced my boots.

‘Hello?’ I said.

‘Hello,’ Linda said from inside the living room.

No unfriendliness in her voice.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ I said and stood up, took off my scarf and jacket and hung them on the clothes hanger in the wardrobe. ‘But I lost track of time while I was reading.’

‘No problem,’ Linda said. ‘I gave Vanja a leisurely bath and put her to bed. It was wonderful.’

‘Good,’ I said, and joined her in the living room. She was sitting on the sofa and watching TV, wearing my dark green woollen jumper.

‘Are you wearing my jumper?’

She turned off the television with the remote and got up.

‘Yes?’ she said. ‘I miss you, you know.’

‘I do live here,’ I said. ‘I’m here all the time.’

‘You know what I mean,’ she said, reaching up to give me a kiss. We hugged each other for a while.

‘I remember Espen’s girlfriend complaining that his mother used to wear his jumpers while she was there,’ I said. ‘I think she thought the mother was communicating a kind of possession over him. That it was a hostile act.’

‘Which it obviously was,’ she said. ‘But this is just you and me. And we aren’t enemies, are we?’

‘No, not at all,’ I said. ‘I’ll go and make some food. Would you like a glass of red in the meantime?’

She looked at me askance.

‘Oh, that’s right, you’re breastfeeding,’ I said. ‘But a glass wouldn’t be a problem, would it? Come on.’

‘Would be nice, but I think I’ll wait. You have one!’

‘I’ll just have a peep at Vanja first. She’s asleep, isn’t she?’

Linda nodded, and we went into the bedroom, where she lay in her cot beside our double bed. She slept in a sort of kneeling position with her bottom in the air, her head boring into the pillow and her arms out to the side.

I smiled.

Linda covered her with the blanket and I went to the hallway, carried the bag to the kitchen, switched on the oven, washed the potatoes, forked them one by one, placed them on the tray which I had greased with a bit of oil, put it in the oven and filled a pan with water for the broccoli. Linda came in and sat at the table.

‘I finished an edit today,’ she said. ‘Could you listen to it afterwards? I might not have to do any more to it.’

‘Of course,’ I said.

She was working on a documentary about her father which she had to hand in on Wednesday. She had interviewed him a few times over recent weeks, and so he had entered her life again after having been absent for some years, despite the fact that he lived in a flat fifty metres from us.

I put the entrecôte steaks on a broad wooden board, tore off some kitchen roll and dried them.

‘That looks good,’ Linda said.

‘I hope so,’ I said. ‘I daren’t tell you what the price per kilo was.’

The potatoes were so small they barely needed more than ten minutes in the oven, so I took the frying pan, put it on the hotplate and dropped the broccoli into the saucepan, where the water had started to boil.

‘I can set the table,’ she said. ‘We’re eating in the living room, aren’t we?’

‘Can do.’

She got up, reached down two of the green plates, took two wine glasses from the cupboard and carried them into the living room. I followed with the bottle of wine and the mineral water. As I entered she was putting out the candlestick.

‘Have you got a lighter?’

I nodded, dug it up from my pocket and passed it to her.

‘That’s cosier now, isn’t it?’ she said with a smile.

‘Yes, it is,’ I said. Opened the wine and poured it into one glass.

‘Shame you can’t have any,’ I said.

‘I suppose I could have a mouthful,’ she said. ‘To taste it. But I’ll wait until the food’s ready.’

‘OK,’ I said.

On the way to the kitchen I stopped by Vanja’s bed again. Now she was lying on her back, with her arms out, as though she had been thrown there from a great height. Her head was as round as a ball and her short body more than well padded. The health visitor who examined Vanja suggested last time that we should try to slim her down. That maybe she didn’t need milk *every* time she cried.

They were crazy in this country.

I supported myself on the bed and leaned over her. She was sleeping with her mouth open and exhaling little wheezes. Now and then I could see Yngve in her face, but only in flashes; otherwise she didn’t have the slightest resemblance to me or anyone in my family.

‘Isn’t she lovely?’ Linda said, stroking my shoulder as she passed.

‘Mm,’ I said. ‘Whatever that means.’

When the doctor had examined her, a few hours after birth, Linda had tried to make her say she was not only a lovely child but an *especially* lovely child. The doctor complied, but Linda was not happy with her low-key response. I had glanced at her in some surprise. Was this how maternal love expressed itself, forcing all considerations to cede to it?

Oh, what a time this had been. We were so unused to dealing with small babies that every little operation was a mixture of anxiety and pleasure.

Now we were more used to it.

In the kitchen the butter in the pan was smoking and had turned dark brown. Steam was rising from the saucepan beside it. The lid was banging against the edge. I put the two pieces of meat in the pan with a hiss, removed the potatoes from the oven and slid them into a bowl, drained the water from the broccoli, kept it on the hotplate for a few seconds, turned the steaks, remembered I had forgotten the mushrooms, got out another frying pan, put them in with two tomato halves and turned on the heat full. Then I opened the window to get rid of the frying fumes, which were sucked out of the room at once. Placed the steaks on a white dish with the broccoli and poked my head out of the window while waiting for the mushrooms. The cold air settled on my face. The offices opposite were empty and dark, but on the pavement below people drifted past, well wrapped up and silent. Some sat around a table at the back of a restaurant, which had to be doing badly, while the chefs in the adjacent room, invisible to them but not to me, shuttled back and forth between worktops and stoves, their movements unerring and fleet. A little queue had formed in front of the entrance to the adjacent jazz club, Nalen. A man wearing a cap got off the Swedish Radio bus and went through the door. Something hung from some string around his neck, probably an ID card. I turned and shook the pan of mushrooms to turn them over. Almost no one lived in this district, it consisted of office buildings and shops in the main, so when they closed at the end of the afternoon street life died. People walking here in the evening were going to restaurants, of which there was a plethora. Bringing a child up here was unthinkable. There was nothing for them.

I switched off the hotplate and put the small white mushrooms, which were now streaked with brown, on the dish. It was white with a blue line round and outside that there was a further line, of gold. It wasn’t very attractive, but I had brought it here after Yngve and I had divided the few items dad had left behind. He must have bought them with the money he got when he divorced and mum bought his share of the house in Tveit. He bought all his household requirements in one fell swoop, and something about that, the fact that everything he possessed stemmed from the same period of time, divested it of meaning, it had no aura other than one of recent domesticity and a solitary existence. For me it was different: dad's goods and chattels which, beyond this crockery service, consisted of one pair of binoculars and one pair of rubber boots, helped to preserve him in my memory. Not in any strong, clear sense, it was more like a regular confirmation that he was also a part of my life. In my mother's house objects played a very different role. There was, for example, a plastic bucket that they had bought some time in the 1960s when they were students and lived in Oslo, which had been placed too near a fire in the 1970s and had melted on one side into a form, I thought as a boy, that resembled a man's face, with eyes, a crooked nose and a twisted mouth. This was still *the* bucket, the one she used when she washed something, and still it was the face I saw when I went to fill it with water and not a bucket. First hot water and then soap were poured onto the poor man's head. The ladle she stirred porridge with was the same one she had used to stir porridge for as long as I could remember. The brown plates which we ate breakfast from when we were there were the same ones I had eaten breakfast from when I was small, sitting on the kitchen stool with my legs dangling down, in Tybakken in the 1970s. The new items she had bought were added to the rest and belonged to her, unlike dad's possessions, which were expendable. The priest who buried him mentioned this in his sermon, he said that you have to ground your gaze, ground yourself in the world, by which he meant that my father had not done this, and he was absolutely right. But it was several years before I understood that there were also many good reasons for loosening your grip, not grounding yourself at all, just letting yourself fall and fall until you were ultimately smashed to pieces at the bottom.

What was it about nihilism that could draw minds to it in this way?

In the bedroom Vanja started to wail. I poked my head through the door and saw her standing with her hands around the rails and jumping up and down with frustration as Linda dashed across the floor towards her.

‘Food’s ready,’ I said.

‘Typical!’ she said, lifting Vanja up, lying on the bed with her, raising her sweater on one side and loosening the bra cup. Vanja instantly went quiet.

‘She’ll be back to sleep in a few minutes,’ Linda said.

‘I’ll wait,’ I said, and went back into the kitchen. Closed the window, turned off the fan, took the dishes and carried them into the living room through the hall so as not to disturb Linda and Vanja. Poured some mineral water into a glass and drank it in the middle of the floor while looking around. Some music wouldn’t be a bad idea. I stood in front of the CD racks. Picked out Emmylou Harris’s *Anthology*, which we had played a lot in recent weeks, and put it on. It was easy to protect yourself against music when you were prepared or just had it on as background, because it was simple, undemanding and sentimental, but when I was not prepared, like now, or was really listening, it hit home with me. My feelings soared and before I knew what was happening my eyes were moist. It was only then that I realised how little I normally felt, how numb I had become. When I was eighteen I was full of such feelings all the time, the world seemed more intense, and that was why I wanted to write, it was the sole reason, I wanted to touch something music touched. The human voice’s lament and sorrow, joy and delight, I wanted to evoke everything the world had bestowed upon us.

How could I forget that?

I put down the CD box and went to the window. What was it that Rilke wrote? That music raised him out of himself, and never returned him to where it had found him, but to a deeper place, somewhere in the unfinished?

It was unlikely he had been thinking about country music . . .

I smiled. Linda came through the door in front of me.

‘Now she’s asleep,’ she whispered, pulled out a chair and sat down. ‘Ah, lovely!’

‘It’s probably a little cold now,’ I said, sitting on the opposite side of the table.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ she said. ‘Can I start? I’m famished.’

‘Go on,’ I said, poured a glass of wine and put some potatoes on my plate while she helped herself to meat and vegetables.

She chatted about the projects chosen by colleagues in her class whose names I barely knew despite there being only six of them. It had been different when she started the course, then I met them regularly, up at Filmhuset and in various pubs where they gathered. It was a relatively mature class, many were in their late twenties and already established. One of them, Anders, was in *Doktor Kosmos*, another, Özz, was a well known stand-up comedian. But when Linda became pregnant with Vanja she took a year off, and then she found herself in a new class which I didn't feel like getting to know.

The meat was as tender as butter. The red wine tasted of earth and wood. Linda's eyes glinted in the glow from the candles. I put my knife and fork down on the plate. It was a few minutes to eight o'clock.

'Do you want me to listen to the documentary now? I asked.

'You don't have to if you don't want to,' Linda said. 'You can do it tomorrow, you know.'

'But I'm curious,' I said. 'And it's not very long, is it?'

She shook her head and got up.

'I'll get the player then. Where do you want to sit?'

I shrugged.

'There perhaps?' I said, motioning towards the chair by the bookshelves. She took out the DAT player, I fetched a pen and paper, sat down and put on the headset, she raised her eyebrows, I nodded and she pressed play.

After she had cleared the table I sat there alone listening. I already knew her father's story, but it was something else to hear it from his own mouth. His name was Roland and he was born in 1941 in one of the towns up in Norrland. He grew up without a father, with his mother and two younger siblings. His mother died when he was fifteen and from then on he was responsible for his little brother and sister. They lived alone without any adult support except for a woman who came to clean and cook for them. He went to school for four further years, became what was known in Sweden as a *gymnas* engineer, started working, played football in his free time, as goalkeeper for his local club, and thrived up there. At a dance he met Ingrid; she was the same age as him, had been to a domestic science college, worked as a secretary in a mining company office and was exceptionally beautiful. They became a couple and got married. Ingrid, however, had acting dreams, and when she was accepted for drama school in Stockholm, Roland abandoned the whole of his former life and moved with her to the capital. The life that awaited her, as an actress at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, had nothing to offer him, there was a gulf between his life as a goalkeeper and *gymnas* engineer in a provincial Norrland town and the one he had now, as the husband of a beautiful actress on the country's most important stage. They had two children in quick succession, but that was not enough to keep them together, they soon divorced and straight afterwards he fell ill for the first time. The illness he had was boundless and caused him to fluctuate between manic heights and depressive abysses, and once it had him in its grip it never let go. From then on he was in and out of institutions. When I met him for the first time, in the spring of 2004, he hadn't worked since the mid-1970s. Linda had not met him for many years. Even though I had seen photographs of him I still wasn't ready for what was awaiting me when I opened the door and he stood outside. His face was utterly open: it was as though there was nothing between him and the world. He had no protection against it, he was wholly defenceless, and to see that hurt you deep into your soul.

'So you're Karl Ove, are you?' he said.

I nodded and shook his hand.

'Roland Boström,' he said. 'Linda's father.'

'I've heard a lot about you,' I said. 'Come in!'

Behind me stood Linda with Vanja in her arms.

'Hi, dad,' she said. 'This is Vanja.'

He stood quite still and looked at Vanja, who looked back, equally still.

'Oohh,' he said. His eyes glistened.

'Let me take your coat,' I said. 'Then we can go in and have a cup of coffee.'

His face was open, but his movements were stiff, almost mechanical.

'Did you do the painting?' he said as we entered the living room.

'Yes,' I said.

He went to the nearest wall and stared at it.

'Did you do the painting, Karl Ove?'

'Yes.'

'You made a grand job of it! You have to be very precise when you paint, and you have been. I'm painting my flat now, you see. Turquoise in the bedroom and creamy white in the sitting room. But I haven't got any further than the bedroom, the back wall.'

'That's good,' Linda said. 'I'm sure it'll be lovely.'

'Yes, it will be, that's for certain.'

Something I had never seen before had come over Linda. She adapted to him, she was subordinate to him somehow, she was his child, she gave him attention and her company while also being above him in the sense that she was constantly trying to hide – although never quite succeeding – her shame. He sat down on the sofa, I poured the coffee, went to the kitchen for the cinnamon snails we had bought that morning and returned with a dish. He ate in silence. Linda sat beside him with Vanja on her lap. She showed him her child. I had never imagined it would mean so much to her.

'Nice buns,' he said. 'And the coffee was good too. Did you make it, Karl Ove?'

'Yes.'

'Have you got a coffee machine?'

'Yes.'

'That's good,' he said.

Pause.

'I wish you all the best,' he went on to say. 'Linda's my only daughter. I'm happy and grateful that I can come and visit you.'

'Do you feel like seeing some photos, dad?' Linda asked. 'Of Vanja when she was born?'

He nodded.

'Take Vanja for a bit, will you,' she said to me. The hot little bundle was placed into my arms, her eyes rolled on the brink of sleep while Linda got up and went to the shelves for the photo album.

'Mhm,' he said to every picture he was shown.

When they had been through the whole album he stretched out a hand for his cup of coffee on the table, raised it to his mouth in one slow, careful, well-considered movement and drank two big gulps.

'I've been to Norway only once, Karl Ove,' he said. 'To Narvik. I was in goal for some football club, and we went there to play a Norwegian team.'

'Oh yes!' I said.

'Yes,' he said, nodding.

'Karl Ove has also played football,' Linda said.

‘Long time ago now,’ I said. ‘And at a very modest level.’

‘Were you in goal?’

‘No.’

‘Right.’

Pause.

He took another swig of coffee in the same, somehow scrupulously planned, way.

‘Well, this has been nice,’ he said when the cup was back on his coaster. ‘But now I’d better think about getting home.’

He stood up.

‘But you’ve only just come!’ Linda said.

‘It was perfect,’ he said. ‘I’d like to invite you to a meal. It’s my turn. Is Tuesday convenient?’

I met Linda’s eyes. It was her decision.

‘It is,’ she said.

‘Then that’s a deal,’ he said. ‘Five o’clock on Tuesday.’

On the way to the hall he peered through the open bedroom door and stopped.

‘Did you do the painting here as well?’

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘May I see?’

‘Of course,’ I said.

We followed him in. He stood in front of the wall and looked up behind the enormous wood burner.

‘It wasn’t easy to paint there, I can see,’ he said. ‘But it looks good!’

Vanja made a little noise. She was lying on my arm so I couldn’t see her face, and I laid her down on the bed. She smiled. Roland sat on the edge of the bed and put his hand around her foot.

‘Don’t you want to hold her?’ Linda asked. ‘You can if you want.’

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen her now.’

Then he got up, went into the hallway and put on his coat. As he was about to leave he hugged me. His stubble rubbed against my cheek.

‘Nice to meet you, Karl Ove,’ he said. He hugged Linda, grabbed Vanja’s foot again and set off down the stairs in his long coat.

Linda avoided my gaze as she passed Vanja to me and went into the living room to clear the table. I followed.

‘What do you think of him?’ she asked airily on her way.

‘He’s a nice man,’ I said. ‘But he has absolutely no filter against the world. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone who radiates such immense vulnerability.’

‘He’s like a child, isn’t he.’

‘Yes, he is. There’s no doubt about that.’

She walked past me with three coffee cups on top of each other in one hand, the cake basket in the other.

‘That’s quite some grandfather Vanja has got,’ I said.

‘Yes, what is it going to be like?’ she asked. There was no irony in her voice; the question came straight from the darkness of her heart.

‘It’ll be fine of course,’ I said.

‘But I don’t want him in our life,’ she said, putting the cups in the dishwasher.

‘If it’s like this I’m sure it’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘No harm in him dropping by for coffee once in a while. And then the odd meal at his place. He is her grandfather after all.’

Linda closed the dishwasher door, took a transparent plastic bag from the bottom drawer of a cabinet and put the three remaining cakes in it, tied a knot and went past me to put it in the hall freezer.

‘But he won’t be happy with that, I know. Now he’s made contact he’ll start ringing. And he only does that when he’s in a mess. There are no limits for him. You have to understand that.’

She went into the living room for the last plates.

‘We can try at any rate,’ I said following her. ‘And see what happens?’

‘OK,’ she said.

At that moment there was a ring at the door.

What could that be? The crazy neighbour again?

But it was Roland. His eyes were frantic.

‘I can’t get out,’ he said. ‘I can’t find the buzzer for the lock. I’ve searched and searched. But it isn’t there. Can you help me?’

‘Of course I can,’ I said. ‘I’ll just pass Vanja over to Linda.’

After doing that I put on my shoes and followed him down to the front hall, showed him where the buzzer was, on the wall to the right of the first door.

‘I’ll make a note of that,’ he said. ‘For next time. On the right of the first door.’

Three days later we had a meal in his flat. He showed us the wall he had painted, and glowed with satisfaction when I praised his handiwork. He hadn’t started cooking yet, and Vanja was asleep in the buggy in the hall, so Linda and I sat alone in the sitting room chatting while he was busy in the kitchen. On the wall were childhood pictures of Linda and her brother, and beside them newspaper articles and cuttings of interviews they had given when they made their debuts. Her brother had also had a book published, in 1996, but, like Linda, he hadn’t produced anything since.

He’s so proud of you,’ I said to Linda.

She looked down at the table.

‘Shall we go out onto the balcony?’ she suggested. ‘So that you can have a smoke?’

There wasn’t a balcony but a roof terrace, from which, between two other roofs, you could see over Östermalm. A roof terrace right by Stureplan; how many millions must the flat be worth? True, it was dark and smoke-infested, but that was easy enough to sort out.

‘Does your father own the flat?’ I asked, lighting a cigarette with my hand cupped over the lighter flame.

She nodded.

I had never lived in a place where the right address and elegant apartments meant as much as they did in Stockholm. Somehow it was a concentrate of everything. If you lived outside, well, you weren’t really included. The question of where you lived, which came up again and again, was therefore charged in Stockholm in a way that was quite different to Bergen, for example.

I walked to the edge to see below. There were still small piles of snow and patches of ice left on the pavement after the winter, almost completely eroded by the mild weather and grey from the sand and exhaust fumes. The sky above us was also grey, laden with cold rain that lashed the town at regular intervals. Grey but with a different light in it from the grey winter sky, for it was March, and March light was so clear and strong that it penetrated the cloud cover, even on a muggy day like this, and opened all the gates of darkness, as it were. There was a gleam in the walls in front of me and in the tarmac on the road beneath. The parked cars glinted, each in its own colour. Red, blue, dark green, white.

‘Hold me,’ she said.

I stubbed out my cigarette in the ashtray on the table and put my arms around her.

When, a moment later, we went back in, the sitting room was still empty and we entered the kitchen. He was by the stove pouring the contents of a tin of mushrooms into the frying pan. The liquid hissed as it met the hot pan. Then he added a diced courgette. A pan of spaghetti was boiling next to it.

‘That looks good,’ I said.

‘Yes, it is good,’ he said.

On the worktop there was a tin of shrimps in brine and a tin of double cream.

‘I usually have dinner down at Vikingen. But on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays I eat here. Then I cook for Berit.’

Berit was his girlfriend.

‘Is there anything we can help with?’ Linda asked.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Have a seat and I’ll bring the food when it’s ready.’

The food tasted like something I could have made when I was a student and ate alone in my bedsit in Absalon Beyers gate during my first year at Bergen University. Linda’s father talked more about the time when he played in goal for the team in Norrland. Then he talked about what his job had been, planning and designing warehouses. Then he talked about the horse he had once owned, which had been injured just as it looked as if it was going to start winning. He recounted everything in very precise, elaborate terms as if every detail was of the uttermost significance. At one point in the conversation he went to fetch a pen and paper so that he could show us how he had come to the precise number of days he had left to live. I sought Linda’s eyes, but she would not meet mine. We had determined in advance that the visit should be brief, so when dessert, a two-litre carton of ice cream served up on the table, was over we got to our feet and said we were afraid we had to go, Vanja had to be taken home and fed and changed. This appeared to please him. The visit had already lasted an infinity. I went into the hall and put on my outdoor clothes while Linda and he exchanged a few words in private. He said something about her being his girl and that she had grown so much. Come here and sit on my lap for a bit. I tied the last shoelace, got up, went to the crack in the door and looked into the room. Linda was sitting on his lap, he had his arms around her waist while saying something I was unable to catch. There was something grotesque about the sight, she was thirty-two years old, the girlish pose she struck was much too young for her, which she knew of course, her lips were pursed in disapproval, her whole being screamed with ambivalence. She didn't want to go along with this, but she didn't want to reject him either. He would not have understood a rejection, it would have hurt him, so she had to sit through it while he patted her until it would no longer seem like a rejection to get up and she was standing in front of him again.

I stepped back so that I would not make the situation worse for her by being a witness to it. When she came into the hall I was studying the pictures hanging on the wall. She put on her things. Her father came out to say goodbye, he gave me a hug, as before, looked at Vanja sleeping in the buggy, embraced Linda, stood in the doorway and watched us as we went into the lift, raised his hand for a last time and went inside as the lift door closed and we sank down through the building.

I never uttered a word regarding the little scene I had witnessed between them. In the way she had subordinated herself to him she had been a ten-year-old girl, I saw that; in the way she had fought against it, an adult woman. But the very fact that she'd had to fight somehow disqualified the notion of adulthood. Surely no adult would end up in a situation like this? He had no such thoughts, he was of the boundless kind, for him she was a daughter, nothing else, a creature of all ages.

And, as she had predicted, after that he began to ring us. It could be at any time of the day and in any state of mind, so Linda struck a deal with him: he would ring at a particular hour on a particular day. He seemed to like that. But it was also a commitment: if we didn't answer the phone he might be terribly offended and regard the contract as null and void, so he would be free to ring us whenever he wanted again, or never ring again. As for myself, I spoke to him only a handful of times. Once he asked me if he could sing me a song. He had written it himself, and it had been performed on stages in Stockholm and on the radio, he said. I didn't know what to believe. But there was no reason why he shouldn't be allowed to sing. He launched into song, his voice was powerful, his energy immense and even though he didn't hit all the notes to perfection the performance was still impressive. The song had four verses and was about a migrant worker building a road in Norrland. When he had finished I didn't know what else to say except that it was a wonderful song. Presumably he had expected more because he was quiet for a few seconds. Then he said, 'I know you write books, Karl Ove. I haven't read them yet, but I've heard a lot of good things about them. And I want you to know that. I'm hugely proud of you, Karl Ove. Yes, I am . . .'

'I'm happy to hear that,' I said.

'Are you and Linda OK?'

'Yes, we are.'

'Are you kind to her?'

'Yes.'

'That's good. You must never leave her. Never. Do you understand?'

'Yes.'

'You must take care of her. You must be kind to her, Karl Ove.' Then he burst into tears.

'We get on well,' I said. 'There's nothing to worry about.'

'I'm just an old man,' he said. 'But I've experienced a lot, you see. I've experienced more than most. My life isn't anything to shout about now. But I've counted how many days I have left. Did you know?'

'Yes, you showed us how you had worked it out when we were at your place.'

'Ah, yes, yes. But you haven't met Berit, have you.'

'No.'

'She's so kind to me.'

'So I gather,' I said.

He was suddenly on his guard.

'Eh? How?'

'Well, Linda has told me a bit about her. And Ingrid. You know . . .'

'I see. I won't bother you any more, Karl Ove. I'm sure you have important things to do.'

'Not at all,' I said. 'You're not bothering me at all.'

'Tell Linda I called. Take care.'

He rang off before I had a chance to wish him the same. On the display I saw that the whole conversation had not taken more than eight minutes.

Linda snorted when I told her.

‘You don’t have to listen to that stuff,’ she said. ‘Don’t answer the phone next time he rings.’

‘It doesn’t bother me,’ I said.

‘But it does bother me,’ she said.

Linda’s documentary contained nothing of this. She had edited out everything except his voice. However, therein lay everything. He talked about his life, and his voice was filled with sorrow when he spoke of his mother’s death, happiness when he spoke of his first years of adulthood, resignation when he spoke about his move to Stockholm. He spoke about the problems he’d had with the telephone, what a curse the invention had been for him, how for long periods he had kept it in a cupboard. He spoke of his daily routines, but also about his dreams, of which the greatest was to run a stud farm. Here he came into his own, and there was something hypnotic about his account, you were sucked into his world from the very first sentence. But most of all of course it was about Linda. Hearing what she did or reading what she wrote, I came so close to the person she was. It was as though those special qualities that stirred within her only then became visible. In our daily lives they were lost in whatever we were doing, which was the same as everyone else did, I saw nothing of the person I had fallen in love with. If I hadn’t actually forgotten, I certainly didn’t give it a thought.

How was that possible?

I looked at her. She tried to hide the anticipation in her eyes. Dropped her gaze too easily to the DAT player on the table and the mass of wires beneath.

‘You don’t need to change anything,’ I said. ‘It’s completely finished.’

‘Is it good, do you think?’

‘Oh yes. Brilliant.’

I placed the headset on the player, stretched and blinked a few times.

‘I was moved,’ I said.

‘By what?’

‘His life is a tragedy, in a way. But when he talks about it, he fills it with life, we know this is a *life*. With a value all of its own, irrespective of what happened to him. Obvious perhaps, but it's one thing to know this and another to feel it. And I did when I was listening to him just now.'

'I'm so pleased,' she said. 'So perhaps I don't need to do any more than adjust the sound levels. I can do that on Monday. But are you sure?'

'As sure as I can be,' I said, getting up. 'Now I'm going for a smoke.'

Downstairs, in the backyard, the wind was cold. The only two children in the block, a boy of nine or ten and his sister of eleven or twelve, were kicking a ball to each other by the gate at the other end. Intense loud music was coming from the Glenn Miller Café beyond the wall in the street behind them. Their mother, who lived alone with them on the top floor and looked seriously tired, had the window open. From the characteristic clinks and clunks I could hear she was washing up. The boy was plump, and probably to compensate had his hair cropped to make him seem tough. He always had blue bags under his eyes. When his sister had friends at home he performed ball tricks or ostentatious climbing feats on the monkey bars. On evenings like this, when they were alone and she had nothing better to do than play with her brother, he was happier, more energetic and keener to play well. Now and then they shouted and screamed up there, sometimes all three of them, but usually it was just him and his mother. I had seen the father come a couple of times to collect them – a small thin sickly guy with a moustache who obviously drank too much.

The sister went to the fence and sat down. She took a mobile phone from her pocket and it was so dark where she was sitting that the blue light of the display lit up the whole of her face. Her brother began to kick the ball against the wall, again and again. Bang. Bang. Bang.

His mother poked her head out of the window.

'Will you stop that!' she yelled. The boy bent forward quietly, picked up the ball and sat beside his sister, who turned away without changing the focus of her attention for a second.

I looked up at the two illuminated towers. A stab of tenderness and pain went through me.

Oh Linda, oh Linda.

At that moment the neighbour who lived next door to us came through the entrance. I watched her as she lightly closed the gate behind her. She was in her fifties and the way that women of this age are nowadays, that is with a certain artificially maintained youthfulness. She had a mass of dyed blonde hair, was wearing a fur jacket and pulling a small inquisitive dog on a taut leash. Once she had told me she was an artist, although I was none the wiser about what it was she did. She wasn't exactly the Munch type. Sometimes she could be very chatty, telling me she was going to Provence in the summer or had a weekend trip to New York or London planned. Sometimes she said nothing and could walk past me without saying a word. She had a teenage daughter who had given birth at the same time as Linda and whom she bossed around.

'Weren't you going to give up smoking?' she asked, not slowing her pace.

'The clock hasn't chimed twelve yet,' I said.

'Ah,' she said. 'It's going to snow tonight. You mark my words.'

She let herself in. I waited, then threw my cigarette end in the flower pot someone had put by the wall for this purpose and followed. My knuckles were red from the cold. I bounded up the stairs three at a time, opened the door, took off my coat and went into Linda, who was watching TV on the sofa. I leaned forward and kissed her.

'What are you watching?' I asked.

'Nothing much. Shall we watch a film?'

'Yes, let's.'

I went to the DVD rack.

'What would you like to see?'

'No idea. You choose.'

I ran my eye along the row. When I bought films it was always with the idea that they should broaden my horizons. They should have their own special imagery I could assimilate, or forge a relationship with places whose potential I hadn't considered or be set in an unfamiliar time or culture. In short, I chose films for all the wrong reasons, because when evening came and we wanted to see one of them we could never be bothered to watch two hours of some Japanese event from the 1960s in black and white or the great open expanses of Rome's suburbs, where the only thing that happened was that some stunningly beautiful people met who were fundamentally alienated from the world, as tended to be the case with films of that era. No, when evening came and we sat down to watch a film we wanted to be entertained. And it had to be with as little effort and inconvenience as possible. It was the same with everything. I hardly read books any more; if there was a newspaper around I preferred to read that. And the threshold just kept rising. It was idiotic because this life gave you nothing, it only made time pass. If we saw a good film it stirred us and set things in motion, for that is how it is: the world is always the same, it is the way we view it that changes. Everyday life, which could bear down on us like a foot treading on a head, could also transport us with delight. Everything depended on the seeing eye. If the eye saw the water that was everywhere in Tarkovsky's films, for example, which changed the world into a kind of terrarium, where everything trickled and ran, floated and drifted, where all the characters could melt away from the picture and only coffee cups on a table were left, filling slowly with the falling rain, against a background of intense, almost menacing green vegetation, yes, then the eye would also be able to see the same wild existential depths unfold in everyday life. For we were flesh and blood, sinews and bone, around us plants and trees grew, insects buzzed, birds flew, clouds drifted, rain fell. The eye which gave meaning to the world was a constant possibility, but we almost always decided against it, at least it was like that in our lives.

'Are we up for *Stalker*?' I asked, turning to her.

'OK as far as I'm concerned,' she said. 'Put it on and let's see.'

I inserted the DVD in the player, switched off the ceiling light, poured a glass of red wine, sat down beside Linda, took the remote and chose the language of the subtitles. She cuddled up to me.

'Does it matter if I fall asleep?' she asked.

'Not at all,' I answered, putting my arm around her.

I had seen the introduction with the man who wakes up in the dark damp room at least three times. The table with all the small objects shaking as a train passes. The man shaving in front of the mirror, the woman who tries to hold him back but fails. I had never got much further than that.

Linda placed her hand on my chest and looked up at me. I kissed her, and she closed her eyes. I stroked her back, she held me tight, almost clung to me, I laid her down, kissed her neck, cheek, mouth, rested my head on her bosom, heard her heart pounding, removed her soft jogging pants, kissed her stomach, her thighs . . . She looked at me with her dark gaze, with her beautiful eyes which closed as I penetrated her. We don't have any protection, she whispered. Do you want to get it? No, I said. No. And when I came, I came inside her. That was all I wanted.

Afterwards we lay close to each other for a long time without speaking.

‘Now we’ll have another child,’ I said at length. ‘Are you ready for that?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Oh yes. I am.’

The next morning Vanja woke at five as usual. Linda brought her into our bed to sleep for a few more hours with her while I got up, took out my laptop and started to work on the translation on which I was writing a report. The work was tedious and unending, I had already written thirty pages, and that about a short story of no more than one hundred and forty. Nevertheless, I was looking forward to the work and enjoyed sitting there. I was alone and working on a text. I needed nothing else. Then there were the little moments of pleasure: putting on the coffee machine, hearing the gurgle of water trickling through, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, standing outside in the darkness of the backyard before anyone had got up, drinking a cup and smoking the first cigarette of the day. Back upstairs and working while the gap between the houses gradually grew light and activity increased in the street. This morning the brightness of dawn was different and with it the atmosphere in the flat, for a thin layer of snow had fallen in the night. At eight o’clock I switched off my laptop, put it in my bag and walked to the little bakery a hundred metres down the street. The shop awnings along the line of buildings flapped above me. On the road the snow had already melted, but it was still on the pavement, peppered with the footprints of those who had wandered past during the night. Now the street was deserted. The bakery was tiny and run by two women of my age. Stepping inside was like stepping inside one of those noir films from the 1940s in which all the women, even those working in kiosks or washing floors in office blocks, are strikingly beautiful. One of them was red-haired, with white skin and freckles, pronounced facial features and green eyes. The other had long dark hair, a slightly square face and friendly dark blue eyes. Both were tall and slim, their bodies flecked with flour. On their foreheads, cheeks, hands or aprons. Newspaper cuttings on the wall told of how they had swapped their creative professions for this, which had always been their dream.

The red-haired woman came from behind the counter when the doorbell rang, I said what I wanted, one of the big sourdough loaves, six of the wholemeal rolls, two cinnamon snails. I pointed at the same time, because even the simplest Norwegian words were met with a ‘What?’ She put everything in a bag and rang up the total on the till. With the white carrier bag in my hand, I hurried back to the flat, wiped the snow off my feet on the hall mat, heard as soon as I opened the door that they were up and sitting in the kitchen having breakfast.

Vanja sat waving her spoon in the air and smiled at me when I entered the room. She had porridge all over her face. It was a long time since she had let us feed her. I reacted instinctively, wanted to wipe up the mess – from her face as well – I didn’t like her sitting there all sticky. It was in my blood. Linda had criticised my reaction from the very beginning, it was important there were no rules or restrictions as far as food was concerned, it was a sensitive area, she should be allowed to do exactly what she wanted. Of course, Linda was right, I did understand, and on a purely theoretical level I could accept the greediness, the freedom and the soundness of a child being allowed to eat noisily and make a mess, but on a practical level my first impulse was to modify her behaviour. That was my father in me. He didn’t tolerate as much as a breadcrumb on the table when I was growing up. But I knew that, I had experienced it myself and hated it with every fibre in my body, so why did I instinctively want to persist at all costs?

I cut some slices of bread, put them in a basket with the rolls, filled the kettle and sat down to have breakfast with them. The butter was a little hard, and as I tried to spread it with the knife the bread tore. Vanja was staring at me. I spun my head round and fixed my eyes on her. She gave a start in her chair. Then, fortunately, she began to laugh. I did the same again, looked down at the table in front of me for a long time until she had begun to give up hope that anything would happen and thought my mind was busy elsewhere, then, as quick as a flash, I stared into her eyes, they widened with alarm and she jumped in fright. Then she burst into laughter again. Linda and I laughed too.

‘How funny our Vanja is,’ Linda said. ‘You’re so funny, you are! My little bunny rabbit!’

She leaned forward and rubbed her nose against Vanja’s. I grabbed the culture section of the newspaper lying open on the table in front of Linda, took a mouthful of bread and chewed as I scanned the headlines. On the worktop behind me the kettle boiled and switched itself off. I got up, put a tea bag in a cup, poured the steaming water over it, went to the fridge to get a carton of milk, then sat down. Dunked the tea bag a few times until the brown billowing liquid slowly issuing from it had completely changed the colour of the water. Poured in a splash of milk and flicked through the paper.

‘Have you seen what they say about Arne?’ I said, looking at Linda.

She nodded and gave a little smile, but to Vanja, not me.

‘The publishers are withdrawing the book. What a defeat.’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Poor Arne. But he only has himself to blame.’

‘Do you think he knew it was lies?’

‘No, not at all. He didn’t do it intentionally, I’m sure. He must have thought that was how it was.’

‘Poor devil,’ I said, raising the cup and sipping the mud-coloured tea.

Arne was one of Linda’s mother’s neighbours in Gnesta. He had written a book about Astrid Lindgren, which had come out this autumn, loosely based on conversations he’d had with her before she died. Arne was a spiritual person, he believed in God, although not in a conventional sense, and it must have surprised many people that Astrid Lindgren shared this unconventional belief in God. The papers were beginning to take an interest in the affair. No one else had been present during the conversations, so even if Lindgren had never expressed such attitudes to anyone else it could not be proved that they had been fictionalised for the occasion. But there were other things in the press, among them Arne’s readings of Lindgren, which turned out to be anachronistic: at the time he said that he had read *Mio my Mio* the book hadn’t been published. And so it continued throughout his book. The Lindgren family denied that she had such attitudes; she could not have said this. The papers did not leave Arne with much honour, the subtext was that he was a liar, as good as a pathological liar, and now the publishing house had decided to withdraw the book. The book that had kept Arne going for the last few illness-plagued years and of which he was so proud.

But Linda was right: he had only himself to blame.

I buttered another slice of bread. Vanja stretched her hands into the air. Linda lifted her out of the chair and carried her into the bathroom, from where soon there came the sounds of running water and Vanja’s little squeals of protest.

The phone rang in the living room. I froze. Even though I knew at once it had to be Ingrid, Linda's mother – no one else would ring us at this time – my heart beat faster and faster.

I sat motionless until the ringing stopped, as suddenly as it had started.

'Who was that?' Linda asked when she emerged from the bathroom with Vanja hanging from her arms.

'No idea,' I said. 'I didn't answer it. But it was probably your mother.'

'I'll call her,' she said. 'I had planned to anyway. Will you take Vanja?'

She held her out as if my lap was the only other place she could be in the flat.

'Just put her on the floor,' I said.

'Then she'll scream.'

'Let her scream. It's no problem.'

'O-K,' she said, the way that meant the opposite. This is not OK, but I'm doing it because you say so. Then you'll see what happens.

Of course, she started to cry as soon as Linda put her down on the floor. I stretched my arms out for her, then fell hands first onto the floor. Linda didn't turn round. I pulled open a drawer, which I could reach now from a sitting position, and took out a whisk. Vanja wasn't interested, even if I could make it vibrate. I held up a banana in front of her. She shook her head as the tears ran down her cheeks. In the end I lifted her up and carried her to the bedroom window, where I stood her on the sill. That did the trick. I named all the things we saw, she stared with interest and pointed at every car that passed.

Linda poked her head through the doorway with the phone held to her chest.

'Mummy asks if we would like to eat there tomorrow. Would we?'

'Yes,' I said. 'That's fine.'

'Then shall I say yes?'

'Go for it.'

I lifted Vanja carefully down to the floor. She could stand but not walk yet, so she squatted and crawled towards Linda. This child could not show a second of dissatisfaction before her needs were fulfilled. For close on the whole of her first year she had woken up in the night every two hours and been fed. Linda had been almost out of her mind with tiredness, yet she wouldn't make Vanja sleep in her own bed because then she would scream.

I was in favour of a brutal course of action, putting her in her own bed and letting her scream as much as she wanted the whole night through, so that the next time she would understand that no one was going to come whatever she did, and resigned and perhaps angry, she would settle down to sleep on her own. I might just as well have told Linda that I would beat Vanja over the head until she was quiet. The compromise was that I rang my mother’s sister, Ingunn, who was a child psychologist and had experience of such things. She suggested a gradual weaning, emphasising that Vanja had to be patted and stroked a lot if she wanted to be fed or to get up but was not allowed, and that bit by bit we should defer the time when she was given the day’s final feed. So there I was, by her bed at night with a notepad, jotting down the exact times and patting and stroking her while she screamed her head off and glowered at me furiously. It took ten nights for her to sleep through. It could have been done in one. Because surely it didn’t hurt her to cry a little? The same happened in the play area. I tried to make her stay there alone so I could sit on a bench and read, but that was out of the question: a few seconds on her own and she was searching for me with her eyes and holding out imploring arms.

Linda rang off and came out with Vanja in her arms.

‘Shall we go for a walk?’ she suggested.

‘I don’t suppose there’s much else we can do,’ I said.

‘What do you mean?’ she asked warily.

‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘Where shall we go?’

‘Skeppsholmen maybe?’

‘OK, let’s do that.’

Since I’d had Vanja in the week, Linda took care of her now. She sat Vanja on her lap, dressed her in a small red knitted jumper we had inherited from Yngve’s children, brown corduroy trousers, the red romper suit Linda’s mother had bought for us, the red cap with the strap under the chin and the white brim and a pair of white woollen mittens. Until a month ago she had always sat still when we changed her, but of late she had begun to wriggle and squirm in our hands. It was particularly difficult when you had to change her nappy, the crap could end up anywhere as she kept wriggling, and more than once I had raised my voice. LIE STILL! Or LIE STILL FOR CHRIST’S SAKE! And my grip on her tightened more than was necessary. For her part, she thought it was funny to try and wriggle away, she always smiled or laughed whenever she succeeded and at first she simply did not understand the loud irritated voice. Sometimes she ignored it totally, or she stared at me in surprise, now what was that meant to be? Or she cried. First the lower lip puckered and started to quiver, then the tears flowed. What on earth was I doing? I thought. Had I gone completely mad? She was one year old, as innocent as only the innocent can be, and there I was, *yelling* at her!

Luckily she was easy to comfort, easy to make laugh, and luckily she had a short memory. From that perspective, it was worse for me.

Linda had more patience, and after five minutes Vanja was fully dressed in her arms with an expectant smile on her lips. In the lift she tried to press the buttons, Linda pointed to the right one and guided her hand. The button lit up, the lift set off. While Linda went into the bicycle room with her, where the buggy was, I lit a cigarette outside. The wind was still strong and the sky heavy and grey. The temperature was around zero or minus one.

We walked down Regeringsgatan, into Kungsträdgården, past the National Museum, and turned left onto the island of Skeppsholmen, along the quays where all the houseboats were. A couple of them were from the turn of the last century and in their heyday had plied between the many islands outside Stockholm. There was also a kind of small boatyard here, or so it seemed, with a keel and timbers arranged like a skeleton inside a wooden warehouse. Now and then a bearded face poked out as we walked past, otherwise the area was deserted. Up on a small hill was the Moderna Museet, where Vanja had spent, considering the length of her short life, a disproportionately large number of days. But admission was free, the restaurant was good and child-friendly, there were play areas and some of the art was worth seeing.

The water in the harbour was black. The clouds were dense and low in the sky. The thin layer of snow on the ground seemed to make everything harder and more naked, perhaps because it removed the little colour that was left in the townscape. All the museum buildings here had once been military and they still bore the hallmarks – low and closed, they ran alongside the short untrafficked roads or stood at the end of what must have been parade grounds.

‘That was great yesterday,’ Linda said, wrapping an arm around me.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It was. But do you really want another child now?’

‘Yes, I do. But the odds are against it.’

‘I’m sure you’re pregnant,’ I said.

‘As sure as you were that Vanja was a boy?’

‘Ha ha.’

‘I’d be so happy,’ she said. ‘Imagine I was! Imagine we were going to have another child!’

‘Yes . . .’ I said. ‘What do you say to that, Vanja? Would you like a little brother or sister?’

She looked up at us. Then she turned her head to the side and pointed to three seagulls bobbing up and down on the waves, their wings tucked into their sides.

‘Deh!’ she said.

‘Yes, there,’ I said. ‘Three seagulls!’

One child was absolutely out of the question for me, two was too few and too close together, but three, I reckoned, was perfect. Then the children outnumbered the parents, there were lots of permutations possible, then we were a gang. I had nothing but contempt for precise plans to pinpoint the most suitable time, both as far as our own lives were concerned and which ages went best together. After all this was not a business we were running. I wanted to let chance decide, let what happened happen, and then deal with the consequences as they emerged. Wasn’t that what life was about? So when I walked down the street with Vanja, when I fed and changed her, with these wild longings for a different life hammering away in my chest, this was the consequence of a decision and I *had* to live with it. There was *no* way out, other than the old well-travelled route: endurance. The fact that I cast a pall over the lives of those around me in doing so, well, that was just another consequence which had to be endured. If we had another child, and we would, regardless of whether Linda was pregnant now or not, and then another, which was equally inevitable, surely this would transcend duty, transcend my longings and end up as something wild and free in its own right? If not, what would I do then?

Be there, do what I had to do. In my life this was the only thing I had to hold on to, my sole fixed point, and it was carved in stone.

Or was it?

A few weeks ago Jeppe had phoned me, he was in town, could we meet for a few beers? I had a lot of respect for him, but I had never managed to talk to him, as was the case with so many people, but we loosened up after I had knocked back several beers in quick succession. I told him what my life was like now. He looked at me and said with that natural authority which was typical of him, ‘But you must *write*, Karl Ove!’

And when push came to shove, when a knife was at my throat, this was what mattered most.

But why?

Children were life, and who would turn their back on life?

And writing, what else was it but death? Letters, what else were they but bones in a cemetery?

The Djurgård ferry rounded the spit at the end of the island. On the other side was Gröna Lund, the vast amusement park, with all the machines empty and motionless, some covered with tarpaulins. A couple of hundred metres away was the building that housed the Vasa ship.

‘Shall we take the ferry across?’ Linda asked. ‘Then we can have lunch at Blå Porten.’

‘We’ve only just had breakfast,’ I said.

‘A coffee then.’

‘Yes, we can. Have you got any cash on you?’

She nodded, and we waited where the ferry berthed. After only a few seconds Vanja started complaining. Linda found a banana in the bag and handed it to her. Happy, she sat back in the buggy and stared across the sea while stuffing bits of banana into her mouth. I was reminded of the very first time I had been out with her on my own, because this was where we came. She had been a week old. I had almost run around the island with the buggy in front of me, frightened she would stop breathing, frightened she would wake up and scream. At home we had the situation under control: there was breastfeeding, sleeping, changing nappies in a soporific yet somehow quietly triumphant system. Away from home, we no longer had a structure to cling to. The first time we took her out was the third day, she had to go for a check-up and it was like we were transporting a bomb. Obstacle number one was all the clothes she had to wear because the temperature outside was more than fifteen degrees below. The second was the child seat. How do you attach it in a taxi? The third was the eyes that studied us in the reception area. But all went well, we survived, albeit with an immense amount of fuss, but it was all worth it when some minutes later she was placid and gently kicking her legs on the changing table as she was being examined. She was in perfect health and in an irresistibly good mood because she suddenly smiled at the nurse bent over her. That was a smile, the nurse said. It wasn't gripe. It's rare for babies to smile so early on! We luxuriated in the compliment, it said something about us as parents, only several months later did it strike me that the line, it's rare for babies to smile so early on, was probably used to accomplish that very effect. But, oh, the low, somehow timid January light that fell through the window and over our daughter on the table, whom we still weren't remotely used to, the ice outside glinting in the freezing temperatures, Linda's utterly open relaxed face, made this one of the few memories that did not contain the slightest trace of ambivalence. It lasted until we were in the corridor and ready to go, and Vanja began to scream her head off. What should we do? Pick her up? Yes, we had to. Should Linda give her a feed? If so, how? She was wearing so many clothes she looked like a balloon. Should we undress her again? *While* she was screaming? Was that what you did? What about if she didn't calm down?

Oh, how Vanja screamed as Linda fiddled with her clothing in her nervous, irresolute way.

'Let me do it,' I said.

Her eyes flashed as they met mine.

Vanja went silent for some seconds as her lips closed around the nipple. But then she jerked her head back and continued to scream her head off.

‘Not that then,’ Linda said. ‘What is it? Is she ill?’

‘No, I doubt that,’ Linda said. ‘After all, she’s just been checked over by a doctor.’

Vanja screamed and screamed. The whole of her little face was in convulsion.

‘What shall we do?’ Linda said in desperation.

‘Hold her for a while and we’ll see,’ I said.

The second couple, the ones after us, came out with their baby in a car seat. They studiously avoided looking at us as they passed.

‘We can’t stand here,’ I said. ‘Let’s go. Come on. She’ll just have to scream.’

‘Have you rung for a taxi?’

‘No.’

‘Then do it!’

She looked down at Vanja, whom she was hugging, not that it helped, there wasn’t much reassurance in the contact between Vanja’s romper suit and Linda’s Puffa jacket. I took out my mobile and tapped in the taxi number, holding the car seat in my other hand, and walked towards the stairs at the end of the corridor.

‘Hang on,’ Linda said. ‘I just have to put on her hat.’

She screamed all the time we waited for the taxi. Fortunately it arrived a few minutes later. I opened the rear door, put the seat in and tried to secure it with the seat belt, which I had managed an hour earlier without a problem, but now it appeared to be absolutely impossible. I tried attaching it in every conceivable way, through, over and under the bloody seat, and none worked. All with Vanja screaming and Linda looking daggers at me. In the end the driver got out to help me. At first I refused to move, I could damn well manage this on my own, thank you, but after another minute’s fumbling I had to concede defeat and let him, a moustachioed Iraqi-looking man, fasten it at a stroke.

All the way through snowy glistening Stockholm she screamed. Only when we were through the door, at home and she was lying undressed on the bed with Linda did she stop.

We were both drenched in sweat.

‘That was a bit of an ordeal!’ Linda said as she got up from Vanja, asleep on the bed.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘There’s some life in her anyway.’

Later that day I heard Linda telling her mother about the medical check-up. Not a word about all the screaming or the panic we had felt, no, what she told her was that Vanja smiled when she was on the table being examined. How happy and proud Linda was! Vanja had smiled, she was in perfect health, and the low sunlight outside, seemingly elevated by the snow-covered surfaces, made everything in the room soft and shiny, even Vanja, as she lay naked on the blanket kicking her legs.

What had happened afterwards was passed over in silence.

Now, waiting in the wind for the ferry, close to a year later, the whole scene appeared bizarre. How was it possible to be so ignorant? But that was how it had been, I could still remember how I felt inside then, how fragile everything had been, also the happiness that was radiated everywhere. Nothing in my life had prepared me for having a baby, I had barely seen one before, and the same was true for Linda, she had not had a single baby near her during her adult life. Everything was new, everything had to be learned on the hoof, also the mistakes that were bound to be made. Quite soon I began to regard various elements of childcare as challenges, as though I were participating in a kind of competition the point of which was to tackle as much as possible at once, and I had continued doing this when Vanja became my responsibility during the day, until there were no new elements left, the little field was conquered, and all that remained was routine.

The engine on the ferry was thrown into reverse as it slowly glided the last metres towards the quay. The ticket collector opened the gate and we, apparently the only passengers, pushed the buggy on board. Bubbles of grey-green water rose to the surface around the propellers. Linda took her wallet from the inside pocket of her blue jacket and paid. I held the railing and looked back towards the town. The white projection which was the Royal Dramatic Theatre, the ridge of hills that separated Birger Jarlsgatan from Sveavägen, where our flat was. The vast mass of building that filled almost all the space in the countryside. How a different perspective, which knew nothing of the purpose of houses and roads, but which considered them as forms and mass, the way pigeons must see the town they fly over and land on, saw the town, how this view in one fell swoop made everything alien. An enormous labyrinth of passages and cavities, some under an open sky, others enclosed, others again under the ground, in narrow tunnels through which trains raced like larvae.

Well over a million people lived their lives there.

‘Mummy said she could look after Vanja on Mondays if you wanted. Then you’d have the day to yourself.’

‘I’d like that of course,’ I said.

‘No of course about it,’ she said.

Mentally, I rolled my eyes.

‘But then we can sleep there,’ she went on. ‘And then come back together early in the morning. If you want, that is. And mummy can bring Vanja in the afternoon.’

‘Sounds like a good plan,’ I said.

When the ferry moored on the other side we walked up the street beside the fair, which in the summer months was always full of people, queuing in front of the ticket windows or hot dog stands, eating in one of the fast food restaurants across the way or just walking. The tarmac was littered with tickets and brochures, ice cream wrappers and hot dog paper, serviettes and drinking straws, Coke cups and juice cartons and everything else people enjoying their leisure tended to drop. Now the street ahead was quiet, empty and clean. Not a soul to be seen anywhere, not in the restaurants on one side, nor in the fair on the other. On a little hill at the other end was Circus, the concert venue. I had been to the restaurant there once with Anders, we had been on the lookout for somewhere showing the Premier League. They had the match we wanted to see on the TV at the back. There was only one other person inside. The light was dim, the walls dark, yet he was wearing sunglasses. It was Tommy Körberg. All the newspapers had his face plastered over the front pages that day, he had been caught drink-driving, you could hardly walk a metre in Stockholm without seeing his face. Now he was hiding in here. The flagrant stares must have been as unpleasant for him as the carefully averted eyes, he left a short time after we entered, even though neither of us had glanced in his direction once.

Compared with what he appeared to be going through, my worst attacks of post-alcoholic angst paled into insignificance.

My mobile rang in my pocket. I took it and looked at the display. Yngve.

‘Hi?’ I said.

‘Hi,’ he answered. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Fine. How about you?’

‘Yep, fine.’

‘Good. Yngve, we’re about to go into a café. Can I ring you later? This afternoon some time? Or was there something in particular?’

‘No, nothing. We can talk later.’

‘Bye.’

‘Bye.’

I put the mobile back in my pocket.

‘That was Yngve,’ I said.

‘Is he all right?’ Linda asked.

I shrugged.

‘I don’t know. But I’ll call him afterwards.’

Two weeks after he turned forty Yngve left Kari and moved into a house on his own. It had all happened very suddenly. Only when he had been here last time had he told me about his plans. Yngve seldom talked about personal matters, he kept almost everything to himself – unless I asked him direct questions, that is. But that didn’t always happen. Besides, I didn’t need him to confide in me to know that he had been living a life he didn’t want. So when he told me it was over, I was happy on his behalf. Nonetheless, I couldn’t help thinking about dad, who had left my mother just a few weeks before he turned forty. The age coincidence, which in this case was down to a week, was neither a family nor a genetic matter and the midlife crisis was not a myth: it had begun to hit people around me, and it hit them hard. Some went almost crazy in their despair. For what? For more life. At the age of forty the life you have lived so far, always pro tem, has for the first time become *life* itself, and this reappraisal swept away all dreams, destroyed all your notions that real life, the one that was meant to be, the great deeds you would perform, was somewhere else. When you were forty you realised it was all here, banal everyday life, fully formed, and it always would be unless you did something. Unless you took one last gamble.

Yngve had done it because he wanted a better life. Dad did it because he wanted a radically different one. That was why I wasn’t worried about Yngve, and actually never had been, he would always manage.

Vanja had fallen asleep in the buggy. Linda stopped, laid her on her back and glanced at the board on the pavement outside Blå Porten showing the meal of the day.

'In fact, I am hungry,' she said. 'How about you?'

'We could have some lunch,' I said. 'The lamb meatballs are good.'

It was a nice place. There was an open area in the middle, full of plants with a fountain, where you could sit in the summer. In the winter the centrepiece was a long corridor with glass walls. The only downside was the clientele, which for the most part consisted of cultured women in their fifties and sixties.

I held the door open for Linda, who pushed the buggy in, then grabbed the bar between the wheels and lifted it down the three steps. The room was just over half full. We chose the table furthest away in case Vanja woke up, and went to order. Cora was sitting at the window table at the back. She got up with a smile when she saw us.

'Hi!' she said. 'How good to see you both!'

She hugged first Linda, then me.

'Well?' she said. 'How are things?'

'Good,' Linda said. 'How about you?'

'Good. I'm here with my mother, as you can see.'

I nodded to her mother, whom I had met once, at one of Cora's parties. She nodded back.

'Are you here alone?' Cora asked.

'No, Vanja's over there,' Linda answered.

'Oh yes. Are you going to be here for a while?'

'Ye-es, I think so . . .' Linda said.

'I'll come over afterwards,' Cora said. 'Then I can have a peep at your daughter. Is that all right?'

'Of course,' Linda said, and went to the end of the counter, where we took our turn in the queue.

Cora was the first of Linda's friends I had met. She loved Norway and all things Norwegian, had lived there for some years and was prone to speaking Norwegian when she was drunk. She was the only Swede I had met who understood that there were big differences between our two countries, and she understood in the only way it could be understood, physically. The way people bump into each other in the street, in shops and on public transport. The way people in Norway always chat, in kiosks, queues and taxis. Her eyes had widened in surprise when she read Norwegian newspapers and saw the tone of debates. They really give each other a tongue-lashing! she said with enthusiasm. They give it everything they've got! They're not afraid of anything! Not only have they got every opinion under the sun and the courage to say things no Swede would ever say, they also do it while going at each other hammer and tongs. Oh, how liberating that is! Her reaction made it easier to get to know her than Linda's other friends, who were sociable in quite a different, formal and more polished way, not to mention the office collective where she had got me in. They were kind and friendly, often invited me to lunch, and just as often I declined, apart from a couple of occasions when I sat silently listening to their conversations. On one of the occasions they were discussing the imminent invasion of Iraq and the neighbouring eternal conflict between Israel and Palestine. Discussing is perhaps not the right word; it was more like small talk about the food or the weather. The following day I met Cora, and she told me her friend had resigned her post at the collective in a fury. Apparently there had been a heated exchange of opinions about the relationship between Israel and Palestine, she had lost her temper and resigned her post on the spot. And sure enough, her place had been cleared the next day. But I had been present! And I hadn't noticed anything! No aggression, no irritability, nothing. Only their friendly chatty voices and their elbows sticking out like chicken wings as they plied their knives and forks. This was Sweden, these were the Swedes.

But Cora also got annoyed that day. I told her that Geir had gone to Iraq two weeks before to write a book about the war. She said he was a conceited egotistical idiot. She wasn't a political person, so I was surprised by her violent reaction. In fact, there were tears in her eyes as she cursed him. Was her empathy that strong?

Her father had gone to the war in the Congo in the 1960s, she said then. He had worked as a war correspondent. It had destroyed him. Not that he had been injured or anything like that, nor that the experiences had shaken him in such a way that he bore mental scars; more the opposite, he wanted to go back, he wanted to have more of the life he had lived there, close to death, a need nothing in Sweden could fulfil. She told us a strange story about how he had ridden a motorbike at a circus afterwards, *the motorbike* *of death* she called it, and of course he had started drinking. He was destructive and had died by his own hand when Cora was young. The tears in her eyes were for him, she was grieving for him.

Fortunate then that she had such a strong, authoritative and strict mother?

Well, not necessarily . . . My impression was that she viewed Cora's life with some disapproval, and Cora took that more to heart than she should. Her mother was an accountant, and it was clear that Cora's wanderings in a vaguely cultural landscape did not quite correspond to her expectations of what constituted a suitable life for her daughter. Cora had earned her corn as a journalist on a variety of women's magazines, although that didn't leave much of a mark on her self-image, and she wrote poems, she was a poet. She had been to Biskops-Arnö, the writing school where Linda had also been, and she wrote good poetry from what I could judge; I heard her do a reading once and was surprised. Her poems were neither language poetry, which most young Swedish poets went in for, nor delicate or sensitive, like those of the others, but something else, unrestrained and exploratory in a non-personal way, written in expansive language it was difficult to associate with her. She remained, however, unpublished. Swedish publishers were infinitely more budget-conscious than their Norwegian counterparts and much more careful, so if you didn't align yourself perfectly with the literary surroundings you didn't have an earthly. If she held her nerve and worked hard she would succeed in the end because she had talent, but when you looked at her, endurance was not the first quality to leap up at you. She was given to self-pity, spoke in a low voice, often about depressing matters, although she could also turn on a five-*øre* piece and be lively and interesting. When she drank she could take centre stage and make a scene, the only one of Linda's friends who would. Perhaps that was why I found her so congenial?

Long hair hung down on either side of her face. The eyes behind the small glasses had a kind of dog-like melancholy about them. Whenever she drank, and occasionally when sober as well, she expressed her great admiration for and feelings of identity with Linda. Linda never really knew quite how to react.

I gently stroked Linda's back. The table we were standing beside was covered with cakes of all shapes and sizes. Dark brown chocolate, light yellow custard cream, greenish marzipan, pink and white meringue kisses. A little flag with the name on every dish.

‘What would you like?’ I asked.

‘I don’t really know . . . Chicken salad maybe. And you?’

‘Lamb meatballs. I know what I’m getting then. But I can order yours. You go and sit down.’

She did. I ordered, paid, poured water into two glasses, cut some slices from the loaves at the end of the enormous cake table, took some cutlery, grabbed a couple of small packets of butter and some serviettes, put everything on a tray and stood beside the counter to wait for the food to be brought from the kitchen, the top half of which I could see over the swing door. In the atrium-style courtyard, tables and chairs stood unoccupied between all the green plants, which the grey concrete floor and the grey sky set off to perfection. The combination of these particular colours, grey and green, drew your eye. No artist would have known how to exploit them better than Braque. I remembered the prints I had seen in Barcelona when I was there with Tonje, of some boats on a beach under an immense sky, their almost shocking beauty. They had cost a few thousand kroner, too much, I had thought. When I reconsidered, it was too late: the next day, our last in Barcelona, a Saturday, I stood vainly pulling at the gallery door.

Grey and green.

But also grey and yellow, as in David Hockney’s fantastic painting of lemons on a dish. Detaching colour from motif was modernism’s most important achievement. Before it, pictures like Braque’s or Hockney’s would have been unthinkable. The question was whether it was worth the price, bearing in mind all the baggage it brought to art.

The café I was in belonged to Liljevalch’s art gallery, whose rear was formed by the fourth and last wall of the garden area, and the cloistered passage at the top of the steps was a part of it. The last exhibition I had seen there was of Andy Warhol’s work, which I was out of my depth to judge as far as quality was concerned, whatever perspective I took. This made me feel ultra-conservative and reactionary, which I certainly did not want to be and definitely didn’t want to cultivate being. But what could I do?

The past is only one of many possible futures, as Thure Erik was wont to say. It wasn’t the past you had to avoid and ignore, it was its ossification. The same applied to the present. And when the movement art cultivated became static, that was what you had to avoid and ignore. Not because it was modern, in tune with our times, but because it wasn't moving, it was dead.

'Lamb meatballs and chicken salad?'

I turned. A young man with pimples, a chef's hat and an apron stood behind the counter looking around with a plate in each hand.

'Yes, here,' I said.

I put the plates on the tray and carried it through the room to our table, where Linda was sitting with Vanja on her lap.

'Did she wake up?' I asked.

Linda nodded.

'I can take her,' I said. 'Then you can eat.'

'Thanks,' she said.

The offer didn't spring from altruism but self-interest. Linda often suffered from low blood glucose and became more and more irritable the longer it lasted. Having lived with her for close on three years I picked up the signals long before she herself was aware of them, the secret lay in details, a sudden move, a hint of black in her gaze, a touch of curtness in her responses. Then all you had to do was put food in front of her and it passed. Before coming to Sweden I had never even heard of this phenomenon, had no idea low blood glucose existed and was perplexed the first time I noticed the condition in Linda, why did she snap at the waitress? Why did she give a brief nod and look away when I asked her about it? Geir thought this phenomenon, which was widespread and well documented, was caused by the fact that all Swedes went to nursery schools and were given *mellanmål*, 'between-meals', all through the day. I was used to people getting moody because something had gone wrong or somebody had made an offensive remark or suchlike, in other words for more or less objective reasons, and I knew the moods of younger children were affected by whether they were hungry or not. I clearly had a lot to learn about the ways of the human mind. Or was it the Swedish mind? The female mind? The cultural middle-class mind?

I lifted Vanja and went to fetch one of the children's chairs inside the door by the entrance. With my daughter in one hand and the chair in the other I went back, took off her hat, romper suit and shoes and put her down.

Her hair was unkempt, her face sleepy, but there was a glint in her eyes that offered hope of a quiet half an hour.

I cut off some bits of the meatballs and put them on the table in front of her. She tried to knock them away with a sweep of her arm, but the edge of the plastic table prevented her. Before she had time to pick them up and throw them one by one, I put them back on my plate. I leaned over and rummaged through the bag to see if there was something that might keep her occupied for a few minutes.

A tin lunch box, would that do the trick?

I removed the biscuits and put them on the edge of the table, then placed the box in front of her, took out my keys and dropped them in.

Objects that rattled and you could take out and put down were just what she needed. Satisfied with my solution, I sat at the table and began to eat.

The room around us was filled with the buzz of voices, the clink of cutlery and occasional muted laughter. In the short time that had elapsed since we arrived, the café had become almost full to the rafters. Djurgården was always crowded at the weekends and had been so for more than a hundred years. Not only were the parks spacious and beautiful, with more trees than park in some places, there were also lots of museums here. The Thielska Gallery, with its death mask of Nietzsche and paintings by Munch, Strindberg and Hill; Waldemarsudde, the former residence of Prince Eugen, also an artist, the Nordic Museum, the Biological Museum, Skansen of course, with its zoo of Nordic animals and buildings from the whole of Sweden’s history, all brought to light in the fantastic period at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, a strange mix of middle-class respectability, national romanticism, health fanaticism and decadence. The sole remnant was health fanaticism; Sweden had distanced itself from the rest, particularly national romanticism; now the ideal was not human uniqueness but equality, and not cultural uniqueness but multicultural society, hence all the museums here were museums of museums. This was especially true of the Biological Museum, which had stood unaltered since it was built some time at the beginning of the previous century and had the same display as then, various stuffed animals in a pseudo-natural environment against backgrounds painted by the great animal and bird artist Bruno Liljefors. In those days there were still enormous tracts of the planet untouched by humans, so its re-creation was not prompted by any necessity other than to provide knowledge; and the view it offered of our civilisation, namely that everything had to be translated into human terms, was occasioned not by need but by desire, by thirst; and the fact that this desire and thirst for knowledge, which was meant to expand the world, at one and the same time made it smaller, also physically, where what then had only just been started, and was therefore striking, had now been completed, made me want to cry every time I was there. The crowds of people walking along the canals and on the gravel paths, across the lawns and through the copses of trees at the weekend were in principle the same as at the end of the nineteenth century, and this reinforced the feeling: we were like them, just more lost.

A man of my age stood before me. There was something familiar about him, although I was unable to put my finger on what. He had a strong jutting chin and had shaved his head to hide the fact that he was beginning to go bald. His earlobes were podgy and there was a vaguely pink glow to his face.

‘Is that chair free?’ he asked.

‘Yes, help yourself,’ I said.

He carefully lifted it and carried it to the table adjacent to ours, where two women and a man in their sixties were sitting with a woman in her thirties and what had to be her two small children. A family outing with grandparents.

Vanja unleashed one of her dreadful screams, which she had started to do in recent weeks. She launched it from the bottom of her lungs. It went right through my nervous system and was unbearable. I looked at her. Both the tin box and the keys were on the floor beside the chair. I picked them up and placed them in front of her. She grabbed them and threw them down again. It could have been a game had it not been for the ensuing scream.

‘Don’t scream, Vanja,’ I said. ‘Please.’

I forked the last bit of potato, yellow against the white plate, and raised it to my mouth. While I was chewing I gathered the remaining pieces of meat on my plate, loaded them onto my fork with the knife, together with some onion rings from the salad, swallowed and lifted it to my mouth. The man who had taken the chair was on his way to the counter with the older man, whom I guessed to be his wife’s father, since none of his facial features were recognisable in the older man’s more ordinary face.

Where had I seen him before?

Vanja screamed again.

She was just impatient, no reason to get excited, I thought, as anger mounted in my chest.

I placed the cutlery on my plate and got up, looked at Linda, who would soon have finished as well.

‘I’ll take her for a little walk,’ I said, ‘just through the cloisters. Would you like a coffee afterwards or shall we have one elsewhere?’

‘We can have one somewhere else,’ she said. ‘Or stay here.’

I rolled my eyes and leaned forward to pick up Vanja.

‘Don’t you roll your eyes at me,’ Linda said.

‘But I asked you a simple question,’ I said. ‘A yes-or-no question. Do you want to, or don’t you? And you can’t even answer.’

Without waiting for her response, I put Vanja down on the floor, took her hands and started to walk, with her leading the way.

‘What do *you* want then?’ Linda asked behind me. I pretended to be too busy with Vanja to hear. She moved one leg in front of the other, more in enthusiasm than pursuit of a particular destination, until we reached the steps, where I carefully let go of her hands. For a moment she stood upright and swayed. Then she went down on her knees and crawled up the three steps. Set off at full speed for the front door like a little puppy. When it was opened, she sat back on her haunches and peered up at the newcomers with saucer eyes. They were two elderly women. The one at the back stopped and smiled at her. Vanja cast down her eyes.

‘She’s a bit shy, isn’t she?’ the woman said.

I smiled politely, lifted Vanja and carried her into the courtyard outside. She pointed to some pigeons pecking at crumbs under a table. Then she looked up and pointed at a seagull sweeping past in the wind.

‘Birds,’ I said. ‘And look over there, behind the windows. All the people.’

She glanced at me, then stared at the people. Her eyes were alive, as expressive as they were open to impressions. When I looked into them I always had a sense of who she was, this very determined little person.

‘Brr, it’s so cold,’ I said. ‘Let’s go in, shall we?’

From the steps I saw Cora had gone over to our table. Fortunately she hadn’t sat down. She was standing behind the chair with her hands in her pockets and a smile on her lips.

‘How big she is!’ she said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘How big is Vanja?’

Usually Vanja was proud when she could answer the question by stretching her arms above her head. But now she just leaned her head against my shoulder.

‘We’re on our way home. Aren’t we?’ I said, looking at Linda. ‘It’ll take half an hour to get a coffee now.’

She nodded.

‘Yes, we have to go soon as well,’ Cora said. ‘But I’ve just arranged with Linda to pop round one day. So I’ll see you soon.’

‘That’s nice,’ I said. I sat Vanja on my lap and started to put on her romper suit. Smiled at Cora so as not to appear stand-offish.

‘What’s it like being a house husband?’ she asked.

‘Dreadful,’ I replied. ‘But I’m hanging in there.’

She smiled.

‘I mean it,’ I said.

‘I got the message,’ she said.

‘Karl Ove’s hanging in there,’ Linda said. ‘That’s his method in life.’

‘It’s an honest answer, isn’t it?’ I said. ‘Or would you rather I lied?’

‘No,’ Linda said. ‘I’m just sorry you dislike it so much.’

‘I don’t dislike it *so much,’* I said.

‘Mum’s waiting over there,’ Cora said. ‘Nice to see you. And see you again soon.’

‘Nice to see you too,’ I said.

As she left I met Linda’s glare.

‘I didn’t say anything out of place, did I?’ I said, and put Vanja in the buggy, tightened the belt and kicked up the lever on the wheel.

‘No,’ Linda said with such vehemence that I knew she meant the opposite. Tight-lipped, she bent down and lifted the buggy when we came to the steps; tight-lipped, she walked beside me out of the courtyard and onto the road to the centre. It felt as if the wind was blowing straight into our bone marrow. Around us, everywhere was teeming with people. The bus stops on both sides were packed with shivering people clad in black, not unlike birds from a certain angle, the ones that hunch together and stand motionless on some cliff in the Antarctic, staring into the sky.

‘It was so lovely and romantic yesterday,’ she said at length as we passed the Biological Museum and caught fleeting glimpses of the gleaming black canal between the branches. ‘And then there’s nothing left of it today.’

‘I’m not the romantic type, as you know,’ I said.

‘No, what type are you exactly?’

She wasn’t looking at me as she said it.

‘Cut it out,’ I said. ‘Don’t start on that stuff again.’

I met Vanja’s eyes and smiled at her. She lived in her own world, which was connected to ours through emotions and perceptions, physical touch and the sound of voices. Alternating between worlds, as I was now, being cross with Linda one moment and being happy with Vanja the next, was strange; it felt as though I was leading two quite separate lives. But she had only one, and soon she would be growing up into the second, when innocence was a distant memory and she understood what was going on between Linda and me at moments like this.

We reached the bridge over the canal. Vanja’s head moved back and forth from one passer-by to the next. Whenever a dog came along or she saw a motorbike she pointed.

‘The thought that we might be having another child made me so happy,’ Linda said. ‘It did yesterday and it does today. I’ve been thinking about it almost non-stop. A shot of happiness in my stomach. But you don’t feel the same way. That makes me sad.’

‘You’re mistaken,’ I said. ‘I was happy too.’

‘But you aren’t now.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘But is that so strange? I’m not in such a great mood.’

‘Because you’re at home with Vanja?’

‘Among other things, yes.’

‘Will it be better if you can write?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we’ll have to start Vanja at a nursery,’ she said.

‘Do you mean that?’ I asked. ‘She’s so small.’

It was the middle of the rush hour for pedestrians, so on the bridge, which was a bottleneck on the route towards Djurgården, we were obliged to walk slowly. Linda held the buggy with one hand. Even though I hated that, I said nothing, it would have been too petty, especially now, during our discussion.

‘Yes, she is much too small,’ Linda said. ‘But there’s a waiting list of three months. By which time she’ll be sixteen months old. She’ll be too small then as well, but . . .’

We turned left when we came to the other side and walked along the quayside.

‘What are you actually saying now?’ I asked. ‘On the one hand, you’re saying she should go to a nursery. On the other, you’re saying she’s too small.’

‘I think she’s too small. But if it’s absolutely imperative for you to work then she’ll have to go anyway. I can’t exactly drop my course.’

‘There has never been any question of that happening. I’ve said I would look after Vanja until the summer. And that she can start nursery in the autumn. Nothing has happened to change that.’

‘But you’re not happy.’

‘Yes, but that’s not perhaps such a big issue. At any rate, I don’t want to be Mr Nasty and send my child to the nursery too early. Against Mrs Nice’s will. For my own benefit.’

She stared at me.

‘If you could choose, what would you do?’

‘If I could choose, Vanja would start on Monday.’

‘Even though you think she’s too small?’

‘Yes. But this is not only my decision, I believe?’

‘No, but I agree. I’ll phone on Monday and put her name on the waiting list.’

We continued walking for a while in silence. To our right were the most expensive and exclusive apartments in Stockholm. It was impossible to have a more prestigious address. The buildings reflected this. The façades gave nothing away, nothing penetrated the walls, they could be best likened to castles or fortresses. Inside were vast apartments containing twelve to fourteen rooms, I knew that. Chandeliers, nobility, massive quantities of money. Lives that were foreign to me.

The harbour was on the other side, pitch black to the edge of the quay, white froth on the tips of the waves further out. The sky was heavy and dark, the lights from the mass of buildings on the other side dots in the vast greyness.

Vanja was whimpering and squirming in the buggy. She slipped down and ended up on her side, which only made her whimper more. When Linda bent forward and pulled her up, she thought for an instant she would be lifted out of the buggy and let out a scream of frustration when that proved not to be the case.

'Stop for a moment,' Linda said. 'I'll see if we've got an apple or something in the bag.'

There was, and the very next second the frustration was gone. Vanja sat happily gnawing at the green apple while we continued towards the ferry.

Three months, that would be May. So I hadn't gained much more than two months. But it was better than nothing.

'Perhaps mummy can take Vanja for a couple of days a week as well,' Linda said.

'Well, that would be brilliant,' I said.

'We can ask her tomorrow.'

'I have a feeling she will say yes,' I said with a smile.

Linda's mother dropped everything and raced off as soon as one of her children needed help. And if there had been any limits before, they had certainly been removed now that a grandchild had come into the world. She worshipped Vanja and would do anything, absolutely anything for her.

'Are you happy now?' Linda asked, stroking my back.

'Yes,' I said.

'She'll be quite a lot bigger,' she said. 'Sixteen months. That's not *so* small.'

'Torje was ten months old when he started at nursery,' I said. 'And it doesn't seem to have left any visible scars at least.'

'And if I *am* pregnant, the birth will be in October. Then it'll be good if Vanja has some structure to her day.'

'I think you are.'

'I do too. No, I *know* I am. I've known ever since yesterday.'

When we reached the square in front of the Royal Dramatic Theatre and stopped to wait for the lights to change to green it started snowing. The wind gusted round corners and over rooftops, leafless branches swayed, flags flapped wildly. The poor birds on the wing were blown hopelessly off course above us. We walked to the marketplace at the end of Biblioteksgatan, where the hostage drama that shook all of Sweden and gave rise to the concept of the Stockholm syndrome had taken place some time in the innocent 1970s, and we followed one of the backstreets up to NK, where we were going to do our food shopping this evening.

‘You can take her home if you like while I do the shopping,’ I said because I knew how much Linda disliked shops and malls.

‘No, I want to be with you,’ she said.

So we took the lift down to the food section in the basement, bought Italian sausage, tomatoes, onions, leaf parsley and two packets of rigatoni pasta, ice cream and frozen blackberries, took the lift up to the floor where the Systembolaget was and bought a litre carton of white wine for the tomato sauce, a carton of red wine and a small bottle of brandy. On the way I bought the Norwegian newspapers that had just appeared – *Aftenposten, Dagbladet, Dagens Næringsliv* and *Verdens Gang* – as well as *The Guardian* and *The Times* in case, but it was by no means guaranteed, I had an hour free to read over the weekend.

We arrived home at a few minutes past one. Sorting out the flat, tidying up and cleaning took exactly two hours. On top of that, there was an enormous pile of clothes that had to be washed. But we had plenty of time: Fredrik and Karin wouldn’t be here before six.

Linda sat Vanja in her chair and heated a tin of baby food in the microwave while I picked up all the rubbish bags that had accumulated, not least the one in the bathroom, where the nappies not only filled the bin and forced the lid into a vertical position but also spilled out onto the floor, and carried them to the refuse room on the ground floor. As it was the end of the week, the bulk containers were full to the brim. I opened all the lids and threw the various types of rubbish into their respective places: cardboard there, coloured glass there, clear glass there, plastic there, metal there, the rest to over there. As always I was able to confirm that a lot of drinking went on in this building; much of the cardboard was wine cartons and almost all the glass was wine and spirits. In addition, there were always big piles of illustrated magazines, the cheap newspaper supplements and the thicker, more specialist editions. In particular, fashion, interior design and country houses in this block. In the corner on the shortest wall there was a hole, provisionally nailed up, where some men had sawn through to get to the hairdressing salon next door. I had almost stumbled over them. One of the mornings when I got up at five I had been on my way outside with a cup of coffee in my hand and had heard the ear-piercing alarm in the salon as soon as I entered the hallway. Downstairs there was a security guard with a telephone to her ear. She stopped talking the second I appeared and asked if I lived here. I nodded. She said someone had just broken into the hairdressing salon and the police had been alerted. I went with her to the bicycle room, where the door had been smashed open, and I saw the half-metre-wide hole in the stud wall. I had a few jokes about vain thieves on the tip of my tongue, but I bit it. She was Swedish, either she wouldn't understand what I said or she wouldn't get the joke. One of the consequences of living here, I mused as I banged the container lids shut and unlocked the door to have a cigarette outside, was that I simply said less. I had stopped almost all the small talk, chatting to assistants in shops, waiters in cafés, conductors on trains and strangers in chance encounters. This was one of the best parts about returning to Norway: the ease of dealing with people I didn't know returned and my shoulders dropped. And also all the knowledge you possessed about your compatriots, which overwhelmed me when I stepped into the arrivals hall at Gardermoen, Oslo Airport: he comes from Bergen, she comes from Trondheim, him, he must be from Arendal, and her, wasn't she from Birkeland? The same applied to all nuances of society. What jobs people did, what their backgrounds were, everything was clear in seconds, while in Sweden it was always hidden from me. A whole world disappeared in this way. What must it be like to live in an African village? Or a Japanese village?

Outside, the wind buffeted me. The snow that had fallen was thick and wound its way across the tarmac in twists and turns, here and there it swirled up in veils, as though this was a mountain plateau I had stepped onto and not an urban backyard near the Baltic. I stood under the porch by the front entrance, where only sporadic, particularly wild, gusts of stinging snow could reach me. The pigeon stood motionless in its corner, totally unaffected by my presence and movements. The café on the other side of the street was packed, I could see, mostly with young people. Occasional passers-by walked, bent double, into the wind. All of them turned their heads towards me.

The break-in I had nearly witnessed was not an isolated example. As the block was in the city centre it was sometimes used by tramps. One morning I came across one in the basement laundry room, at the back, lying asleep by a washing machine, whose heat he had probably sought, like a cat. I had slammed the door, gone upstairs and waited for a few minutes, and when I returned he had left. Also in the basement I had bumped into a tramp one evening at around ten. I wanted something or other from our storage room and there he was, sitting against the wall, bearded with intense eyes, staring at me. I nodded, unlocked our door and left when I had got what I wanted. Of course, you should ring the police, there was an implicit fire risk, but they didn't bother me, so I let them be.

I stubbed my cigarette out on the wall and like a good tenant took it to the big ashtray, thinking seriously I would have to stop smoking soon. These days my lungs seemed to be burning. And how many years had I woken up in the morning with my throat full of thick mucus? But not today, it was never today, I said to myself half out loud, as I had got into the habit of doing lately, and let myself in.

While I was cleaning the flat I could always hear what Linda was doing with Vanja. She read to her, she found toys for her, which were mostly banged on the floor again and again – several times I was on the point of intervening, but our neighbour obviously wasn't in, so I let it go – she sang songs to her, she ate 'between-meals' with her. Sometimes they came to see me, Vanja dangling from Linda's arms, sometimes Linda tried to read a newspaper while Vanja was playing on her own, but not many minutes passed before she began to demand Linda's full attention. Which she always gave her. But I had to be wary about going in and giving my opinion, it didn't take much for it to be regarded as criticism. Having another child might loosen the tense dynamics. Having two certainly would.

When I had finished I sat down on the sofa with a pile of newspapers. The only jobs left were to iron the tablecloth, set the table and cook the food. But it was a simple meal, wouldn't take more than half an hour, so I had plenty of time. Darkness was drawing in. From the flat across the way came the sound of a guitar, it was the bearded forty-something practising his blues songs.

Linda stood in the doorway.

'Can you take Vanja?' she said. 'I need a break as well.'

'I've just sat down,' I said. 'I've cleaned the whole bloody flat, as I'm sure you've noticed.'

‘And I’ve had Vanja,’ she said. ‘Do you consider that less demanding?’

Well, in fact, I did. I could have Vanja on my own *and* clean the flat. There were a few tears, but it worked fine. However, that was not a line I could take unless I wanted a head-on confrontation.

‘No, I don’t,’ I said. ‘But I have Vanja all week.’

‘Me too,’ she said. ‘In the morning and in the afternoon.’

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘I’m the one who’s at home with her.’

‘When I was at home with her, what did you do? Did you take her in the mornings and the afternoons? And did I perhaps go to the café every day when you came home, like you do now?’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘I’ll have her. Sit down.’

‘Not if you take that kind of attitude. I’ll have her myself.’

‘Surely it doesn’t matter what kind of attitude I have? I take her, you get a break. Simple. Everyone happy.’

‘And you keep going out and having cigarette breaks. I don’t. Have you thought about that?’

‘You’ll have to start smoking then,’ I said.

‘Perhaps I will,’ she said.

I walked past her, without meeting her stare, to Vanja, who was sitting on the floor and blowing into a recorder which she held in one hand while waving the other up and down. I stood by the windowsill and crossed my arms. I was definitely not going to fulfil Vanja’s every little wish. She had to be able to survive a few minutes without being fully occupied, like other children.

From the living room I could hear Linda flicking through the newspaper.

Should I tell her she could iron the tablecloth, set the table and cook the food? Or act surprised and say she was responsible for that now, when she came to take care of Vanja again? We had swapped, hadn’t we?

An acrid fetid smell began to spread through the room. Vanja had stopped blowing into the recorder and was sitting still and staring into the distance. I turned and looked out of the window. Snowflakes being blown through the street below, where the gleam from the hanging lights picked them out, but which were invisible until the moment they hit the window with a tiny, barely perceptible tap. The door of US Video forever opening and closing. Cars going past at intervals regulated by traffic lights out of my eyeshot.

Windows in the flats opposite, which were so far away that residents were only visible as vague intrusions in the subdued light of the panes.

I turned back.

‘Have you finished now?’ I asked Vanja and met her eyes. She smiled. I took her under my arms and threw her onto the bed. She started laughing.

‘I’m going to change you now,’ I said. ‘It’s important that you lie still. Have you got that?’

I lifted her and threw her again.

‘Have you got that, you little troll?’

She laughed so much she could hardly breathe. I pulled off her trousers and she wriggled round and tried to crawl up the bed. I grabbed her ankles and dragged her back.

‘Lie still, will you. Do you understand?’ I said, and for a moment it was as though she did understand, because she was lying quite still and staring at me with her round eyes. With one hand I lifted her legs into the air while releasing the tabs with the other and removing her nappy. Then she tried to wriggle free, squirmed round and because I had a tight grip on her, she contorted like some epileptic.

‘No, no, no,’ I said, throwing her back onto the bed. She laughed, I pulled some wipes from the packet as fast as I could, she swung round again, I pressed her down and wiped her clean while breathing through my nose and trying not to react to the irritation I could feel was brewing inside me now. I had forgotten to put the full nappy away, she had her whole foot in it, I nudged it to the side and wiped her foot, somewhat half-heartedly, because I knew wipes were no longer up to the job. I lifted her and carried her to the bathroom, where with Vanja kicking and struggling under my arm I took the showerhead from the holder, turned on the water, adjusted it until it was warm on the back of my hand and began to spray the lower half of her body carefully while she gripped the ends of the yellow shower curtain. Once this was done I dried her with a towel and got her into a new nappy, after thwarting another bid for freedom. All that was left to do was to dispose of the used one, put it in a plastic bag, tie a knot and chuck it outside the front door.

Linda was skimming through the newspaper in the living room. Vanja banged one of the building bricks she had been given as an autumn present by Öllegård on the floor. I lay back on the bed with my arms behind my head. The next moment there was a thunderous knocking on the pipes.

‘Don’t take any notice of her,’ Linda said. ‘Let Vanja play as she likes.’

But I couldn’t. I got up, went over to Vanja and took the brick from her. And handed her a cloth lamb instead. She threw it away. Even when I put on a silly voice and bounced the lamb back and forth she still wasn’t interested. It was the brick she wanted; she was attracted by the sound of it banging on the floor. Well, she can have it then. She took two from the box and began to bang them on the floor. The very next second the pipes thundered again. What was this? Was she standing there and *waiting*? I took one of the bricks from the box and hammered it with all my strength against the radiator. Vanja watched me and laughed. The next second I heard the door below slam again. I went through the living room into the hallway. When the bell rang I snatched open the door. The Russian was looking at me with a furious expression on her face. I stepped out so that I was only a few centimetres from her.

‘What the HELL do you want?’ I shouted. ‘What do you BLOODY mean by coming up here? I don’t want you here. Don’t you UNDERSTAND?’

She hadn’t expected that. She recoiled, tried to say something, but as the first word escaped her lips I went on the attack again.

‘NOW PISS OFF!’ I shouted. ‘IF YOU COME HERE AGAIN I’LL CALL THE POLICE.’

At that moment a woman in her fifties came up the stairs. She was one of the people who lived on the floor above. She looked down at the floor as she passed. Nevertheless, a witness. Perhaps that gave the Russian courage because she didn’t go.

‘DON’T YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I SAID? OR ARE YOU A RETARD? GO AWAY, I SAID. GO, GO, GO!’

After saying this I took another step towards her. She turned and set off down the stairs. After a couple of steps she turned back to me.

‘This will have consequences,’ she said.

‘I don’t give a shit,’ I said. ‘Who do you think they’ll believe? A lonely alcoholic Russian or an established couple with a small child?’

Then I closed the door and went back in. Linda stood looking at me from the living-room doorway. I walked past without a glance.

‘That wasn’t perhaps the wisest move,’ I said. ‘But it felt good.’

‘I can imagine,’ she said.

I went into the bedroom and took the bricks from Vanja, put them in the box, which I put on top of the dresser so that she couldn’t reach them. To distract her from the despondency she felt I lifted her and put her on the windowsill. We watched cars for a while. But I was too angry to be able to stand still for long, so I sat her back on the floor and went into the bathroom, where I washed my hands – they were always so cold in winter – in warm water, dried them, studied my reflection, which did not betray a single one of the thoughts or feelings stirring inside me. Perhaps my clearest childhood legacy was that loud voices and aggression frightened me. I hated rows and scenes. And for a long time I had managed to avoid them in my adult life. There hadn’t been any slanging matches in any of the relationships I’d had; any disagreements had proceeded according to my method, which was irony, sarcasm, unfriendliness, sulking and silence. It was only when Linda came into my life that this changed. And how it changed. As for me, I was afraid. It wasn’t a rational fear, physically I was stronger than she was, of course, and as far as the balance of the relationship was concerned she needed me more than I needed her, in the sense that I had no problem being alone, being alone was not only an option for me, it was also an enticement, whereas she feared being alone more than anything; however, despite the fact that I was in a stronger position, I was afraid when she had a go at me. Afraid in the way I was afraid when I was a boy. Oh, I was not proud of this, but so what? It wasn’t something I could control by thought or will, it was something quite different, which was released in me, anchored deeper, down in what was perhaps the very foundation of my personality. All of this, though, was unknown to Linda. You couldn’t see that I was frightened. When I defended myself my voice would break because I was on the verge of tears, but to her that could easily have been caused by my anger, for all I knew. No, now that I came to think about it, somewhere inside her she must have known. But perhaps not the precise extent of how awful the experience was for me.

I suppose I must have learned from it. To shout at someone, the way I had done with the Russian, would have been inconceivable only a year ago. In this case, however, there would never be any reconciliation. From now on further escalation was the only possible outcome.

And so?

I took the four blue Ikea bags full of dirty laundry, which I had completely forgotten, and carried them into the hall. Put on my shoes and said aloud that I was going down to the basement to do the washing. Linda came to the door.

‘Do you have to do it now?’ she asked. ‘They’ll be coming soon. And we haven’t started cooking yet . . .’

‘It’s only half past four,’ I said. ‘And we don’t have another washing slot until Thursday.’

‘OK,’ she said. ‘Are we friends?’

‘Yes,’ I answered. ‘Of course.’

She came to me and we kissed.

‘I love you, you know,’ she said.

Vanja crawled in from the living room. She grabbed hold of Linda’s trouser leg and pulled herself up.

‘Hello, do you want to join us?’ I said, lifting her up. She put her head between ours. Linda laughed.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘Then I’ll go and get a machine started.’

With two bags in each hand I staggered down the stairs. I put out of my mind the unease I felt at thoughts of the neighbour, the fact that she was totally unpredictable and now, in addition, deeply hurt. What was the worst that could happen? She wasn’t exactly going to launch herself at me with a knife. Revenge behind closed doors, that was her forte.

The staircase was empty, the hallway was empty, the laundry room was empty. I switched on the light, sorted the clothes into four heaps, coloureds forty, coloureds sixty, whites forty, whites sixty, and shoved two of the piles into the two big machines, poured powder into the detachable drawer on the control panel and switched them on.

When I went back up Linda had put some music on, one of the Tom Waits CDs that had come out after I lost interest in him and with which I therefore had no associations other than that they were Tom Waits-like. Once Linda had reworked some Waits texts for a performance in Stockholm, which she said was among the most entertaining and satisfying stuff she had done, and she still had an intense, indeed intimate, relationship with his music.

She had fetched glasses, cutlery and plates from the kitchen and put them on the table. A cloth was there too, still folded, and a pile of creased serviettes.

‘Think we’ll have to iron them, don’t you?’ she said.

‘Yes, if we’re going to have a tablecloth. Could you iron it and I’ll make a start on the cooking?’

‘OK.’

She fetched the ironing board from the cupboard while I went to the kitchen and took out the ingredients. Put a cast-iron pot on the stove, switched on the hotplate, poured in some oil, peeled and chopped garlic, then Linda came in for the spray in the cupboard under the sink. She shook it a little to see if there was any water in it.

‘Are you cooking without a recipe?’ she asked.

‘I know it off by heart now,’ I answered. ‘How many times have we made this meal now? Twenty?’

‘But they haven’t had it before,’ she said.

‘No,’ I said, holding the chopping board over the pot and letting the tiny cubes of garlic fall into it while she went back to the living room.

Outside, it was still snowing, quieter now though. It struck me that in two days I would be back in the office and a frisson of pleasure ran through me. Perhaps Ingrid would even be able to have Vanja three times a week and not just twice? I desired no more of life, in fact. I wanted to have some peace, and I wanted to write.

Of Linda’s friends, Fredrik was the one she had known longest. They had met when they were working on costumes at the Royal Dramatic Theatre as sixteen-year-olds and had maintained contact ever since. He was a film director working mostly on commercials while waiting to make his first feature film. His clients were big names, the adverts were constantly on TV, so I assumed he was good at what he did and earned a packet. He had made three shorts, for which Linda had written the scripts, and a slightly longer film. He had close-set blue eyes and blond hair. His head was big, his body thin and there was something evasive about his character, also vague perhaps, which made it difficult for you to know where you were with him. He giggled rather than laughed and had a cheery disposition, both of which could lead you to draw hasty conclusions about him. His cheery nature didn’t necessarily hide greater depths or gravity, rather it functioned in ways that were not readily apparent. There was something latent in Fredrik, what, I didn’t know, but the fact that there was, which one day would metamorphose into a brilliant film perhaps, perhaps not, intrigued me. He was astute and fearless, and must have discovered many years ago that he didn’t have much to lose. At least that was how I read his character. Linda said that his greatest strength as a director was that he was so good at dealing with actors, giving them exactly what they needed to achieve optimal performances, and when I saw him I could see that, for he was a friendly soul who flattered everyone he met, and his innocuous appearance allowed you to feel strong while the calculating side of his nature knew how to exploit the benefits this accrued. The actors were welcome to discuss their characters and attempt to find what made them tick, but they were not allowed to see the entirety, where the meaning lay, no one knew that apart from him.

I liked him, but couldn’t talk to him and I tried to avoid any situations where we were left in each other’s company. As far as I could gather, he did the same.

I didn’t know Karin, his partner, so well. She was at the same college as Linda, at DI, but on a screenplay-writing course. Since I also wrote I ought to have been able to relate to her work, but the craft side was so prominent in writing a screenplay, where it was about all manner of ebbs and flows of tension, character development, plots and subplots, intros and turning points, I assumed I would have little to contribute in that respect and never mobilised more than polite interest. She had black hair, narrow brown eyes and her face, also narrow, was white. She radiated a business-like manner which went well with Fredrik’s more flippant and childlike character. They had one child and were expecting another. Unlike us, they had everything under control, there was order in the home, they went out with their child and organised interesting activities. After we had been to theirs, or they had been to ours, that was often what Linda and I discussed: how on earth what appeared to be so simple for them could be so utterly beyond our capability.

There was a lot to suggest we could make friends with them as a couple: we were the same age, we worked in the same areas, belonged to the same culture and we both had children. But there was always a piece missing, it was always as though we were standing on opposite sides of a small chasm, the conversation was always tentative, we never really found the right tone. But the few times we did it was to everyone’s relief and pleasure. Much of the reason it did not really work was me: my great expanses of silence and the slight discomfort that came over me when I did say something. This evening proceeded by and large as always. They arrived at a few minutes after six, we exchanged polite pleasantries, Fredrik and I each had a gin and tonic, we sat down and ate, asked one other about various matters, how this and that were going, and it was, as always, clear how much more adept they were at this than we were, or at least than I was. Taking the initiative – suddenly talking about something I had experienced or thought in an attempt to get the conversation going – was beyond me. Linda didn't do this very often either, her strategy was rather to home in on them, ask about something and play it by ear from there, unless she felt so secure and good in herself that she held the floor with the same ease that I did not. If she did, it was a great evening; there would be three players who didn't give the game a single thought.

They praised the food, I cleared the table, put on some coffee and set the table for dessert while Karin and Frederik settled their child down in the bedroom beside where Vanja was already asleep in her cot.

'By the way, your flat was on Norwegian TV just before Christmas,' I said when their son had fallen asleep and they had both sat down again and helped themselves to hot blackberries and ice cream.

'Your flat' was my office, actually a one-room flat with a bathroom and a small kitchenette which I rented from Fredrik.

'Oh yes?' he said.

'I was interviewed by *Dagsrevyen,* the Norwegian TV news programme. At first they wanted to do it here. I said no, of course. Then they'd heard I was looking after our child at the moment and wondered if they could film me with Vanja. I said no again, of course. But they persisted. They didn't need to film her, the buggy would be enough. What about if I pushed the buggy through town and then handed Vanja over to Linda – before the interview started as it were? What could I say?'

'What about no?' Fredrik said.

'But I had to throw them a bone. They absolutely refused to do it in a café or anything like that. It had to be *about* something. So the interview was in your office, plus I went looking for an angel to buy for Vanja in the Old Town. Oh, it was so stupid it could drive you to tears. But that's what it's like. They need to have something.'

‘Turned out well though,’ Linda said.

‘No, it didn’t,’ I said. ‘But I find it hard to understand how it could have been better in fact. Under the circumstances.’

‘So you’re big in Norway then, are you?’ Fredrik said with a knowing look.

‘No, no, no,’ I said. ‘It’s just because I was nominated for a prize.’

‘Aha,’ he said. Then he laughed. ‘I was just winding you up. But in fact I’ve just read an excerpt from your novel in a Swedish journal. It was immensely evocative.’

I smiled at him.

To divert attention from the fact that there had been a touch of smugness about the theme I had just introduced, I got up and said, ‘Ah, I almost forgot. We bought a little bottle of cognac for the meal today. Would you like some? And I was on my way to the kitchen before he could answer. On my return, the conversation had turned to alcohol and breastfeeding, which a doctor had told Linda was not a problem, at least in moderation, but she wasn’t taking any chances as the Swedish health authorities recommended total abstinence. Alcohol and pregnancy were one thing, when the foetus was in direct contact with the mother’s blood, breastfeeding was quite another. From there it was a swift jump to pregnancies in general and then to births. I chimed in with something or other, added a snippet here and there and otherwise listened in silence for the main part. Births are an intimate and sensitive topic of conversation for women, there is a lot of covert prestige, and as a man the only possible option is to keep well away. To refrain from expressing an opinion. Which both Fredrik and I did. Until the subject of Caesareans came up. Then I couldn’t restrain myself any longer.

‘It’s absurd that Caesareans are an alternative form of giving birth,’ I said. ‘If there are no medical grounds for it, if the mother is hale and hearty, why should you cut open the belly and take the baby out that way? I watched an operation on TV once and, hell, it was cruel: one minute the baby’s inside, the next it’s out in the light. That must be a terrible shock for the child. And for the mother. Birth is a transition and it’s slow. It’s meant to be a way of preparing the mother and the baby. I don’t doubt for a second that it happens in this way for a reason, that there’s some meaning in it. However, like this, you forgo the whole process and everything that is set in motion within the child during that time and which takes place completely outside our control, because it's simpler to cut open the belly and take out the baby. It's sick, if you ask me.'

Silence. The mood was broken. Linda looked embarrassed. I gathered that I had unwittingly crossed a line. The situation had to be saved, but as I didn't know what I had done wrong, it wouldn't be by me. Instead it was Fredrik.

'A genuine reactionary Norwegian!' he said with a smile. 'And an author on top of that. Hail Hamsun!'

I eyed him in amazement. He winked at me and smiled again. For the rest of the evening he called me Hamsun. Hey, Hamsun, is there any coffee left in the pot? he would say, for example. Or: What do you reckon, Hamsun? Should we move into the country or continue living in towns?

The latter was a topic we often discussed, for not only were we thinking about moving from Stockholm, perhaps to one of the islands along the south or west coast of Norway, but Fredrik and Karin were also toying with the idea, especially Fredrik, who cherished romantic notions of a life on a smallholding in a forest somewhere and would occasionally even show us places for sale they had found on the Net. But the Hamsun twist at the end suddenly cast our motivation in a completely new light. And all because I had said that a Caesarean might not be the best way to give birth to a child.

How was it possible?

After they had gone, effusive with their 'Thanks for a nice evening' and 'We must do this again,' and after I had tidied the room, cleared the table and switched on the dishwasher I sat up for a bit while Linda and Vanja slept in the bedroom. I wasn't used to drinking any more, so I could feel the cognac, a warm flame burning behind my thoughts and casting a glow of abandon over them. I wasn't drunk though. After sitting still on the sofa for half an hour, without thinking about anything special, I went into the kitchen, drank a few glasses of water, took an apple and sat down in front of the computer. When it started I went into Google Earth. Slowly rotated the globe, found the tip of South America and moved gently upwards, first from a great distance, until I saw a fjord cutting into the land mass and zoomed in. A river came down a valley, rugged mountains soared sharply on one bank, on the other the river branched into what appeared to be a wetlands area. Further out, by the edge of the fjord, lay a town, Rio

Gallegos. The streets dividing it into blocks were as straight as a ruler. From the size of the cars I concluded the buildings were low. Most of them had flat roofs. Broad streets, low buildings, flat roofs: the province. The habitations became more and more sparse closer to the sea. The beaches seemed abandoned with the exception of some harbour areas. I zoomed out again and saw the green gleam of scattered patches of shallow water off the shoreline and the dark blue where it was deeper. The clouds hanging over the surface of the sea. Then I continued up the coast of this desolate countryside, which must have been Patagonia, and stopped by another town, Puerto Deseado. It was small and had something desert-like and golden about it. There was a mountain in the centre, with very few buildings, and there were two lakes, which looked dead. By the sea was a refinery plant with quays alongside huge tankers. The countryside around the town consisted of tall unoccupied vegetation-less mountains, the odd narrow road winding inwards, a lake or two, a valley or two with rivers, trees and houses. I moved away again and zoomed in on Buenos Aires on the Rio Plata opposite Montevideo, chose a place by the coastline and focused on the airport. The planes stood close to the terminal like a flock of white birds, a stone's throw from the water, which was bordered by a tree-lined road. I followed it and arrived at what seemed like three enormous swimming pools in the middle of a park. What could it be? I zoomed in closer. Aha! An aqua park! Beyond, I knew, on the other side of the road in the great open space it traversed was the River Plate Stadium. The width of it was striking, there was not only a running track around the pitch, outside it on two sides were also two semicircles of turf before the towering stands. The World Cup final between Holland and Argentina, which was played here in 1978, was one of the first I could remember seeing on TV. All the white confetti, the huge crowd, Argentina's blue and white striped shirts and Holland's orange against the green of the grass. Holland, who lost a second final in a row. Then I came out again, found the river a bit further up and followed it downwards. Heavy industry on both sides, docks with cranes and big ships, crossed by road and rail bridges. Several football pitches here too. Where the river flowed into the centre of town the boats appeared to be more for pleasure. Behind it was the district with all the colourful timber buildings, I knew that. La Boca. Beneath it an eight-lane motorway crossed the river, and I followed that instead. It bordered the harbour for a while. Great barges on both sides. Perhaps ten blocks further was the city centre with its parks, monuments and magnificent buildings. I zoomed in on where the Teatro Cervantes ought to be, but the image resolution was too poor, everything blurred into contourless green and grey, so I switched off, had a final glass of water in the kitchen, went to the bedroom and lay down beside Linda.

The next morning we went to Central Station early to catch the suburban train to Gnesta, where Linda's mother lived. A roughly five-centimetre layer of snow covered the streets and roofs. The sky above us was leaden grey with glimmers of light in places. There were not many people up and about, naturally enough, it was a Sunday morning. The odd partygoer wending his way home, the odd pensioner walking a dog and as we approached the station the odd prospective passenger trundling a bag. A young man sat on the platform and slept with his chin resting on his chest. Behind him a crow was pecking in a rubbish bin. Further away, a train drew alongside the platform without stopping. The electronic display board above us showed no signs of life. Linda walked up and down the edge of the platform wearing the white calf-length coat I had bought in London for her thirtieth birthday, a white woollen hat and a white scarf with some rose-like embroidery, which I had given her for Christmas and I gathered she didn't really like, even though it suited her very well. Both the colour – she always looked good in white – and the pattern were as romantic as she was. The cold made her cheeks red, her eyes moist and shiny. She clapped her hands a couple of times and jogged on the spot. From the escalator came a fat woman in her fifties with a roller bag on either side of her. Behind her was a girl of around sixteen dressed in dark clothes with black mascara round her eyes, black finger mittens, black hat and long blonde hair. They stood next to each other by the edge of the platform. Mother and daughter they must have been, even though it was hard to discern any similarity.

'Tu whoo tu whoo!' Vanja said, pointing to two pigeons that strutted over. She had just learned to imitate an owl in one of the books we were reading to her, and now it was the sound all birds made.

Her facial features were so small, I thought. Small eyes, small nose, small mouth. Not that she was small, but she would always have small facial features, you could already see. Not least when you saw her beside

Linda. They didn’t resemble each other in any direct, obvious way, but the family likeness was still apparent, especially in the proportions of their features. Linda also had small eyes and a small mouth and nose. My features were, apart from eye colour and perhaps the almond-shaped upper part of the eye, nowhere to be seen. But now and then she had expressions I recognised – they were Yngve’s, he’d had that look when he was growing up.

‘Yes, two pigeons,’ I said, crouching in front of her. She looked at me expectantly. I lifted the flap of her leather hat and whispered in her ear. She laughed. At that moment the board above us came to life. Gnesta, track two, three minutes.

‘Doesn’t look like she wants to sleep,’ I said.

‘No,’ said Linda. ‘It’s a bit too early.’

Sitting still and being strapped in were not Vanja’s favourite pastimes, unless she was in the buggy and moving, so on trips to Gnesta, which took an hour, we had to keep her constantly occupied. To and fro down the aisle, up to the windows and the glass in the doors, if we couldn’t hold her attention with the aid of a book, a game or a packet of raisins, which might divert her for up to half an hour. Provided the train was not crowded this was not a problem, as long as you hadn’t planned to read a newspaper, as I had today, the entire pile from yesterday was in my bag, but in the rush hour when these carriages were packed with people it could be unpleasant, a tired child screaming for an hour, nowhere to walk with her, it was a wearing experience. We often did this journey. Not only because Linda’s mother could look after Vanja and we would have a few hours to ourselves, but also because we, or at least I, liked being there so much. Farms, animals grazing, vast forests, small gravel paths, lakes, clear fresh air. Dense black night, starry sky, total silence.

The train drew slowly into the platform, we got on board and sat on the seats by the door, where there was room for the buggy, I lifted Vanja and let her stand on the seat with her hands against the window to watch as the carriages slipped through the tunnel and onto the bridge over Slussen. The ice-bound snow-covered water shone white against the yellow and reddish brown of the houses and the steep black mountainside of Mariaberget, where the snow had not settled. The clouds in the sky to the east had a gentle golden hue, as though lit from the inside by the sun, which was behind them. We entered the tunnel underneath Söder and when we emerged we were high above the water on a bridge leading to the land on the other side, at first a mass of high-rise buildings and one satellite town after another, thereafter residential areas and detached houses until the ratio of buildings to nature was inverted and it was villages which appeared as small units in great expanses of forest and lake.

White, grey, black, isolated patches of dark green, those were the colours of the countryside through which we passed. Last summer I came here every day. We lived with Ingrid and Vidar for the last two weeks of June and I commuted between Gnesta and Stockholm, where I wrote. It was the perfect life. Up at six, a slice of bread for breakfast, a smoke and a cup of coffee on the front doorstep, pre-warmed by the sun, with a view of the meadow up to the edge of the forest, then cycle to the station, the sandwiches Ingrid had made for me in my rucksack, read on the train into Stockholm, walk to the office, write, travel back at around six through the vibrant sun-filled forest, cycle across the fields to the little house, where they were waiting with dinner, perhaps have an evening dip in the lake with Linda, sit outside reading and go to bed early.

One day the forest had been on fire alongside the railway line. That had also looked fantastic. A whole hillside, only a few metres from the train, ablaze. Flames licking up tree trunks, other trees fully alight. Orange tongues drifting across the ground, shrubs and bushes, everything illuminated by the same summer sun, which along with the thin blue sky seemed to make what was happening transparent.

Oh, this fulfilled me, it was sublime, it was the world opening up.

Vidar got out of his car in Gnesta station car park as the train pulled in and he was waiting for us with a little smile playing on his lips as we walked towards him a moment later. He was seventy-something years old, had a white beard and white hair, was a touch stooped but in robust health, which was borne out by his tanned complexion, a product of a life spent very much outdoors, and the sharp, intelligent, yet somewhat evasive, blue eyes. I knew next to nothing about what he had done in life, apart from the little Linda had told me and what I could deduce from appearances. Although he touched on many topics in the course of a weekend, it was rare for them to include anything about himself. He had grown up in Finland and still had family there, but spoke Swedish without an accent. He was an authoritative but in no way domineering man who liked to socialise with people. He read a lot, both newspapers, which he scoured from front to back, and literature, in which he was uncommonly well versed. His age revealed itself perhaps first and foremost in the viewpoints he stoutly defended; although there were not many, they could, as I had seen, occupy a great deal of space. These sides of his personality didn't affect me, only Ingrid and Linda, whom he treated as one, and Linda's brother. I suppose this was partly because I was new to the family and partly, I assumed, because I liked to hear him talk and was actually interested in what he had to say. The fact that our conversations were one-sided, as my contributions amounted to no more than questions and an unending series of short responses such as 'Yes,' 'Oh, yes,' 'Really?' 'Mm,' 'I see,' 'How interesting,' seemed to me only natural, for we were not equal, he was twice my age and had a long life behind him. Linda didn't really understand this. Many was the time she called for me or came to get me, convinced that I needed to be saved from a boring conversation I was too polite to extricate myself from on my own. Now and then this was indeed the case, but more often than not my interest was genuine.

'Hi, Vidar,' Linda said, pushing the buggy behind the car.

'Hi,' he said. '*Trevligt* to see you again.'

Linda lifted Vanja out, I folded up the buggy and put it in the boot, which Vidar opened for me.

'And now the car seat,' I said, passing it through the rear door, lifting Vanja in and attaching the seat belts.

Vidar drove as many older men did, hunched over the wheel, as though the few extra centimetres closer to the windscreen were decisive for good vision. In daylight he was a good driver – that spring, for example, we had been with him for four hours in one stretch when we went to Idö, where his country house was – but as darkness descended over the roads I felt a lot less secure. A few weeks ago we had almost run over one of the neighbours walking by the gravel track. I saw him from afar and assumed Vidar had done so as well and hadn't changed course because he was going to veer away a few metres before. But this wasn't the case, he hadn't seen him, and only a combination of my shout and the neighbour's presence of mind – he jumped into a bush – prevented an accident.

We turned out of the station car park and onto the main road, which was the only one in Gnesta.

‘Everything all right with you?’ Vidar enquired.

‘Yes,’ I answered. ‘Can’t grumble.’

‘We had frightful weather last night,’ he said. ‘Several trees keeled over. Then the power went at home. But I suppose they’ll fix it during the morning. What was it like in town?’

‘Well, there was a bit of a wind as well,’ I said.

We turned left, crossed the little bridge and came to the huge field where white hay bales were still piled up by the road. After a kilometre we turned off again and drove onto the gravel track through the forest, which mostly consisted of deciduous trees, between whose trunks a meadow looking like a small lake was visible on one side, bordered by bare rock and a swathe of evergreens growing over it. Hardy longhorn cattle grazed here all year round. A hundred metres further on there was a grass track leading up to Ingrid and Vidar’s house, while the road continued for a couple of kilometres or so until it ended by grassland in the middle of the forest.

Ingrid was waiting for us outside the house when we arrived. She hurried over to the car as it stopped and opened the rear door where Vanja was.

‘Oh, my little sweetheart!’ she said with her hand on her bosom. ‘How I have been looking forward to seeing you!’

‘Just pick her up if you want,’ Linda said, opening the door on the other side. While Ingrid lifted Vanja and held her out to have a look at her and then hugged her, I removed the buggy from the boot, unfolded it and pushed it towards the front door.

‘Hope you’re hungry,’ Ingrid said. ‘Because lunch is ready.’

The house was small and old. There was forest on all sides of the property, apart from at the front, where there was an open field. In the evenings and at dawn the deer would emerge there from the forest on the other side and frolic. I had also seen foxes running and hares leaping around. Originally the house had been a smallholding and it still bore the marks: even though the two rooms constituting the house had been augmented with a kitchen and bathroom annexe, Ingrid and Vidar still didn’t have many square metres to live in. The living room was dark and crammed with all sorts, and in the bedroom behind there was scarcely space for much more than two built-in beds and some shelves of books on one wall. In addition, there was an earth cellar some way behind the house, a newly erected cabin with two beds and a television, and at the very top of the plot a combined workshop and wood store. When we came to stay Vidar and Ingrid moved into the cabin so we had the house to ourselves in the evening. There was little I liked better than being here, lying on the bed near the coarse old wooden beams with the starry sky visible through the window above, surrounded by darkness and silence. The last time we had been here I had read Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees*, the time before that Wijkmark's *The Draisine*, and what made both of these reading experiences fantastic must have been as much to do with the surroundings and the atmosphere I was imbued with as the actual content of the books. Or was it rather that the atmospheric space these books created had a special resonance in the world in which I found myself? For I had read a novel by Thomas Bernhard before Wijkmark and nothing in it came even close to charging me in the same way. No space was opened to me in Bernhard, everything was closed off in small chambers of reflection, and even though he had written one of the most frightening and shocking novels I had read, *Extinction*, I didn't want to look down that road, I didn't want to go down that road. Hell, no, I wanted to be as far from that which was closed and mandatory as it was possible to be. *Come on! Into the open, my friend,* as Hölderlin had written somewhere. But how, how?

I sat down on the chair by the window. A pot of meat broth was steaming in the middle of the table. A basket of fresh home-made bread rolls beside it, along with a bottle of mineral water and three cans of *folkøl,* Swedish low-alcohol beer. Linda put Vanja in the baby seat at the end of the table, sliced a roll in half, gave it to her and then went to warm up a jar of baby food in the microwave. Linda's mother took over and Linda sat down next to me. Vidar sat on the opposite side of the table rubbing his bearded chin between thumb and forefinger and watching us with a little smile on his face.

'OK,' Ingrid shouted from the kitchen. 'Just start all of you!'

Linda stroked my arm. Vidar nodded to her. She began to ladle soup into the bowls. Pale green rings of leek, orange slices of carrot, yellowy pieces of kohlrabi and large grey pieces of meat, with reddish fibres in places, shiny, bluish surfaces in others. The flat white bones it was attached to, some smooth like polished stones, others coarse and porous. All swimming in the hot broth, in the fat that would stiffen as soon as the heat was gone, but which was floating around now like small almost transparent beads and bubbles in the cloudy liquid.

‘It’s as delicious as always,’ I said, looking at Ingrid, who was sitting beside Vanja and blowing on the food for her.

‘Good,’ she said, and met my eyes fleetingly, then put the plastic spoon in the plastic dish and held it to Vanja’s mouth, which, for a change, was as open as a fledgling chick’s. When we came here Ingrid would automatically take over everything to do with Vanja. Food, nappies, clothes, sleep, fresh air, she wanted to do the lot. She had bought a high chair, children’s plates and cutlery, feeding bottles, games and even an extra buggy, which was always here ready for use, as well as all the jars of baby food, baby porridge and purée in the cupboard. If we were short of something, if Linda for example asked for an apple or was concerned that Vanja might have a bit of a temperature, she jumped on her bike and cycled the three kilometres to the shop or chemist and returned with apples or a thermometer or temperature-reducing medicines in the little basket on the handlebars. And when we came here she had carefully planned and done the shopping for all the meals, which often consisted of two courses for lunch and three for dinner. She got up when Vanja woke at six, baked some bread rolls, perhaps went for a walk with her and slowly began to prepare lunch. When we got up at nine there was a lavish breakfast table set, with fresh rolls, boiled eggs, often an omelette if for example she had it in her head that I liked them, coffee and juice, and when I sat down she would always put the newspaper she had bought for me by my place. She was extraordinarily positive, extraordinarily understanding about everything, the word ‘no’ didn’t exist in her mouth and there was nothing in the world she couldn’t help us with. Her freezer was filled with an infinite number of tubs of ice cream and plastic buckets of herring as well as various meals she had made and labelled: Meatball Sauce, Jansson’s Temptation, Beef and Potato Stew, Rissoles, Stuffed Peppers, Stuffed Pancakes, Pea Soup, Lamb Chop with Crispy Wedge Potatoes, Beef Bourgignon, Salmon Pudding, Cheese and Leek Pie . . . If there was a chill in the air and she was out walking with Vanja, well, she was quite likely to go to a shoe shop and buy her new boots.

‘How’s your mother?’ she asked. ‘Is she OK?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ I said. ‘She’ll soon have finished her dissertation, from what I understand.’

I wiped some soup off my chin with the serviette.

‘But she won’t let me read it,’ I added with a smile.

‘I take my hat off to her,’ Vidar said. ‘There aren’t many sixty-year-olds with enough curiosity left to study at university, that’s for sure.’

‘I think she probably has mixed feelings about that,’ I said. ‘She’s always wanted to, you see, and she does it when her career’s almost over.’

‘Nevertheless,’ Ingrid said. ‘It’s not easy what she’s done. She’s tough, your mother is.’

I smiled again. The distance between Sweden and Norway was much greater than they imagined, and for a moment I saw my mother through Swedish eyes.

‘Yes, perhaps she is,’ I said.

‘Send her our regards,’ Vidar said. ‘And the rest of the family as well, by the way. I liked them so much.’

‘Vidar has been talking about them ever since we were there for the christening,’ Ingrid said.

‘There were some real characters!’ Vidar said. ‘Kjartan, the poet. He was an interesting and unusual man. And what were they called, the people from Ålesund, the child psychologists?’

‘Ingunn and Mård?’

‘Exactly. So nice! And Magne, wasn’t that his name? Your cousin Jon Olav’s dad? The director of development?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ I said.

‘A man with authority,’ Vidar said.

‘Yes,’ I said.

‘And your father’s brother. The teacher from Trondheim. He was a fine man too. Is he like your father?’

‘No,’ I replied. ‘He’s probably the least like him, I would say. He’s always kept his distance, and I think that was a smart move.’

There was a pause. The slurping of soup, Vanja banging her cup on the table, her gurgles of laughter.

‘They still talk about both of you,’ I said, looking at Ingrid. ‘Especially the food you made!’

‘It’s so different in Norway,’ Linda said. ‘It really is. Particularly on 17 May. People were wearing traditional costumes and medals on their chests.’

She laughed.

‘At first I thought it was meant to be ironic, but no, it wasn’t. It was quite genuine. The medals were worn with dignity. No Swedes would do that, that’s for certain.’

‘I’m sure they were proud,’ I said.

‘Yes, precisely. But you wouldn’t catch a Swede admitting that, nowhere, not even to themselves.’

I angled the bowl to spoon up the last remnants of the soup as I looked out of the window, at the rectangular snow-covered meadow beneath the grey sky, the line of black deciduous trees on the edge of the forest behind, broken here and there with luxuriant green spruces. The dark dry twig-strewn forest floor in which they grew.

‘Henrik Ibsen was obsessed with medals,’ I said. ‘There wasn’t a decoration for which he was not willing to grovel. He wrote letters to every conceivable king or regent to get them. And then he wore them at home in his living room. Strutted round with his little chest plastered with them. Heh heh heh. He also had a mirror in his top hat. So he sat in his café surreptitiously staring at himself.’

‘Did Ibsen do that?’ Ingrid asked.

‘He did,’ I said. ‘He was extremely vain. And isn’t that a much more fantastic form of excess than Strindberg’s? With him it was all about alchemy, madness, absinthe and women’s hats, which is just the typical artist myth. But with Ibsen it was bourgeois vanity taken to an extreme. He was a great deal madder than Strindberg.’

‘While we’re on the subject,’ Vidar said, ‘have you heard the latest about Arne’s book? The publishers have withdrawn it.’

‘And they were probably right,’ I said. ‘There were so many errors.’

‘Yes, I suppose there were,’ Vidar said. ‘But the publishers should have helped him with them. After all, he’d been ill. He couldn’t draw a line between his own fantasies, wishful thinking and reality.’

‘So in your opinion he really thought he was writing the truth?’

‘Oh yes, no doubt about it. He’s a good man. But there is something of the pathological liar in him. He eventually begins to believe his own stories.’

‘How is he taking it?’

‘I don’t know. Right now that’s not the first thing you talk about with Arne.’

‘Of course,’ I said with a smile. I drank the last drop of *folkøl*, ate a roll and leaned back in my chair. I knew there was no question of me being allowed to help with the washing-up or anything like that, so I didn’t even bother to offer my services.

‘Shall we go for a walk?’ Linda suggested, looking at me. ‘Then Vanja might go to sleep.’

‘OK,’ I said.

‘She could stay here with me,’ Ingrid said, ‘if you want to be on your own.’

‘No, it’s all right, thanks. We’ll take her with us. Come here, my little troll, we’re off now,’ she said, lifted Vanja and went to wash her mouth and hands while I put on my outdoor clothes and prepared the buggy.

We took the path leading down to the lake. A cold wind blew across the fields. On the other side some crows or magpies were hopping around. Up above them, among the trees, large motionless cows stood staring into the distance. Some of the trees were oaks, and they were old, from the eighteenth century, I would have thought, perhaps even older, what did I know? Behind them ran a railway line, and a roar came every time a train passed and resounded across the countryside whenever a train passed. The path ended by a beautiful small brick house. In it lived an old priest – the father of Lars Ohly, chairman of the left-wing Swedish *Vänster* party – who was said to have once been a Nazi. Whether that was true or not I had no idea, rumours of that nature sprang up so easily around famous figures. But now and then he hobbled around, hunchbacked and stooped.

Once in Venice I had seen an old man whose head was so bowed it was horizontal. His neck was at ninety degrees to his shoulders. All he could see was the ground in front of his feet. It took him an eternity to shuffle across the piazza. It was in Arsenale, next to a church where a choir was practising, I was sitting in a café smoking, unable to take my eyes off him from the moment I spotted him. It was an evening at the beginning of December. Apart from the two of us and the three waiters standing with their arms crossed by the entrance, there wasn’t a person in the vicinity.

Mist hung above the roofs. The cobblestones and all the old stone buildings, which were covered in moisture, glinted in the light from the lamps. He stopped by a door, produced a key, and he *tipped* his whole body backwards so that he could see where, roughly, the lock was. His fingers groped their way to the keyhole. The deformity meant that none of his body's movements seemed to belong to him, or rather the unmoving downward-facing head became the focus of attention, which as a result became a kind of centrepiece, a part of the body, though independent of it, where all the decisions were taken and all the movements were decided.

He opened the door and went in. From behind, it looked as if his head was missing. And then, with an unexpectedly violent movement which I would have considered impossible, he slammed the door.

It was eerie, eerie.

A red estate car came up the hill a few hundred metres in front of us. The snow swirled after it in the undertow. We moved to the side as it approached. The rear seats had been taken out and two white dogs ran around barking in the freed space.

'Did you see them?' I said. 'They looked like huskies. But they can't be, can they?'

Linda shrugged.

'I don't know,' she said. 'But I think they're the ones in the house by the bend, aren't they? The ones that are always barking.'

'Never been any dogs there when I walked past,' I said. 'But I know you've said that before. Were you afraid of them? Was that what it was?'

'I don't know. Maybe a little,' she said. 'It's pretty unpleasant. They're on retractable leashes and then they come bounding . . .'

She had lived here for lengthy periods when she was so depressed she couldn't look after herself. By and large she had spent all day watching TV from her bed in the guest cabin. She hardly spoke to Vidar and her mother, didn't want anything, couldn't do anything, everything inside her had come to a halt. I didn't know how long this had lasted. She had barely said a word about it. But I saw it in many places, such as the concern for her I noticed in neighbours' eyes or voices.

In the valley we walked past the manor – which was not grand and the buildings were somewhat dilapidated – where the elderly, shrunken patriarch lived. Light shone in the windows, but there was no one to be seen inside. In the drive between the barn and the house were three old cars, one on blocks. They were covered in snow.

It was scarcely credible that we had once sat there, at a set table, beside the swimming pool, one hot dark August evening, gorging on crabs. But indeed we had. Paper lanterns glowing in the darkness, happy voices, a bulging pile of red glistening crabs at each end of the long table. Beer cans, bottles of aquavit, laughter and song. The sound of grasshoppers, distant traffic. Linda had surprised me that night, I remembered, she tapped her glass, stood up and sang a drinking song. Twice she did it. She said this was required of her here, she had always done it. She had been the type of child who performed for adults. She had performed in *The Sound of Music* for more than a year at a theatre in Stockholm when she was at school. Also at parties at home, I supposed. An exhibitionist, as I had been, and equally happy to hide.

Ingrid also made an appearance. When she mingled with the neighbours, hugged everyone, showed the food she had brought along, chatted and laughed she became the centre of attention and everyone had a word to say to her. When there were social arrangements in the district, she always gave a hand, by baking or cooking something, and if anyone was ill or in need of help she cycled over to see them and do what she could.

The party began, everyone sat hunched over their dish of crabs, which had been caught in the lake below, and tossed their heads back now and then as they sank what Swedes call a *nubbe*, a schnapps. The atmosphere was festive. Then came the sudden sound of voices from the barn, a man shouting at a woman, the mood round the table evaporated, some looked, some tried to avoid looking, but everyone knew. It was the son of the old man who owned the manor, he was known to have a violent temper, and now he was taking it out on his teenage daughter, who had been smoking. Ingrid stood up at once and walked over with firm swift steps, her whole body quivering with suppressed fury. She stopped in front of the man, he was about thirty-five, well built, strong, with hard eyes, and railed at him with such vehemence that he shrank before her. After she had finished and he had driven off she put her hand on the daughter’s shoulder – she had been standing close by and crying – and led her to the table. The second Ingrid sat down she tuned into the previous mood and started chatting, laughing and pulling the others along with her.

Now everything was white and still.

Below the manor the path led up to holiday cabins. The snow hadn't been cleared; no one was here at this time of the year.

During my work on *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* it was Ingrid I had in mind when I was writing about Anna, Noah's sister. A woman who was stronger than all of them, a woman who, when the flood came, took the whole family up the mountain, and, when the water reached them, took them higher until they could go no further and all hope was lost. A woman who never gave up and who would sacrifice everything for her children and grandchildren.

She was a remarkable person. She filled the room when she appeared while still remaining humble. She might give the impression she was superficial, yet there was a depth in her eyes which contradicted that. She tried to keep her distance, she always kept to the background, always set great store by not getting in the way, yet she was the person closest to us.

'Do you think Fredrik and Karin had a good time last night?' Linda said, looking up at me.

'Ye-es, I think they did,' I said. 'It was very nice.'

Somewhere in the distance there was a roar.

'Even though he called me Hamsun a couple of times too often,' I continued.

'He was just messing around!'

'I did understand that.'

'They like you very much, both of them.'

'That, however, I don't understand. I say almost nothing when we meet.'

'Oh, you do. Anyway, you're so attentive it doesn't seem like that.'

'Mhm.'

Sometimes I had a bad conscience about being so quiet and uninvolved with Linda's friends, about my lack of interest in them; it was enough to be present when they were there, like a duty. For me it was a duty, but for Linda it was life, and I didn't take part. She had never complained, but I had a feeling she wished it were different.

The roar increased in volume. From the crossing bells began to go off. *Ding ding ding ding.* Then I glimpsed movement between the trees. The next moment a train shot out from the forest. Snow rose like a cloud around it. It ran alongside the lake for a few hundred metres, a long line of goods wagons carrying containers of various colours gleaming in all the whiteness and greyness, and then it was gone behind the trees in the forest on the other side.

‘Vanja should have seen that,’ I said. But she was asleep and oblivious to the world. Her face was almost completely submerged beneath the executioner’s cap that went round her neck like a collar and, over it, the red polyester hat with white lining and thick earflaps. She had a scarf as well and padded red overalls with a woollen jumper and woollen trousers underneath.

‘Fredrik was so good to me when I was ill,’ Linda said. ‘He used to come into the ward and fetch me. Then we went to the cinema. Didn’t say a lot. But it was a great help, just getting out. And his taking care of me like that.’

‘All your friends must have done that, didn’t they?’

‘Yes, each in their own way. And there was something about . . . I suppose I understood that I’ve always been on the other side, always been the one to help, the one to understand, the one to give . . . Not unconditionally of course, but in the main. My brother when we were growing up, my father and also my mother, sometimes. And then everything was turned on its head: when I fell ill I was on the receiving end. I had to accept help. The strange thing is . . . Well, the only moments I’ve had of freedom, where I’ve done what I wanted, were when I was manic. But the freedom was so great I couldn’t handle it. It hurt. There was something good about it though. Finally being free. But of course it couldn’t work. Not like that.’

‘No,’ I said.

‘What are you thinking about?’

‘Two things actually. One has nothing to do with you. But it was what you said about receiving. It struck me that if I’d been in your position I wouldn’t have accepted anything. I wouldn’t have wanted anyone to see me. And definitely not to help me. This is so strong in me you have no idea. Receiving is not for me. And it never will be, either. That’s one thing. The second was wondering what you did when you were manic. I mean, since you connect it with freedom so much. What did you do when you were free?’

‘If you won’t receive how can anyone reach you?’

‘What makes you think I want to be reached?’

‘But that’s no good.’

‘Come on, you answer my question first.’

On the left the festival green came into sight. It was a small patch of grass with a few benches and a long table at the back which was generally used only on Midsummer Night, when everyone in the area gathered together to dance round the tall leaf-bedecked pole in the middle, to eat cake, drink coffee and participate in a quiz with an award ceremony concluding the formal part of the evening. I joined in for the first time that summer and waited intuitively for someone to set fire to the post. Surely there couldn’t be a Midsummer celebration without a fire? Linda laughed when I told her. No, no fire, no magic, just children dancing to the ‘Little Frogs’ song around the enormous phallus and drinking fizzy drinks, as everyone did in the smaller communities all over Sweden that night.

The pole was still there. The leaves were withered and reddish-brown with white streaks of snow.

‘It wasn’t so much what I did as how I felt,’ she said. ‘The feeling that anything was possible. That there were no hindrances. I could have been president of the USA, I told mummy once, and the worst of it is that I meant it. When I went out, the social side was not a hindrance; quite the contrary, it was an arena, a place where I could make things happen and be completely and utterly myself. All my inclinations were valid, there wasn’t a speck of self-criticism, there was a sense of anything goes, right, and the point was that anything also *became true*. Do you understand? Anything really *did* go. But I was incredibly restless, of course, there was never enough happening, I had a hunger for more, it mustn’t end, it was not allowed to end, because somewhere I must have had an inkling it would, the trip I was on, that it would end with a fall. A fall into the absolutely immovable. The greatest hell of them all.’

‘That sounds dreadful.’

‘It certainly was. But it wasn’t only dreadful. It’s fantastic to feel so strong. So confident. And somewhere it is *also* real. In other words, it exists in me. But you know what I mean.’

‘In fact, I don’t,’ I said. ‘I’ve never reached that point. I know the feeling. I think I’ve experienced it once, but, heck, that was while I was writing, sitting quietly behind a desk. That’s quite different.’

'I don't think so. I think you were manic. You weren't eating, you weren't sleeping, you were so happy you didn't know what to do with yourself. But you have some kind of boundary nevertheless, some security inside you, and this is a lot about not going beyond what you actually, and it is a big actually, can tolerate. If you do something for long enough without the tolerance there are major consequences. You have to pay. It doesn't come free.'

We had joined the path running alongside the lake and into the forest. The wind had laid bare great swathes of ice. In places it was as shiny as glass and reflected the dark sky like a mirror, in others it was grey, greenish and grainy, like frozen slush. Now that the train had passed and the warning bell had stopped ringing there was almost complete silence in the forest. Just some rustling and cracking as branches rubbed or the occasional thwack. The squeaking of the buggy wheels, our own brittle footsteps.

'At the hospital there was one thing they said which became important for me,' Linda continued. 'It was a simple matter. But what they said was that I had to try to remember I was actually fed up with myself when I became manic. That I was deeply depressed. And just that, the thought that I existed, helped. This is a lot of what it's about, completely losing sight of who you are. In fact. And I think this might have been the most significant reason for it going so far. I had never actually lived. Had never had an inner life, that is. It had always been an external life. And things went fine for a long time, I pushed it further and further, and then in the end it wouldn't go any further. It came to a stop.'

She looked at me.

'I think I was pretty ruthless in those days. Or there was something ruthless inside me. I had cut myself off from others, if you know what I mean.'

'I think that's true,' I said. 'When I met you for the first time you had a completely different aura from today. Yes, ruthless, that fits. Attractive and dangerous is what I thought. I don't think that about you now.'

'I was on my way down. It was during those weeks it happened, that I started to lose control. I'm so pleased we didn't get together then! It would never have worked. It couldn't have worked.'

'No, probably not. But I was a bit surprised when I found out exactly how romantic you were, I must say. And how close you want those who are around you. How important it is for you.’

We were silent for a while.

‘Would you rather have been with me when I was like that?’

‘No.’

I smiled. She smiled. Around us all was perfectly still, apart from the occasional whoosh as the wind gusted through the forest. It was good to walk here. For the first time in ages I had some peace in my soul. Even if snow lay thick on the ground everywhere and white is a bright colour, the brightness didn’t dominate the terrain, because out of the snow, which so sensitively reflects the light from the sky and always gleams, however dark it is, rose tree trunks, and they were gnarled and black, and branches hung above them, also black, intertwining in an endless variety of ways. The mountainsides were black, the stumps and debris of blown-down trees were black, the rock faces were black, the forest floor was black beneath the canopy of enormous spruces.

The soft whiteness and the gaping blackness, both were perfectly still, all was completely motionless, and it was impossible not to be reminded of how much of what surrounded us was dead, how little of it all was actually alive and how much space the living occupied inside us. This was why I would have loved to be able to paint, would have loved to have the talent, for it was only through painting this could be expressed. Stendhal wrote that music was the highest form of art and that all the other forms really wanted to be music. This was of course a Platonic idea, all the other art forms depict something else, music is the only one which is something in itself, it is absolutely incomparable. But I wanted to be closer to reality, by which I meant physical, concrete reality, and for me the visual always came first, also when I was writing and reading, it was what was behind letters that interested me. When I was outdoors, walking, like now, what I saw gave me nothing. Snow was snow, trees were trees. It was only when I saw a picture of snow or of trees that they were endowed with meaning. Monet had an exceptional eye for light on snow, which Thaulow, perhaps the most technically gifted Norwegian painter ever, also had, it was a feast for the eyes, the closeness of the moment was so great that the value of what gave rise to it increased exponentially, an old tumbledown cabin by a river or a pier at a holiday resort suddenly became priceless, the paintings were charged with the feeling that they were here at the same time as us, in this intense here and now, and that we would soon be gone from them, but with regard to the snow, it was as if the other side of this cultivation of the moment became visible, the animation of this and its light so obviously ignored something, namely the lifelessness, the emptiness, the non-charged and the neutral, which were the first features to strike you when you entered a forest in winter, and in the picture, which was connected with perpetuity and death, the moment was unable to hold its ground. Caspar David Friedrich knew this, but this wasn't what he painted, only his idea of it. This was the problem with all representation, of course, for no eye is uncontaminated, no gaze is blank, nothing is seen the way it is. And in this encounter the question of art's meaning as a whole was forced to the surface. Yes, OK, so I saw the forest here, so I walked through it and thought about it. But all the meaning I extracted from it came from me, I charged it with something of mine. If it were to have any meaning beyond that, it couldn't come from the eyes of the beholder, but through action, through something happening, that is. Trees would have to be felled, houses built, fires lit, animals hunted, not for the sake of pleasure but because my life depended on it. Then the forest would be meaningful, indeed so meaningful that I would no longer wish to see it.

Around the bend, perhaps twenty metres ahead of us, came a man dressed in a red anorak. He had a ski stick in each hand. It was Arne.

'Hi, so it's you out walking, is it!' he said as he got closer.

'Hi, Arne. Been a long time,' Linda said.

He stopped beside us and cast a glance into the buggy. The scandal didn't appear to have crushed him.

'She's so big,' he said. 'How old is she now?'

'Turned one two weeks ago,' Linda said.

'Really! Time goes so quickly,' he said, meeting my gaze. One of his eyes was rigid and filled with water. In recent years he had been plagued by all manner of illness, there had been a brain tumour, and after it had been removed he hadn't been able to shake the taste he had acquired for morphine, so he was taken into rehab for a while. When this was over he suffered a stroke. Now it was pneumonia he'd just had, wasn't it?

But even though he looked wilder and more ravaged every time I saw him, even though he walked with greater difficulty and his movements were slower, he did not seem any weaker, there was no shortage of energy, a lust for life still burned inside him, he marched on with all his defects, and he still put to shame what could have been said about him two years ago, that he hadn't got long left. It must have been this spark, this lust for life, which had kept him going. Almost anyone else exposed to what he had experienced would have been two metres under the ground.

'Your book's going to be translated into Swedish, Vidar told me,' he said.

'Yes,' I said.

'When? I really don't want to miss it.'

'Next autumn they're telling me, but it'll probably be the autumn after.'

'I'll wait then,' he said.

How old was he? Late sixties? It was hard to say, there was nothing old-man-ish about him, the one eye that worked glinted with youthfulness, and even though it was the sole feature of his face that did and even though other parts were wrinkled and worn, bloodshot and blotchy, life shone through in other ways, most of all in his enthusiastic tone of voice, which was forced into a slowness that didn't suit it, but also in the total impression he gave, his aura, which strangely enough, despite all the resistance his body offered, appeared indefatigable. He had grown up in an orphanage but hadn't wandered off the straight and narrow like his friends. He had played football at a high level, at least if you believed what he told you, and worked as a journalist on *Expressen* for many years. Furthermore, he had published several books.

His wife always sent him indulgent glances when he made comments, in the way that all women married to boys do. She was a nurse and was approaching the limits of her tolerance, for in addition to an ailing husband she had to look after their child, who had just had twins and needed lots of support.

'Right,' he said. 'Nice to meet you, Linda, and you, Karl.'

'Same to you,' I said.

He raised his hand to his brow and then he set off, his sticks raised high with every stride he took.

His rigid watering eye, which had stared ahead during the whole conversation, might have belonged to a troll or some mythological creature, and even though I didn't have the image constantly in front of me the feeling it generated lasted all day.

‘He didn’t exactly seem crushed, did he?’ I said after he had disappeared round the bend and we had started walking again.

‘No,’ Linda said. ‘But it’s never easy to see how people really are.’

Another roar sounded in the distance, from the other side now. I sat Vanja up as she lay blinking in the buggy, and turned her so that she could see when, soon after, the train sped past us between the trees. It didn’t go by unnoticed; she pointed and shouted as it passed, so close that a thin layer of powdery snow was blown against my face, to melt in a trice.

Barely a kilometre later, by a railway embankment, the path came to an end. The field on the other side, where horses grazed in the summer, lay white and untouched like a tablecloth between the trees. To the left, in the east, there was a clump of houses, behind them a path, and if you followed it you came to a beautiful large manor owned by Olof Palme’s brother. One summer evening Linda and I had been out for a bike ride and we ended up there, lost, pushing our bikes down the gravel road between the houses where a white-clad party was sitting outdoors and eating with a view of the great lake and Gnesta town centre far on the other side. However careful I had been to look in another direction, I still had the image of the party on my retina: them sitting there so Bergman-like on the white garden furniture and eating, between austere white farmhouses and modern red office buildings, in the midst of the green rolling Södermanland countryside.

I took Vanja from the buggy and held her in my arms as we turned to walk back the same way we had come.

Arriving half an hour later on the incline in front of the house, we heard loud voices coming from indoors. Through the kitchen window I saw Ingrid and Vidar standing on either side of the sitting-room table shouting at each other. I suppose we had come earlier than they had expected, and the snow had muffled our arrival. It was only when I stamped my boots a few times on the front doorstep that the voices stopped. Linda took Vanja, I pushed the buggy into the garage beside the house that Vidar had built in the spring and summer. When I returned he was standing in the hall and putting on his overalls.

‘Well?’ he said with a smile. ‘Did you walk far?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Just a little way. The weather’s really grim!’

‘Yes, it is that,’ he said, stepping into tall brown rubber boots. ‘I’m just off to fix a few things.’

He slipped past me and walked slowly up the slope to his workshop. In the kitchen, which started half a metre from where I was removing my outdoor clothes, Ingrid had put Vanja in a high seat by the worktop while she peeled potatoes. I put my hat and gloves on the hat shelf, kicked my boots off against the door frame, she put a bowl of water and some plastic measuring spoons in front of Vanja. That could occupy her for hours, I knew. I hung my coat on a hanger and pushed it between all the other jackets, capes and coats hanging there and walked past them.

Ingrid looked upset. But her movements were considered and calm, her voice to Vanja was gentle and kind.

‘What’s for dinner? Something nice?’ I asked.

‘Lamb,’ she said. ‘Wedge potatoes. And red wine sauce.’

‘Ah, that sounds good!’ I said. ‘Lamb’s my favourite.’

‘I know,’ she said. Her eyes, enormous behind glasses, regarded me with a smile.

Vanja smacked the set of measuring spoons against the water.

‘You’re having a good time here, Vanja, aren’t you,’ I said. Tousled her hair. Looked at Ingrid. ‘Has Linda gone for a lie-down?’

Ingrid nodded. From the sleeping alcove, which was out of eyeshot, although no more than four metres away, came Linda’s voice: ‘I’m in here!’

I went in. The two beds were at ninety degrees to each other and took up almost all the room. She was on the one further away with the duvet pulled up under her chin. Even though the curtains were not drawn it was dim, almost murky inside. The dark coarse-wood walls soaked up all the light.

‘Brr!’ she said. ‘Are you going to have a nap?’

I shook my head.

‘Think I’ll do some reading. But you sleep.’

I sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair. On one wall there were photos of Vidar’s children and grandchildren. The other was covered in books. An alarm clock and a photo of Vidar’s youngest daughter were on the windowsill. I always felt uncomfortable in other people’s bedrooms, I always saw something I didn’t want to see, but that was not the case here.

‘I love you,’ she said.

I leaned forward and kissed her.

‘Sleep tight,’ I said, got up and left the room. Found the books I had packed, couldn’t face Dostoevsky, too difficult to get into at this moment, instead took a biography about Rimbaud which I had long thought I should read and reclined with it in my hand on the sofa under the window. What excited my interest was his Africa connection. That, and the times in which he lived. I wasn’t so bothered about his poetry, except for what it could say about his unusual, unique character.

In the kitchen Ingrid was chatting to Vanja while she worked. She was so good with her, managing to turn even the worst chore into an exciting adventure, not least because she put aside her own needs when they were together. Everything was about Vanja and her experiences. But there was no sense of it being a sacrifice, the pleasure she reaped from it seemed to be deeply heartfelt.

I doubted there was a woman more different from my mother than Ingrid. Mum put aside her own needs as well, but the distance to Vanja and what they did together was so much greater, and she obviously didn’t derive the same pleasure from it. Once when I had been to a play area with them her faraway look had caused me to ask if she was bored; she was, she said, and she always had been, also when we were young.

If she wanted, Ingrid could capture any child’s attention, there was something in her nature that facilitated immediate contact. She had a powerful aura; she couldn’t enter a room without making a difference. She took it captive. My mother could sit in a room without anyone knowing she was there. Ingrid had once been an actress on the country’s most important stage, lived a big life, an active life. My mother observed, deliberated, read, wrote, reflected and lived a contemplative life. Ingrid loved to cook; my mother did it because it was necessary.

Vidar walked past the bedroom window, a trifle stooped in his blue overalls, taking careful steps so as not to go flying on the path. A moment later he came into view through the living-room window, on his way to the garage. In the kitchen Vanja was standing and supporting herself on the cupboard while Ingrid lifted a steaming hot pan of potatoes from the stove. I got up and went into the hall, put on my jacket, hat and boots, opened the door and sat down on the chair by the wall to have a smoke. Vidar came out of the garage with a bucket in one hand.

‘Could you give me a hand afterwards, do you reckon?’ he said. ‘In about ten minutes?’

‘Course,’ I said.

He nodded, and continued round the corner of the house. I stared into the distance. The light beneath the sky was losing its lustre. The approaching darkness was unevenly distributed across the landscape, the already dark areas were sucking it in more and more greedily, such as the trees at the edge of the forest, the trunks and branches were completely black now. The weak February light faded without a fight, without resistance, not even a last flicker could it rouse, just a slow, imperceptible decline until everything was darkness and night.

A sudden feeling of happiness gripped me.

It was the light over the field, the chill in the air, the silence in the trees. The darkness that was waiting. It was a February afternoon breathing its atmosphere into me, and it evoked memories of all the other February afternoons I had experienced or rather the resonance of them, for the memories themselves had long faded. It was so immensely rich and replete because all of life was gathered there. It seemed to slice through the years; the special light spread out like ripples in my memory.

The feeling of happiness segued into an equally strong feeling of sorrow. I stubbed out my cigarette in the snow and threw it towards the barrel underneath the downpipe, told myself I had to get rid of the butts before we left and walked up to the back of the house, where Vidar was in the hut above the earth cellar screwing a lid onto a freezer cabinet.

‘We have to carry this over to the cabin,’ he said. ‘It’s a bit slippery, but if we take care it should be all right.’

I nodded. A crow cawed behind us. I turned round, stared at the line of trees on the other side, but couldn’t see where the sound had come from. Today all their movements in the snow were visible. Their tracks followed the paths from the front door of the house and up to all the small outhouses. The rest was white and untouched.

Vidar started on the third screw. His fingers were supple and well coordinated. He did all the small repairs, the smaller the better, by the looks of things. Personally, I lost patience with anything I couldn’t grip with the whole of my hand. Assembling Ikea furniture drove me mad.

As he worked his lips parted. The bared crooked teeth together with his narrow eyes and the triangular-shaped face that emphasised his goatee made him look like a fox.

The bucket he had fetched, which was full of sand, was next to him, pale red against the grey concrete floor.

‘Were you going to sand the paths?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Would you like to do it?’

‘No problem,’ I said.

I lifted the bucket, grabbed a handful of sand and sprinkled it over the footprints as I walked down. Ingrid came out of the house, taking her usual short hurried steps through the snow, dressed in an open green windcheater, heading towards the earth cellar. Even at such an insignificant moment there was an aura of intensity about her. Linda must be up, I thought. Unless Vanja had gone to sleep with her.

There were still a few apples hanging from the two trees below the path. Their skins were wrinkled and covered with black spots, and the colour that was still intact, a muted dark red and green, seemed to have grown into them and was enhanced by the surrounding black leafless branches. If you viewed them with the meadow and forest as a background, where there was no colour, they glowed. If you viewed them with the red huts behind, the colours were matt and hardly visible.

Ingrid came out of the earth cellar with two 1.5-litre bottles of mineral water in her hands and three cans of beer squeezed under her arm, she put down one bottle in the snow so as to slip the hook into the eye of the door lock, the cap and the label so yellow against the white snow, picked it up again and shuffled back to the house. I had reached the shed and sprinkled the remaining sand on the way back. As I put the bucket down on the ground I suddenly remembered who the man I had seen in the café the previous day looked like. Tarjei Vesaas! He had been the spitting image. The same square chin, the same gentle eyes, the same bald patch. But his complexion had been different, conspicuously pink and baby-soft. It was as though Vesaas’s cranium had been recreated, or the same code had been reused in one of nature’s many caprices, but with different skin stretched over.

‘There we are,’ Vidar said, putting the little screwdriver on the lathe behind him. ‘Let’s do it then. I’ll tip it this way and then you lift the other end, OK?'

'OK,' I said.

I lifted, and saw that when the weight shifted towards Vidar his body seemed to tense. I would have liked to take the bulk of the weight, because it wasn't heavy, but that was clearly not possible. We walked down the little hill taking tiny steps, then we turned and walked side by side up the gentle slope to the hut, where we at first put it down in the middle of the floor, then coaxed it into position in the corner.

'Thank you,' Vidar said. 'It's great to get this done.'

Since he had no one to help him, little jobs of this kind were often waiting for me when we came.

'My pleasure,' I said.

He put in the plug and immediately the freezer started humming. There were two other similar-looking cabinets in there, as well as two big chest freezers. All of them full of food. Elk meat and venison, veal and lamb. Pike and perch and salmon. Vegetables and berries. All manner of home-made meals. This was an attitude to food and money completely alien to us. In addition to being as self-sufficient as possible, Ingrid always bought in huge quantities of items that were on offer, turned every krone over twice and made it a point of honour. It was all about exploiting resources. For example, she had an arrangement with a supermarket to take fruit off their hands if they were going to throw it out, to make juice or jam or cakes or whatever occurred to her to do with it. Now and then she would say what she had paid for the meat during the meal we were eating, the point of which was to underline the difference between the value of the meal before and after she had applied her culinary arts. The cheaper, the better. However, she was by no means a greedy person; she showered us with every possible, and impossible, present, regardless of her own financial position. What was at the bottom was something else, perhaps a housewife's pride and honour, because she had been to a home economics school, and after her acting career was over she had obviously reverted to the life she'd once had.

So the room buzzed and hummed with freezer chests and cabinets, so the earth cellar was full of vegetables, fruit, jars of jam and pickle, so we were served with incredible food every time we came, largely meals that used to be eaten in this country a generation or two ago, but also Italian, French and

Asian meals, all of which had one feature in common: they were rustic in some way.

When we were preparing for Vanja's christening, Ingrid wanted to help with the cooking. The event was to take place in Jølster, at my mother's, and as Ingrid knew neither the kitchen nor the shops she suggested making the food at home and bringing it with her. To me that sounded like an absolutely absurd idea, transporting food more than a thousand kilometres for a small gathering, but she insisted, said it was easiest, so that was how it was left. As a consequence, Ingrid and Vidar, in addition to the usual luggage, had had three full freezer bags with them when they arrived at Bringelandsåsen Airport outside Førde one day at the end of May the previous year. There were to be two celebrations, first my mother's sixtieth birthday on the Friday, then Vanja's christening on the Sunday. Linda and I had arrived a few days earlier, not without some turmoil, because mum had been renovating the living room for the festivities and still hadn't finished tidying up, so it looked like a building site, which disappointed and enraged Linda. When she saw the state of the place she knew it would take me at least three days to sort it out. I understood her anger, if not the vehemence, but could not accept it. We went for a walk with Vanja in the valley, and Linda was cursing my mother – this was not the situation we had been led to expect; had she known we would never have had the christening here, we would have had it at home in Stockholm.

'Sissel is mean-spirited, unwelcoming, cold and closed,' Linda shouted in the green sun-drenched valley. 'That's the truth about her. You say I can't see my mother as she is, you say a gift is never a gift and that she makes me dependent on her, and you may be right, you may be, but you can't see your *bloody* mother, either.'

My stomach churned with despair, as always when I had to counter her fury, which I considered completely unreasonable, close on insane in fact, with arguments and objectivity.

We were almost running down the valley road as we pushed the buggy with Vanja asleep inside.

'It's *our* daughter being christened,' I said. 'Of course the house has to be done up! Mum works, as you know, unlike your mother, that's why she hasn't been able to finish. She can't spend all her time on us and what we're doing. She has her own life.'

‘You’re blind,’ Linda said. ‘You always have to work when we come here, she exploits the situation, and we can never be alone when we’re here.’

‘But we’re always alone!’ I said. ‘We have nothing else but time alone. It’s the only sodding thing we do have!’

‘She never gives us any space,’ Linda said.

‘She what?!’ I said. ‘Space? If anyone gives us space it’s her. It’s *your* mother who doesn’t give us space. Not one bloody centimetre. Do you remember when Vanja was born? You said you didn’t want anyone there for the first few days, you wanted us to be alone with her?’

Linda didn’t answer; she just glared.

‘Mum wanted to come, of course. Yngve too. But then I rang and said they couldn’t come for the first two weeks, any time afterwards though. And what happened? Who comes in the door, at your invitation? Your mother. And what did you say? “It’s only mummy!” Bloody hell! Yes, those were your precise words. The “only” says everything. You don’t see her. You’re so used to her coming and helping you that you don’t notice. *She* can come, my mother can’t.’

‘But your mother never came to see Vanja. Months went by.’

‘And why do you think that was? I told her not to!’

‘Love, Karl Ove, is stronger than any sense of rejection.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake,’ I said.

And then we were silent.

‘Yesterday, for example,’ Linda said, ‘she sat with us until we went to bed.’

‘And?’

‘Would mummy have done that?’

‘No, she’d go to bed at eight, she would, if she thought you wanted her to. And she does everything when we’re there, that’s true enough. But it doesn’t damn well mean it’s nature’s order. I’ve helped mum with bits and bobs ever since I left home. Painted the house, cut the grass and cleaned. Is there anything wrong with that now? Being helpful, is there anything wrong with that? Eh? And this time it’s not even her I’m helping but us! It’s our christening. Don’t you understand?’

‘You don’t understand what this is about,’ Linda said. ‘We haven’t come here for you to work and me to take Vanja around on my own. That’s what we've left behind. And your mother isn't as innocent as you make out. She's given this some thought and counted on it.'

Oh, fucking hell, I thought as we walked along the road in silence after the last word had been spoken. What a total fucking mess this was. How the hell did I end up in this shit?

The sun burned in the clear blue sky above us. The cliffs rose steeply on both sides of the river, which, swollen with melt water, roared down towards Lake Jølstravannet, so glassy-smooth and silent between the mountains. At the top of one an arm of the Jostedal glacier glistened. The air was pure and sharp, the meadows above and beneath us green and full of bell-jingling sheep, the upper reaches of the mountains bluish, dotted with large flecks of white snow. It was so beautiful it hurt. We walked with Vanja asleep in the buggy arguing about whether I should spend a few days fixing up my mother's house or not.

Linda's unreasonableness knew no bounds. There was no point at which she thought, no, now I've gone too far.

What was going through her head?

Oh, I knew. She was all alone with Vanja during the day, from when I went to my office until I returned, she felt lonely, and she had been looking forward so much to these two weeks. Some quiet days with her little family gathered around her, that was what she had been looking forward to. I, for my part, never looked forward to anything except the moment the office door closed behind me and I was alone and able to write. Especially now that after six years of failure I had finally got somewhere and I felt it wouldn't stop here, there was more. This was what I longed for, this filled my thoughts, not Linda and Vanja and the christening in Jølster, which I took as it came. If it was good, fine, then it was good. If it wasn't good, well then it wasn't good. The difference did not matter much to me. I should have been able to categorise the row in this way, but I couldn't, my feelings were too strong, they had me under their control.

Friday came, I had sat up all night writing a speech for my mother's birthday and I was tired as we drove through the vertiginous countryside of fjords, mountains, rivers and farms up to Loen in Nordfjord, where she had rented an old manor-style building belonging to the Nurses' Association as the venue for the celebrations. The others went up to the Briksdal glacier; Linda and I stayed in our room with Vanja to have a little sleep. The beauty of the scenery around us was stupendous and alarming. All this blue, all this green, all this white, all this depth and all this space. I hadn't always experienced it in this way; before, I remembered, the scenery was routine, almost inconsequential, something you had to pass through to get from one place to another.

There was the sound of a rushing river. A tractor driving in a field nearby. The drone rising and falling in volume. Now and then voices from the front of the building. Linda lay asleep beside me with Vanja on her chest. For her our row was long forgotten. It was just me who could be gruff and sullen for several weeks, just me who could nourish resentment for several years. Against no one else but her though. Linda was the only person I argued with, she was the only person I held grudges against. If my mother, my brother or my friends said something offensive, I let it go. Nothing of what they said touched me or mattered very much to me, not really. I assumed it was part of my life as an adult that I had succeeded in muting all the overtones and undertones of my character, which at first had been explosive, and I would therefore live the rest of my life in peace and tranquillity, and solve any cohabitation problems with irony, sarcasm and the sulky silence I had honed to perfection after the three lengthy relationships I'd had. But with Linda it was as though I had been cast back to the time when my feelings swung from wild elation to wild fury to the pits of despair and desperation, the time when I lived in a series of all-decisive moments, and the intensity was so great that sometimes life felt almost unlivable, and when nothing could give me any peace of mind except books, with their different places, different times and different people, where I was no one and no one was me.

That was when I was young and had no options.

Now I was thirty-five years old and wanted as few disturbances and as little mental agitation as possible, I should be able to have that, shouldn't I, or at least be in a position to get it?

Didn't really look like it.

I sat on a rock outside and smoked a cigarette while skimming through the speech I had written. I had hoped to the very last minute I would slip through the net, but there was no escape – Yngve and I had decided she would get a speech from both of us. I dreaded it like the plague. Sometimes when I had to do a reading or an interview or participate in a discussion on stage I was so nervous I could barely walk. But ‘nervous’ in no way covered my state, nervousness was a transient phase of nerves, a minor aberration, a quivering of the spirit. This was painful and unyielding. It would pass though.

I got to my feet and trudged down to the road, from where you could see the whole district. The fertile moisture-green fields between the mountainsides, the wreath of deciduous trees growing beside the river, the tiny village centre on the plain with its handful of shops and residential blocks. The adjacent fjord, bluish-green and totally still, the mountains that towered up on the other side, the few farms, high on the slopes, with their white walls and reddish roofs, their green and yellow fields, all gleaming in the bright light from the sun, which was sinking and would soon disappear in the sea far beyond. The bare mountains above the farms, dark blue, black here and there, the white peaks, the clear sky above them, where the first stars would soon appear, imperceptible initially, a vague lightening of colour, then they became clearer and clearer until they hung there twinkling and shining in the darkness above the world.

This was beyond our comprehension. We might believe that our world embraced everything, we might do our thing down here on the beach, drive around in our cars, phone one other and chat, visit one another, eat and drink and sit indoors imbibing the faces and opinions and the fates of those appearing on the TV screen in this strange semi-artificial symbiosis we inhabited and lull ourselves for longer and longer, year on year, into thinking that it was all there was, but if on the odd occasion we were to raise our gaze to this, the only possible thought was one of non-comprehension and impotence, for in fact how small and trivial was the world we allowed ourselves to be lulled by? Yes, of course, the dramas we saw were magnificent, the images we internalised, sublime and sometimes also apocalyptic, but be honest, slaves, what part did we play in them?

None.

But the stars twinkle above our heads, the sun shines, the grass grows and the earth, yes, the earth, it swallows all life and eradicates all vestige of it, spews out new life in a cascade of limbs and eyes, leaves and nails, hair and tails, cheeks and fur and guts, and swallows it up again. And what we never really comprehend, or don’t want to comprehend, is that this happens outside us, that we ourselves have no part in it, that we are only that which grows and dies, as blind as the waves in the sea are blind.

Four cars came from behind me down the valley. These were my mother's guests – her sisters, their husbands and children, as well as Ingrid and Vidar. I walked up to the house, saw how excited and happy they were, getting out of their cars, clearly the glacier had been a fantastic sight. For the next hour they were going to arrange their rooms, then we would collect in the living room and eat venison and drink red wine, listen to speeches, drink coffee and cognac, gather in small groups and chat and take it easy as the evening turned into the light summer night.

Yngve was the first to take the floor. He handed over our present, which was a single-lens reflex camera, and gave a speech. I was so nervous I didn't catch a scrap of it. He concluded by saying that she had always had great confidence in herself as a photographer, but her confidence had always been unjustified as she had never owned a camera. Hence the present.

Then it was my turn. I hadn't managed to swallow any of the food. And that despite the fact that I had known virtually all of those who were now staring at me all my life, and their expressions were without exception friendly. But the speech had to be given. I had never told my mother that she meant anything at all to me. I had never said I loved her or that I liked her. The mere thought of saying something like that could make my stomach turn in disgust and abhorrence. Of course I wasn't going to say that now either. But today she was sixty years old, and I, her son, had to honour her with a few words.

I rose to my feet. Everyone looked at me, most with a smile. I had to concentrate with all my might to be able to hold the piece of paper, for my hands not to tremble.

'Dear mum,' I said, and turned to her. She sent me an encouraging smile. 'I'd like to start by thanking you,' I went on. 'I'd like to thank you for being such an unbelievably good mother. That you've been an unbelievably good mother is just one of the things I know. But of course it's not always easy to put into words what we know. In this instance it is especially difficult because the qualities you possess are not always so easy to see.'

I swallowed, stared down at my glass of water, decided not to take it, raised my head and looked at the eyes staring at me.

‘There’s a film by Frank Capra about this precise point. *It’s a Wonderful Life*, from 1946. It’s about a good man in a small American town who, at the outset of the film, is in deep crisis, and he wants to give up everything he has. Then an angel intervenes and shows him what the world would have been like *without* him. It’s only *then* that he can see what significance he in fact has for other people. I don’t think *you* need the assistance of an angel to understand how important you are for us, but perhaps now and then *we* might. You give everyone the space to be themselves. Now that might sound like a commonplace, but it isn’t; on the contrary, it is a very rare quality. And sometimes it’s hard to see. It’s easy to see those who push themselves forward. It’s easy to see those who set limits. But you never push yourself forward and you never set limits for others; you take them as they are and adapt to *that*. Which I think everyone in this room has experienced.’

A mumble ran around the table.

‘When I was sixteen or seventeen, this quality was so important for me. We were living alone in Tveit, and it was a tricky period, I think, but I always felt that you had confidence in me, that you trusted me, and, not least, that you believed in me. You allowed me to learn from my own experiences. While this was happening, of course, I didn’t realise this was what you were doing. I didn’t have a picture of either you or myself, I don’t think. But I do now. And I’d like to thank you for that.’

In so saying, I met my mother’s gaze and my voice cracked. I took the glass, gulped down water, tried to smile, but it was not so easy, I had a sense that some sort of sympathy for me had arisen around the table, and I found it difficult to cope with. All I wanted to do was give a speech, not plumb the depths of my own sentimentality.

‘Well,’ I said. ‘Now you’re sixty. The fact that you’re not planning life as a pensioner and that you’ve just finished your main subject in your studies says a lot about who you are: first of all, you’re lively and energetic and you have intellectual curiosity; secondly, you never give up. That applies to you in your life, but it also has something to do with how you are with others: things have to take time. Things have to take the time they need. When I was seven and about to start school, I didn’t know how to appreciate this. You drove me to school on my first day, I remember it well, you weren’t a hundred per cent sure of the way to school, but you were sure we would be fine. We ended up in a residential area. Then in another. I sat there in my light blue suit with my satchel on my back, hair combed, and we drove around Tromøya while my new friends stood in the schoolyard listening to all the speeches. When we finally made it to the school it was all over. There's an endless list of similar anecdotes I could tell. For example, you've driven a fair few kilometres completely lost, literally, kilometre after kilometre through unfamiliar territory without realising you were not on the Oslo road until you ended up on a tractor path in a dark field at the end of some remote valley. There are so many of these I'll limit myself to the most recent. A week ago, on your sixtieth birthday, you invited colleagues to your house for coffee. They came, but you'd forgotten to buy coffee, so all of you had to sit there drinking tea. Sometimes I think the absent-minded side of your personality is the very precondition for you to be so present in our conversations and in those you have with others.'

Again I was stupid enough to meet her gaze. She smiled at me, my eyes moistened and then, no, oh no, she got up and wanted to give me a hug.

The other guests clapped, I sat down again, full of disgust with myself, because even though losing control of my emotions made a good impression, gave extra emphasis to what I had said, I was ashamed that I had revealed such weakness.

A few seats down, mum's eldest sister, Kjellaug, got to her feet, she spoke about the autumn of our lives and was met with a couple of good-natured boos, but her speech was good and full of warmth, and after all sixty wasn't forty, was it.

During the speech Linda came in, sat down beside me and placed her hand on my arm. Everything all right? she whispered. I nodded. Is she asleep now? I whispered, and Linda nodded and smiled. Kjellaug sat down, and the next speaker rose, and so it went on until all the guests around the table had spoken. The exceptions were Vidar and Ingrid, of course, since they didn't know my mother at all. But they were enjoying themselves, at least Vidar was. Gone was the slightly rigid old man's slow-wittedness, occasionally noticeable when he was at home; here he was at his ease, happy and smiling, his cheeks and eyes ablaze, with something to say to everyone, genuinely interested in what people said and quick to respond with a rich variety of anecdotes, stories and arguments. It was harder to say how Ingrid felt. She seemed excited, laughed out loud and cast around superlatives to excess – everything was wonderful and fantastic – but that was as far as she got, she seemed to be stuck there, she didn't really get into, or come down into, the mood of the evening either because she was unable to tune in, they weren't people she knew, or because her state of mind was too exalted, or simply because the distance from the life she usually led was too great. I had seen that many times with old people: they couldn't manage abrupt change very well, they didn't like being moved from their environment, but first of all something stiff and regressive came over them, which did not exactly describe Ingrid's behaviour, it was more the opposite, and secondly Ingrid was not old, at least not by today's yardstick. When we travelled back next day to get ready for the christening her manner persisted, but with more space around her it was less conspicuous. She was anxious about the food, tried to prepare as much as possible the night before, and when the day of the christening arrived she was afraid the door of the house might be locked and she wouldn't be able to have everything ready for the guests, and, on her own in the kitchen, she might not find the necessary equipment.

The priest was a young woman, we stood around her by the font, Linda held Vanja as her head was moistened with water. Ingrid left when the ceremony was over, the rest of us stayed seated. It was a communion. Jon Olav and his family stood up and knelt before the altar. For some reason I got up and followed suit. Knelt before the altar, had a wafer placed on my tongue, drank the communion wine, was given the blessing, got up and went back, with mum's, Kjartan's, Yngve's and Geir's eyes on me, disbelieving to varying degrees.

Why had I done it?

Had I become a Christian?

I, a fervent anti-Christian from early teenage years and a materialist in my heart of hearts, had in one second, without any reflection, got to my feet, walked up the aisle and knelt in front of the altar. It had been pure impulse. And, meeting those glares, I had no defence, I couldn't say I was a *Christian.* I looked down, slightly ashamed.

Many things had happened.

When dad died I had spoken to a priest, it had been like a confession, everything poured out of me, and he was there to listen and to give solace. The funeral, the ritual itself, was almost physical, something to hold on to for me. It turned dad's life, so miserable and destructive towards the end, into a life.

Wasn't there some solace in that?

Then there was what I had been working on over the last year. Not what I wrote, but what I was slowly realising I wanted to explore: the sacred. In my novel I had both travestied and invoked it, but without the hymnic gravity I knew existed in these tracts, in these texts I had started to read; and the gravity, the wild intensity in them, which was never far removed from the sacred, to which I had never been or would ever go, yet which I sensed all the same, had made me think differently about Jesus Christ, for it was about flesh and blood, it was about birth and death, and we were linked to it through our bodies and our blood, those we beget and those we bury, constantly, continually, a storm blew through our world and it always had, and the only place I knew where this was formulated, the most extreme yet simplest things, was in these holy scriptures. And the poets and artists who dealt with similar themes. Trakl, Hölderlin, Rilke. Reading the Old Testament, particularly the third Book of Moses with its detailed accounts of sacrificial practices, and the New Testament, so much younger and closer to us, nullified time and history, it was just a swirl of dust, and brought us to what was always there and never changed.

I had thought a lot about this.

And then there was the trivial matter of the local priest being somewhat reluctant to christen Vanja because we weren't married, I was divorced and when she enquired about our faith and I couldn't say, yes, I am a Christian, I believe that Jesus was God's son, a wild notion I could never entertain as a belief, and instead just skirted round it, tradition, my father's funeral, life and death, the ritual, I felt hypocritical afterwards, as though we were christening our daughter under false pretences, and when the communion came I suppose I wanted to revoke this, with the result that I appeared even more hypocritical. Not only had I had my daughter christened without being a Christian, now I was taking bloody communion as well!

However, the sacred.

Flesh and blood.

Everything that changes and is the same.

And last but not least, the sight of Jon Olav walking past and kneeling up there. He was a whole person, a good person, and in some way it also drew me up the aisle as well and down on my knees: I so much wanted to be whole. I so much wanted to be good.

On the church steps we, the parents, the child, the godparents, stood for photographs. Vanja's great-grandmother had been christened in the dress she was wearing here in Jølster. Some of my maternal grandmother's sisters were there, among them Linda's favourites, Alvdis and her husband Anfinn, all of mum's sisters, some of their children and grandchildren, in addition to Linda's friends from Stockholm, Geir and Christina, and of course Vidar and Ingrid.

And while we were standing there Ingrid came running up the hill. The fear she'd had that the house would be locked was not ungrounded, for mum, who was so scatter-brained, had indeed locked the door. Ingrid was handed the key and dashed back. When we arrived half an hour later she was in despair over some dish she could not find. But all was well, of course, the weather was brilliant, we held the celebration in the garden with a view of the lake, in which the mountains were reflected, and the food was praised by everyone. But once the food had been served and Vanja wandered from lap to lap without needing any one-to-one supervision, Ingrid had nothing to do, and perhaps that was what was difficult for her. At any rate she went up to her room and there she stayed until we began to miss her, at five, half past five, when the first guests had already left. Linda went to find her. She was sleeping and almost impossible to wake. She had always been like this, I knew. Linda had told me before how scary it was when she was fast asleep and how impossible it was to have any contact with her for the first five to ten minutes after she woke up. Linda had a theory that sleeping tablets were involved. When she did come outside she almost staggered across the lawn, and her laughter was inappropriate, in the sense that it was too loud for what was going on around the table where she sat and slightly out of synch with the places where the others laughed. I was concerned to see her like that, there was something wrong, it was obvious. She wasn't really present, she was loud and overwrought, with glittering eyes and a flushed complexion. Linda and I talked about this after all the others had settled down for the night. It was the sleeping medicine, as well as all the stress in connection with the party. After all, she had made food for and served twenty-five guests. And everything was new and strange for her.

The next time I met them was here, and all her fluster and unease was completely gone. And Vidar was back into his routines.

Now he was standing with his hands on his hips for a moment contemplating his handiwork. The sound of a train approaching carried from the other side of the ridge, faded, returned a few seconds later on the other side, louder and fuller, as Linda came walking up the slope towards us.

‘Food’s ready!’ she shouted, on catching sight of us.

Early next morning Vidar drove us to the railway station. We arrived just before the train was about to depart, so I had no chance to buy a ticket. Ingrid, who had joined us to look after Vanja for the next three days, had a monthly ticket while Linda had enough left on her strip for the return to Stockholm. I sat down by the window and took out my pile of newspapers, which I still hadn’t managed to read. Ingrid took care of Vanja, Linda sat looking out of the window. The conductor didn’t come until several stations after we had changed trains at Södertälje. Ingrid showed her card, Linda passed him her strip and I dug in my pocket for loose change. When he turned to me, Ingrid said, ‘He got on at Haninge.’

What?

Was she fiddling the fare on my behalf?

What the hell was she doing?

I met the conductor’s eyes.

‘To Stockholm,’ I said. ‘From Haninge. How much is that?’

I couldn’t say that actually I had got on at Gnesta. How would that make Ingrid feel? Nevertheless, I always made it a rule to pay for myself; if I was in a shop for example and was given too much change, I always pointed this out to the assistant. Fare dodging was the last thing I would do.

The conductor passed me the ticket and my change, I thanked him and he merged into the throng of early-morning commuters.

I was furious, but I continued reading and said nothing. After we had arrived at Stockholm Central and I had lifted the buggy onto the platform I offered to take her suitcase to the office so that she wouldn’t have to drag it up to ours first of all, then back down to the office, which is where she usually stayed when she visited us in the afternoon. She was pleased. I said goodbye to them in the concourse, made my exit by the airport trains, walked to the marketplace with the fortress-like trade union building, hurried up Dalagatan, one hand pulling the roller suitcase, the other holding the bag containing my computer, and unlocked the office door five minutes later.

The place had already become full of memories. The period when I wrote *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* flooded towards me from all sides. Oh, how happy I had been then.

I made room for Ingrid's suitcase in the cupboard under the sink, I didn't want to have to look at it while I was working, then I went to the toilet for a pee.

And what did I see there? Ingrid's shampoo and hair conditioner. And what was that at the bottom of the rubbish bag? Ingrid's Q-tips and dental floss.

What the HELL! I shouted, grabbing the two bottles and throwing them in the kitchen bin. That bloody DOES it, I yelled, snatched at the bag in the wastepaper basket, bent over and took the little clump of hair from the plug hole, it was hers, for Christ's sake, this was my office, the only place I had that was all mine, where I was completely alone, and even there she came with all her bits and bobs and all her odds and ends, even there I was invaded, I thought, slung her hair as hard as I could into the bag, crumpled it up and stuffed it deep, deep, down in the rubbish bin under the worktop in the kitchen.

Well, screw that.

Then I switched on the computer and sat down at the desk. Waited impatiently for it to boot up. On the wood floor there was the thorn-crowned Jesus Christ. On the wall behind the sofa hung the poster of Balke's night scene. Over the desk Thomas's two photos. On the wall behind me the dissected whale and the almost photographically precise drawings of beetles from the same eighteenth-century expedition.

I couldn't write here. That is, I couldn't write anything new.

But that wasn't what I was going to do this week. On Saturday morning I would be giving a lecture about my 'authorship' in Bærum of all places, and that was what I would be working on for the next three days. It was a meaningless job, but I had accepted it ages ago. The enquiry had come the same day it became clear that my book had been nominated for the Nordic Council’s Literature Prize. They wrote that it was a tradition for the Norwegian nominee to go and talk about their book or their authorship, and as my defences had been low at that point, I said yes.

And now here I was.

Ladies and gentlemen. I don’t give a shit about you, I don’t give a shit about the book I’ve written, I don’t give a shit if it wins a prize or not, all I want is to write more. So what am I doing here? I allowed myself to feel flattered, I had a moment of weakness, I have lots of them, but now this is the end of feeling flattered and having moments of weakness. To mark the occasion in a suitably unambiguous way I’ve brought along a few newspapers with me. I’m going to place them on the floor in front of the rostrum and have a shit. I’ve saved it up for a few days so that I can make the point with force. So here we go. Right. Oooh. There we are. Now I’ll just wipe my arse and that’s that. May I now pass over to the second nominee, Stein Mehren? Thank you.

I erased that, went to the kitchenette, filled the kettle, poked a spoon into the jar of freeze-dried coffee, loosened some clumps and sprinkled them into the cup, which I filled with boiling water straight afterwards. Then it was on with my outdoor clothes and out to the bench opposite the hospital across the street, where I smoked three cigarettes in quick succession while observing people and cars passing by. The sky was a dreary grey, the air cold and raw and the snow by the kerb dark with exhaust fumes.

I took out my mobile and tapped to and fro until I had written a verse I could send to Geir.

Geir, Geir, I have to say
That stiffy of yours has had its day
But fret you not
A child you begot
A girl who never says no to a lay

Then I went indoors and sat down in front of the computer again. The aversion I felt, along with the fact that there were three whole days until I had to be finished, made it difficult, if not impossible to motivate myself.

What should I say? Blah, blah, blah, *Out of the World*, blah, blah, blah, *A Time for Everything*, blah, blah, blah, happy and proud.

The mobile in my jacket pocket went off. I grabbed it and clicked on Geir's message.

> *Quite right, died in a car accident this morning. Didn't know it was already news. You can have my porn mags. I won't need them any longer. I'm stiffer now than I've ever been. Fine epitaph, by the way. But surely you can do better than that?*

Certainly can, I wrote back. *What about this?*

Here lies Geir in his final abode
He was driving his Saab when it left the road
His eyes were extinguished, his heart beat on
Yet nobody knew he'd actually gone
Though his bones were smashed, his ribcage crushed
Talk of his death was always hushed
Till the coffin was lowered and all went black
As his soul took flight, that wonderful hack!

It wasn't outrageously funny, but at least it helped to pass the time. And gave Geir a cheap laugh in his university office. After I had sent it I went to the supermarket and did some food shopping. Ate, slept for an hour on the sofa. Finished reading the first volume of *The Brothers Karamazov*, started the second, and when I had finished that it was completely dark outside and the house was filled with its early-evening sounds. I felt as I had in my childhood, when I also used to lie on my bed reading for several hours at a stretch, my head somehow cold, as though rising from a sleep, a cold sleep, in the afterglow of which my surroundings appeared hard and inhospitable. I rinsed my hands in hot water, dried them thoroughly, switched off the computer and put it in my bag, knotted a scarf around my neck, pulled a hat over my head, put on a coat and shoes, locked the door behind me, put on gloves and went into the street. I had just over half an hour before I was due to meet Geir at Pelikanen, so there was plenty of time.

The snow on the pavement was yellowish-brown with a fine-grained consistency like semolina, which meant it slipped when you stepped on it. I walked up Rådmannsgatan towards the Metro station, where it crossed

Sveavägen. It was half past six. The streets around me were as good as deserted, permeated with that elusive darkness that is only found in the gleam of electric light and which here was reflected from every window, every street lamp, across snow and tarmac, stairs and railings, parked cars and bicycles, façades, window ledges, street signs and lamp posts. I could equally well have been someone else, I thought as I walked, there was nothing in me now that felt precious enough for it not to be taken for something else. I passed Drottninggatan, which at its lower end was teeming with dark beetle-like people, descended the steps beside Observatorielunden Park, along the part of the street where there was the repugnant sign outside the Chinese restaurant exhorting us to 'guzzle', and down the stair shaft to the underground. There were perhaps thirty to forty people on the two platforms, most on their way home from work judging by the bags they were carrying. I stood where there was most space, placed my bag on the floor between my legs, leaned against the wall with one shoulder, took out my mobile and rang Yngve.

'Hello?' he said.

'Hi, Karl Ove here,' I said.

'I could see that,' he said.

'You rang?' I said.

'On Saturday, yes,' he said.

'I was going to call back, but things got a bit hectic. We had people round and then I forgot.'

'No problem,' Yngve said. 'It wasn't anything special.'

'Has the kitchen arrived yet?'

'Yes, it came today in fact. It's right beside me. And I've bought a new car.'

'Have you!'

'I had to. It's a Citroën XM, not very old. It was a hearse.'

'You're joking!'

'No, I'm not.'

'Are you going to drive around in a hearse?'

'It's been modified, of course. There isn't any room for coffins in it now. It looks quite normal.'

'Nevertheless. Just the fact that there have been *bodies* in it . . . That's the creepiest thing I've heard in a long while.'

Yngve snorted.

‘You’re so sensitive,’ he said. ‘It’s a very normal car. And I could afford it.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ I said.

There was a silence.

‘Any other news?’ I asked.

‘Nothing special. How about you?’

‘No, nothing. I was at Linda’s mother’s yesterday.’

‘Oh, yes.’

‘Yuh.’

‘And Vanja? Has she started walking yet?’

‘A couple of steps. But it’s more falling than walking, to tell the truth,’ I said.

He chuckled at the other end.

‘How are Tore and Ylva?’

‘They’re fine,’ he said. ‘Tore’s written you a letter, by the way. From school. Have you received it?’

‘No.’

‘He didn’t want to tell me what he’d written. But you’ll find out.’

‘Right.’

From the tunnel the headlights of a train came into view. A light wind swept across the platform. People began to move towards the edge.

‘The train’s coming,’ I said. ‘Talk to you soon.’

The train braked slowly in front of me. I lifted my bag and took a few steps forward.

‘OK,’ he said. ‘Take care.’

‘And you.’

The doors opened and passengers began to spill out. As I lowered my hand with the mobile someone nudged my elbow from behind and sent the phone flying into the crowd by the door – I didn’t see where, I had automatically turned to the person who had knocked me.

Where was it?

There was no clink as it hit the ground. Perhaps it had hit a foot? I crouched down and searched the platform in front of me. No telephone anywhere. Had someone kicked it further away? No, I would have noticed, I thought, standing up, and I craned my head towards those heading for the exit. Could it have fallen into someone’s bag? There was a woman walking with an open handbag hanging from her arm. Could it have landed in there? No, that sort of thing doesn’t happen.

Does it?

I began to walk after her. Could I gently tap her on the shoulder and ask to see in her bag, I’ve lost a phone, you see, and think it might have ended up there.

No, I couldn’t.

The warning signal that the doors were closing sounded. The next train wouldn’t be here for another ten minutes, I was already late, and my mobile was an old model, I had time to think before jumping through the doors, which were already half-closed. Dazed, I sat down on a seat beside a goth-clad twenty-year-old as the station lights flashed through the carriage and were suddenly replaced by pitch darkness.

Fifteen minutes later I got off at Skanstull, withdrew some cash from the ATM outside, crossed the road and went into Pelikanen. It was a classic beer hall, with benches and tables along the walls, chairs and tables close together on the black and white chequered floor, brown wooden wall panels, paintings on the plaster above them and on the ceiling, a few broad supporting pillars, also clad with brown panelling at the bottom and surrounded by benches, and a long wide bar at the end. The waiters were almost all old and wore black clothes and white aprons. There was no music, but the noise level was loud nevertheless, the buzz of voices and laughter and the clinking of cutlery and glasses lay like cloud cover above the tables, unnoticed when you had been there a while, but conspicuous and also often intrusive when you opened the door and came in from the street, when it sounded like thunder. Among the clientele there was still the odd drunk who might conceivably have been drinking here since the 1960s, the odd elderly man who had his dinner here, but they were dying out, the predominant types were, as everywhere else in Södermalm, men and women from the culture-creating middle classes. They were not too young, not too old, not too attractive, not too ugly, and they were never too drunk. Cultural correspondents, postgraduates, humanities students, employees from publishing houses, backroom staff for radio and television, the occasional actor or writer, but rarely any high-profile figures.

I stopped a few metres inside the door and scanned the clientele as I loosened my scarf and unbuttoned my jacket. Glasses sparkled, bald heads gleamed, white teeth flashed. Beer in front of all of them, an ochre colour against the brown tabletops. But I couldn't see Geir.

I walked over to one of the cloth-covered tables and sat down with my back to the wall. Five seconds later a waitress arrived and passed me a thick imitation-leather menu.

'There are two of us,' I said. 'So I'll wait before ordering food. But could I have a Staropramen in the meantime?'

'Of course,' the waitress said, a woman of about sixty with a large fleshy face and big auburn hair. 'Pale or dark?'

'Pale, thanks.'

Oh, how nice it was here. The typical pure beer hall style led my mind elsewhere, to more classical periods, not that the place came across as museum-like for that reason, there was nothing forced about the atmosphere, people came here to drink beer and chat the way they had done ever since the 1930s. This was one of Stockholm's great virtues – there were so many places from different epochs which were still in operation without their making a great song and dance about it. Van der Nootska Palace from the seventeenth century, for example, where Bellman was supposed to have got drunk for the first time, when the place was already a hundred years old – sometimes I had lunch there, I first went the day after Foreign Minister Anna Lindh had been murdered, and the mood in the town was strangely muted and wary – and then there was the eighteenth-century restaurant Den Gyldene Freden in the Old Town, the nineteenth-century Tennstopet and Berns Salonger, where the Red Room described by Strindberg was to be found, not to mention the beautiful art nouveau Gondolen bar, which stood, unaltered from the 1920s, on top of the Katharina Lift with a panorama of the whole town, where you felt as though you were on board an airship, or perhaps in the lounge of an Atlantic liner.

The waitress came with a tray of full glasses in her hand, put one down on a hastily lobbed beer mat, smiled and continued towards the many noisy tables, where she, perhaps once every second, was greeted with some witty comment.

I raised the glass to my mouth and felt the froth touch my lips, the cold slightly bitter liquid fill my mouth – which was so unprepared for all this taste that a shiver ran through me – and slip down my throat.

Ahh.

When you visualised the future and conjured up a world in which urban life had spread everywhere and man had achieved his long-desired symbiosis with the machine, you never took account of the simplest elements, beer for example, so golden and flavoursome and robust, made from grain in the field and hops in the meadow, or bread, or beetroot with its sweet but dark earthy taste, all this which we had always eaten and drunk at tables made of wood, inside windows through which beams of sunlight fell. What did people do in those seventeenth-century palaces, with their liveried servants, high-heeled shoes and powdered wigs pulled down over skulls full of seventeenth-century thoughts, what else if not drink beer and wine, eat bread and meat and piss and shit? The same applied to the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Conceptions of humanity changed constantly, conceptions of the world and nature too, all manner of strange ideas and beliefs emerged and vanished, useful and useless objects were discovered, science penetrated ever deeper into the world's mysteries, machines grew in number, speeds increased and ever greater areas of old lifestyles were abandoned, but no one dreamed of discarding beer or changing it. Malt, hops, water. Field, meadow, stream. And basically that was how it was with everything. We were rooted in the archaic past, nothing radical about us, our bodies or needs had not changed since the first human saw the light of day somewhere in Africa 40,000 years ago or however long *Homo sapiens* had existed. But we imagined it was different, and so strong was our imaginative power we not only believed that but we also organised ourselves accordingly, as we sat getting drunk in our cafés and darkened clubs, and dancing our dances that presumably were even more clumsy than those performed, shall we say, 25,000 years ago in the glow of a fire somewhere along the Mediterranean coast.

How could the notion that we were modern even arise when people were dropping all around us, infected with illnesses for which there were no remedies? Who can be modern with a brain tumour? How could we believe we were modern if we knew that everyone would soon be lying somewhere in the ground and rotting?

I raised my glass to my mouth again and took long deep draughts.

How I loved drinking. I barely had half a glass before my brain would start toying with the thought of really going for it this time. Just sit there knocking them back. But should I?

No, I shouldn't.

The few minutes I was there a regular stream of people came through the door. Most of them did as I had done, they stopped a few metres inside and studied the clientele while fumbling with their coats.

At the back of the last crowd I recognised a face. Yes, it was Thomas!

I waved to him, and he came over.

'Hi, Thomas,' I said.

'Hi, Karl Ove,' he said, shaking hands. 'It's been a long time.'

'Yes, it has. Everything OK with you?'

'Yes, pretty good. How about you?'

'Yup, everything's fine.'

'I'm meeting some people here. They're over there in the corner. Join us if you want.'

'Thanks, but I'm waiting for Geir.'

'Right! Yes, I think he said he was meeting you. I talked to him yesterday. I'll come over and say hello afterwards if that's OK.'

'Of course,' I said. 'See you.'

Thomas was one of Geir's friends, and the one I indisputably liked best. He was in his early fifties, bore a striking resemblance to Lenin, everything from the beard and the bald patch to the Mongolian eyes matched to a T, and he was a photographer. He'd had three books published, the first pictures of coastal rangers, the second pictures of boxers – it was in this setting he had met Geir – and the last a series of pictures of animals, objects, landscapes and people over whom there hung a dark shadow and where the emptiness in and around them was the most striking feature. Thomas was friendly and undemanding in social contexts – there was, as it were, nothing to lose when you spoke to him, perhaps because he didn't take himself very seriously, although he was self-confident, or possibly that was the reason why. He cared about others, that was the impression he gave. However, in his work he was extremely stringent and demanding, always aiming for perfection, with photos orientated towards stylisation rather than improvisation. The ones I liked best were those occupying the middle ground: improvised stylisation, chance frozen in time. They were brilliant. Some of the boxing photos reminded me of ancient Greek sculptures in the balance of the bodies and the fact that they were caught in activities outside the ring; others possessed a great sombreness, and violence, of course. I had bought two of his photos in the winter, they were going to be presents for Yngve's fortieth birthday. I had sat in Thomas's lab flicking through the series that made up his last book, humming and hawing for a long time, but in the end I chose two. When I gave them to Yngve I could see from his face he didn't really like them, so I said he could choose two others, and I would keep the first two, which are now hanging in my office. They were brilliant but also sinister, for what they exuded was death, so I could well understand that Yngve didn't want them in his living room, even though of course I was a little offended. More than a little, actually. When I went to pick up the photos Yngve had finally chosen and I knocked on the door of the cellar, with massive sixteenth-century stone walls, in the Old Town, where Thomas had his lab, his colleague, an unkempt somewhat shabbily dressed man in his sixties, opened the door. Thomas wasn't there, but I could go down and wait if I wanted. It was Anders Petersen, the photographer Thomas shared his lab with, who for me was best known as the creator of the photo on Tom Waits' record *Rain Dogs*, but who'd had a name since the 70s, when he broke through with *Café Lehmitz*. His work was raw, intimate, chaotic and as close to real life as you could get. He sat down on the sofa in the room above the labs, asked if I wanted some coffee, I didn't, and he resumed his activity, leafing through a pile of contact prints and humming. I didn't want to get in the way or appear intrusive, so I stood in front of a board covered with photos and looked at them for a while, not untouched by his aura, which might have dissolved if there had been more people in the room, but there were just the two of us, and I was aware of every movement. He radiated naïvety, but not as though from inexperience; quite the contrary, he gave every impression of having experienced a great deal, it was more as if all the experiences were there but he hadn't drawn the consequences, as though they had left him unaffected, so to speak. That probably was not the case, but it was the feeling I had when meeting his gaze and watching him sit there working. Thomas returned a few minutes later and seemed glad to see me, the way he undoubtedly was with everyone. He grabbed some coffee, we sat down on a sofa by the stairs, he produced the photos, scrutinised them carefully one last time, put them in their plastic covers, which he placed in an envelope, while I passed the envelope of money to him across the table so discreetly that I wasn’t even sure he had noticed. There was something about private cash transactions that embarrassed me, the natural balance was upset in some way, or even rendered null and void, without my quite knowing what it was all about. I put the photos in my bag, we chatted about this and that; apart from Geir, we had another connection, Marie, the woman he lived with, who was a poet, she had taught Linda at Biskops-Arnö many years ago and now she was a kind of mentor to Linda’s friend Cora. She was a good poet, classical in a way; truth and beauty were not irreconcilable entities in her poems, and meaning was not just something to do with language. She had translated some Jon Fosse plays into Swedish and was working now on poems by Steinar Opstad, among other things. I had only met her a couple of times, but to me she seemed to have many sides, there was a wealth of nuance in her personality, and you intuited a psychological depth with no apparent signs of neuroticism, the constant companion of sensitivity of course, at least not obtrusively. But when she stood opposite me that was not what engaged my mind, for in her right eye the pupil seemed to have detached itself and slipped down, it lay somewhere between the iris and the white of the eye, and this was so fundamentally alarming that it completely dominated my first impression of her.

Thomas said they would invite Linda and me to dinner one evening, I said that would be very nice, got up and took my bag, he got up as well and we shook hands, and since it did not appear that he had seen the envelope containing the money I told him, there’s the money for the photos, he nodded and thanked me as though I had forced him to express this gratitude, and slightly ashamed I went up the stairs and out into the Old Town’s wintry streets.

That was almost two months ago now. I wasn’t much bothered by the fact that no invitation had appeared yet; one of the first things I had heard about Thomas was that he was very forgetful. I am too, so I didn’t hold that against him.

When he sat down at a table at the very back of the room it was as a thin well-dressed man wearing a Lenin mask. I took the yellow Tiedemanns pouch of tobacco from my bag, rolled a cigarette with fingertips that were for some reason so sweaty that shreds kept getting stuck to them, swallowed long gulps of beer, lit the roll-up and through the window saw Geir's figure passing by in the street.

He spotted me as soon as he came in the door, but still surveyed the room as he walked towards the table, as though searching for other options. Not unlike a fox, one might imagine, incapable of selecting a place where there weren't several exits.

'Why don't you answer your bloody phone?' he said, stretching out his hand and meeting my eyes for a fleeting instant. I got up, shook hands and then sat down again.

'Thought we said seven o'clock,' I said. 'It's gone half past now.'

'Why do you think I wanted to call you? To tell you to mind the gap between the train and the platform?'

'I lost my mobile at the Metro station,' I said.

'Lost it?' he queried.

'Yes, someone knocked my elbow and sent it flying. I reckon it must have landed in a bag because I never heard it hit the ground. And a woman was passing with an open bag at precisely that moment.'

'You're unbelievable,' he said. 'I assume you didn't ask her if you could have it back?'

'No-o. Because, firstly, the train arrived at that precise moment and, secondly, I wasn't sure that was what had happened. And you can't just ask women if you can have a rummage through their handbags.'

'Have you ordered?' he asked.

I shook my head. He took hold of the menu and looked around for a waiter.

'She's over there by the pillar,' I said. 'What are you going to have?'

'What do you reckon?'

'Pork and onion sauce maybe?'

'Yes, maybe.'

Whenever I met Geir there was always a distance, it was as though he couldn't absorb the fact that I was there, so he tried to keep me at arm's length. He didn't meet my eyes, he didn't pursue my topics of conversation, he seemed to throttle them by turning his attention to something else, he could be sarcastic and his whole being radiated arrogance. Sometimes that put me out, and when I was put out, I said nothing, which he could easily find it in himself to criticise. 'My God, you're hard graft today, you are,'

‘Are you going to sit there gaping into eternity all evening?’ or ‘Well, you were fun this evening, Karl Ove.’ It was a kind of preliminary psychological skirmish he orchestrated inside himself, for after a while, perhaps half an hour, perhaps an hour, perhaps only five minutes, he changed, cast his defences aside and seemed to attune to the situation, become attentive, considerate and present, and the laughter, hitherto cold and hard, was warm and sincere, in a transformation that also encompassed his voice and eyes. When we spoke on the telephone there were no defences, then we chatted on an equal footing from the moment the receiver was lifted. He knew more about me than anyone else, in the same way that probably, but it was by no means certain, I knew more about him than anyone else.

The difference between us, which had diminished over the years but was never completely erased because it had nothing to do with opinions or attitudes, it was basic character, buried deep in the forever un-influence-able, manifested itself in all its clarity in a present Geir gave me after I had finished writing *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*. It was a knife, the model that US Marines use, which couldn’t be used for much else apart from killing someone. He didn’t do this as a joke, it was simply the finest object he could imagine. I was pleased, but the knife, so intimidating with its polished steel, sharp blade and deep indentations to enable blood to flow, remained in its box behind some books on an office shelf. He may have realised how alien this object was to me because when *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* came out a few months later, he gave me another present, a replica edition of an eighteenth-century *Encyclopaedia Britannica* – profoundly fascinating for all the objects and phenomena it did not describe since they did not yet exist – which of course was more up my street.

He took out a polysleeve containing a few sheets of paper and passed it to me.

‘It’s just three pages,’ he said. ‘Could you read it and tell me if it’s better?’

I nodded, pulled the sheets from the sleeve, stubbed out my cigar-ette and began to read. It was the opening of the essay I had been looking for when I went through his manuscript. It was based on Karl Jaspers’ concept of *Grenzsituationen*, border situations. The point where life is lived at maximum intensity, the antithesis of everyday life in other words, close to death.

‘This is good,’ I said when I had finished.

‘Sure?’

‘Definitely.’

‘Good,’ he said, replacing the papers in the sleeve and dropping it in the bag on the chair beside him. ‘You’ll get more to read later.’

‘I’m sure I will.’

He pulled his chair closer, rested his elbows on the table and folded his hands. I lit another cigarette.

‘Your journalist rang me today, by the way,’ he said.

‘Who’s that?’ I asked. ‘Oh, that *Aftenposten* guy.’

Since the journalist was writing a portrait he had asked if he could talk to a couple of my friends. I had given him Tore’s number, who was a bit of a loose cannon in that respect, likely to say anything at all about me, and Geir’s, as he knew more about my present situation.

‘What did you say then?’ I asked.

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing? Why not?’

‘Well, what should I have said? If I’d told him the truth about you, he would have either not understood it or totally distorted it. So I said as little as possible.’

‘What was the point of that?’

‘How should I know? It was you who gave him my number . . .’

‘Yes, so that you could say something. Anything, I told you, it doesn’t matter what they print.’

Geir eyed me.

‘You don’t mean that,’ he said. ‘Well, actually, I did say one thing about you. Perhaps the most important, in fact.’

‘And that was?’

‘That you have high morals. Do you know what the idiot answered? “Everyone has.” Can you imagine that? That’s exactly what they *don’t* have. Next to *no one* has high morals or even knows what they are.’

‘That just means he has a different interpretation of morals from you.’

‘Yes, but he was only after a bit of scandal. A few anecdotes about how drunk you once were and stuff like that.’

‘Oh well,’ I said. ‘We’ll see tomorrow. It can’t be *that* awful. This is *Aftenposten* after all.’

Geir, sitting on the other side of the table, shook his head. Then his eyes went in search of the waitress, who came over at once.

‘Pork and onion sauce, please,’ he said in Swedish. ‘And a pale Staropramen.’

‘I’ll have the meatballs, please,’ I said and raised my glass. ‘And another of these.’

‘Thank you, gentlemen,’ the waitress said, putting her tiny notebook in her breast pocket and heading for the kitchen, which you could glimpse through the ever-swinging doors.

‘What do *you* mean by high morals?’ I asked.

‘Well, you’re a deeply ethical person. There is an ethical foundation at the base of your personality and it is irreducible. You react in a purely physical way to inappropriate behaviour, the shame that overwhelms you is not abstract or conceptual but a hundred-per-cent physical, and you cannot escape it. You’re not a dissembler. Nor a moralist though. You know I have a predilection for Victorianism, their system with the front stage where everything is visible and a back stage where everything is hidden. I don’t think that kind of life makes anyone happier, but there is more life. You’re a Protestant through and through. Protestantism, that’s inner life, that’s being at one with yourself. You couldn’t live a double life even if you wanted to, it’s not something you can make happen. There’s a one-to-one relationship between life and morality in you. So you are ethically unassailable. Most people are Peer Gynt. They fudge their way along life’s road, don’t they? You don’t. Everything you do you do with the uttermost seriousness and conscientiousness. Have you ever skipped a line of the manuscripts you read, for example? Has it ever happened that you haven’t read them from the first page to the last?’

‘No.’

‘No, and there’s something in that. You can’t fudge anything. You *can’t*. You’re an arch-Protestant. And as I’ve said before, you’re an auditor of happiness. If you have some success, generally something others would die for, you just cross it off in the ledger. You’re not happy about anything. When you’re at one with yourself, which you are almost all the time, you’re much, much more disciplined than me. And you know what I’m like with all my systems. There are unmapped areas in your mind where you can lose control, but when you don't go there, and nowadays invariably you don't, you are absolutely ruthless in your morality. You are exposed to temptations far more than me or anyone else. If you had been me you would have lived a double life. But you can't do that. You are doomed to a simple life. Ha ha ha! You're no Peer Gynt and I think that is the heart of your nature. Your ideal is the innocent, innocence. And what is innocence? I'm right at the other end. Baudelaire writes about it, about Virginia, do you remember, the picture of pure innocence, which is confronted with the caricature, and she hears coarse laughter and realises that something dishonourable has happened, but she doesn't know what. She doesn't know! She folds her wings around herself. And then we're back to the painting by Caravaggio, you know, *The Cardsharps*, where he's tricked by all the others. That's you. That's innocence as well. And in that innocence, which in your case also lies in the past, the thirteen-year-old you wrote about in *Out of the World*, and the crazy nostalgia trip you have for the 1970s . . . Linda has some of this too. How was it she was described? Like a mixture of Madame Bovary and Kaspar Hauser?'

'Yes.'

'Kaspar Hauser, he's the enigma of course. Now I never met your previous wife, Tonje, but I've seen photos of her, and although she's not like Linda there was something innocent about her, her appearance. Not that I think she is innocent, necessarily, but she gives that impression. Innocence of this kind is typical of you. Purity and innocence don't interest me. However, it's very clear in you. You're a deeply moral and a deeply innocent person. What is innocence? It is that which has not been touched by the world, that which has not been destroyed, it is like water into which a stone has never been thrown. It's not that you don't have lusts, that you don't have desire, for you do, it's just that you conserve innocence. Your insanely huge longing for beauty comes in here as well. It wasn't by chance that you chose to write about angels. That's the purest of the pure. You can't get purer than that.'

'But not in my novel. There it's about the bodily, the physical side of them.'

'Well, nevertheless, they are the very symbol of purity. And of the fall. But you have made them human, allowed them to fall, not into sin, but into human-ness.’

‘If you take an abstract view of this, in a way you’re right. The thirteen-year-old, that was innocence, and what happened to it? It had to be made physical.’

‘What a way to put it!’

‘Yeah, well, OK. She had to be screwed then. And the angels had to become human. So there’s a connection. But all this takes place in the subconscious. Deep down. So, in that sense, it’s not real. I might be heading in that direction, but I’m not aware of it. Of course, I didn’t know I had written a book about shame before reading the blurb on the cover. And I didn’t think about innocence and the thirteen-year-old until long after.’

‘It’s there though. Perfectly obvious and not a shred of doubt.’

‘OK. But hidden from me. And it strikes me there’s something you’re forgetting. Innocence is related to stupidity. What you’re talking about is stupidity, isn’t it? About ignorance?’

‘No, no, far from it,’ Geir said. ‘Innocence and purity have become a *symbol* of stupidity, but that’s nowadays. We live in a culture where the person with the most experience wins. It’s sick. Everyone knows which way modernism is going, you create a form by breaking up a form, in an endless regression; just let it continue, and for as long as it does, experience will have the upper hand. The unique feature of our times, the pure or independent act, is, as you know, to renounce, not to accept. Accepting is too easy. There’s nothing to be achieved by it. That’s more or less where I place you. Almost saint-like, in other words.’

I smiled. The waitress came with our beer.

‘*Skål,’* I said.

‘*Skål,’* he said.

I took a long swig, wiped the froth from my mouth with the back of my hand and put the glass on the beer mat in front of me. There was something uplifting about the light, golden colour, it seemed to me. I looked at Geir.

‘Saint-like?’ I repeated.

‘Yes. Saints in the Catholic faith could have been close to your way of believing and thinking and acting.’

‘You don’t think you’re going a little too far now?’

‘No, not at all. For me, what you do is utter mutilation.’

‘Of what?’

‘Of life, of opportunities, of living, of creating. Creating life, not literature. For me, you live in an almost frightening asceticism. Or rather, you wallow in asceticism. As I see it, it’s extremely unusual. Extremely deviant. I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone, or heard of anyone . . . well, as I said, then I have to go back to the saints or the Church fathers.’

‘Stop right there.’

‘You did ask. There’s no other conceptual framework for you. There are no external characteristics, there’s no morality at stake, there’s no social morality, that’s not where it is. It’s in religion. Without a god though, that’s clear. You’re the only person I know who can take communion despite not believing in God and not commit blasphemy. The only person I know.’

‘No one else you know has done it, I suppose?’

‘They have, but not with purity! I did it when I got confirmed. I did it for money. Then I renounced the Church. What did I spend the money on? Well, I bought a knife. But that’s not what we were talking about. What were we talking about again?’

‘Me.’

‘Yes, that’s right. You have something in common with Beckett, in fact. Not in the way you write, but in the saintliness. It’s what Cioran says somewhere: “Compared with Beckett I’m a whore.” Ha ha ha! I think that’s absolutely spot on. Ha ha ha! And by the way Cioran was reckoned to be one of the most incorruptible people around. I look at your life and regard it as totally wasted. For that matter, I think that of everyone, but your life is even more wasted because there is more to waste. Your morality is not about tax declarations, as that idiot thought, but about your nature. Your nature, nothing less. And it is this enormous discrepancy between you and me which allows us to talk every day. *Sympatio* is the right term for it. I can sympathise with your fate. Because it is a fate, there is nothing you can do about it. All I can do is watch. Nothing can be done for you. There is nothing anyone can do. I feel sorry for you. But I can only view it as a tragedy unfolding at close quarters. As you know, a tragedy is when a great person goes through bad times. In contrast to a comedy, which is when a bad person goes through good times.’

‘Why tragedy?’

‘Because it is so joyless. Because your life is so joyless. You have such unbelievable reserves and so much talent, which stops there. It becomes art, but never more than that. You’re like Midas. Everything he touches turns to gold, but he gains no pleasure from it. Wherever he goes everything around him sparkles and glitters. Others search and search, and when they find a nugget, they sell it to acquire life, splendour, music, dance, enjoyment, luxury, or at least a bit of pussy, right, throw themselves at a woman just to forget they exist for an hour or two. What you lust for is innocence and this is an impossible equation. Lust and innocence can never be compatible. The ultimate is no longer the ultimate when you’ve stuck your dick in it. You have been allotted the Midas role, you can have everything and how many people do you think can have that? Almost no one. How many would turn it down? Even fewer. One, to my knowledge. If this isn’t a tragedy, then I don’t know what is. Could your journalist have made anything of this, do you reckon?’

‘No.’

‘No. He has his journo scales with which he weighs everything. Everyone is lumped into the same pot by journalists. That’s the basis of the whole system. But like that he won’t get close, not even close, to you or who you are. So we can forget it.’

‘It’s the same for everyone, Geir.’

‘We-ell, maybe, maybe not. Your distorted self-image and your yearning to be like everyone else also come into this.’

‘That’s what you say. I say that the picture you paint of me is one only you could have painted. Yngve or mum or any one of my relatives or friends wouldn’t have had a clue what you were talking about.’

‘That doesn’t make it any less true, does it?’

‘No, not necessarily, but I’m reminded of what she said about you once, that you big up everyone around you because you want your own life to be great.’

‘But it is. Everyone’s life is as great as they make it. I’m the hero in my own life, aren’t I. Well-known people, famous people, people everyone knows, they aren’t well known or famous in themselves, in their own right; someone has made them well known, someone has written about them, filmed them, talked about them, analysed them, admired them. That’s how they become great for others. But it’s just scene-setting. Should my scene-setting be any the less true? No, quite the opposite, because the people I know are in the same room as me, I can touch them, look them in the eye when we talk, we meet in the here and now, and of course we don't do that with any of all those names swirling around us all the time. I'm the Underground Man and you're Icarus.'

The waitress came towards us with the food. A piece of pork protruded from a sea of white onion sauce like an island on the plate she put down in front of Geir. On mine there was a dark heap of meatballs beside bright green mushy peas and red lingonberry sauce, all in a thick cream sauce. The potatoes were served in a separate dish.

'Thank you,' I said, looking up at the waitress. 'May I have another please?'

'A Staro, yes,' she said, and looked at Geir. He unfolded the serviette over his lap and shook his head.

'I'll wait, thanks.'

I drained the last drop from the glass and put three potatoes on my plate.

'That wasn't a compliment in case you thought it was,' Geir said.

'What wasn't?' I said.

'The saint image. No modern person wants to be a saint. What is a saintly life? Suffering, sacrifice and death. Who the hell would want a great inner life if they don't have any outer life? People only think of what introversion can give them in terms of external life and success. What is the modern view of a prayer? There is only one kind of prayer for modern people and that is as an expression of desire. You don't pray unless there is something you want.'

'I want loads of things.'

'Yes, of course. But they don't give you any pleasure. Not to strive for a happy life is the most provocative thing you can do. And again this is not a compliment. Not at all. I want life. It's all that counts.'

'Talking to you is like going to the devil for therapy,' I said, putting the dish of potatoes in front of him.

'But the devil always loses in the end,' he said.

'We don't know,' I said. 'It's not the end yet.'

'You're right. But there's nothing to indicate that he's going to win. At any rate, not that I can see.'

'Even when God is no longer among us?'

'Among us is the right expression. Before, he wasn't here, he was above us. Now we've internalised him. Incorporated him.'

We ate in silence for a few minutes.

'Well?' Geir said. 'How has your day been?'

'It hasn't really been a day,' I said. 'I tried to write a speech, you know the one, but it was just rubbish, so I've been reading instead.'

'I suppose you could have done worse.'

'Yes, probably. But I've noticed how angry I am at all that. You'll never understand, by the way.'

'What's "all that"?' Geir asked, putting down his glass.

'In this particular case it's the feeling I have when I'm forced to write about my two books. I'm *forced* to pretend it's meaningful, otherwise it's impossible to talk about them, and it's a bit like patting yourself on the back, isn't it. It's repugnant because then I have to stand there talking in complimentary terms about my own books, and those listening are actually *interested*. Why? Afterwards they come to me wanting to tell me how fantastic the books are and what an unbelievably wonderful talk it was, and I don't want to meet their eyes, I don't want to see them, I want to escape from the hell, because I'm a prisoner there, do you understand? There is no worse fate than being subjected to bloody praise. Georg Johannesen spoke about "praise competence". The distinction is redundant, it implies that valuable praise *exists*, but it doesn't. And the higher the authority, the worse it is. At first I'm embarrassed, I have nothing to hide behind, and then I lose my temper. When people start treating me in that special way. You know what I mean. Oh no, shit, you don't know what I mean at all! You're right at the bottom of the ladder, aren't you! You *want* to climb. Ha ha ha.'

'Ha ha ha.'

'That stuff about praise is not quite true, by the way,' I continued. 'If you say something is good, that has meaning. If Geir praises me, it has meaning. And Linda, of course, and Tore and Espen and Thure Erik. All those who are close to me. It's all the outsiders I'm talking about. Where I no longer have any control. I don't know what it is . . . All I know is that success is not to be trusted. I notice that I get angry just talking about it.'

'There are two things you've said that I've taken note of and have made me think a lot,' Geir said, looking at me with his knife and fork hovering over his plate. 'The first was when you were talking about Harry Martinson's suicide. He cut open his stomach after receiving the Nobel Prize. You said you could understand exactly why.'

‘Yes, but that’s obvious,’ I said. ‘Getting the Nobel Prize for literature is the greatest dishonour of all for a writer. And his prize was systematically called into question. He was Swedish, he was a member of the Swedish Academy, it was clear there was some kind of cronyism going on, that he didn’t really deserve it. And if he didn’t deserve it, the whole affair was a mockery. You have to be bloody strong if you’re going to get over that sort of mockery. And for Martinson, with all his inferiority complexes, it must have been unbearable. If that was why he did it. What was the second?’

‘Hm?’

‘You said there were two things I’d said which had stuck in your mind. What was the second?’

‘Oh, that was Jastrau in Tom Kristensen’s *Havoc*. Do you remember?’

I shook my head.

‘There’s no safer place for secrets than in you,’ he said. ‘You forget everything. Your brain’s like Swiss cheese without the cheese. You told me *Havoc* was the scariest book you’d ever read. You said the fall in it wasn’t a fall. He just let go, let himself go, gave up everything he had, to drink, and in the book that seemed like a real alternative. A good alternative, that is. Just letting go of everything you have, letting yourself go. Like from the quayside.’

‘Now I remember. He writes so well about what it’s like to be drunk. How fantastic it can be. And then you have the feeling it’s not such a big deal. I hadn’t thought about the lazy, unresisting side of the fall before. At the time I saw it as something dramatic, something far-reaching. And it was shocking to think of it as everyday routine, arbitrary and maybe even wonderful. Because it is indeed wonderful. The second day of inebriation, for example. The thoughts that come into your mind . . .’

‘Ha ha ha!’

‘You could never let go,’ I said. ‘Could you?’

‘No. Could *you*?’

‘No.’

‘Ha ha ha! But almost everyone I know has done. Stefan boozes all the time on his farm, doesn’t he. Boozes, grills whole pigs and drives a tractor. When I was at home this summer Odd Gunnar was drinking whisky from a milk tumbler. The pretext for filling it to the brim was that I was visiting him. But I didn’t drink. And then there’s Tony. But he’s a drug addict, that’s a bit different.’

From one of the tables on the other side a woman who’d had her back to us until now stood up, and as she headed for the door where the toilets were I saw it was Gilda. In the few seconds I was within her sight I bowed my head and studied the table. Not that I had anything against her, I just didn’t want to talk to her right now. She had been one of Linda’s best friends for years, they had even lived together for a while, and at the beginning of our relationship we spent quite a bit of time in one another’s company. She’d had a lot to do with the Vertigo publishing house for a period, I never quite worked out what she did there, but at any rate there were photographs of her on one of their covers, a book by the Marquis de Sade; otherwise she worked at Hedengrens bookshop a few days a week, and recently she had started a company with a girlfriend who also had some connection with literature. She was unpredictable and volatile, but not in any pathological way, it was more a surfeit of life, which meant you never knew what she was going to say or do. One side of Linda was a perfect match. The way they met was typical. Linda had spoken to her in the street, they had never seen each other before, but Linda thought Gilda looked interesting, went over to her and they became friends. Gilda had wide hips, a large bosom, dark hair and Latin features, in appearance she was reminiscent of a 1950s female type, and had been courted by more than one well-known Stockholm writer, but a conspicuous girlishness often shone through this façade, an ill-mannered sullen wild quality. Cora, a more fragile nature, had once said she was frightened of her. Gilda was with a literature student, Kettil, who had just begun a doctorate. Having had a proposal about Herman Bang turned down, he had gone for what they wanted, what they would not reject, namely Holocaust literature, which went through without a problem of course. The last time we had seen each other had been at a party at their place, he had just been to a seminar in Denmark where he had met a Norwegian who studied in Bergen, what was his name? I had asked, Jordal he had said, not Preben by any chance? I had said, yes, that was his name, Preben Jordal. I said he was a friend of mine, we had edited *Vagant* together and I had a high opinion of him, he had both wit and flair, to which Kettil answered nothing, and from the way he said nothing, the slight embarrassment that came over him, a sudden urge to fill my glass and thus create a distance to make the breakdown in communication less obvious, I gathered that Preben might not have mentioned me in equally glowing terms. Then the thought flashed through my mind that he had panned my last book with such vehemence, and twice at that, first in *Vagant*, afterwards in *Morgenbladet*, and that this must have been the topic of conversation in Denmark. Kettil was ill at ease because my name had been dragged through the mud. True, this was little more than a theory, yet I was fairly sure there was something in it. It was strange that I hadn't remembered the panning straight away, but no stranger than my recognition of what lay behind it: Preben belonged to the Bergen section of my memory, that was where he was, while the panning belonged to the Stockholm period, the present, and was tied to the book, not the life around it. Oh, it had hurt, it had been like being stabbed in the heart, or perhaps back would be more apt since I knew Preben. However, I didn't blame Preben so much, more the fact that my book was not infallible, it was not immune to that kind of criticism, in other words, it was not good enough, and at the same time I was also afraid this verdict would be the one that would be passed on the book, these words the ones that would be remembered.

But surely that wasn't why I didn't want to talk to Gilda? Or was it? For me incidents like this lay like a shadow over all those involved. No, it was her company I didn't want to hear about. It was some kind of link between publishing houses and bookshops, as far as I was informed. Some event management stuff? Festivals and stunts . . . ? Whatever it was I didn't want to hear about it.

'Nice evening at your place, by the way,' Geir said.

'Was that the last time we saw each other?'

'Why?'

'That was five weeks ago. Strange you should bring it up now.'

'Ah, I see. I was talking about it with Christina yesterday, perhaps that's why. We were thinking of inviting you all over soon.'

'Good idea,' I said. 'By the way, Thomas is here. Have you seen him? He's at the back there.'

'Oh? Have you talked to him?'

'Briefly. He said he'd come over later.'

'He's reading your book now. Did he say?'

I shook my head.

‘He really liked the essay about angels. Thought it should have been much longer. But that’s typical of him not to say anything to you. He must have forgotten you wrote it. Ha ha ha! He’s so terribly forgetful.’

‘I suppose he’s just immersed inside himself,’ I said. ‘The same happens to me. And, for Christ’s sake, I’m only thirty-five. Do you remember when I came here with Thure Erik? We stayed here drinking all day and night. As the hours passed he began to talk about his own life. He told me about his childhood, his mother, father and sisters, about generations of his family. Firstly he’s pretty damned good at storytelling, and secondly there were a couple of quite sensational things he said. However, even though I listened very carefully and even though I thought to myself, this is bloody fantastic, by the following day I had forgotten everything. All that was left was the narrative structure. I remembered that he had talked about his childhood, his father and his family. And that it had been sensational. But I couldn’t remember *what* it was that constituted the “sensational”. Not a thing! A black hole!’

‘You were drunk.’

‘That’s got nothing to do with it. I remember Tonje was always talking about something terrible that had happened in her life, many years ago, she was forever harking back to it, but she wouldn’t say what it was, we didn’t know each other well enough, it was *the* great secret of her life. Do you understand? Two years went by before she finally told me what it was. There wasn’t any alcohol involved. And I was completely and utterly present, I listened attentively to every word she had to say, and afterwards we discussed it at length. But then it was gone. A few months later nothing was left. I don’t remember a thing. And that put me in an extremely tricky position because this was so unbelievably painful for her, it was such a raw topic she would have left me if I’d said I was sorry, I couldn’t remember anything. So then I had to pretend I knew the whole story whenever it came up. And this forgetfulness can arise anywhere. Once, for example, I suggested to Fredrik at Damm that they should publish a book of Norwegian short prose, and in his next email he continued the conversation without referring directly to the idea and I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about. It had totally gone from my mind. There are writers who have told me what they are writing about with great passion and intensity, and I have responded, chatted with equal passion for perhaps half an hour or an hour at a stretch. A few days later, totally gone. I *still* don't know what my mother actually wrote her dissertation on. At a certain point you can no longer ask without causing great offence, right, so I pretend. I sit there nodding and smiling, wondering what the hell it was again. It's like that for me in all areas of life. You may think it's because I don't care enough, or I'm not present enough, but that's not true, I do care and I am present. Nevertheless, puff, gone. Yngve, on the other hand, can remember everything. Everything! Linda remembers everything. And you remember everything. However, to complicate matters, there are also things that have never been said or have never happened which I'm sure actually took place. Thure Erik again: do you remember when I met Henrik Hovland at Biskops-Arnö?'

'Naturally.'

'It turned out that he came from a farm very close to Thure Erik's. He knew them well and talked a bit about Thure Erik's father. Then I said that Thure Erik's father was dead now. Oh? said Henrik Hovland, it was the first he had heard. But he didn't have much contact with people in the area any more, he said. Nevertheless, he was obviously surprised. He had no doubt it was true. Why would I say Thure Erik's father was dead if he wasn't? Because he wasn't. The next time I met Thure Erik, he spoke about his father in the present tense, with no hesitation or anguish. He was very much alive. So what had made me think he was dead? Enough for me to proclaim it as a fact? I do not know. I haven't a clue. But it meant I was nervous whenever I met Thure Erik after that, for what if he had bumped into Hovland and Henrik had offered his condolences, and Thure Erik had sent him a bemused look, what was he talking about, well, your father, he died so suddenly, didn't he, my father, where the hell did you get that from? Er, Knausgaard told me. Is he alive? Is that what you're saying? But Knausgaard said . . . ? No one on earth would accept I said that by mistake, that I really believed it, because why would I believe it, no one could have told me, no other fathers of people I knew had died, so there was no chance of my being confused. It was pure fantasy, but I thought it was the truth. It's happened a few times, but not because I'm a mythomaniac, I really do believe what I say. God knows how often I go round believing facts that are just nonsense!'

‘Good job I’m such a monomaniac and talk about the same stuff all the time. In that way I hammer it home and you can’t make a mistake.’

‘Are you sure? When was the last time you spoke to your father?’

‘Ha ha.’

‘It’s a disability. It’s like poor vision. Over there, is that a person? Or a small tree? Ouch, I’ve just bumped into something. A table. Aha, it’s a restaurant! Keep close to the wall on the way to the bar. Whoops! Something soft? A person? Sorry! Do you *know* me? Oh, Knut Arild! Oh shit! I didn’t recognise you straight away . . . And the terrible thought that arises from this is that everyone has such disabilities. Their inner, private, secret black holes which they expend so much energy on trying to hide. And that the world is full of inner cripples bumping into one another. Yes, behind all the attractive and less attractive, though at least normal and non-frightening faces we confront. Not psychologically or spiritually or psychically, but in a conscious manner, physiognomically. Defects in thoughts, consciousness, memory, perception and comprehension.’

‘But that *is* how it is. Ha ha ha! That’s how it *is*! Look around you, man! Wake up! How many comprehension deficiencies do you think there are just in here? Why do you think we have established forms for everything we do? Forms of conversation, address, lectures, serving, eating, drinking, walking, sitting and even sex. You name it, it’s there. Why do you think normality is so sought after if not for this very reason? It’s the only place where we can be sure of meeting. But even there we don’t meet. Arne Næss once described how, when he knew he was going to meet an ordinary, normal person, he would make a supreme effort to be ordinary and normal while this normal person, from his side, presumably exerted himself to the utmost to reach Næss. Yet they would never meet, according to Næss, the chasm that existed between them could not be bridged. Formally, yes, but not in reality.’

‘But wasn’t it Arne Næss who also said that he could parachute from a plane anywhere on the planet and know that he would always be greeted with hospitality? Always have a meal and a bed somewhere?’

‘Yes, it was. I wrote about it in my thesis.’

‘That must be where I’ve got it from. The world is small.’

‘At least ours is,’ Geir said with a smile. ‘But he’s quite right. This is my experience too. There is a kind of minimum common humanity which you meet everywhere. In Baghdad it was very much like that.’

Gilda came behind him across the floor in low heels and a flowery summer dress.

‘Hi, Karl Ove,’ she said. ‘How are you?’

‘Hi, Gilda,’ I said. ‘Very well. How about you?’

‘Fine too. Working a lot now, you know. How are things at home? With Linda and your little daughter? It’s terrible how time has flown since we last talked. Is she OK? Is she doing well?’

‘Yes, she is. She’s busy with her course at the moment. So I’m busy taking Vanja out in the buggy during the day.’

‘And what’s that like?’

I shrugged.

‘OK.’

‘I’m wondering about it myself, you see. What it’s like to have a child. I think they’re a bit repellent. And the enormous belly and the milk in your breasts – that bothers me, to tell the truth. But Linda’s happy?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘Well, there you go. Say hello to her. I’ll ring her one day. Tell her!’

‘I will. Regards to Kettil!’

She raised a hand in a wave and went back to her seat.

‘She’s just taken her test,’ I said. ‘Did I tell you that? The first time she drove on her own she was behind a lorry and two lanes merged into one, but she thought she had time to overtake, accelerated and moved out, only to see that she couldn’t. Her car was forced against the crash barrier, ended up on its side and skidded along for several hundred metres. But she was unhurt.’

‘That one’s going to live to be an old lady,’ Geir said.

The waitress came and cleared the table. We ordered two more beers. Sat for a while without saying anything. I smoked a cigarette and manoeuvred the soft ash into a little pile in the shiny ashtray with the tip.

‘I’m paying today, just so that you know,’ I said.

‘OK,’ Geir said.

If I didn’t say straight out I was seeing to the bill he would, and when he had made up his mind it was impossible to change it. Once we had been out, all four of us, Geir and Christina and Linda and me, to a Thai restaurant at the end of Birger Jarlsgatan, and he had said he was going to pay, and I had said no, we should at least share, no, he said, I’m paying and that’s that. After the waiter had taken his card I had pulled out half the sum in cash and put it on the table in front of him. He made no move to take it, in fact, it didn’t seem as if he had even seen it. The coffee came, we drank it and as we got up to go, ten minutes later, he still hadn’t touched the money. Hey, take the money, I said, we’re sharing this one. Come on now. No, I’m paying, he repeated. It’s your money. You take it. So I had no choice but to pick up the money and stuff it back into my pocket. If I hadn’t it would have been left there, I knew. Then he smiled his most obnoxious I-knew-you-would smile. And I regretted not having paid. No sacrifice was too great for Geir when it was about not losing face. But from Christina’s face, which was so incredibly sensitive and betrayed all her thoughts, she appeared to be ashamed of him. Or at least found the situation embarrassing. I had never entered into open conflict with him. Wisely, perhaps, for there was something in him I would never defeat. If we had a competition to outstare each other, the way you do when you’re young, he would have held my stare for a week if need be. I would have held his as well, but sooner or later I would have thought this was unnecessary and looked down. He would never entertain such an idea.

‘Well,’ I said. ‘How has *your* day been?

‘I’ve been writing about the *Grenzsituation*, the border situation. To be precise, about Stockholm in the eighteenth century. How high the mortality rate was, how short their lives were and what they did with the lives they had, compared with ours. Then Cecilia came into the office wanting to chat. We went for lunch together. She had been out last night with her partner and his friend. She had flirted with the friend all evening, she said, and her partner had been livid when they got home, of course.’

‘How long have they been together?’

‘Six years.’

‘Was she thinking of leaving him?’

‘No, not at all. On the contrary, she wants children with him.’

‘So why the flirting?’ I asked.

Geir looked at me.

‘She wants to have her cake and eat it, obviously.’

‘What did you say to her? I assume she went to you for advice?’

‘I said she should deny it. Deny everything. She hadn’t been flirting, she’d just been friendly. Say no, no, no. And then don’t be so bloody stupid next time, wait for an opportunity to offer itself and go about it calmly and collectedly. I don’t blame her for doing what she did. I blame her for being inconsiderate. She hurt him. That was uncalled for.’

‘She must have known you would say that. Otherwise she wouldn’t have gone to you.’

‘I agree. Had she gone to you, on the other hand, it would have been to get advice about admitting everything, going down on her knees and begging for forgiveness and then sticking to her lawful husband from then on.’

‘Yes, either that or leaving him.’

‘The worst is that you mean it.’

‘Of course I mean it,’ I said. ‘The year after I was unfaithful to Tonje and didn’t say anything was the worst year I’ve ever experienced. It was blackest night. One long, endless bloody night. I thought about it all the time. Jumped out of the chair in alarm whenever the phone rang. And if the word infidelity was mentioned on TV I blushed from head to toe. I was on fire inside. When we hired films I studiously avoided anything connected with it because I knew that sooner or later she would notice me squirming like a grub whenever the topic came up. And the fact that I had been guilty destroyed everything else in my life, I couldn’t say anything with heartfelt sincerity, it was all lies and pretence. It was a nightmare.’

‘Would you own up now?’

‘Yes.’

‘What about the events on Gotland?’

‘That wasn’t infidelity.’

‘But it still torments you?’

‘Yes, it does.’

‘Cecilia wasn’t unfaithful. Why should she tell her partner what she was thinking of doing?’

‘That’s not what this is about. It’s about intent. As long as it’s there you have to take the consequences.’

‘What about your intentions on Gotland?’

‘I was drunk. I wouldn’t have done it if I’d been sober.’

‘But you would have thought it?’

‘Maybe. It’s a huge leap, though.’

‘Tony’s a Catholic, as you know. His priest said once, and I took note, sinning is putting yourself in a position where a sin becomes possible. Getting drunk, when you know what’s on your mind and what pressure there is inside you, is putting yourself in such a position.’

‘Yes, but I thought I was absolutely safe before I started drinking.’

‘Ha ha ha!’

‘It’s true.’

‘Karl Ove. What you did was nothing. A bagatelle. And everyone understands that. Everyone. What did you do actually? Knock on a door?’

‘For half an hour, yes. In the middle of the night.’

‘But she didn’t let you in?’

‘No, no. She opened the door and gave me a bottle of water, and closed it again.’

‘Ha ha ha! And for that you sat shaking, white-faced, when I met you. You looked as though you’d killed someone.’

‘It felt like it.’

‘But actually it was nothing, was it?’

‘Possibly. But I can’t forgive myself. And that’s the way it will be until my dying day. I have a long list of things I’ve done when I didn’t behave well. And that’s what it’s about. For Christ’s sake, you shouldn’t cheat. And one would have thought it was an easy ideal to uphold. For some it is. I know some people, not many, but some who always do the right thing. Who are always good, decent people. I’m not talking about those who don’t do anything wrong because they don’t do anything, because the lives they lead are so trivial that nothing can be destroyed, for they exist as well. I’m talking about those people who are fair to the last fibre of their being, and those who always know the best way to act in every situation. Those who don’t put themselves first, who don’t betray their principles. You’ve met them as well. People good through to the core, right? And they wouldn’t know what I was talking about. Precisely because it’s not something they have given any thought to, they don’t think like that, that they should be good; they just *are*, and are unaware of it. They take care of their friends, they’re considerate to their partners, they’re good parents, but not in a feminine way, always do a good job, they want whatever is good and do whatever is good. Whole people. Jon Olav, for example, you know, my cousin.’

‘Yes, I’ve met him.’

‘He’s always been an idealist, but not in order to achieve anything for himself. He’s always stood up for everyone who’s needed him. And he’s not in the slightest bit corrupt. The same applies to Hans. His integrity – yes, that’s the word I was after. Integrity. If you have integrity you do the right thing. I have so little integrity, there’s always something . . . well, not sick exactly, but something base, fawning, creeping, it oozes out of me. If I get into a situation that requires prudence, where everyone knows prudence is required, I can just steam in, right, and why? Because I only think about myself, only see myself, ooze out of myself. I can be good to others, but then I need to have it formulated in advance. It’s not in my blood. It’s not in my nature.’

‘And where do you place me in this system of yours?’

‘You?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh, you’re a cynic. You’re proud and ambitious, perhaps the proudest person I know. You would never do anything openly debasing, you’d rather starve and live on the street. You’re loyal to your friends. I trust you blindly. At the same time you look after yourself and can be ruthless to others if for some reason you have something against them, or if they’ve done something to you, or if there is something greater to gain by it. Isn’t that true?’

‘Yes, but I’m always considerate to those I like. Really. Scrupulous might be a more accurate expression. There is in fact an important distinction.’

‘Scrupulous then. But let me mention one example. You lived with the human shield in Iraq, travelled with them all the way from Turkey, shared everything with them in Baghdad. Some of them became your friends. They were there because of their convictions, which you didn’t in fact share, but they didn’t know that.’

‘They had a suspicion,’ Geir said with a smile.

‘So when the US Marines come, you simply say goodbye to your friends and go over to their enemies without a backward glance. You betrayed them. There is no other way to see it. But you didn’t betray yourself. I place you somewhere around there. It’s a free, independent place, but the price of getting there is high. People lie strewn around you like skittles. That wouldn’t be possible for me. Social pressure from all sides starts when I get up from my office chair and by the time I’m in the street I’m bound hand and foot by it. I can hardly move. Ha ha ha! But it’s true. At bottom, and I don’t think you have understood this, it’s not saintliness or high morals but cowardice. Cowardice and nothing else. Don’t you think I’d like to cut all my ties to everyone and do what I want, not what they want?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Do you think I’m going to do that?’

‘No.’

‘You’re free. I’m not. It’s as simple as that.’

‘No, it isn’t, not by a long chalk,’ Geir said. ‘You may be trapped by social pressure, which sounds strange, after all you never meet anyone. Ha ha ha! But I understand what you mean, and you’re right, you try to take account of everyone all at once. I’ve seen it with my own eyes, how you run around when we come to yours for a meal. However, there are many ways to be trapped; there are many ways of not being free. You have to remember that you’ve had everything you wanted. You’ve had your revenge on those you targeted. You have status. People sit waiting for what you do and wave palm leaves as soon as you show your face. You can write an article about something that interests you and it will be in print in the newspaper of your choice a few days later. People ring and want you to go here, there and everywhere. Newspapers ask you for a comment on all sorts of matters. Your books will be published in Germany and England. Do you understand the freedom there is in that? Do you understand what has opened in your life? You talk about a longing to let go and fall. If I let go I would be standing in the same place. I’m standing right at the bottom. No one’s interested in what I write. No one’s interested in what I think. No one invites me anywhere. I have to force my way in, right? Whenever I enter a room full of people I have to make myself interesting. I don’t pre-exist, like you, I don’t have a name, I have to create everything from scratch every time. I’m sitting at the bottom of a hole in the ground and shouting through a megaphone. It doesn’t matter what I say, no one is listening. And you know that whatever I say from the outside contains a criticism of what is inside. And then by definition you’re self-opinionated. The embittered querulous type. Meanwhile the years pass. I’ll soon be forty and I don’t have *any* of what I wanted to have. You say it’s brilliant and unique, and perhaps it is, but what good is that? You have everything you want, and you can dispense with it, leave it, make no use of it. But I can’t. I *have* to get in. I’ve spent twenty years trying. The book I’m busy with now is going to take three years at least. I can already feel how the world around me is losing belief and hence any interest. I’m becoming more and more like a madman refusing to drop his mad project. Everything I say is measured against that. When I said something after my doctorate it was measured against that, that was when I was academically and intellectually alive, now I’m dead. And the more time that passes the better the next book has to be. It’s not enough for the next book to be all right, pretty OK, very good, because I’ve spent a lot of time on it and because my age is, relatively speaking, so advanced that it has to be outstanding. From that perspective, I'm not free. And to link up with what we were talking about before, the Victorian ideal, which wasn't an ideal but a reality, namely a double life. Therein lies a sorrow too because such a life can never be whole. And of course that's what everyone dreams of, one love affair, or falling in love with someone, when cynicism and calculation are absent, when everything is whole. Yes, you know. Romance. A double life is a passable resolution of a problem, but it is not unproblematic, if that's what you reckoned I went around thinking. It's practical, provisional, pragmatic, in other words, part of life. But it's not whole, and it's not ideal. The most important difference between us is not that I'm free and you aren't. For I don't believe this to be the case. The most important difference is that I'm happy, a glad soul. And you aren't.'

'I don't think I'm that unglad—'

'Exactly! Unglad. Only you can use a word like that! It says everything about you.'

'Unglad is a good word. I've seen it in the old Norwegian saga *Heimskringla*, in point of fact. And the Storm translation is a hundred years old. But perhaps it's time we changed the subject?'

'If you'd said that two years ago I would have understood.'

'OK. I can go on. After everything finished with Tonje I went to an island and lived there for two months. I had been there before, I just had to get on the phone and everything was arranged. A house, a small island, right out in the sea, three other people there. It was the end of the winter, so the whole island was frozen and stiff. I walked all over it thinking. And what I thought was that I would have to do everything I could to become a good person. Everything I did should be to that end. But not in the abject, evasive manner that had characterised my behaviour so far, you know, being overcome by shame at the smallest trifle. The indignity of it. No, in the new image I was drawing of myself there was also courage and backbone. Look people straight in the eye, say what I stood for. I had become more and more hunched, you see, I wanted to occupy less and less space, and on the island I began to straighten my back, quite literally. No joking. At the same time I read Hauge's diaries. All 3,000 pages. It was an enormous consolation.'

'He went through worse times, didn't he?'

‘He certainly did. But that wasn’t the point. He fought *without cease* for the same, for the ideal of how he should be, as compared with the person he was. The determination to fight was extraordinarily strong in him. And that in a man who didn’t really do anything, didn’t really experience anything, just read, wrote and fought his inner struggle on a stupid little farm by a stupid little fjord in a stupid little country on the margin of the world.’

‘No wonder he was prone to going absolutely bananas.’

‘You get the impression it was also a relief. He gave in, and part of the velocity with which he was hurled off course was born of happiness. He escaped the iron grip on himself and relaxed, so it seemed.’

‘The question is whether it was God,’ Geir said. ‘The feeling of being seen, of being forced to your knees by something that can see you. We just have a different name for it. The superego or shame or whatever. That was why God was a stronger reality for some than others.’

‘So the urge to give yourself to baser feelings and wallow in pleasure and vice would be the devil?’

‘Exactly.’

‘That’s never attracted me. Apart from when I drink, that is. Then everything goes overboard. What I want to do is travel, see, read and write. To be free. Completely free. And I had a chance to be free on the island because the reality was that I had finished with Tonje. I could have travelled anywhere I wanted – Tokyo, Buenos Aires, Munich. But instead I headed out there, where there wasn’t a soul. I didn’t understand myself, I had no idea who I was, so what I resorted to, all these ideas about being a good person, was simply all I had. I didn’t watch TV, I didn’t read newspapers, and all I ate was crispbread and soup. When I indulged myself out there it was with fishcakes and cauliflower. And oranges. I started doing press-ups and sit-ups. Can you imagine? How desperate do you have to be to start doing press-ups to solve your problems?’

‘This is all about purity, nothing less. Through and through. Asceticism. Don’t be corrupted by TV or the newspapers, eat as little as possible. Did you drink coffee?’

‘Yes, I drank coffee. But it’s true what you said about purity. There is something almost fascist about it all.’

‘Hauge wrote that Hitler was a great man.’

‘He wasn’t so old then. But the worst of it is that I can understand: that need to rid yourself of all the banality and small-mindedness rotting inside you, all the trivia that can make you angry or unhappy, that can create a desire for something pure and great into which you can dissolve and disappear. It’s getting rid of all the shit, isn’t it? One people, one blood, one earth. Now precisely this has been discredited once and for all. But what lies behind it, I don’t have any problem understanding that. And as sensitive to social pressure, as governed by what others think of me as I am, God knows what I would have done if I’d lived through the 1940s.’

‘Ha ha ha! Relax. You don’t do what everyone else does now, so you probably wouldn’t have then.’

‘But when I moved to Stockholm and fell in love with Linda, everything changed. It was as though I had been raised above trivia, none of it mattered, everything was good and there were no problems anywhere. I don’t know how to explain . . . It was as though my inner strength was so great everything outside it was crushed. I was invulnerable, do you understand? Filled with light. Everything was light! I could even read Hölderlin! It was an utterly fantastic time. I’ve never been happier. I was bursting with happiness.’

‘I can remember. You were up in Bastugatan and positively glowing. You were almost luminous. You played Manu Chao again and again. It was barely possible to talk to you. You were running over with happiness. Sitting in bed like some bloody lotus flower, beaming all over your face.’

‘The point is that all this is about perspectives. Seen in one way, everything offers pleasure. Seen in another, just sorrow and misery. Do you think I cared about all the rubbish TV and the press stuff us with while I sat up there being happy? Do you think I was ashamed of anything at all? I was tolerant of everything. I couldn’t bloody lose. That was what I told you when you were so terribly depressed and beyond yourself the following autumn. It was all about perspective. Nothing in your world had changed or become an urgent problem except for the way you saw it. But of course you didn’t listen to me; you went to Iraq instead.’

‘The last thing you want to hear when you’re in the darkness of depression is the babbling of some happy tosser. But I was happy when I returned. It got me out of it.’

‘Yes, and now the roles are reversed again. Now I’m sitting here and complaining about the wretchedness of life.’

‘I think it’s the natural order,’ he said. ‘Have you started doing press-ups again?’

‘Yes.’

He smiled. I smiled too.

‘What the hell am I going to do?’ I said.

We left Pelikanen an hour later, took the same Metro train to Slussen, where Geir changed to the red line. He placed his hand on my shoulder, told me to take care and say hello to Linda and Vanja. I slumped back into the seat after he had gone, wishing I could sit there for hour after hour and travel through the night, not like now, having to stand up and get off at Hötorget, only three stations along.

The carriage was nearly empty. A young man with a guitar case on his back stood holding the pole by the door, thin as a toothpick with curly black hair falling from under his hat. Two girls of around sixteen on the seat at the back were showing each other text messages. An elderly man in a black coat, rust-red scarf and the kind of grey woollen almost square hat worn in the 1970s sat on the opposite side. Facing him was a small dumpy woman with South American features in a large Puffa jacket, cheap dark blue jeans, suede boots with an edge of synthetic wool at the top.

I had forgotten the telephone business until Geir reminded me just before we left. He handed me his mobile and said I should ring my phone, which I did, but no one answered. We agreed he would write a text asking her to ring my home number and send it in half an hour, by which time I should be at home.

Perhaps she might think this was some kind of pick-up? I had intentionally put the phone in her bag so that I could ring her later?

At T-Centralen Metro station the place was heaving. Mostly young people, a few boisterous gangs, a number of loners with small headsets over their ears, some with sports bags between their feet.

They probably all slept at home.

The idea came from nowhere and tingled.

This was my life. This was what my life was.

I had to pull myself together. Chin up.

A train passed on the parallel track, for a few seconds I saw straight into an aquarium-like carriage with passengers sitting immersed in their own thoughts, then they were propelled upwards on their path while we were hurled down a tunnel where there was nothing to see but the reflection of the carriage and my vacant face. I stood up and went to the door as the train slowed. Crossed the platform and took the escalator up to Tunnelgatan. The fat blonde woman in her thirties who had long been anonymous to me until Linda had greeted her once and said she had been at Biskops-Arnö with her sat in the ticket office window. As our eyes met she looked down. Fine by me, I thought, pushing the barrier aside with my thigh and leaping up the last steps.

Whenever I climbed the long staircase up to Malmskillnadsgatan it went through my mind that my homeward route was probably the same one that Olaf Palme’s murderer had followed. I remembered every detail of the day when the murder had been made public. What I had been doing, what I had been thinking. It had been a Saturday. Mum had been ill and I had caught the bus to town with Jan Vidar. We had been seventeen years old. If the Palme murder had not taken place the day would have vanished, as all the others had. All the hours, all the minutes, all the conversations, all the thoughts, all the events. Into a pool of oblivion with everything else. And then the little that was left would have to represent the whole. How ironic was it that the only reason it remained was that it stood out from the rest?

In the KGB restaurant a few long-haired men sat by the window drinking. Otherwise it appeared to be empty. But perhaps all the action was in the cellar this evening.

Two black shiny taxis raced past towards the centre. Snowflakes swirled up, settling seconds later on my face, which was level with the road. I crossed, jogged the last metres to the front door and let myself in. Luckily, no one was in the front hallway or the stairwell. The flat was silent.

I took off my coat and shoes, walked quietly through the living room and opened the bedroom door. Linda opened her eyes and looked at me in the semi-darkness. She stretched out her arms towards me.

‘Did you have a nice evening?’

‘Yes,’ I said, bending forward to kiss her. ‘Everything OK here?’

‘Mhm. We missed you. Are you coming to bed now?’

‘I’ll grab a bite to eat first. Then I’ll come. OK?’

‘OK.’

Vanja lay in her cot with her backside in the air and her face pressed against the pillow as usual. I smiled as I walked past. I drank a glass of water in the kitchen, stared into the fridge for a while before taking out some margarine and a packet of ham. Took the bread from the cupboard next to it. As I was about to close the door I glanced at the bottles on the top shelf. There was nothing casual about my glance. The bottles were not standing in their usual positions. The half-full bottle of aquavit from Christmas had changed places with the Calvados. The grappa that had been at the back was now to one side near the Dutch gin. Had that been all, I would not have given it a second thought, I would have concluded I must have cleaned the shelf on Saturday, but now that I was looking, the bottles also seemed to be less full. The very same thought had struck me only a week ago, but I had dismissed it. We must have drunk more than I remembered when we’d had people round. Now, on top of everything else, they were in different positions.

I stood for a while rotating the various bottles in my hands wondering what could have happened. The grappa had been almost full, hadn’t it? I had poured three small shots after a dinner we’d had a few weeks ago. Now it was right down by the label. And the aquavit, surely there had been more than a bit at the bottom? And the cognac, surely there had been a bit more as well?

These were bottles I brought back with me when I had been travelling or ones we had been given. We never drank from them, except when we had guests.

Could it be Linda?

Was she having a drink when she was alone here?

On the quiet?

No, no, no, absolutely no chance. She hadn’t had a drop of alcohol since she became pregnant. And as long as she was breastfeeding she wouldn’t touch it.

Was she lying?

Linda?

No, hardly likely. I couldn’t be that blind.

I put the bottles back, exactly as they had been, in positions I would remember. I also tried to memorise more or less how much was left in each of them. Then I closed the cupboard door and sat down to eat.

Probably my memory had been playing tricks on me. Probably we had drunk more than I had realised in recent weeks. I didn't know exactly how much there was left. Then the bottles had been moved around when I cleaned the cupboard on Saturday. It was quite normal not to remember. Wasn't it Tolstoy who wrote about this in his diaries, according to Shklovsky? About not being able to remember whether he had dusted the living room or not? If he had, what status did the experience have, and what time did it occupy?

Oh, Russian formalism, where have you been in my life?

I got up and was just about to clear the table when the telephone rang in the living room. Fear gripped my chest. But then I remembered the text message Geir had sent to my mobile. Nothing to be concerned about.

I hurried to the phone and picked it up.

'Hello, Karl Ove here,' I said.

The other end of the line was quiet for some seconds. Then a voice said, 'Are you the person who has lost a mobile phone?'

The voice belonged to a man. He spoke broken Swedish, and if the tone was not aggressive, it was not particularly friendly either.

'Yes, that's me. Have you found it?'

'It was in my fiancée's bag when she came home. Now would you mind telling me how it ended up there?'

The door opened in front of me. Linda came through and sent me a worried stare. I raised my hand in defence and smiled.

'I had the phone in my hand on the platform at Rådmannsgatan when someone knocked me from behind and I lost it. I turned to the man who had nudged me and didn't see where it landed. But I never heard it hit the ground. Then I saw a woman with an open bag over her arm and guessed that it had to be there.'

'Why didn't you say anything to her? Why did you want her to contact you?'

'The train arrived at that moment. And I didn't have the time. Besides, I wasn't sure that was where it had landed. I couldn't go over to a stranger and ask her if I could look in her bag, could I.'

'Are you Norwegian?'

'Yes.'

‘OK. I believe you. You can have your phone back. Where do you live?’

‘In the city centre. Regeringsgatan.’

‘Do you know where Banérgatan is?’

‘No.’

‘Östermalm, one street up from Strandgatan, right by Karlaplan. There’s an ICA shop there. Be there at twelve. I’ll be outside. If I’m not, your mobile will be at the cash desk. Just ask the assistant. OK?’

‘Fine. Thanks.’

‘Don’t be so cack-handed next time.’

Then he rang off. Linda, who had sat down on the sofa with a blanket over her lap, raised her eyebrows.

‘What was that about?’ she asked. ‘Who was it, ringing at such a late hour?’

She laughed when I told her what had happened. Not so much at the sequence of events as at the suspicion it had been greeted with. If you wanted to meet a woman whose telephone number you didn’t know, what better way than to drop a phone in her bag and then ring her up?’

I sat down beside her on the sofa. She snuggled up to me.

‘Now Vanja’s on the waiting list for the nursery,’ she said. ‘I rang them today.’

‘Did you? That’s great!’

‘I have mixed feelings, I must confess,’ she said. ‘She’s so small. But maybe we can send her for half a day to start with?’

‘Of course.’

‘Little Vanja.’

I looked at her. It was as though her face was tired from the sleep she had just woken up from. Narrow eyes, doughy skin. Surely she couldn’t be drinking on the sly? With the immense affection she had for Vanja and the seriousness she brought to the maternal role?

No, definitely not. How could I even think it?

‘There’s something mysterious going on in the kitchen cupboard,’ I said. ‘Whenever I see the bottles there seems to be less in them. Have you noticed?’

She smiled.

‘No, but we’re probably drinking more than you realise.’

‘Seems so,’ I said.

I laid my forehead against hers. Her eyes, which looked straight into mine, filled me to the brim. In this short second they were all I saw, they shone with her life, the way she lived it inside her.

‘I miss you,’ she said.

‘I’m here,’ I said. ‘What is it? Do you want all of me?’

‘Yes, that’s what I want,’ she said, taking my hands and drawing me down onto the sofa.

Next morning I got up at half past four as usual, worked on editing the translated collection of short stories until seven and had breakfast with Linda and Vanja without saying a word. At eight Ingrid came to collect Vanja. Linda went to her course and I sat reading the online newspapers for half an hour before starting to answer the emails that had accumulated. Then I showered, dressed and went out. The sky was blue, the low sun shone across the town and although it was still cold, the light presaged a sense of spring, even deep down in the shadowy street I followed on the way towards Stureplan. Obviously I was not the only person to feel this; whereas the previous day people had walked with lowered heads and stooped shoulders, now they lifted their faces and in the eyes they viewed the world with there was both curiosity and happiness. Was this open cheery town the same as the enclosed depressed one we were walking around yesterday? While the muted winter light that had forced its way through the clouds seemed to draw all the colours and flat surfaces towards one another and minimise the differences between them with its greyness and frailty, this clear, direct sunlight emphasised them. Around me the town exploded with colour. Not the warm biological colours of the summer but the mineral colours of the winter, cold and synthetic. Red brick, yellow brick, dark green car bonnets, blue signs, an orange jacket, a purple scarf, grey-black tarmac, verdigris metal and shiny chrome. Sparkling windows, glowing walls and glinting gutters on one side of a building; black windows, dark walls, toned down almost invisible gutters on the other. In Birger Jarlsgatan the snow lay heaped along the side of the street, sometimes gleaming, sometimes grey and mute, all depending on how the sunlight fell. Towards Stureplan and into Hedengrens bookshop, where a young man was unlocking the door as I arrived. I went down to the basement, drifted between shelves and collected a pile of books which I sat down to flick through. I bought a biography of Ezra Pound because I was interested in his theory about money and hoped it would be included, a book about science in China from 1550 to 1900, a book about the economic history of the world written by a certain Rondo Cameron, and a book about native Americans which described all the tribes existing before the Europeans arrived, a magnificent work of 600 pages. In addition, I found a book about Rousseau by Starobinski, and a book about Gerhard Richter, *Doubt and Belief in Painting*, which I bought. I knew nothing about Pound, economics, science, China or Rousseau, nor whether I was interested, but I was about to write a novel soon, and I had to start somewhere. I had been thinking about the Indians for a long time. Some months ago I had seen a picture of some Indians in a canoe. They were paddling across a lake, in the bow was a man dressed like a bird with its wings outstretched. The picture penetrated all the layers of conceptions I had about Indians, everything I had read in books and comics and seen in films, straight through to reality: they had existed. They had indeed lived their lives with their totem poles, spears and bows and arrows, alone on an enormous continent, blissfully unaware that lives other than theirs were not only possible but also existed. It was a fantastic thought. The romance this picture evoked, with its wildness, this birdman and this untouched nature therefore evolved from reality and not vice versa, which was otherwise always the case. It was shocking. I can’t explain it in any other way. I was shocked. And I knew I would have to write about it. Not about the picture itself but what it contained. Then all the counter-arguments seeped through. They might have existed once, but they didn’t any more, they and their culture had long since been wiped out. Why write about it then? Their time was gone and it would never return. If I created a new world in which elements of their culture were to be found, it would just be literature, just fiction, and worthless. However, I could counter that Dante, for example, had written just fiction, that Cervantes had written just fiction and that Melville had written just fiction. It was irrefutable that being human would not be the same if these three works had not existed. So why not write just fiction? The truth did not, of course, have a one-to-one relationship with reality. Good arguments, but they didn’t help, just the thought of fiction, just the thought of a fabricated character in a fabricated plot made me feel nauseous, I reacted in a physical way. Had no idea why. But I did. The Indians would have to wait. I was aware I might not always feel like this.

After I had paid for the books I went down to the lower section of Sergels torg, to the music and film shop, where I bought three DVDs and five CDs, next up to Akademi bookshop, where I found a dissertation on Swedenborg published by Atlantis, which I bought along with a couple of journals. I wouldn't get round to reading much of this, which did not prevent me from feeling good, however. I went home, unloaded my purchases, had a couple of sandwiches standing by the kitchen worktop and went out again, this time across Östermalm to the shop in Banérgatan, where I arrived at twelve on the dot.

No one was there. I lit a cigarette and waited. Searched the faces of passers-by, but no one stopped or came over. After fifteen minutes I went into the shop and asked the female assistant if anyone had handed in a mobile phone today. Yes, indeed, it was here. Could I describe it?

I did, and she took it from a drawer beside the till and passed it to me.

'Thank you,' I said. 'Who handed it in? Do you know?'

'Yes, well, I mean I don't know his name. But he's a young guy. He works at the Israeli Embassy just over there.'

'At the *Israeli* Embassy?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, right. Thank you again. Bye.'

'Bye.'

I sauntered down the street grinning to myself. The Israeli Embassy! No damn wonder he had been suspicious! The phone must have been examined outside and in. All the text messages, all the phone numbers . . . heh heh heh!'

I switched it on and rang Geir.

'Hello?' he said.

'Someone rang about my mobile yesterday,' I said. 'He was very suspicious, but in the end agreed to give it back to me. So now I've just picked it up. He left it at a shop till. I asked the girl working there if she knew who he was. Do you know what she said?'

'Of course not.'

'He worked in the Israeli Embassy.'

'You're joking!'

‘I’m not. When I dropped my phone it didn’t land on the platform, it landed in a bag. And when I dropped it into a bag it wasn’t just anyone’s bag but one belonging to the girlfriend of someone working at the Israeli Embassy. Bizarre, eh?’

‘I think you can forget the girlfriend idea. It’s more likely she works at the Israeli Embassy and contacted them when she found your mobile. So they sat there looking at this phone wondering who the hell could have planted it. And what was it? A bomb? A microphone?’

‘And what on earth did the Norwegian connection signify? Something to do with heavy water? Revenge for the Lillehammer Affair?’

‘It’s unbelievable how you manage to get caught up in things. Russian prostitutes and Israeli agents. That writer you invited to dinner, who weighed all the food before she ate it, what was her name?’

‘Maria. She has a Russian connection too, by the way.’

‘And who had to ring someone and tell them exactly what she had eaten after the meal. Ha ha ha!’

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘I don’t know. That weird things happen when you’re around perhaps? Linda’s other friend who’s in love with a drug addict whose sister lives in your building? The flat you got in the block where Linda lived? Your computer being exposed to all sorts, getting drenched in the rain, being dropped from a train onto the rails and it isn’t damaged. You losing your phone and it turning up in an Israeli Embassy worker’s bag slots neatly into the frame.’

‘That all sounds very intense and jolly,’ I said. ‘But the truth about my life is quite different, as you know.’

‘Oh, come on, can’t we pretend for once?’

‘No. What are you doing?’ I asked.

‘What do you think?’

‘Sounds very much like you’re messing around backstage. So I suppose you’re writing.’

‘I suppose I am. And you?’

‘I’m on my way to Filmhus. Going to have lunch with Linda. Catch you later.’

‘OK.’

I rang off, put the phone in my pocket and picked up the pace. Walked past the drained fountain in Karlaplan, through Feltöversten, into Valhallavägen to Filmhus, which was on the edge of the semi-snow-covered Gärdet district and glittered in the sun.

After lunch I caught the Metro to Odenplan and walked from there to my office, mostly to have somewhere to sit in peace. Ingrid had a key for the flat and would probably be there with Vanja. I wasn't in the right frame of mind for cafés either, with all the unfamiliar faces and restless eyes. So I sat behind the desk and tried for a while to write my talk, but I just became depressed. Instead I lay down on the sofa and fell asleep. When I awoke the street outside was dark and it was ten minutes past four. The *Aftenposten* journalist was coming at six, so I had no choice but to put my coat on and go home if I wanted to see anything of Vanja and Linda that day.

'Anyone at home?' I called as I opened the door. Vanja crawled through the hall towards me at full speed, laughing, and I threw her up in the air a few times before carrying her into the kitchen, where Linda was stirring a saucepan.

'Chickpea stew,' she said. 'Best I could manage.'

'Oh, that's good,' I said. 'How's it been with Vanja today?'

'Fine, I think. They spent the whole morning in the children's museum. Mummy's just left. Did you bump into her?'

'No,' I said, and took Vanja to our bed, tossed her around until I was tired, sat her down, flushed and sweaty from laughing, on the chair by the kitchen worktop and went into the living room to check my emails. After reading them I switched off the computer and gazed down at the flat across the street on the floor beneath ours, where another computer was lit. Once I had seen a man masturbating in front of the screen there. He thought he couldn't be seen, hadn't realised he was visible from here. He was alone in the room, but not in the flat; on the other side of the wall was a kitchen, where a man and a woman were sitting. It was strange to see how close private and open areas were to one another.

Now the room was empty. Just pixels jumping about on the screen, the light of a lamp in the corner falling across a chair, and a little table with a book face up.

‘Food’s ready!’ Linda shouted from the kitchen. I got to my feet and joined them. It was already a quarter past five.

‘When are they supposed to be coming?’ Linda asked. She must have noticed me glance at the clock.

‘At six. But we’ll go out straight away. You won’t need to show your face. Well, you can say hello to them if you like, but you don’t have to.’

‘I think I’ll stay here. Out of sight. Are you nervous?’

‘No, but I’m not in the mood. You know what it’s like.’

‘Don’t give it a thought. Just chat with them, say what you want and don’t be hard on yourself. Relax.’

‘I spoke to that Majgull Axelsson, you know, the writer? She was at the lectures in Tvedestrand and Gothenburg. During the tour she took me under her maternal wing a bit. She said she made it a rule never to read what was written about her, never to watch herself on TV and never to listen to herself on the radio. Treat them as one-offs. Just concentrate on the moment it’s happening, she said. They were meetings with people then, that was all, easy, no complications. That made sense to me. But there was all the vanity business, wasn’t there? Am I being presented as a complete idiot now, or just an idiot? And is it the presentation or is it me?’

‘I wish you would drop all this,’ Linda said. ‘It’s so unnecessary! It takes so much out of you. It occupies you all the time.’

‘Yes, I know. But I will stop doing it. I’ll refuse everything.’

‘You’re such a wonderful person. If only you could see that.’

‘My basic feeling is the opposite. In fact, it pervades everything. And don’t say I should have therapy.’

‘I didn’t say a word!’

‘You feel the same,’ I said. ‘The only difference is that you also have periods when your self-esteem is intact, not to put too fine a point on it.’

‘Just hope Vanja will be spared this,’ Linda said, looking at her. She smiled at us. The whole table was covered with rice, and the floor under the chair. Her lips were red with sauce, and white grains were stuck around her mouth.

‘But she won’t be,’ I said. ‘It’s impossible. Either she has it from the start or she picks it up on the way. It’s impossible to hide. But it might not mark her. It doesn’t have to, does it?’

‘I hope not,’ Linda said.

Her eyes were moist.

'That was delicious anyway,' I said, getting up. 'I'll do the washing-up. Should manage it before they come.'

I turned to Vanja.

'How big is Vanja?' I asked.

She stretched her arms above her head proudly.

'So big!' I said. 'Come on, and I'll give you a little wash.'

I lifted her off the chair and carried her into the bathroom, where I rinsed her face and hands. Held her up in front of the mirror and rested my cheek against hers. She laughed.

Then I changed her nappy in the bedroom, set her down on the floor and went in to clear the table. After it was done and the dishwasher was humming beneath the worktop I opened the cupboard to check in the unlikely event that something had happened to the bottles.

It had. Someone had drunk from the grappa bottle since yesterday, and I was absolutely certain because the contents had been level with the edge of the label. The cognac was standing in a different position and although I wasn't quite so sure of this, it appeared some had been drunk.

What the hell was going on?

I refused to believe that Linda was behind this. Especially after we had been chatting about it the night before.

But there was no one else here.

It wasn't as if we had a home help or anything.

Oh shit, no.

Ingrid.

She had been here today. And yesterday. It had to be her, it was obvious.

But was she drinking while she was looking after Vanja? Was she sitting here with her grandchild around her legs and knocking back the juice?

If so, she would have to be an alcoholic. Vanja was everything to her. She wouldn't risk anything, for Vanja's sake. But if she was still drinking, the urge had to be stronger in her, it had to be, she was willing to risk everything for it.

Oh, Lord above, please be merciful.

From the bedroom floor I could hear Linda's footsteps approaching, so I closed the cupboard door, went to the worktop, took a cloth and began to wipe down the surface. It was ten minutes to six.

‘I’ll go down for a smoke before they come. Is that OK?’ I said. ‘There’s a bit left to do, but . . .’

‘Of course. Off you go,’ Linda said. ‘Take the rubbish down on the way, will you?’

At that precise moment the doorbell rang. I went to open up. A young man with a beard and a shoulder bag stood there smiling. Behind him was another man, older, dark-skinned, with a large camera bag over his shoulder and a camera in one hand.

‘Hi,’ the young man said, proffering his hand. ‘Kjetil Østli.’

‘Karl Ove Knausgaard,’ I said.

‘Pleased to meet you,’ he said.

I shook the photographer’s hand and asked them in.

‘Would you like a coffee?’

‘That would be nice. Thank you.’

I went into the kitchen, fetched the Thermos of coffee and three cups. When I returned they were looking around the living room.

‘Getting snowed in wouldn’t be a problem here,’ the journalist said. ‘You’ve got the odd book or two!’

‘Most of which I haven’t read,’ I said. ‘And the ones I have I don’t remember a thing about.’

He was younger than I had thought, probably no more than twenty-six or twenty-seven, despite the beard. His teeth were large, his eyes jovial and his personality was easy-going and cheery. This type was not unfamiliar to me, I had met several people who reminded me of him, but only in recent years, never when I was growing up. It might have had something to do with class, geography or generation, probably all of them at once. South-east Norway, middle class, I guessed, possibly academic parents. Well brought up, self-confident manner, sharp-witted, good social skills. Someone who had not been buffeted by adversity yet, that was the impression he gave in the first few minutes. The photographer was Swedish, thereby evading any chance I had of detecting nuances in the way he presented himself.

‘In fact, I had decided to turn down all interviews from now on,’ I said. ‘But they said at the publisher’s you were so good that I absolutely mustn’t let the opportunity slip through my fingers. Hope they’re right.’

Bit of flattery never hurts.

‘I hope so too,’ the journalist said.

I poured them a cup of coffee.

‘Could I take a few shots here?’ the photographer asked.

As I hesitated he assured me they would only be of me and nothing else.

At first the journalist had wanted to do the interview at home, and I had said no, but when he rang to arrange where to meet I said they should come up after all. Then we could take it from there. I could hear he was pleased.

‘OK,’ I said. ‘Here?’

I stood in front of the bookshelves with a cup of coffee in my hand, he walked round taking photos.

What a load of shite this was.

‘Could you raise your hand a bit?’

‘Doesn’t that look a bit artificial?’

‘OK then. We’ll let that one go.’

From the hallway I heard Vanja crawling in. She sat up in the doorway and looked at us.

‘Hi, Vanja!’ I said. ‘Are there lots of scary men here? But you know me, don’t you . . .’

I lifted her up. At that moment Linda came in. She gave a perfunctory greeting, took Vanja and went back into the kitchen.

Everything I didn’t want to be seen was seen. Everything that was me and mine became stiff and stilted. I didn’t want it to be like this. No bloody way. But there I went again, grinning like an imbecile.

‘Can I have a couple more?’ the photographer asked.

I posed again.

‘A photographer once told me that taking pictures of me was like taking pictures of a lump of wood,’ I said.

‘Must have been a rotten photographer,’ said the photographer.

‘But you know what he meant?’

He stopped, took the camera away from his face, smiled, put it back and continued.

‘I think we should go to Pelikanen,’ I said to the journalist. ‘That’s my local. And there’s no music. Should do the trick.’

‘Fine by me.’

‘Let’s do a few shots outside first. Then I’ll let you two get on with it,’ the photographer said.

At that moment the journalist’s mobile rang. He scrutinised the number.

‘I’ll have to take this,’ he said. The conversation, which lasted no more than one, maximum two, minutes, was about snowfall, a car, train times, a skiing hut. He rang off and met my glance.

‘I’m going skiing with some friends for the weekend. That was our lift from the train to the hut. An old boy who’s always helped us out.’

‘Sounds nice,’ I said.

A hut, skiing with friends, that was something I had never done. While I was at *gymnas* and for a couple of years into the course at university, this had been a sore point. I barely had any friends. And the few I had didn’t know each other. Now I was too old to bother about that sort of thing, but nevertheless I did feel a stab of pain, on behalf of the old me, as it were.

He put the mobile into his pocket and set the cup down on the table. The photographer was packing away his gear.

‘Shall we go then?’ I said.

It was a bit awkward standing together and getting dressed to go out, the hall was too narrow, they were too close, no one said anything. I called goodbye to Linda and we went down the stairs and out. On the front doorstep I lit a cigarette. The temperature was biting cold. The photographer drew me over to the step across the street, where I posed for a few minutes with the cigarette cupped behind my hand until the photographer said he would like it in the picture, if I didn’t mind. I understood what he meant, it gave a bit of life, so I stood on the step smoking while he clicked away and I moved according to his instructions, all of which was registered by the many passers-by, then we walked to the tunnel entrance, where he continued for a further five minutes until he was happy. He left, and I walked in silence with the journalist over the hill and down to the Metro station on the other side. A train pulled into the platform at once, we stepped on and sat by the window facing each other.

‘Taking the Metro still reminds me of the Norway Cup,’ I said. ‘When I catch a whiff of that special smell in the concourses that’s what I think of. I come from a small town, you see, and then the Metro was the most exotic invention in existence. And Pepsi-Cola. We didn’t have that either.’

‘Did you play football for a long time?’

‘Until I was eighteen. But I was never any good. It was a very low level, all of it.’

‘Is everything you do at a low level? You said you hadn’t read any of your books. And in interviews with you that I’ve seen you often talk about how poor what you do is. Aren’t you being a bit too self-critical?’

‘No, I don’t think so. It depends how high you set the bar, of course.’

He peered out of the window as the train emerged from the tunnel at T-Central.

‘Do you think you’re going to win the prize?’ he asked.

‘The Nordic Council one?’

‘Yes.’

‘No.’

‘Who will then?’

‘Monica Fagerholm.’

‘You seem sure?’

‘It’s a very good novel, the author’s a woman and it’s ages since Finland has won it. Of course she’s going to get it.’

The conversation went quiet again. The time before and after an interview was always uneasy; he, and I didn’t know him, was there to elicit my innermost thoughts, but not yet, the situation hadn’t arisen, the roles hadn’t been allocated, we were on an equal footing, but there were no points of contact, nonetheless we had to talk.

I thought about Ingrid. I couldn’t say anything to anyone, not even Linda, until I was absolutely sure that I was right. I would simply have to mark the bottles. Would have to do it this evening. Then have a look tomorrow. If the levels were down I would have to take it from there.

We arrived in Skanstull, and with the town glittering in the darkness around us we walked in silence to Pelikanen, where we found ourselves a table at the back of the pub. We sat chatting for an hour and a half about me and my work, then I got up and left while he, not having to fly back to Norway until the next day, remained where he was. As always after long interviews I felt empty, drained like a ditch. As always, it felt as though I had betrayed myself. Merely by sitting there I had gone along with the premise, which was that the two books I had written were good and important, and that I, the writer, was an unusual and interesting person. That was the starting point for the conversation: everything I said was important. If I didn’t say anything important, well, then I was just hiding it. Because it obviously had to be somewhere! So when I told stories about my childhood, for example, some perfectly normal, ordinary story everyone had experienced, it was important because it was me who said it. It said something about me, the writer of two good and important books. And I not only went along with this view, which formed the basis for the conversation, but did it with great enthusiasm. I sat there jabbering away like a parrot in the zoo. All while knowing the reality of the situation. How often did a good meaningful novel come out in Norway? Somewhere between every ten to twenty years. The last good Norwegian novel was *All Ablaze* by Kjartan Fløgstad, and that was published in 1980, twenty-five years ago. The last good one before that was *The Birds* by Vesaas, which appeared in 1957, so a further twenty-three years previously. How many Norwegian novels had there been in the meantime? Thousands! Yes, thousands! Some of them good, a few more passable, most weak. That's how it is, nothing to shout about, everyone knows this. The problem is what surrounds all these authorships, the flattery that mediocre writers thrive on and, as a consequence of their false self-image, everything they are emboldened to say to the press and TV.

I know what I'm talking about. I'm one of them myself.

Oh, I could cut off my head with bitterness and shame that I have allowed myself to be lured, not just once but time after time. If I have learned one thing over these years which seems to me immensely important, particularly in an era such as ours, overflowing with such mediocrity, it is the following:

Don't believe you are anybody.

Do not bloody believe you are somebody.

Because you are not. You're just a smug mediocre little shit.

Do not believe that you're anything special. Do not believe that you're worth anything, because you aren't. You're just a little shit.

So keep your head down and work, you little shit. Then at least you'll get something out of it. Shut your mouth, keep your head down, work and know that you're not worth a shit.

This, more or less, was what I had learned.

This was the sum of all my experience.

This was the only true bloody thought I'd ever had.

This was one side of the coin. The other was that I was preoccupied, to an unusually high degree, by being liked, and always had been, ever since I was small. I had attached huge importance to what other people thought about me ever since I was seven. When newspapers showed some interest in what I was doing and who I was, it was, on the one hand, confirmation that I was liked and therefore something part of me accepted with great pleasure while, on the other, it became an almost unmanageable problem because it was no longer possible to control other people's opinions of me, for the simple reason that I no longer knew them, no longer saw them. So whenever I had done an interview and there was something in the interview I hadn't said or what I had said was cast in a different light, I moved heaven and earth to change it. If it wasn't possible, my self-image burned with shame. The fact that despite all this I went on giving interviews, and once again sat facing a journalist somewhere, was the result of my desire for flattery being stronger than both my fear of looking an idiot and any ideals of quality I had, as well as acknowledging that it was important for the books to reach a readership. When I had written *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* I said to Geir Gulliksen that I didn't want to do any interviews, but after talking to him I decided to do them after all, such was the effect he had on me, and I justified the about-turn with the excuse that I owed the publishing house nothing less. But it was no good: I was a writer, not a salesman or a whore.

All this turned into one unholy mess. I often complained I was presented as an idiot in the newspapers, but it was no one's fault but my own because I saw how other writers were presented – for example Kjartan Fløgstad – they definitely never came across as idiots. Fløgstad was a man of integrity, he stood as tall as a tree whatever was going on around him, and had to belong, I guessed, to that rare breed of whole person.

And then he didn't talk about himself.

What had I just done, if not that and only that?

I gave my ticket to the black man in the ticket office window, he stamped it hard and pushed it back with expressionless eyes, and I went back down the escalator to the underground, through the tunnel and onto the narrow platform, where, after confirming that the next train was due in seven minutes, I sat down on a bench.

In late autumn, when *Out of the World* was published, *TV2 News* wanted to do an interview. They came to my home to collect me, we drove down to the Hurtigruten terminal, where the interview was going to take place, and on the way there, by the Technology Centre at the end of Nygårdsparken, the journalist turned and asked who I was.

‘Who are you actually?’ he asked.

‘What do you mean?’ I answered.

‘Well, Erik Fosnes Hansen is the sage, the cultural conservative, the child prodigy. Roy Jacobsen is the Socialist Party writer. Vigdis Hjort is the wanton and drunken female writer. Who are you? I know nothing about you.’

I shrugged. The sun was glittering on the snow.

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I’m just an ordinary fellow.’

‘Come on! You’ve got to give me something. Something you’ve done?’

‘Had a few odd jobs. Studied a bit. You know . . .’

He turned round in his seat. Later that day he solved the problem by showing rather than telling: towards the end of the interview he pieced together a series of pauses and hesitations to represent my personality, and brought it to a conclusion with my statement: ‘Ibsen said that he who stood alone was strongest. I think that’s wrong.’

Sitting on the bench, I threw up my hands and took a deep breath as the memory of what I had said overcame me.

How could I have said anything like that?

Had I believed it?

Yes, I had. But it was my mother’s ideas I was expressing, she was the one who was preoccupied by human relationships, who thought that was where value lay, not me. That is, at the time I was, at the time I believed it. But not from any personal experience, it was just one of the things that were as they were.

Ibsen had been right. Everything I saw around me confirmed it. Relationships were there to eradicate individuality, to fetter freedom and suppress that which was pushing through. My mother was never so angry as when we discussed the concept of freedom. When I expressed my opinion, she snorted and said that was just an American notion without any content, vacuous and fallacious. We were here for others. But this was the idea that had led to the systematised existence we had now, where unpredictability had vanished and you could go from nursery to school to university and into working life as if it were a tunnel, convinced that your choices had been made of your own free will, while in reality you had been sieved through like grains of sand right from your very first school day: some were sent into practical jobs, some into theoretical, some to the top, some to the bottom, all while being taught that everyone was equal. This was the idea that had made us, at least my generation, have *expectations* of life, to live in the belief that we could make demands, make real demands and blame every possible circumstance other than ourselves if it didn't turn out the way we had imagined, that made us rage against the state if a tsunami came and you didn't receive immediate help. How pathetic was that? Become embittered if you didn't get the job you had merited. And this was the thinking that meant the fall was no longer a possibility, except for the very weakest, because you could always get money, and pure existence, one where you stand face to face with a life-threatening emergency or peril, had been completely eliminated. This was the thinking that had spawned a culture in which the greatest mediocrities, warm and with a well-fed stomach, trumpeted their cheap platitudes, thus allowing writers such as Lars Saabye Christensen or whoever to be worshipped as if Virgil himself were sitting on the sofa and telling us whether he had used a pen or a typewriter or a computer and what times of the day he wrote. I hated it, I didn't want to know about it. But who was talking to journalists about how he wrote his mediocre books as though he were some literary giant, a champion of the written word, if not myself?

How can you sit there receiving applause when you know that what you have done is not good enough?

I had *one* opportunity. I had to cut all my ties with the flattering, thoroughly corrupt world of culture in which everyone, every single little upstart, was for sale, cut all my ties with the vacuous TV and newspaper world, sit down in a room and read in earnest, not contemporary literature but literature of the highest quality, and then write as if my life depended on it. For twenty years if need be.

But I couldn't grasp the opportunity. I had a family and I owed it to them to be there. I had friends. And I had a weakness in my character which meant that I would say yes, yes, when I wanted to say no, no, which was so afraid of hurting others, which was so afraid of conflict and which was so afraid of not being liked that it could forgo all principles, all dreams, all opportunities, everything that smacked of truth, to prevent this happening.

I was a whore. This was the only suitable term.

Half an hour later, after I closed the door behind me at home, there was a sound of voices in the living room. I poked my head in and saw that Mikaela was there. They were curled up on the sofa with a cup of tea in their hands. On the table in front of them was a candlestick with three lighted candles, a dish with three pieces of cheese in it and a basket full of various biscuits.

‘Hi, Karl Ove, how was it?’ Linda asked.

They smiled at me.

‘OK,’ I said with a shrug of the shoulders. ‘Nothing worth talking about anyway.’

‘Would you like a cup of tea and some cheese?’

‘No, thanks.’

I unwound my scarf as I stood there, hung it in the wardrobe with my jacket, untied my laces and put my shoes on the shelf by the wall. The floor underneath was grey with sand and gravel. I would have to join them for a while so as not to appear totally unsociable, I thought, and went into the living room.

Mikaela was talking about a meeting she’d had with the minister of culture, Leif Pagrotsky. He was a tiny man and had been sitting on a large sofa, she said, with a huge cushion on his lap, which he hugged as he sat there, and even, according to her, sank his teeth into. But she had the greatest respect for him. He had a razor-sharp mind and an enormous capacity for work. I wasn’t sure what qualifications Mikaela had, since I had only met her in contexts like this, but whatever they were they obviously worked well for her: barely thirty years old, she went from one top post to the next. Like so many women I had met she was close to her father, who had something or other to do with literature. With her mother, a demanding lady who lived alone in an apartment in Gothenburg, from what I had gathered, she had a more complicated relationship. Mikaela often changed her partners, and no matter how different they were they had one thing in common: they were always inferior to her. Of all the stories she had told over the three years since I first met her there was one in particular that stood out in my mind. We were sitting in the bar at Folkoperan and she told us about a dream she’d had. She had been to a party and had gone without any trousers on, so she was naked from the waist down, like Donald Duck. It had made her feel uneasy, she said, but that wasn’t all, there had also been something alluring about it, and then she simply lay down on a table with her naked backside in the air. What did we think the dream could mean?

Ye-es, what could it mean?

When she told us this I didn't think it was true, or that the others around the table knew something I didn't, because surely what the dream said about her was something she would not want everyone to know? From then on, this trace of naïvety, which had appeared so unexpectedly in her otherwise sophisticated demeanour, led me to view her with affection and wonderment. Was that perhaps the intention? Whatever the reason, she had a high opinion of Linda, turned to her sometimes for advice because, like me, she knew about Linda's unfailing intuition and taste. That on occasions like this she could become a little too self-centred didn't strike me as much of a surprise, and it was perfectly forgivable. Besides, what she told us about life in the corridors of power was always interesting, at least for me, so far removed on the periphery. If you switched perspective and took her point of view, she was visiting a close but fragile friend and her taciturn husband, and what option had she but to take the initiative and embrace this small family with some of her happiness and energy? She was Vanja's godmother and had been at the christening, where she had made such a good impression on my mother that she still asked after her. She had been interested in what mum had to say and went into the kitchen to help with the washing-up when the party was coming to an end, thereby revealing an understanding of the situation, which Linda had never shown in the same way, with all the latent friction that this caused between her and my mother. This is what we have forms for, they help us to co-exist, they are in themselves signs of friendship or goodwill, and with them in place greater personal divergence is tolerated, more idiosyncrasy, which unhappily idiosyncratic individuals never understand since it is in the very nature of idiosyncrasy not to understand. Linda did not want to serve anyone, she wanted to be served, and the consequence of that was she wasn't served. Whereas Mikaela served, and so she was served. Simple as that. It grieved me that mum was so taken with her, also because there was quite a different richness and unpredictability in Linda's personality. Sudden precipices, unexpected blasts of wind, enormous walls of resistance. Getting things to run smoothly, working to achieve a lack of resistance, this is the antithesis of art's essence, it is the antithesis of wisdom, which is based on restricting or being restricted. So the question is: what do you choose? Movement, which is close to life, or the area beyond movement, which is where art is located, but also, in a certain sense, death?

‘I’ll have a cup of tea after all,’ I said.

‘It’s herbal tea,’ Linda said. ‘You don’t want that, do you? But the water’s probably still hot.’

‘No, preferably not,’ I said, and went into the kitchen. While I was waiting for the water to boil I took a pencil, positioned myself on a chair in front of the cupboard and marked all the bottles. A little dot on the labels, nothing more, so small that to see it you had to know it was there.

I was behaving like the father of a teenager and felt somewhat stupid standing there, yet I couldn’t see what else I could do. I didn’t want the woman who was looking after my child and the person who had most to do with her apart from Linda and me to drink alcohol when she was with her.

Then I popped a tea bag in the cup and poured water on it. I looked down at Nalen, where the cooks were hosing the floor and the dishwashers were steaming. From the departure sounds in the living room I gathered Mikaela was on her way home. I went into the hall and said goodbye to her. Then I sat down in front of the computer, accessed the Net, checked my emails, nothing, went onto a few websites and googled myself. There were over 29,000 hits. The figure rose and sank like a kind of index. I surfed and clicked at random. Steered clear of interviews and reviews, clicked on some of the blogs. Someone wrote that my books weren’t even worth wiping your arse with. Elsewhere I found the homepage of a small publishing house or journal. My name appeared in a caption under a picture of Ole Robert Sunde which said he was telling anyone who would listen how bad Knausgaard’s last book was. Then I stumbled on the documents of a boundary dispute between neighbours in which a relative had clearly been involved. The cause was a garage wall a few metres too short or too long.

‘What are you doing?’ Linda asked behind me.

‘Googling myself. It’s a bloody Pandora’s box. You wouldn’t believe what people come out with.’

‘You shouldn’t do it,’ she said. ‘Come here and sit down.’

‘Coming,’ I said. ‘Just got a couple of things to check.’

The next morning I left for the office when Ingrid came to pick up Vanja at eight. Sat there until three writing the speech, was back home by half past three. Linda was in the bath, she was going out for a meal with Christina. I went into the kitchen and monitored the bottles. Two of them had been drunk from.

I went in to Linda and sat on the toilet seat lid.

'Hi,' she said with a smile. 'I bought myself a bath bomb today.'

The bathtub was full of lather. When she raised an arm to sit up there was a ribbon of foam hanging from it.

'I can see,' I said. 'There's something we have to talk about.'

'Oh?'

'It's your mother. Remember what I told you about how the levels in the bottles of booze were falling very noticeably of late?'

She nodded.

'I marked the bottles yesterday. So that I could be sure. And they've gone down again. If it's not you it has to be your mother.'

'Mummy?'

'Yes, she drinks when she's here with Vanja. She's been doing it all week, and I don't think there are any grounds for believing it's just started.'

'Are you sure?'

'Ye-es, as sure as I can be.'

'What shall we do?'

'Tell her we know what's going on. And for us it's unacceptable.'

'Right.'

She fell silent.

'When are they coming back?' I asked after a while.

She looked at me.

'Around five,' she said.

'What do you suggest?' I asked.

'We'll have to tell her. Simply give her an ultimatum. If she does it again she can't be left alone with Vanja.'

'Mm,' I said.

'This must have been going on for several years,' she said, apparently engrossed in her own thoughts. 'It would explain a great deal. She's been so incredibly scratchy. It's next to impossible to have any real communication.'

I got up.

'It might not,' I said. 'Maybe it has something to do with Vidar and her. Perhaps she's stuck in a cul-de-sac out there. And she's unhappy.'

'But you don't start drinking because you're unhappy when you're over sixty,' she said. 'Must be a way of coping. Must have been going on for a long time.'

'They'll be here in about half an hour,' I said. 'Shall we let it go and tackle it later, or shall we go for it right away? Get it over and done with?'

'I don't suppose there's anything to wait for,' she said. 'But how shall we put it to her? I can't do it on my own. She'll only deny it and somehow make it all about me. Shall we do it together?'

'Bit like a family meeting, you mean?'

Linda shrugged and turned her palms face up in the foam-filled bath.

'Well, *I* don't know,' she said.

'It's too complicated. And it's two against one. Like some tribunal. I can do it. I'll go out with her and talk to her.'

'Do you want to do that?'

'Want? It's the last thing I'd want to do on this earth! She's my mother-in-law for Christ's sake. All I want is some decency, dignity and peace and quiet.'

'I'm pleased you'll do it,' she said.

'I must say you're taking this well though,' I said.

'This is almost the only time when I'm calm, when something unforeseen happens, some crisis or other. It's a hangover from childhood. Then it was the normal situation. I'm used to it. But I'm angry too, just so that you know. It's now that we need her. She has to be someone for our children. They have almost no family, as you know. She can't let us down now. She can't, even if I have to make sure she doesn't myself.'

'Children?' I said. 'Do you know something I don't?'

She smiled and shook her head.

'No, but perhaps I can feel something.'

I went out, closed the door behind me and stood in front of the living-room window. Heard the water draining down the bath plughole, looked at the torch flickering outside the café across the narrow street, the dark figures with white mask-like faces walking past. On the floor above a neighbour was playing a guitar. Linda came into the hall with a red towel wrapped round her head like a turban and disappeared behind the open cupboard door. I went to check my emails. One from Tore, one from Gina Winje. I started a reply to her, then deleted it. Went into the kitchen, put on the coffee machine and drank a glass of water. Linda was standing in front of the hall mirror putting on her make-up.

‘When’s Christina coming?’ I asked.

‘At six. But I might as well get ready now while we’re alone. How was it today by the way? Did you get anything done?’

‘Bit. Have to do the rest tomorrow evening and on Friday.’

‘Are you going on Saturday?’ she asked, leaning her head back and running the little brush across one eyelash.

‘Yes.’

Outside the lift started. There weren’t many residents in the building so the chances were it would be them. Yes, it was. The lift stopped, the door opened into the corridor, followed immediately by the sound of a buggy being reversed.

Ingrid opened the door and came into the hall, which was soon filled with her energetic-frenetic presence.

‘Vanja fell asleep on the way,’ she said. ‘The little darling was worn out, poor thing. But she’s done a lot today! We were at the children’s museum. I bought a season ticket which you can have . . . so you’ve got free entrance for the whole of the rest of the year . . .’

She put down all the bags she was carrying, pulled a wallet from her jacket and took out a yellow card, which she passed to Linda.

‘And then we also bought a new jumpsuit, identical to the old one, which was a bit too small for her – hope that’s not a problem?’

She looked at me. I shook my head.

‘And a new pair of gloves while we were at it.’

She searched through the bags and took out a pair of red gloves.

‘They’ve got hooks you can attach to the sleeve. They’re nice and warm, and big.’

She looked at Linda.

‘Are you going out? Oh yes, you’re off with Christina tonight.’ She looked at me. ‘So you and Geir will have to think of something. But I won’t hold you up. I’m leaving now.’

She turned to Vanja, who was lying in the buggy behind her with her hat down over her eyes.

‘She’ll probably sleep for another hour. She didn’t sleep much this morning, you see. Shall I put her in the living room?’

‘I can do that,’ I said. ‘Are you going back to Gnesta, or what?’

She looked at me with raised eyebrows.

‘No. I’m going to the theatre with Barbro. I had planned to borrow your office for another night. I thought . . . I told Linda. Do you need it?’

‘No, no,’ I said. ‘I was just wondering. I wanted to have a chat with you actually. There’s something I have to say.’

The large eyes behind the thick glasses examined me with unease.

‘Fancy coming for a walk with me?’ I said.

‘All right,’ she said.

‘Let’s go right away then. This won’t take long.’

I loosened the nuts on the screws holding the double doors together, pulled the bolt fixing them to the floor, opened them and pushed in the buggy. While I was doing this Ingrid went into the kitchen for a glass of water. Then I got ready, stood a few metres away and waited, lost in my own thoughts. Linda had gone into the living room.

‘You’re not splitting up, are you?’ she said as I closed the door behind us. ‘Please don’t say you’re splitting up . . .’

Her face was white as she said it.

‘No, we’re not. My God, no. No, we’re not. I want to talk to you about something completely different.’

‘Ooof, I’m so relieved.’

We went into the backyard, through the gateway and into David Bagares gata, which we followed up to Malmskillnadsgatan. I said nothing, I didn’t know how to articulate this, how to start. She didn’t say anything either, glanced at me a couple of times, in anticipation or surprise.

‘I don’t quite know how to say this,’ I said as we approached the crossroads and started to walk towards Johanneskyrk.

Pause.

‘But it’s . . . Well, I may as well blurt this straight out. I know you were drinking when you looked after Vanja today. And you were yesterday. And I . . . well, I simply can’t tolerate that. It’s no good. You can’t do that.’

Her eyes were on me the whole time we were walking.

‘I don’t want to be checking on you in any way,’ I continued. ‘You can do what you like, of course, as far as I’m concerned. But not if you’re looking after Vanja. I have to set a limit. That’s no good. Do you understand?’

‘No,’ she said, astonished. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never had a drink while looking after Vanja. Never. Nor would it ever occur to me. Where have you got this idea from?’

My insides plummeted. As always when I was in situations where there was a lot at stake, agonising situations, when I went further, or was forced to go further than I wanted, I saw everything around me, also myself, with a special almost hyper-real clarity. The green tin roof of the church tower before us, the black leafless trees in the cemetery we were walking beside, the car, a gleaming blue, gliding up the road on the other side. My own slightly stooped gait, Ingrid’s more energetic walk beside me. Her looking up at me. Bemused, a slight almost imperceptible shadow of reproach.

‘I noticed the levels in the spirits bottles were down. To make sure, I marked the labels yesterday. When I came home I saw that more had gone. I hadn’t drunk any. The only other people who have been there today are you and Linda. I know it wasn’t Linda. That means it has to be you. There’s no other explanation.’

‘There must be,’ she said. ‘Because it wasn’t me. I’m sorry, Karl Ove, but I haven’t been drinking your spirits.’

‘Listen,’ I said. ‘You’re my mother-in-law. I wish you nothing but well. I don’t want this. Not at all. The last thing I want to do is to accuse you of anything. But what can I do when I *know* what happened?’

‘But you can’t know,’ she said. ‘I didn’t do this.’

My stomach ached. I had wandered into a kind of hell.

‘You have to understand, Ingrid,’ I said. ‘Whatever you say, this will have consequences. You’re a fantastic mother-in-law. You do more for Vanja, and you mean more to Vanja than anyone else. And I’m incredibly happy about that. And I want this to continue. We don’t have much family around us, as you know. But if you won’t come clean we can’t trust you. Do you understand? Not that you won’t be able to see Vanja, because you will, whatever happens. But if you won’t come clean, if you don’t agree to put this behind you, you won’t be able to see her on your own. You’ll never be alone with her. Do you understand what I’m saying?’

‘Yes, I do. It’s a great shame. But that’s the way it’ll have to be. I can’t confess to doing something I haven’t done. Even though I feel like it. I can’t do it.’

‘OK,’ I said. ‘We’re not going to get any further with this. I suggest we drop it for a while, and then we can discuss it again and work out what to do.’

‘All right,’ she said. ‘But it won’t change anything, you know.’

‘OK.’

We walked down the steps in front of the French school and followed Döbelnsgatan up to Johannesplan, along Malmskillnadsgatan and down David Bagares gata, all the way without saying a word. Me stooped with long strides, her almost jogging beside me. It shouldn’t be like this, she was my mother-in-law; there was no reason in the world for me to correct her, or punish her, except this. It felt unworthy. And even more unworthy when she denied everything.

I put the key into the lock and swung the gate open for her. She smiled and went in.

How could she be so calm, and answer with such confidence?

Could it have been Linda after all?

No, of course it couldn’t.

But was I wrong? Had I made a mistake?

No.

Or?

In the yard the white-clad hairdresser was smoking. I greeted her and she smiled. Ingrid stopped outside the front door, which I unlocked.

‘I’m going now,’ she said as we went up the stairs. ‘We can discuss this later, as you suggested. Perhaps you’ll have found out what happened by then.’

She took her handbag and two of the plastic bags, smiled as usual as she said goodbye, failed to give me a hug though.

Linda came into the hall after she had gone.

‘How did it go? What did she say?’

‘She said she hadn’t been drinking when she’d been with Vanja. Not today, either. And she couldn’t understand how the levels in the bottles had gone down.’

‘If she’s an alcoholic, denial is part of the whole picture.’

‘Possible,’ I said. ‘But what the hell can we do? She just says no, I didn’t do it. I say yes, you did, and she says no, I didn’t. I can’t *prove* anything. It’s not as if we have CCTV in the kitchen.’

‘As long as *we* know, it doesn’t matter much. If she wants to play games she’ll have to take the consequences.’

‘Which are?’

‘We-ell. We can’t leave her alone with Vanja.’

‘Oh, fucking hell,’ I said. ‘What a pile of shit. Fancy having to walk around with my mother-in-law and insist that she’s been drinking. What is this?!’

‘I’m glad you did. She’ll probably admit to it in the end.’

‘I don’t think she will.’

How quickly a life sets new roots. How quickly you move from being a stranger in a town to being absorbed into it. Three years ago I had been living in Bergen, at that time I knew nothing about Stockholm and knew no one there. Then I went to Stockholm, the unknown, populated by foreigners, and gradually, day by day, though imperceptibly, I began to thread my life into theirs until now they were inseparable. If I had gone to London, which I might well have done, the same would have happened there, just with different people. It was that arbitrary, and so momentous.

Ingrid rang Linda the next day and admitted everything. She added she didn’t think it was that serious herself, but since we did, she would implement the necessary measures to ensure it would never be a problem for anyone again. She already had an appointment to see an alcohol therapist and had decided to spend more time concentrating on herself and her own needs, as she thought that was where part of the problem lay, with the enormous pressure she put on herself.

Linda was desperate after the conversation because, as she said, her mother was so optimistic and keen it wasn’t possible to have proper communication with her, it was as though she had lost her grip on reality and had started to live in a kind of light, carefree future world.

‘*I can’t talk to her!* I have no real *contact* with her. It’s just platitudes and words and how fantastic this and that is. You, for example, had praise heaped on you for the way you handled the situation. I’m fantastic and everything is wonderfully brilliant. But it comes one day after we told her we don’t want her to drink while she’s looking after Vanja. I’m seriously worried about her, Karl Ove. It’s as if she’s suffering, but she doesn’t know she is, if you get me. She represses *everything*. She deserves to enjoy her twilight years. She shouldn’t have to be tormented and suffer and drink to drown her sorrows. But what can I do? She obviously doesn’t want any help. She won’t even admit there are problems in her life.’

‘But you’re her daughter,’ I said. ‘It’s no wonder she doesn’t want you to help her. Or admit something is not as it should be. Her entire life has been orientated towards helping others. You, your brother, your father, her neighbours. If all of you were to help her, everything would unravel.’

‘I’m sure you’re right. But I just want contact with her, do you understand?’

‘Yes, I do.’

Five days later I received an email with the *Aftenposten* interview attached. Reading it just made me sad. It was hopeless. I had no one to blame but myself, yet I wrote a long reply to the journalist in which I tried to expand on my side of the matter, that is give it the semblance of seriousness it had in my mind, which of course led to my faring even worse. The journalist rang me straight afterwards, suggested adding my email to the interview on the website, which suggestion I rejected, this wasn’t the point. All I could do was give the newspaper a miss that day and stop thinking about how I came across as stupid. So I was stupid, OK, I would have to live with it. Close-up interviews also included photos of the featured person’s private life, and as I didn’t have any I asked my mother to send me some. Since they hadn’t arrived by the deadline and the journalist was asking for them I rang Yngve, who scanned some and emailed them through while mum’s photos came a week later, carefully glued onto thick card with detailed information underneath in her handwriting. I could see how proud she was and despair rose inside me like a wall. Most of all I felt like disappearing into the depths of a forest somewhere, building myself a log cabin and staying there, far from civilisation and gazing into a fire. People, who needs people?

‘A young Sørlander with nicotine-stained fingers and faintly discoloured teeth,’ he had written. The sentence was indelibly etched in my brain.

But I got what I deserved. Had I not myself written up an interview with Jan Kjærstad many years ago entitled ‘The Man Without a Chin’? And *that* without appreciating what an insult it was . . .

Ha ha ha!

No, bugger it, this wasn’t worth the worry. I had to refuse everything from now on, endure the last months as a house husband with Vanja and then resume work in April. Hard, methodical, keeping an eye open for anything that imparted joy, energy and light. Cherish what I had, ignore everything else.

At that moment Vanja woke in the bedroom. I picked her up, held her against my chest and walked around for a few minutes until she had stopped crying and was ready for some food. I heated a potato and some peas in the microwave, mashed them with a little butter, hunted for something meaty in the fridge, found a bowl containing two fish fingers, heated them as well, and put this in front of her. She was hungry, and since I could see her from the living room, I went in, checked my emails again and answered a couple while keeping an ear open for any sounds of disgruntlement.

‘Have you eaten everything?!’ I said when I went back. She smiled with pleasure and threw her cup of water on the floor. I lifted her up and she made a grab for the wisps of beard on my chin and stuck a finger in my mouth. I laughed, tossed her up in the air a few times, fetched a nappy from the bathroom and changed her, put her on the floor and went to throw the old one in the bin under the sink. On my return she was standing in the middle of the floor and swaying. She started to walk towards me.

‘One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Six!’ I counted. ‘A new record!’

She noticed that something extraordinary had happened because she was beaming over all her face. Perhaps she was full of the sensational feeling of walking.

I put on her outdoor clothes and carried her to the buggy in the bike room. The day was bright and spring-like, even though the sun wasn’t shining. The tarmac was dry. I texted Linda about our child’s first long walk. ‘Fantastic!’ she texted back. ‘Home at half past twelve. Love you both!’

I went into the supermarket down in the Metro station by Stureplan, bought a grilled chicken, a lettuce, some tomatoes, a cucumber, black olives, two red onions and a fresh baguette, popped into Hedengrens on the way back and found a book about Nazi Germany, the first two volumes of *Das Kapital*, Orwell's *1984*, which I had never managed to read, a collection of essays by the same author, a book about Céline by Ekerwald and the latest Don DeLillo until Vanja brought my browsing to an end and I had to go and pay. The DeLillo I regretted buying the instant I was outside because even though I had been a fan of his, especially the novels *The Names* and *White Noise*, I hadn't been able to read more than half of *Underworld*, and since the next book had been terrible it was evident that he was in decline. I was on the point of going back and exchanging it, there were a couple of other books I had seen and fancied, for example, the latest Esterházy novel, *Celestial Harmonies*, which was about his father. But I preferred not to read novels in Swedish, it was too close to my own language, it constantly threatened to leach in and destroy it, so if the title was available in Norwegian I read it in Norwegian, also because I read too little in my mother tongue. Besides I was strapped for time if I was going to make lunch before Linda got home. And Vanja obviously felt that I had already looked at enough books in the shop.

Upstairs in the kitchen I made a chicken salad, sliced some bread and set the table, all while Vanja sat on the floor banging small wooden balls through holes in a board with a tiny mallet, down a slide and onto the floor.

Five minutes later she had to stop because the Russian woman started hammering on the radiators. I hated the sound, hated waiting for it, although her reaction wasn't always unjustified now, the banging could drive anyone insane, so I took the toy off Vanja, put her in the chair instead, tied a bib around her neck and was giving her some bread and butter when Linda came in the door.

'Hi!' she said, coming over to hug me.

'Hi?' I said.

'I went to the chemist this morning,' she said, looking at me with a sparkle in her eyes.

'Yes?' I said.

'I bought a pregnancy test.'

'Yes? What are you actually telling me?'

'We're going to have another child, Karl Ove!'

'Are we really?'

There were tears in my eyes.

She nodded. Her eyes were moist too.

'I'm so happy,' I said.

'Yes, I couldn't talk about anything else in therapy. Haven't thought about anything else all day. It's fantastic.'

'Did you tell your therapist before you told me?'

'Yes, and?'

'What have you got between your ears? Do you imagine it's only your child? You can't tell other people before you tell me! Is there something wrong with you or what?'

'Oh, Karl Ove, I'm so sorry. I didn't think. I was just overwhelmed. I didn't mean to. Please, don't let this come between us.'

I looked at her.

'OK,' I said. 'I don't suppose it makes much difference. In the bigger picture, I mean.'

In the night I was woken by her crying. Sobbing her heart out as only she could. I placed my hand over her neck.

'What's up, Linda?' I whispered. 'Why are you crying?'

Her shoulders shook.

She turned her face to me.

'I was only being dutiful!' she said. 'That was all it was.'

'All what was?' I asked. 'What are you talking about?'

'This morning. I went into the chemist and bought the test because I wanted to know. I couldn't wait! And so after I had the answer I had to go to therapy! It didn't occur to me that I could come home! I thought I had to go!'

She started sobbing again.

'I could have come home and told you the fantastic news! Straight away! I didn't need to go to therapy, did I!'

I stroked her back, ran my hand through her hair.

'But, Linda love, it's nothing!' I said. 'It doesn't matter! I was a bit put out, that was all. Hell, the only thing that counts is we're going to have a baby!'

She looked at me and smiled through the tears.

'Do you mean that?' she said.

I kissed her.

Her lips tasted of salt.

That November evening I sat on the balcony of our flat in Malmö in the darkness after having taken Vanja to the birthday party, and almost two years had passed. The child, barely conceived back then, had not only been born but was now a year old. We had christened her Heidi, she was a happy blonde girl, more robust than her sister in some ways, just as sensitive in others. During the christening Vanja had shouted No! No! No! so loudly it resounded around the church as the priest was about to splash water over her sister's head, and it was impossible not to laugh, it was as if she was reacting physically to the holy water, like some tiny vampire or devil. When Heidi was nine months old we moved to Malmö on a kind of impulse, neither of us had been there before, and we didn't know anyone, but we went there to have a look at a flat and made the decision after being in the town for a total of five hours. This was where we were going to live. The flat was on the top floor of a block in the centre, it was large, 130 square metres, and since it was so high up light flooded in from dawn to dusk. Nothing could have suited us better; our life in Stockholm had become darker and darker until in the end we had no choice but to get out. Away from the crazy Russian, with whom we had been engaged in an unresolvable conflict and who continued to send complaints to the owners of the block, who then summoned us to a meeting, not that that led anywhere, because even though they believed us, which in the end they did, there was nothing they could do. We took matters into our own hands. After a further incident when she had come up to our flat and I, holding Vanja and Heidi in my arms, had told her to leave us in peace, to which she had said she had a man in her flat and was going to tell him to beat me up, we rang the police and reported her for harassment and threatening behaviour. I never thought I would go that far, but I did. The police couldn't do anything, but that wasn't important because they set the social services on her, two people who came to inspect her living conditions, and for her there could be no greater humiliation. Oh, how I relished the thought of that! But it didn't make relations with the neighbours any better. And with two children in the middle of a large city, where the only car-free green zones were parks, where we walked them like dogs, the question was not whether but when we would move. Linda wanted to go to Norway and I didn't, so the choice was between two towns in Sweden, Gothenburg or Malmö, and since Linda had negative associations with the former, having broken off her studies at Litteræer Gestaltning, the writers' school, after a few weeks because of illness, the matter was decided: we moved to Malmö as we liked the feeling we had in the few hours we were there. Malmö was open, the sky above the town high, the sea close by, there was a long beach only a few minutes from the centre, Copenhagen was three quarters of an hour away, and the atmosphere in the town was laid-back, in holiday mode, quite different from Stockholm's tough, stern, careerist ambience. The first months in Malmö were wonderful, we went swimming every day, sat on the balcony eating when the children were in bed, buoyed with optimism, closer to each other than we had been for two years. But the darkness crept in there as well, slowly and imperceptibly it filled all the other parts of my life, the novelty wore off, the world slipped away, leaving quivering frustration.

As it did this evening. Linda and Vanja were eating in the kitchen, Heidi slept her fevered sleep in the cot in our bedroom and I was almost suffocated by the thought of the washing-up, the rooms that looked as if they had been systematically ransacked, as though someone had tipped everything from the drawers and cupboards across the floor, by the dirt and sand everywhere and the pile of dirty laundry in the bathroom. By 'the novel' I was writing, which was taking me nowhere. I had spent two years on nothing. By the oppressiveness of life in the flat. By our arguments, which were escalating and becoming more and more unmanageable. By the joy that had departed.

My angry outbursts were petty, they flared up over trifles; who cares who washed what when, as you looked back on a life, summed up a life? Linda shifted between her moods, and when she was at her lowest ebb she simply lay on the sofa or in bed, and what at the start of our relationship had aroused tenderness in me now led directly to irritation: was I supposed to do *everything* while she lay there moping? Well, I could, but not without conditions. I did it and had every right to be bad-tempered and grumpy, ironic, sarcastic, occasionally furious. This joylessness spread far beyond me and right into the centre of our life together. Linda said she wanted only one thing, for us all to be a happy family. That was what she wanted, that was what she dreamed about, for us to be one happy, contented family. All I ever dreamed about was for her to do her half of the housework. She said she did, so there we were, with our accusations, our anger and our longings, in the middle of life, of our lives, no one else's.

How was it possible to waste your life getting het up about housework? How was it *possible*?

I wanted the maximum amount of time for myself, with the fewest disturbances possible. I wanted Linda, who was already at home looking after Heidi, to take care of everything that concerned Vanja so that I could work. She didn't want to. Or perhaps she did, but she couldn't cope. All our conflicts and rows were in some form or other about this, the dynamics. If I couldn't write because of her and her demands, I would leave her, it was as simple as that. And somewhere she knew. She stretched my limits, according to what she needed in her life, but never so far that I reached my snapping point. I was close though. The way I took my revenge was to give her everything she wanted – I took care of the children, I cleaned the floors, I washed the clothes, I did the food shopping, I cooked and I earned all the money so that she had nothing tangible to complain about as far as me and my role in the family were concerned. The only thing I didn't give her, and it was the only thing she wanted, was my love. That was how I took my revenge. Cold and unmoved, I watched her become more and more desperate until it became untenable and she screamed at me in rage, frustration and yearning. What's the problem? I asked. Don't you think I'm doing enough? You're exhausted, you say. But I can take the children tomorrow. I can take Vanja to the nursery, and then I can go out with Heidi while you sleep and have a rest. Then I can collect Vanja from the nursery in the afternoon and look after them in the evening. That's OK, isn't it? Then you'll be able to rest as you're so drained. In the end, when she ran out of arguments she would throw objects and smash them. A glass, a plate, whatever came to hand. She was the one who should have been doing these chores for me, so that I could work, but she didn't. And since her problem was not that she was doing too much, but the fact that there was no love, only spite, moodiness, frustration and bad temper in the man she loved, which she was unable to find a way to articulate, the best revenge for me was to take her at her word. Oh, how I gloated when I caught her in the trap and could stand there agreeing to all her demands! After the eruption, which was inevitable, after we had gone to bed, she would often cry and want to be comforted. That gave me an opportunity to extract further revenge, because I wouldn't comply.

However, living like this was impossible, nor was it what I wanted, so when my anger, which was hard and implacable, abated, and all that was left was this soul in torment, as though everything I had was going to pieces, we made up, came closer to each other and lived as we once had. Then the whole process started again, it was cyclical, as in nature.

I stubbed out my cigarette, drank the last mouthful of flat Coke and got up, held the railing and stared into the sky, where a light hung motionless somewhere outside town, too low to be a star, too quiet to be a plane.

What on earth . . . ?

I stared for several minutes. Then it suddenly fell to the left, and I realised it was a plane. It was motionless because it was coming down over Øresund and maintaining a course straight for me.

Someone knocked on the window and I turned. It was Vanja, she smiled and waved. I opened the door.

'Are you going to bed now?'

She nodded.

'I wanted to say goodnight to you, daddy.'

I bent down and kissed her on the cheek.

'Goodnight. Sleep tight!'

'Sleep tight!'

She ran through the hall and into her room, a bundle of energy even after such a long day.

Better do the bloody washing-up then.

Scrape the leftovers into the bin, empty the dregs of milk and water from the glasses, take the apple and carrot peel, the plastic packaging and tea bags from the sinks, clean them and put everything on the drainer, run hot water, squirt some washing-up liquid, rest my forehead against the cupboard and start washing, glass by glass, cup by cup, plate by plate. Rinse. Then, when the stand was full, start drying to make room for more. Afterwards the floor, which had to be scrubbed where Heidi had been sitting. Tie the bin bag and take the lift down to the cellar, walk through the warm labyrinthine corridors to the waste disposal room, which was strewn with filth and slippery, which had pipes hanging from the ceiling like torpedoes, adorned with torn plastic ties and bits of insulation tape, a sign on the door proclaiming *Miljørom,* Milieu Room, a typical Swedish euphemism, throw the bags up into one of the large green rubbish containers, suddenly reminded of Ingrid, who the last time she had been here had found hundreds of small canvasses in one of them and had carried them up to the flat, imagining this would fill us with as much happiness as it did her, the idea that the children would now have enough painting material for several years into the future, close the lid and walk back to the flat, where at that moment Linda was tiptoeing out of the children's room.

'Is she asleep?' I asked.

Linda nodded.

'What a nice job you've done,' she said. Stopped at the kitchen door. 'Would you like a glass of wine? The bottle Sissel brought last time she came is still here.'

My first impulse was to say no, I definitely did not want any wine. But, strangely, the short time away from the flat had softened my attitude towards her, so I nodded.

'Could do,' I said.

Two weeks later, one afternoon while Heidi and Vanja were running wild around us, jumping on the sofa and screaming, we huddled together examining for the third time in our lives a small blue line on a small white test stick, overcome with emotion. It was John signalling his arrival. He was born late the following summer, gentle and patient from the first moment, always close to laughter, even when the storm around him was at its worst. Often he looked as if he had been dragged through a thicket, covered with scratches from the clawings Heidi gave him whenever she had the chance, usually under the pretext of a hug or an amicable pat on the cheek. What once had irked me, walking through the town with a buggy, was now history, forgotten and outlandish, as I pushed a shabby buggy with three children on board around the streets, often with two or three shopping bags dangling from one hand, deep furrows carved in my brow and down my cheeks, and eyes that burned with a vacant ferocity I had long lost any contact with. I no longer bothered about the potentially feminised nature of what I did; now it was a question of getting the children to wherever we had to go, with no sit-down strikes or refusals to go any further or any other ideas they could dream up to thwart my wishes for an easy morning or afternoon. Once a crowd of Japanese tourists stopped on the other side of the street and pointed at me, as though I were the ringmaster of some circus parade or something. They *pointed*. There you can see a Scandinavian man! Look, and tell your grandchildren what you saw!

I was so proud of the children. Vanja was wild and plucky, you would never think her thin body could have such a huge appetite for activity, that it could devour the physical world so greedily, with its trees, climbing frames, swimming pools and open fields, and her introversion, which had held her back in the first months at the new nursery, had completely gone, so much so that the next 'progress conversation' was to focus on the opposite. Now it was not that Vanja hid away or she didn't want contact with adults or she never took the initiative in games that was the problem; on the contrary, it was perhaps that she took too central a role sometimes, as they deftly put it, and was too keen to be number one. 'To be frank,' the nursery head said, 'she sometimes bullies some of the other children. The positive side of that,' he continued, 'is that in order to do so she has to be able to understand the situation and be intelligent enough to exploit it. But we're working at making her understand that she can't do that. Have you any idea where she might have picked up this rhyme: naaa-na-na-na-naaa-na? Has she seen it in a film or what? If so, we can show the film here and explain to them what it is.' After the last meeting, when they had talked about a speech therapist and treated her shyness as a flaw or a defect, I couldn't care less what they thought about her. She had only just turned four, she would be rid of it in a few months . . . Heidi wasn't quite as wild, her physical control was of another order, she seemed to be present in her body in quite a different way from Vanja, for whom fiction was simply a variant of reality and who allowed her imagination to run away with her. Vanja would lose her cool and go frantic with despair if she couldn't master something from the outset and gratefully accept help, whereas Heidi wanted to do everything herself, she would be offended if we offered our help and she would keep going and going until she succeeded. Oh, the triumph on her face then! She climbed to the top of the big tree in the playground before Vanja. The first time she wrapped her arms round the top branch. The second time, driven by tiny-tot hubris, she stood on top. I was sitting on a bench reading a newspaper and heard her scream: she was perched at the end of the branch, with nothing to hold on to, six metres above the ground. One rash move and she would fall.

I shinned up and grabbed her, unable to stop laughing, what on earth were you doing *there*? She often did an extra skip when she walked, and that, I thought, was a skip of happiness. She was the only person in the family who was truly happy, it seemed, or who had a sunny disposition. She tolerated everything, apart from being told off. Then her lips quivered, the tears began to well up and it could take an hour to console her. She loved playing with Vanja, she went along with everything, and she adored riding. When she was astride the donkey at the amusement park we went to in the summer her face glowed with pride. But even the sight of Heidi was not enough to change Vanja's opinion, she didn't want to ride, she would never ride again, pushed her glasses up her nose, suddenly threw herself in front of John and let out a scream that made everyone around look at us. John liked it though, he shouted back, and then they laughed.

The sun was already low over the pine trees in the west. The sky was the same deep blue colour I remembered from my childhood and loved. Something eased inside me, soared upwards. But I couldn't make any use of it. The past was nothing.

Linda lifted Heidi off the stupid donkey. She waved goodbye to the animal and to the woman selling the tickets.

'There we are,' I said. 'Now it's straight home.'

The car was on its own in the large gravelled car park now. I sat down on the kerbstone nearby with Heidi on my lap, changing her nappy. Then I strapped in John on the front seat while Linda did the same for the girls in the back.

We had rented a big red VW. It was only the fourth time I had driven since I got my licence, so everything connected with it gave me pleasure. Starting up, changing gear, accelerating, reversing, steering. It was all fun. I had never thought I would ever drive a car, it wasn't part of my self-image, so my pleasure was all the greater when I found myself driving homewards on the motorway at 150 kph, in the regular almost drowsy rhythm that set in, indicating to pull out, overtaking, indicating to pull in, surrounded by countryside initially dominated by forest, then after a long gradual incline up an enormous hill, by cornfields as far as the eye could see, low farm buildings, magnificent coppices and small forests of deciduous trees, with the sea as a constant blue border in the west.

‘Look!’ I said as we reached the summit, and the Skåne countryside lay beneath us. ‘So *unbelievably* beautiful!’

Golden cornfields, green beech forests, blue sea. All seemingly intensified and shimmering in the light from the setting sun.

No one answered.

I knew John was asleep. But those at the back, had they also nodded off?

I turned to look over my shoulder.

Yes, indeed. Three girls lay there with mouths agape and eyes closed.

Happiness exploded inside me.

It lasted for one second, two seconds, maybe three. Then came the shadow that always followed, this happiness’s dark train.

I tapped my hand against the steering wheel and sang along to the music. It was Coldplay’s latest CD, one I couldn’t stand but which I had found was perfect for driving. Once I’d had the exact same feeling as now. When I was sixteen, in love, on my way through Denmark early one summer morning, heading for Nykøbing to a football training camp, all the others in the car apart from the driver and me at the front were asleep. He was playing the *Brothers in Arms* CD by Dire Straits, which had come out that spring, and with Sting’s *The Dream of a Blue Turtle* and Talk Talk’s *It’s My Life* formed the soundtrack to all the fantastic experiences I’d had over the past months. The flat landscape, the sun rising, the stillness outside, the sleeping passengers, reinforced by a happiness that was so strong I remembered it twenty-five years later. But this happiness hadn’t had a shadow, it had been pure, undiluted, unadulterated. Then life lay at my feet. Anything could happen. Anything was possible. It wasn’t like that any longer. A lot had happened, and what had happened laid the ground for what could happen.

Not only were the opportunities fewer; the emotions I experienced were weaker. Life was less intense. And I knew I was halfway, perhaps more than halfway. When John was as old as I was now I would be eighty. And with one foot in the grave, if not both feet. In ten years I would be fifty. In twenty, sixty.

Was it strange that a shadow hung over happiness?

I indicated to pull out and overtook a juggernaut. I was so inexperienced that I felt uneasy when the car was buffeted by the turbulence. But I wasn’t afraid, I had only been afraid once for as long as I had been driving, and that was on the day of my driving test. It took place early one midwinter morning, it was pitch black outside, I had never driven in the darkness. The rain was pelting down, and I had never driven in the pouring rain. And the examiner was an unfriendly-looking man with an unfriendly presence. Naturally, I had the compulsory safety check off by heart. The first thing he said was that we would skip the check. Just clean the condensation off the windows and we'll say that's fine. I didn't know how to do that out of the sequence I had drilled into myself, and by the time I had worked it out after two minutes' fumbling around on the dashboard, I had forgotten to switch on the ignition for the demist to work, which caused the examiner to scrutinise me, ask, 'You do know how to drive, do you?' and with a shake of the head to turn the key for me. After such an incredibly bad start I wasn't helped by the fact that my legs were wildly out of control, they were shaking and trembling, and my coordination was conspicuous by its absence, so we kangaroo-jumped rather than glided into the traffic. Pitch black. Morning rush hour. Pouring rain. After a hundred metres the examiner asked me what my day job was. I said I was a writer. Then he became really interested. He was an artist himself, he told me. He'd had an exhibition and so on. He asked me what I wrote. I had just started to tell him about *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* when he gave me the name of the town I should head for. In front of us was an enormous motorway junction. I couldn't see a sign with the name. He asked if the book had come out in Swedish. I nodded. There! There was the sign. But over on the far lane! So I steered towards it and accelerated, and he jumped on the brakes, bringing us to a sudden halt.

'The lights are red!' he said. 'Didn't you see? Fire-engine red!'

I hadn't even seen any lights.

'Well, that's it then, isn't it?'

'I'm afraid so,' he said. 'If we have to intervene, you've failed. Those are the rules. Do you want to drive a bit more?'

'No. Let's go back.'

The whole test had lasted three minutes. I was home by half past nine. Linda regarded me with tense eyes.

'Failed,' I said.

'Oh no!' she said. 'Poor you! What happened?'

'Went through on red.'

'Really?'

‘Yes, really! Who would have imagined when I got up early this morning that I would jump the lights during the test! It’ll be fine next time. I won’t do it again in the next test.’

It wasn’t a big issue. We didn’t have a car, and it didn’t matter whether I got my licence in January or March. And I had already squandered such an incredible amount of money on driving lessons that a handful more wouldn’t make much difference. The only problem was that we had planned a trip at the end of the month. I had agreed to do a job in Søgne, in southern Norway, with the idea of going there as a family and afterwards travelling back via Sandøya, outside Tvedestrand, and staying at a guest house for a couple of days to see what it was like. In fact, I had checked out Sandøya a few years ago and thought it would be a perfect place for us to live. An island with around two hundred inhabitants, a nursery, a school with classes for children up to ten and no cars. The countryside was exactly like the area I had grown up with, and for which I felt such a deep yearning, except that it wasn’t, it wasn’t Tromøya or Arendal or Kristiansand, which I would not have returned to for the whole wide world, but something different, something new. Sometimes I thought the longing for the terrain we had grown up with was biological, somehow rooted in us, that the instinct which could make a cat travel several hundred kilometres to find the place it came from also functioned in us, the human animal, on a par with other deeply archaic currents within us.

Sometimes I looked at pictures of Sandøya on the Net, and the sight of the landscape gave me a rush that was so strong it completely overshadowed the potentially lonely and abandoned existence there. Not for Linda, of course, she was more sceptical, but not entirely closed to the idea. Living in a forest by the sea would suit us a great deal better than living on the sixth floor in the centre of the town. So we spent hours speculating, long enough for us to want to go there and check it out. But then I didn’t get my licence, so I had to go to Søgne alone, which meant the whole point of the job was lost. What was I going to talk about?

That evening, Geir rang me as I was booking the flight online. We had already spoken during the day, but he hadn’t been himself over recent weeks, in his own controlled way, so there was nothing strange about him phoning again. I sat back in my armchair and put my feet on the desk. He told me a bit about the biography he was writing, about Montgomery Clift and how he always strove to get the maximum out of life in all ways. My only reference point to Montgomery Clift was via The Clash, their line ‘Montgomery Clift, honey!’ from *London Calling*, and it transpired that was also where Geir had heard his name, although in a different context: in Iraq he had been living in a waterworks with Robin Banks, an English junkie who had been one of the band’s best friends, he travelled with them on tour, he even had a song dedicated to him, and he had told him how Montgomery Clift had occupied an important place in their lives, which prompted Geir to find out more about him. Another reason was that *The Misfits* was one of his favourite films. I spoke about Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks*, which I had just started rereading, about how perfect the sentences were, how high the quality of the writing was, for which reason I enjoyed, truly enjoyed, every page, which was a rare occurrence, and about how this perfection, like the setting and the form incidentally, belonged to a different era from Thomas Mann’s, which made it more like an imitation, a reconstruction, or in other words, a pastiche. What happened when the pastiche surpassed the original? *Could* it indeed? This was a classic problem; writers as far back as Virgil must have grappled with it. How closely is a style or a form tied to the particular era and the particular culture it first appeared in? Is a style or a form destroyed as soon as it appears? In Thomas Mann’s hands it wasn’t destroyed, that was not the right word, more ‘ambivalent’ perhaps, endlessly ambivalent, whence the irony, the irony that would destabilise all foundations, flowed. From there we moved on to Stefan Zweig’s *The World of Yesterday*, the fantastic portrait of the turn of the last century, when age and gravity and not youth and beauty were desirable, and all young people tried to look middle-aged with their stomachs, watch chains, cigars and bald patches. All blown to pieces by the First World War, which, followed by the Second World War, formed a chasm between us and them. Geir then talked about Montgomery Clift again, his tumultuous life, his unbridled vitalism. He realised that all the biographies he had read over the last year had this in common: they were all about vitalists. Not in theory, but in practice, they were always out to get the most from life. Jack London, André Malraux, Nordahl Grieg, Ernest Hemingway. Hunter S. Thompson. Mayakovsky.

‘I can easily understand why Sartre took amphetamines,’ he said. ‘Life in the fast lane, achieve more, burn. That’s how it is. But the most consistent one of them all was Mishima. I always go back to him. He was forty-five when he took his own life. He was consistent. The hero had to be good-looking. Couldn’t be old. And Jünger, who went the other way. On his hundredth birthday he sat drinking cognac and smoking cigars, as sharp as a razor. Everything’s about strength. That’s all I’m interested in. Strength, courage, determination. Intelligence? No. I think you get that if you want. It’s not important, it’s not interesting. Growing up in the 70s and the 80s is a joke. We don’t do anything. And what we do do is just rubbish. I write to recapture my lost gravity. That’s what I do. But of course it serves no purpose. You know where I sit. You know what I do. My life is so trivial. And my enemies, they’re so trivial. It’s not worth wasting your strength on. But there’s nothing else. So here I sit, thrashing around in my bedroom.’

‘Vitalism,’ I said. ‘There is another vitalism, you know, the one connected with land and kinfolk. Norway in the 1920s.’

‘Oh, I’m not interested in that. There’s not a trace of Nazism in the vitalism I’m talking about. Not that it would matter if there was, but there isn’t. What I’m talking about is anti-liberal culture.’

‘There wasn’t a trace of Nazism in Norwegian vitalism either. It was the middle classes who imported Nazism, converted it into something abstract, an idea, in other words something that didn’t exist. It was about a longing for a plot of land, a longing for family. What makes Hamsun so complicated was that as a person he was so rootless, so anchorless, and as such modern, in an American sense. But he despised America, mass humanity, rootlessness. It was himself he despised. The irony that results from this is a great deal more relevant than Thomas Mann’s because it has nothing to do with style, it deals with basic existence.’

‘I’m not a writer, I’m a farmer,’ Geir said. ‘Ha ha ha! But, no, you can keep your land. I’m only interested in the social world. Nothing else. You can read Lucretius and shout hallelujah. You can talk about forests in the seventeenth century. I couldn’t be less interested. It’s only people that count.’

‘Have you seen that picture by Anselm Kiefer? It’s of a forest. All you can see is trees and snow, with red stains in places, and then there are some names of German poets written in white. Hölderlin, Rilke, Fichte, Kleist.

It’s the greatest work of art since the war, perhaps in the whole of the previous century. What does it depict? A forest. What’s it about? Well, Auschwitz of course. Where’s the connection? It’s not about ideas, it reaches right down into the depths of culture, and it can’t be expressed in ideas.’

‘Have you had a chance to see *Shoah*?’

‘No.’

‘Forest, forest and more forest. And faces. Forest and gas and faces.’

‘The picture’s called *Varus*. As far as I remember, he was a Roman army commander who lost a decisive battle in Germany. The line goes right back from the 70s to Tacitus. Schama traces it in *Landscape and Memory*. We could have added Odin, who hangs himself from a tree. Perhaps he does, I don’t remember. But it’s forest.’

‘I can see where you’re going.’

‘When I read Lucretius it’s all about the magnificence of the world. And that, the magnificence of the world, is of course a Baroque concept. It died with the Baroque age. It’s about things. The physicality of things. Animals. Trees. Fish. If you’re sorry that action has disappeared, I’m sorry the world has disappeared. The physicality of it. We only have pictures of it. That’s what we relate to. But the apocalypse, what is it now? Trees disappearing in South America? Ice melting, the waters rising. If you write to recapture your gravity, I write to recapture the world. Yes, not the world I’m in. Definitely not the social world. The wonder-rooms of the Baroque age. The curiosity cabinets. And the world in Kiefer’s trees. That’s art. Nothing else.’

‘A picture?’

‘You’ve got me there. Yes, a picture.’

There was a knock at the door.

‘I’ll call you back,’ I said, and rang off. ‘Come in!’

Linda opened the door.

‘Are you on the phone?’ she said. ‘I just wanted to say I was going to have a bath. Keep an ear open for the children. In case they wake up. Don’t put your headphones on.’

‘OK. Are you going for a sleep afterwards?’

She nodded.

‘I’ll join you.’

‘Right,’ she said, smiled and closed the door. I called Geir back.

‘Well, what the hell do I know,’ I said with a sigh.

‘Or me,’ he said.

‘What have you been doing this evening?’

‘Listening to some blues. Got ten new CDs in the post today. And I’ve ordered . . . thirteen, fourteen, *fifteen* more.’

‘You’re mad.’

‘No, I’m not . . . Mum died today.’

‘What?’

‘She passed away in her sleep. So now her angst is over. What good did it do? one might ask. But dad’s devastated. And Odd Steinar, of course. We’re going down there in a few days. The funeral’s in a week. Weren’t you going to Sørland at about that time?’

‘Ten days later,’ I said. ‘I’ve just booked the tickets.’

‘Then we’ll see each other perhaps. We’re bound to stay on for a few days.’

There was a pause.

‘Why didn’t you tell me straight away?’ I said. ‘We chatted for half an hour before you told me. Were you trying to make a point out of everything being as normal?’

‘No. Oh no. You’ve got the wrong end of the stick. No, no. I just don’t want to go there. And when I talk to you I’m away from it. It was as simple as that. It’s not worth talking about. I’m sure you understand that. It doesn’t help at all. It’s the same with blues. It’s a place to escape to. Well, not that I feel a lot. But I reckon that’s a feeling too.’

‘It is.’

After we had rung off I went into the hall between the kitchen and the living room, took an apple and stood munching as I gazed at the kitchen, which had been stripped of everything. Plaster where the worktop had been, long planks leaning against the bare walls, the floor covered in dust, various tools and cables, some furniture which would soon be assembled wrapped in plastic packaging. The renovation was supposed to take another two weeks. All we had really wanted was a dishwasher, but the worktop wasn’t the right size for it, and it would be simpler, the fitter said, to have the whole kitchen changed. So that’s what we did. The owners of the block would pay.

A voice made me turn my head.

Had it come from the children's room?

I went over and peeped in. They were asleep, both of them. Heidi in the top bunk, with her feet on the pillow and her head on the rolled-up duvet, Vanja beneath, on the duvet as well, with her arms and legs stretched out, her body in a little X-formation. She tossed her head from one side to the other and back again.

'Mummy,' she said.

She had opened her eyes.

'Are you awake, Vanja?' I asked.

No answer.

She must have been asleep.

Now and then she woke late in the evening and cried so piercingly, but it wasn't possible to make contact with her, she just screamed and screamed, trapped inside herself, it seemed, as though we didn't exist and she was completely alone where she was. If we lifted her and held her tight, she put up a furious resistance, kicked and punched and wanted to be put down again, where she was just as wild and unapproachable. She wasn't asleep, but she wasn't awake either. It was a kind of in-between state. It was heart-wrenching to see. But when she woke next day she was in a cheery mood. I wondered whether she remembered the desperation or if it drifted away like a dream.

At any rate, she would like to hear that she had said mummy in her sleep. I would have to remember to tell her.

I closed the door and went into the bathroom, where the only light came from a small candle on the edge of the bath, flickering in the draught from the window. The steam was dense inside. Linda lay with her eyes closed and her head half under the water. She sat up slowly when she noticed me.

'Here you are in your grotto,' I said.

'It's lovely,' she said. 'Don't you want to jump in?'

I shook my head.

'Thought so,' she said. 'Who were you talking to, by the way?'

'Geir,' I said. 'His mother died today.'

'Oh, how sad . . .' she said. 'How is he taking it?'

'Well,' I said.

She leaned back in the bath.

‘I suppose we’re at that age now,’ I said. ‘Mikaela’s father died only a few months ago. Your mother had a heart attack. Geir’s mother has died.’

‘Don’t say that,’ Linda said. ‘Mummy will live for many years yet. Your mother too.’

‘Maybe. If they get through their sixties they can live to be quite old. That’s how it usually is. Anyway, it won’t be long before we are the oldest.’

‘Karl Ove!’ she said. ‘You aren’t even forty yet! And I’m thirty-five!’

‘I talked to Jeppe about this once,’ I said. ‘He’s lost both his parents. I said that the worst for me would be that I no longer had anyone to witness my life. He didn’t have a clue what I was talking about. And I don’t really know if I meant it. Or if it’s not my life I want witnessed, but our children’s. I want mum to see how they get on, not just now while they’re small but when they grow up. I want her to know them inside out. Do you understand what I mean?’

‘Of course. But I don’t know if I want to talk about it.’

‘Do you remember when you came into the room and asked if I knew where Heidi was? I went out with you to look. Berit was here. She had opened the balcony door. And when I saw it, the open door, I was seized by a terrible fear. All the blood drained from my face. I almost fainted. The fear or the panic or the terror, or whatever it was, was so instantaneous. I thought that Heidi had wandered onto the balcony on her own. In those seconds I was sure we had lost her. They must be the worst seconds of my life. I’ve never known such a strong emotion. The wonder is that I’d never experienced it before, that something can happen and we could really lose them. In some way or other, I imagined they were immortal. Oh, yes, that was what we weren’t supposed to talk about.’

‘Thank you.’

She smiled. When she had her hair slicked back and didn’t wear any make-up she looked so young.

‘You definitely don’t look thirty-five,’ I said. ‘You look like twenty-five.’

‘Do I?’

I nodded.

‘They actually asked me for ID last time I went to the Systembolaget. I suppose I should be flattered by that, but at the same time I am stopped by all manner of Christian organisations when I’m walking in the street. I’m always the one they latch on to. When I’m with other people they don’t bother *them*. Then they see me and make a beeline for me. Must be something to do with the vibes I give off. There's one we can redeem. She's dying for redemption. Don't you reckon?'

I shrugged.

'Could be because you look so innocent?'

'Ha! Even worse!'

She held her nose with two fingers and ducked her whole body under the water. When she re-emerged she shook her head first. Then she looked at me with a smile.

'What's up? Why are you looking at me like that?' she asked.

'That, for example,' I said. 'What you used to do as a child.'

'What?'

'Duck your head under the water.'

In the bedroom, which was adjacent to the bathroom, John began to cry.

'Pat him on the back a bit and I'll be with you in a minute.'

I nodded and went into the bedroom. He was lying on his back and flailing with his arms as he cried. I turned him over like a turtle and stroked his back with the palm of my hand. This is what he liked best, he always went quiet then, if he hadn't had sufficient time to get himself into a real state.

I sang the five lullabies I knew. Linda came in and pulled him to her in bed. I went into the living room, put on my outdoor jacket, a scarf, a hat and shoes, which were by the balcony door, and went out. Sat down on the chair in the corner, poured myself some coffee and lit a cigarette. The wind was blowing from the east. The sky was deep and starry. Plane lights twinkled.

The summer I turned twenty mum rang one day and told me she had a large tumour in her stomach and was being admitted to hospital the following day to have it operated on. She said she didn't know whether it was malignant or not, and it wasn't possible to say how this would go. She said the tumour was so big she hadn't been able to lie on her stomach for a long time. Her voice was tired and weak. I was staying with Hilde, a girlfriend from the *gymnas*, in Søm, outside Kristiansand, where a few minutes before I had been standing on the drive beside the car waiting for her. We were going swimming. Then she had called me from the balcony, your mother's on the phone, Karl Ove. I immediately grasped the gravity of the situation, but nothing about it aroused any emotions, I was completely cold towards her. Rang off, went over to Hilde, who had got into the car, opened the passenger door and got in, said mum was having an operation and that I would have to go to Førde the next day. It felt like an event, one I should have a part in, a role I could play, the son who flies home to take care of his mother. I visualised the funeral, everyone passing on their condolences, how sorry they would be for me, and I thought about the inheritance she would bequeath. And then I thought at last I had something of significance to write about. While all this was going on another voice seemed to be running in parallel and saying no, this was serious, come on, this is your mother who's dying, she means a lot to you, you want her to live, you do, Karl Ove! Telling Hilde would give me kudos, I felt, my importance would grow in her eyes. She drove me to the airport the following day, I landed in Bringelandsåsen, caught the airport bus to Førde centre and a local bus to the hospital, where I was given mum's house keys. She had just moved, everything was packed away in boxes, I didn't need to bother about that, she said, just leave them where they were, I'll sort them out when I'm back. *If* you come back, I thought. Caught the bus up the valley through the strident green countryside, I was alone in the house all evening and night, went down to the hospital the next day, she was drowsy and weak after the operation, which had gone well. After I arrived back at the house, situated at the end of a short plain with gently sloping fields up to a mountain on one side and a river, a forest and another mountain on the other, I began to sort the boxes, put the ones with cooking utensils in the kitchen and so on. Darkness fell, the traffic on the road dwindled, the hum of the river grew, the shadow of my body flickered on walls and boxes. Who was I? A lonely person. I had just begun to learn to come to terms with it, that is minimise the significance of it, but I still had a good way to go, so every time I stopped working I would feel this chill in my head, this ice-cold evil, and perhaps put on my outdoor clothes, perhaps walk over the grass, through the garden gate, over the road to the river, which flowed past in the summer darkness, grey and black, stand between the shining-white birch trees and gaze at the water, which in some way soothed my feelings, matched them, what did I know? There must have been something to it, because that was what I did then, went out at night and searched for water. Sea, rivers, lakes, it made no difference. Oh, I was so preoccupied with myself, and I was so great, yet a nobody at the same time, quite shamefully alone and friendless, full of thoughts about *the* one, *the* woman, although I wouldn’t know what to do if I got her because I still hadn’t been to bed with one. Cunt, that only existed in theory for me. I would never dream of using such a word. Lap, bosom, backside, they were the words I used to describe my desire. I toyed with the idea of suicide, I had done that ever since I was small and despised myself for that reason, it would never happen, I had too much to avenge, too many people to hate and too much due to me. I lit a cigarette, and when it was finished I went back to the empty house with all the cardboard boxes. By three in the morning all the boxes were in place. I started moving the pictures in the hall to the living room. When I put one of them down a bird suddenly flew up into my face. Oh Jesus! I must have jumped a metre. It wasn’t a bird, it was a bat. It darted to and fro through the room with wild, agitated movements. I was terrified. I ran out, closed the door behind me and went up to the bedroom on the first floor, where I spent the whole night. I fell asleep at about six and slept through till three the next afternoon, threw my clothes on and caught the bus to the hospital. Mum was better, but still groggy from painkillers. We sat on a terrace, she was in a wheelchair. I told her some of the terrible experiences I’d had that spring. The notion that I shouldn’t worry her so soon after the operation didn’t occur to me until several years later. When I returned to the house the bat was hanging from the wall. I took a washtub and put it over the bat. Heard it banging around inside and almost threw up with revulsion. Dragged the bucket down the wall and got it onto the floor without the bat escaping. So that it was trapped at least, if not dead. I did as the night before, closed the living-room door and went up to the bedroom. Lay reading Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et Le Noir* until I fell asleep. The next morning I found a brick in the shed. Carefully lifted the bucket, found the bat lying still, hesitated for a second, was there a way to get it outside? Nudge it into a bucket perhaps and then cover it with a newspaper? I didn’t want to crush it if I didn’t have to. Before I had really made up my mind I smacked the brick down as hard as I could on the bat and squashed it against the floor. Pressed the brick down and wriggled it to and fro until I was sure there was no life left. The feeling of soft flesh against hard stone stayed with me for several days, indeed weeks. I shoved a dustpan under the bat and threw it into the ditch beside the road. Then I washed where it had been, thoroughly, and caught the bus to the hospital again. The next day mum came home, and I was a good son for two weeks. Amid the lush green of the valley, beneath the grey sky, I carried furniture and unpacked boxes until the time came for me to start university and I caught the bus to Bergen.

How much of the twenty-year-old was left in me now?

Not much, I thought, sitting and looking up at the glimmering stars above the town. The feeling of being me was the same. The person I woke up to every morning and fell asleep to every night. But the quivering panic was gone. As was the immense focus on others. And its opposite, the megalomaniac importance I ascribed to myself had become smaller. Perhaps not much smaller, but smaller nevertheless.

When I was twenty it was only ten years since I had been ten. Everything in my childhood was still close. It was still my reference point, from it I made sense of things. Not now, not any more.

I got up and went in. Linda and John were asleep, lying close together in the darkness of the bedroom. John like a little ball. I lay down beside them, watched for a while, until I too fell asleep.

Ten days later, early in the morning, I landed at Kjevik Airport, outside Kristiansand. Even though between the ages of thirteen and eighteen I had lived ten kilometres away and the countryside was full of memories, it aroused little or nothing in me this time, perhaps because it was no more than two years since I had last been there, perhaps because I was further away than ever. I descended the steps from the plane with Topdalsfjord to the left sparkling in the light from the February sun, and Ryensletta to the right, where one New Year’s Eve Jan Vidar and I had dragged ourselves downhill through a snowstorm.

I walked into the terminal building, past the baggage carousel, to a kiosk, where I bought a cup of coffee and took it with me outside. Lit a cigarette, watched people coming out in dribs and drabs, heading for the airport bus or the line of taxis, everywhere I heard the southern Norwegian dialect, which filled me with such ambivalence. It belonged here, it was the very marker of belonging, both cultural and geographical, and I could still hear the smugness I had always heard in it so clearly, probably my own interpretation, because I didn’t belong here myself and never had done.

A life is simple to understand, the elements that determine it are few. In mine there were two. My father and the fact that I had never belonged anywhere.

It was no more difficult than that.

I switched on my mobile phone and looked at the clock. A few minutes past ten. I was supposed to give the day's first talk at one at the new university in Agder, so I had plenty of time. The second was in Søgne, approximately twenty kilometres outside the town, at half past seven. I had decided to speak without a script. I had never done this before, and fear and nerves were washing through me about every ten minutes. I was weak at the knees too, and it felt as if the hand holding the cup was shaking. But it wasn't, I confirmed. I stubbed the cigarette out on the ash-coloured grid above the rubbish bin and went through the automatic doors, back to the kiosk, where I bought three newspapers and sat down on one of the high barstools to read them. Ten years ago I had written about this room, it was where the main protagonist in *Out of the World*, Henrik Vankel, went to meet Miriam in the final scene of the novel. I had been up in Volda, on the west coast, writing, where the view of the fjord, ferries shuttling hither and thither, the lights in the harbour and beneath the mountains on the other side was a mere shadow in the rooms and the countryside I was describing, this Kristiansand I had once wandered around and was now revisiting in my mind. I might not have remembered what people said to me, I might not have remembered what had happened where; however I did remember exactly what it looked like and the atmosphere which surrounded it. I remembered all the rooms I had been in and all the landscapes. If I closed my eyes I could invoke all the details of the house in which I had grown up, and the neighbour's house, and the countryside around, at least within a radius of a couple of kilometres. The schools, the swimming baths, the sports halls, the youth clubs, the petrol stations, the shops, my relatives' houses. The same applied to the books I had read. What they were about was gone in weeks, but the places where the plot had taken place had stayed with me for years, perhaps they would for ever, what did I know?

I flicked through *Dagbladet*, followed by *Aftenposten* and *Fædrelandsvennen*, then sat watching people pass by. I ought to have spent the time preparing. All I had done thus far was read through some old papers the night before and print the texts I was going to read. On the plane I had written down ten points I would cover. I couldn't bring myself to do any more because the thought that I was only going to talk, that there was nothing simpler, was so strong and so appealing. I was supposed to talk about the two books I had written. I couldn’t do that, so it would have to be about how the books came into being, those years of nothing until something definite began to take shape, how it slowly but surely took over, in such a way that in the end everything came by itself. Writing a novel is setting yourself a goal and then walking there in your sleep, Lawrence Durrell had once said that was what it was like, and it was true. We have access not only to our own lives but to almost all the other lives in our cultural circle, access not only to our own memories but to the memories of the whole of our damn culture, for I am you and you are everyone, we come from the same and are going to the same, and on the way we hear the same on the radio, see the same on TV, read the same in the press, and within us there is the same fauna of famous people’s faces and smiles. Even if you sit in a tiny room in a tiny town hundreds of kilometres from the centre of the world and don’t meet a single soul, their hell is your hell, their heaven is your heaven, you have to burst the balloon that is the world and let everything in it spill over the sides.

That, more or less, was what I was going to say.

Language is shared, we grow into it, and the forms we use it in are also shared, so irrespective of how idiosyncratic you and your notions are, in literature you can never free yourself from others. It is the other way round, it is literature which draws us closer together. Through its language, which none of us owns and which indeed we can hardly have any influence on, and through its form, which no one can break free of alone, and if anyone should do so, it is only meaningful if it is immediately followed by others. Form draws you out of yourself, distances you from yourself, and it is this distance which is the prerequisite for closeness to others.

For the talk I was going to start with an anecdote about Hauge, the crabby old man who mumbled and was so locked inside himself, utterly isolated for all those years, yet so much closer to the centre of culture and civilisation than perhaps anyone else of his era. What conversations did he have? What places did he inhabit?

I slipped down off the stool and went to the counter for a refill. Changed a fifty-krone note into coins. I had to ring Linda before going any further, and I couldn’t use my mobile phone to call from abroad.

It'll be fine, I thought as I scanned the two sheets of cues. It didn't matter too much that these were old ideas and I no longer believed in them. The important thing was that I said something.

Over recent years I had increasingly lost faith in literature. I read and thought this is something someone has made up. Perhaps it was because we were totally inundated with fiction and stories. It had got out of hand. Wherever you turned you saw fiction. All these millions of paperbacks, hardbacks, DVDs and TV series, they were all about made-up people in a made-up, though realistic, world. And news in the press, TV news and radio news had exactly the same format, documentaries had the same format, they were also stories, and it made no difference whether what they told had actually happened or not. It was a crisis, I felt it in every fibre of my body, something saturating was spreading through my consciousness like lard, not least because the nucleus of all this fiction, whether true or not, was verisimilitude and the distance it held to reality was constant. In other words, it saw the same. This sameness, which was our world, was being mass-produced. The uniqueness, which they all talked about, was thereby invalidated, it didn't exist, it was a lie. Living like this, with the certainty that everything could equally well have been different, drove you to despair. I couldn't write like this, it wouldn't work, every single sentence was met with the thought: but you're just making this up. It has no value. Fictional writing has no value, documentary narrative has no value. The only genres I saw value in, which still conferred meaning, were diaries and essays, the types of literature that did not deal with narrative, that were not about anything, but just consisted of a voice, the voice of your own personality, a life, a face, a gaze you could meet. What is a work of art if not the gaze of another person? Not directed above us, nor beneath us, but at the same height as our own gaze. Art cannot be experienced collectively, nothing can, art is something you are alone with. You meet its gaze alone.

That was as far as the thought got, it hit a wall. If fiction was worthless, the world was too, for nowadays it was through fiction we saw it.

Now of course I could relativise this as well. I could think it was more about my mental state, my personal psychology than the actual state of the world. If I spoke to Espen or Tore about it, who were now my oldest friends, whom I had known long before they made their debuts as writers, they would utterly reject my view. Each in their own way. Espen was the critical type, yet at the same time he had this burning curiosity, he had a voracious appetite for the world, and when he wrote all his energy was focused outwards: politics, sport, music, philosophy, the history of the Church, medical science, biology, painting, great events of the present, great events of the past, wars and battlefields, but also his daughters, his holiday trips, minor events he had witnessed: he wrote about everything, and with his characteristic lightness, which he had because he wasn't interested in the in-turned gaze, introspection, where his criticism, which was so fruitful on the outside, could easily contrive to destroy everything he tried to understand. It was this participation in the world that Espen liked and craved. When I first got to know him he was introverted and shy, self-contained and not very happy. I had seen the long way he had come, to the life he lived now, which he had managed so that everything that depressed him was gone. He had landed on his feet, he was happy, and if he was critical of much in the world he didn't despise it. Tore's lightness was of a different kind: he loved the present and took a great interest in it, which perhaps stemmed from his deep fascination with pop music – the anatomy of the charts, one week's top songs being replaced by others the next, the whole aesthetic of pop, big sales, high media visibility, touring with his own show. He had transferred this to literature, for which of course he was castigated, but nevertheless he carried on with typical resolve. If there was one thing he hated it was modernism because it was non-communicative, inaccessible, abstruse and endlessly self-important, though he never bothered to elaborate. But what do you say to have any impact on a man who at one time admired the Spice Girls? To influence a man who once wrote an enthusiastic essay about the sitcom *Friends*? I liked the direction he was taking, towards the pre-modern novel, Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Dickens, but I didn't share his belief that the form could be transferred to today. Hence the only thing I was doing that he really criticised was the form, which he thought was weak. I also liked the direction Espen was taking, towards the scholarly but digressive and overflowing, all-encompassing essay which had something Baroque about it, but I disliked the standpoint he took, in which for example rationalism was lauded and Romanticism ridiculed. Nonetheless, Espen and Tore didn't do anything by halves, and I saw nothing wrong in that; on the contrary, that was what I also had to do, affirm life, in a Nietzschean sense, for there was nothing else. This was all we had, this was all that existed, and so should we say no to it?

I took out my mobile and flipped it open. The photo of Heidi and Vanja shone up at me. Heidi with her face pressed against the display, one big smile, Vanja a little more tentative behind.

It was a quarter to eleven.

I got up and went to the payphone, inserted forty kroner and dialled Linda's mobile number.

'How was it this morning?' I asked.

'Terrible,' she said. 'Absolute chaos. Uttterly out of control. Heidi clawed John again. Vanja and Heidi had a fight. And Vanja had a temper tantrum on the street as we were about to go.'

'Oh no. Oh no,' I said. 'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'And then when we got to the nursery Vanja said. "You and dad are always so angry. You're always so angry." I was so upset! So unbelievably upset.'

'I can understand that. It's terrible. We'll have to sort this out, Linda. We have to. We have to find a solution. It's no good what we're doing. I'll have to pull myself together. A lot of this is my fault.'

'Yes, we must,' Linda said. 'We'll have to talk about it when you come home. What drives me to despair is that I only want us to be happy. That's all I want. And I can't do it! I'm such a terrible mother. I can't even be alone with my own children.'

'No, that's not true. You're a fantastic mother. That's not what this is about. But we'll get there. We will.'

'Yes . . . How was the trip?'

'Fine. I'm in Kristiansand now. Off to the university soon. I'm dreading it. I really hate this. I can't think of anything worse. And then I go and do it again and again.'

'It always goes well though.'

'That's a qualified truth. Sometimes it does. But I don't want to keep grumbling. It'll be fine, and I am fine. I'll ring again tonight, OK? If there is anything, ring my mobile. It's OK for incoming calls.'

'All right.'

'What are you doing now?'

‘Walking in Pildamms Park with John. He’s asleep. It’s nice here and I should be happy. But . . . this morning has shattered me.’

‘It’ll pass. You’ll have a nice afternoon together. Linda, I’ve got to go. Bye!’

‘Bye. And good luck!’

I hung up the receiver, collected my bag and went out for a last cigarette.

SHIT. SHIT, SHIT, SHIT.

I leaned against the wall and looked at the forest, the grey rock face between all the yellow and green.

I was so sad for the children. I was so angry and irritable at home. It took nothing for me to tell Heidi off, nothing to *shout* at her. And Vanja, Vanja . . . When she had her bouts of defiance and not only said no to everything but also shouted and screamed and punched, I shouted back, grabbed her and threw her onto the bed. I was completely out of control. Then came the remorse afterwards, the attempts to be patient, kind, nice, friendly, good. Good. And that was what I wanted to be, all I wanted to be, to be a good father to the three of them.

Wasn’t I a good father?

SHIT. SHIT. SHIT.

I tossed the cigarette away, grabbed my bag and left. As I had no idea where the university was, nothing like it had existed when I lived here, I took a taxi all the way. It went from the car park with me on the back seat, alongside the runway at first, then over the river, past my old school, which I couldn’t care less about, up and down the hills and past Hamresanden, the campsite, the beach, the hills with the estate behind, where most of my classmates had lived. Through the forest to the Timenes crossroads, where we followed the E18 to Kristiansand.

The university was on the other side of a tunnel, not so far from the *gymnas* I had attended but completely isolated from it. It lay like a little island in the forest. Large attractive new buildings. There was no doubt that money had flowed into Norway since I lived here. People were better dressed, their cars were more expensive and building projects were under way everywhere.

A bearded bespectacled lecturer-type met me at the front entrance. We shook hands, he showed me the room where the talk was to be held and went about his business. I made a beeline for the canteen, stuffed down a baguette, sat outside in the sun, drank coffee and smoked. There were students everywhere, younger than I thought they should be, they looked more like they were attending a *gymnas*. Suddenly I had a vision of myself, an ageing man with sunken eyes and a bag, sitting on his own. Forty, I would soon be forty. Hadn't I almost fallen off my chair when Hans's pal Olli had once told us he was forty? I hadn't believed it at first, but then his life appeared in a very new light, what was that old boy doing with us?

Now I was the same age myself.

'Karl Ove?'

I looked up. Nora Simonhjell stood in front of me with a smile on her face.

'Hi, Nora! What are you doing here? Do you work here?'

'Yes. I saw you were coming. Thought I would find you here. Nice to see you!'

I got up and gave her a hug.

'Grab a seat!' I said.

'You're looking so good!' she said. 'Tell me what's new in your life.'

I gave her the edited highlights. Three children, four years in Stockholm, two in Malmö. Everything OK. She – I had first met her at a department party at Bergen University the night they were celebrating having finished their main subject, and then bumped into her in Volda where she taught and I wrote my first novel, which she read and was the first to comment on – had lived for a while in Oslo, worked in a bookshop and at *Morgenbladet*, published her second collection of poems and got a job here. I told her Kristiansand had been a nightmare for me. But a lot must have changed in the intervening twenty years. And it was one thing to go to a *gymnas* and another to be employed at a university.

She loved it, she said. Seemed happy. She had hung up her quill, but not for good, you never knew what might happen. A friend came over, she was American, we talked a little about the differences between the old country and her new one, then went up to the auditorium. The talk was due to start in ten minutes. My stomach hurt, my whole body did in fact, everything ached. And my hands, which had been trembling subconsciously all day, now really were trembling. I sat down at the desk, flicked through the books, looked up at the entrance. Two people in the hall. Me and the lecturer. Was it going to be that kind of day?

The first time I read in public, a few weeks after my debut novel had come out, was in Kristiansand. There were four people in the audience. One of them, I saw to my great satisfaction, was my old history teacher, now the headmaster, Rosenvold. I went over to chat with him afterwards. It turned out that he had almost no memory of me, but he had come to listen to and meet the second of the evening's debutants, Bjarte Breiteig.

So much for the homecoming. So much for revenge over the past.

'We-ell, I think we can begin then, can't we?' the lecturer said.

I looked along the rows of chairs. Seven people sitting there.

Nora said she was impressed when it was over, an hour later. I smiled and thanked her for her kind words, but I hated myself and my whole being, I couldn't get away fast enough. Fortunately, Geir had turned up twenty minutes before we had arranged. He was standing in the middle of the large foyer when I came downstairs. I hadn't seen him for more than a year.

'I didn't think you could lose any more hair,' I said. 'But I was wrong.'

We shook hands.

'Your teeth have gone so yellow the dogs are going to flock round you in town,' he said. 'They'll think you're their king. How was it?'

'Seven people came.'

'Ha ha ha!'

'Never mind. Otherwise, it went well. Shall we go? Have you got your car outside?'

'Yes,' he said.

Considering he had buried his mother the day before, he was in an astonishingly good mood.

'Last time I came here it was on an exercise with the Home Guard cadets,' he said as we crossed the square. 'We were given our kit near here. But there was none of this here then, of course.'

He pressed the remote key, and twenty metres away a red Saab flashed. There was a child's car seat in the back, for his son, Njaal, who was born the day after Heidi and whom I was godfather to.

'Do you want to drive?' he asked with a smile.

I couldn’t think of a quick retort and just smiled. Opened the door and got in, pushed the seat back, put on the seat belt and looked at him.

‘Aren’t we going?’

‘Where to?’

‘Town, I suppose. What else is there to do?’

He turned the key, reversed and pulled onto the road.

‘You seem a bit dejected,’ he said. ‘Didn’t it go particularly well?’

‘It went fine. And I’m not going to burden you with what isn’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, you know . . .’ I said. ‘There are small problems and then there are big problems.’

‘Mum’s burial yesterday does not belong to the category “problem”,’ he said. ‘What has happened has happened. Come on now. What’s eating you?’

We drove into the short tunnel and emerged on the plain by Kongsgård, which, flooded with the sharp winter light, seemed almost beautiful.

‘I spoke to Linda earlier,’ I said. ‘She had a hard morning, well, you know what I mean. Tempers and chaos. Then Vanja said we were always angry. And she’s bloody right. I can see it as soon as I’m away. In fact, I feel like going back right this minute and sorting it out. That’s what’s eating me.’

‘Nothing new then,’ Geir said.

‘No.’

We drove onto the E18, pulled up in front of the toll booths, where Geir opened his window and threw coins into the grey metal cone, and went past Oddernes Church, behind it the chapel where dad had been buried, and Kristiansand Cathedral School, where I had spent three years.

‘This place is packed with meaning for me,’ I said. ‘My grandparents are buried here. And dad . . .’

‘He’s in some warehouse here, isn’t he?’

‘Correct. How could we not have got the job done properly, eh?! Heh heh heh.’

‘Sometimes blood is thinner than water. Heh heh heh.’

‘Ha ha ha! Seriously, though, I’ll get this sorted out soon, get him under the ground. I have to.’

‘Ten years in a warehouse has never hurt anyone,’ Geir said.

‘Yes, it has. But no one who’s been cremated.’

‘Ha ha ha!’

Silence. We drove past the fire station into the tunnel.

‘How was the funeral yesterday?’ I asked.

‘It was wonderful,’ he said. ‘Lots of people came. The church was packed. Loads of relatives and family friends I haven’t seen for years, in fact, ever since I was a boy. It was great. Dad and Odd Steinar cried. They were devastated.’

‘And you?’ I said.

He glanced at me.

‘I didn’t cry,’ he said. ‘Dad and Odd Steinar hugged. I sat beside them on my own.’

‘Doesn’t that bother you?’

‘No, why should it? I feel what I feel. They feel what they feel.’

‘Turn left here,’ I said.

‘Left? Over there?’

‘Yes.’

We came into the centre of town and drove down Festningsgaten.

‘There’s a multi-storey car park to the right soon,’ I said. ‘Shall we go there?’

‘OK.’

‘What do you reckon your father thinks about that?’ I asked.

‘About me not grieving?’

‘Yes.’

‘He won’t give it a thought. “That’s the way Geir is,” he’ll think. That’s what he’s always done. He’s always accepted me exactly as I am. Did I tell you about the time he picked me up from a party once? I was sixteen and had to throw up; he stopped the car, I spewed, he drove on, didn’t say a word. Total confidence. So, if I don’t cry at mum’s funeral or I don’t put my arm round him, it doesn’t mean anything to him. He feels what he feels, others feel what they feel.’

‘He sounds like a nice man.’

Geir looked at me.

‘Yes, he is a nice man. And he’s a good father. But we live on different planets. Was that where you meant? Over there?’

‘Yes.’

We drove down into the underground garage and parked. Wandered round town, Geir wanted to go to some record shops and look for blues CDs, his new obsession, and then we went to the two big bookshops before looking for somewhere to eat. The choice fell on Peppes Pizza, beside the library. Geir seemed unmoved by what had happened in his life during the last week, and while we sat eating and chatting I wondered whether it was because he was in fact unmoved, and if so, why, or whether it was because he needed to hide his feelings. During my early days in Stockholm he had written some short stories, I read them, they were characterised above all else by a great distance to the events they described, and I remembered I told him it was as though a huge sunken ship had to be raised. Lying deep in his consciousness. He didn't care about this any more, it wasn't important for him, which of course did not mean it was without significance. He didn't acknowledge it, and lived accordingly. But what status did it have? Was it repressed? Rationalised out of existence? Or was it, as he said, yesterday's news? The distance he kept from his family was related: he held everything in the past at arm's length. Their lives, which from what he said consisted of a regular series of everyday events, whose high points were trips to out-of-town shopping centres and Sunday lunch at some roadside inn, and topics of which conversation rarely rose beyond food and the weather, drove him crazy with restlessness, also because, I assumed, what he did had no place in them. They weren't in the slightest bit interested in what he did. If the relationship was going to work he had to meet them on their terms, but he didn't want to. At the same time he would often praise their warmth, their concern for their immediate world, hugs, embraces, but he invariably did that after having talked about what he couldn't stand about them, like a kind of penance, and not without jibes at my expense, for while I had everything he didn't have in the family, intellectual curiosity and constant conversation, which he called middle-class values, we didn't have the warmth and closeness that he saw as typical of the working class from which he came, nor the desire to create cosy atmospheres so disdained in academic circles, inasmuch as the taste with which it was expressed was regarded as basic, simple even. Geir loathed the middle classes and middle-class values, but was quite aware they were the ones he himself had embraced in his university career with all that that entailed, and somewhere there he was caught like a fly in a spider's web.

He was glad to see me, I noticed, and perhaps he also felt some relief that his mother was dead, not so much for his own sake as hers. One of the first things he mentioned was what importance her fear had now. None . . . but that was the point, we were as trapped in each other as in ourselves, we couldn’t escape, it was impossible to free yourself, you had the life you had.

We talked about Kristiansand. For him it was only a town, for me it was a place where I was unable to stay without the old feelings welling up. Mostly they were of hatred, but there was also my own inadequacy, not being able to live up to any of the demands made of me. Geir thought this was all about the place where you were brought up, it was coloured by the time, but I disagreed, there was a big difference between Arendal and Kristiansand, even the mentality was different. Towns also have a character, psychology, mind, soul, whatever you like to call it, which you notice the moment you enter them, and it marks the people who live there. Kristiansand was a commercial town, it had a mercenary soul. Bergen also had a mercenary soul, but it had wit and irony in addition, that is to say it had incorporated the world outside, it knew very well it was not the only town.

‘By the way, I read *Shallow Soil* this summer,’ I said. ‘Have you read it?’

‘A long time ago.’

‘Hamsun pays tribute to the businessman in it. He’s young, dynamic, the future of the world and the great hero. He has nothing but contempt for artists. Writers, painters, they’re off the scale. But the man of trade! It’s amusing. Can you understand how contrary the man was!’

‘Mm,’ he said. ‘There’s a section in the biography about when he hits on serving girls. The colophon takes a prudish stand with regard to this issue, or is unable to understand. But in fact Hamsun came from the lowest echelon. That’s what you forget. He was a working-class writer. He came from the poorest of the poor regions. For him serving girls were a rung up the social ladder! It’s impossible to get anything out of Hamsun if you don’t understand that.’

‘He didn’t look back,’ I said. ‘It’s as if his parents weren’t a part of his psychology, if you get what I mean. I’m left with the impression of some old grey people hugging the wall in a room somewhere in northern Norway, so old and grey that you can barely distinguish them from the furniture.

And so alien to Hamsun’s later life that they have no relevance at all. But it can’t have been like that.’

‘Can’t it?’

‘Well, I suppose it could, but you know what I mean, don’t you? There isn’t a single portrait of childhood in Hamsun apart from in *The Ring is Closed*. Nor of parents. Characters emerge from nothing in his books. Without a vestige of a past. Was it because they actually had no meaning or because their meaning had been repressed? And so these characters somehow become the first mass-produced humans, that is without their own predetermining origins. They are determined by the present.’

I took a slice of pizza, cut the long threads of cheese holding it back and bit off a mouthful.

‘Try the dip,’ he said. ‘It’s good!’

‘You can keep the dip,’ I said.

‘When do you have to be there, by the way?’

‘Seven. It starts at half past.’

‘We’ve got an hour or two on our hands then. Shall we drive around for a bit? So that you can see some of your old haunts? I’ve got a couple of Kristiansand haunts as well. Mum’s uncle and his family lived in Lund. I’d like to pop by.’

‘Let’s have coffee somewhere else first. And then we’ll go. OK?’

‘There’s a café close by where we used to walk when I was a boy. We can see if it still exists?’

We paid and left. Strolled down to Hotel Caledonien. I told him about the fire there, how I had stood behind the barriers, gaping up at the black façade, where it was all burned out. We ambled past the containers in the harbour to the bus station, up by the stock exchange, across Markensgate and into some arty-type café. Despite the cold, we sat outside so that I could smoke. Then we walked to the car, drove first to the house in Elvegaten, where I had lived during the winter mum and dad got divorced. The house had been sold and renovated. Then we went to grandma and grandad’s house, where dad had died. Turned in the square in front of the marina, parked in the tiny street and looked up at the house. It had been painted white. The tables had been replaced. The garden was neat and tidy.

‘Is that it?’ Geir asked. ‘What a wonderful house! Attractive, middle class, expensive. I would never have believed it. I had imagined something quite different.'

'Yes,' I said. 'That's it all right. But I have no feelings for it. It's just a house. It doesn't mean anything any more. I can see that now.'

Two hours later we parked in front of the folk high school where I was going to do the reading. It was situated in the middle of a forest outside Søgne. The sky was all black, everywhere stars twinkled and shone, somewhere nearby a river rushed and trees rustled. The sound of a car door slamming resounded between walls. Then the silence closed around us.

'Are you sure it's here?' Geir asked. 'In the middle of a forest? Who on earth would come here to listen to you read on a Friday evening?'

'Who knows,' I said. 'But it is here. Nice, isn't it?'

'Oh yes. Full of atmosphere.'

Our footsteps crunched on the frozen gravel as we walked in. One building, a large white timber house that looked to be from the turn of the last century, was unlit. In the other, which was twenty metres away and at right angles to it, three windows were lit. Two figures were visible in one of them. They were playing the piano and violin. Then there was a large barn to the right, also unlit, where the reading was due to take place.

We wandered round for a few minutes, peered in through the darkened windows and saw a library and what seemed to be a living room. We followed the path, ended up by a stone bridge over a little river or stream. Black water and the forest like a black wall on the other side.

'We've got to have a coffee or something,' Geir said. 'Shall we ask those two in there if they have a key?'

'No, we're not asking anyone anything,' I said. 'The event organisers will come when they come.'

'We need to warm ourselves up a bit at the very least,' Geir said. 'You don't mind us doing that, do you?'

'Not at all.'

We entered the narrow house ringing with notes from the two young musicians. They must have been sixteen or seventeen. She had a soft beautiful face. He, the same age as her but pimply, ungainly and also flushed, did not seem happy to see us.

'Have you got a key or something for these buildings? He's doing a reading, and we're a trifle on the early side.'

She shook her head. But we could sit down in the adjacent room, where there was also a coffee machine. So we did.

‘This place reminds me of school trips,’ Geir said. ‘The light in here. The cold and the darkness outside. And the forest. And the fact that no one knows where I am. No one knows what I’m doing. Yes, a kind of feeling of liberation. But there’s a lot of darkness. The atmosphere inside it.’

‘I know what you mean,’ I said. ‘For myself, I’m simply nervous. My whole body aches.’

‘Because of this? Because of your talk here? Relax, man! It’ll be fine.’

I held up a hand.

‘See?’ I said.

I was trembling like an old man.

Half an hour later I was shown into the hall where I was to give the talk. Another bearded lecturer-type, late fifties with glasses, received me.

‘Isn’t this wonderful?’ he said as we entered.

I nodded. It really was. Inside the barn there was a large gallery like a capsule, built to give optimal acoustics, with seating for 200 people. Art on the walls of all the rooms. There was a lot of money in this country now, I reflected again. I placed my bag against the lectern, took out my papers and books, shook hands with a few others I had to greet, among them the bookseller who had come to set up shop after the talk, a charming energetic elderly woman, before going downstairs for a walk in the darkness, to the river, where I smoked two cigarettes. Then I sat on the toilet for a quarter of an hour with my head in my hands. When I went back up there was quite a turnout. Forty, maybe fifty? That was good. And there was a brass band, too, who were going to play some Baroque music. They kept it up for half an hour, in the middle of the forest on a Friday night, and then it was my turn. I stood in the centre with everyone’s eyes on me, drank water, flicked through my papers, began to talk, hesitantly, swallowed words, my voice quivered, until I got into my stride and could talk freely. The audience was attentive, their interest streamed up towards me, I relaxed more and more, they laughed where they were supposed to, and I was filled with a feeling of happiness, for few things are more uplifting than talking to an audience who are on your wavelength, who don’t just wish you well but are also into what you are talking about. I could see it, they were vitalised, and when I sat down to sign books afterwards they all wanted to discuss what I had said, it touched something in their lives which they were enthusiastic to tell me about. It was only when I was walking over to the car with Geir that I came down to the ground again, to where I usually was, to the place where contempt flourished. I said nothing, just got in and stared at the road winding its way through the dark landscape.

'That was good,' Geir said. 'You've got that down to a fine art. I don't know what you were moaning about. You could travel round earning money from it!'

'It went well,' I said. 'But I give them what they want. I say what they want to hear. I pander to them the way I pander to everyone and everything.'

'There was a woman in front of me,' Geir said. 'She looked like a teacher. When you started to talk about child abuse she stiffened. Then you said the word they wanted to hear. Infantilisation. She nodded. This was a concept she could handle. It smoothed over everything. But if you hadn't said it, if you hadn't gone into detail, I'm not sure everyone would have spoken to you afterwards – I'm not. And what is paedophilia, if not infantile?'

He laughed. I closed my eyes.

'And the brass band in the middle of the forest. Baroque music. Who would have expected that? Ha ha ha! It was a great evening, Karl Ove, it was. Almost magical. The darkness and the stars and the sough of the forest.'

'Yes,' I said.

We drove around Kristiansand, over Varodd Bridge, past the animal park, past Nørholm, Lillesand and Grimstad. Chatted about this and that, arrived in Arendal, where we strolled around on the Tyholmen peninsula, I had a beer in a pub and for no particular reason felt completely out of kilter. Being here, surrounded by familiar buildings around the harbour, with the silhouette of Tromøya island on the other side of the water, in a world so crammed with memories, felt good but strange, not least because Geir, whom I connected with the Stockholm part of my life, was with me. At around twelve we drove to the island of Hisøya, he showed me some places which I looked at without being able to muster much interest, among them a quay where they had hung out in his youth, then we drove to the estate where he had grown up. He parked outside a garage, from the boot I took my bag and the bouquet I had been given and followed him to the house, which was a similar type to ours, or at least from the same period.

The hallway was full of flowers and wreaths.

‘There’s been a funeral, as you can see,’ he said. ‘If you like, you can put yours in one of these vases.’

I did as suggested. He showed me the room where I would sleep, which actually belonged to his brother, Odd Steinar, but had been tidied up for me. We had a couple of sandwiches in the kitchen, I wandered round the two living rooms looking. He had always said his parents actually belonged to the generation before our parents’ generation, and when I saw how they had arranged the house I understood what he meant. Tablecloths, runners, rugs, there was something 1950s, deepest Norway, about it, and the same applied to the furniture and the pictures on the walls. A 1970s house furnished like a 1950s home, that was how it looked. Lots of family photos on the walls, a large collection of ornaments on the windowsills.

I had been in a house once before when someone had just died. It was total chaos. Here everything was as good as unaffected.

I had a smoke on the lawn. Then we said goodnight, I went to bed, I didn’t want to close my eyes, I didn’t want to meet what I met there, but I had to, I summoned all the strength I had to think about a neutral topic and fell asleep after a few minutes.

The following morning I was woken at seven by activity in the rooms above me. Njaal, Geir’s son, and Christina had got up. I showered, dressed and went upstairs. A man of around seventy with a kind face and friendly eyes came out of the kitchen and greeted me. It was Geir’s father. We talked a bit about how I had grown up here and how beautiful it was. He radiated goodness, but not in that open, almost self-exposing, way that Linda’s father did. No, there was also solidity in this face. Not hardness exactly, but . . . character. That was what it was. Then Geir’s brother came in, Odd Steinar. We shook hands, he sat down on the sofa and began to talk about this and that; he too was friendly and kind, but with a shyness his father didn’t have and Geir definitely didn’t. The father set the table for breakfast in the living room, we sat down and I kept thinking that his wife and their mother had been buried yesterday, and that it was inappropriate for me to be here, yet I was being treated with kindness and interest, any friends of Geir's were their friends, their house was an open house.

Nonetheless, I took a deep breath as I left afterwards.

The flight home was in the afternoon, we had planned to drive around, go to Tromøya where I hadn't been for a long time, not to Tybakken, where I had grown up, and then straight to the airport, but Geir's father had insisted we should go back home first. It was Saturday, he would buy some shrimps at the harbour, I would have to experience them before I went to Malmö, we didn't have shrimps like that there, did we.

So we got into the car and motored over to Tromøya. Geir talked about the places we passed, told anecdotes associated with them. A whole life emerged from this area. Then he told me about his family. About who his mother had been, who his father and his brother were.

'It was interesting to meet them,' I said. 'Now I understand more about what you've been saying. Your father and brother, they have almost *nothing* in common with you. With your temperament. Your mind and your curiosity. Your restlessness. With your father and brother there was just kindness and friendliness. So where's the connection? Someone was missing, and it was so obvious. Your mother must have been like you. Am I right?'

'Yes, you are. I understood her. But that was also why I had to get away. Shame you never met her, by the way.'

'I've arrived when it's all over.'

'The most solid connection between the three generations is probably that Njaal, dad and I all have the same head from the back.'

I nodded. We drove up the hills before Tromøya Bridge. Mountains had been dynamited, roads built, industrial plants established like everywhere in the district.

Beneath us I saw the little island of Gjerstadholmen, further behind it Ubekilen Bay. To the right, Håvard's house. The bus stop, the forest below, where in the winter we had made ski slopes and in the summer walked down to the rocks to go swimming.

'In there,' I said.

'Where? To the left? Jesus, you didn't live *there*, did you?'

Old Søren's house, the wild cherry tree, and there, the estate. Nordåsen ringvei.

My God, it was so small.

'There it is. Straight ahead.'

'Where? The red house?'

'Yes. It was brown when we lived there.'

He parked the car.

How small everything was. And so ugly.

'Not a lot to see,' I said. 'Come on, let's go on. Up the hill here.'

A woman in a white Puffa jacket was walking down pushing a buggy. Otherwise there wasn't a sign of life anywhere.

Olsen's house.

The mountain.

We had called it the mountain, but it was only a little hill. Siv's house behind it. Sverre and the others' house.

Not a soul. Yes, there was. A huddle of children.

'You've gone quiet,' Geir said. 'Are you overwhelmed?'

'Overwhelmed? No, more like underwhelmed. This is so small. There isn't anything here. I've never experienced that before. There's nothing at all. And at one time it was my everything.'

'Ye-es, Karl Ove,' he said with a smile. 'Straight on?'

'Let's drive round the island, shall we? Tromøya Church? That's wonderful. Thirteenth century. There are some fantastic headstones from the seventeenth century, with skulls and hourglasses and snakes. I used an inscription from one of them in the first decent short story I wrote. As an epigraph.'

All the places I carried inside me, which I had visualised so many, many times in my life, passed outside the windows, completely aura-less, totally neutral – the way they were, in fact. A few crags, a small bay, a decrepit floating pier, a narrow shoreline, some old houses behind, flatland that fell away to the water. That was all.

We got out of the car and went to the cemetery. Wandered around, looked across towards the sea, but even that, even the sight of the pine trees growing down to the pebble beach, smaller and smaller the closer they got to the raw wind, aroused nothing in me.

‘Come on, let’s go,’ I said. Saw the fields where I had worked in the summer, the road leading to the water, where we could go swimming as early as 17 May. Sandum Bay. My teacher’s house, what was her name? Helga Torgersen? Must be getting on for sixty now? Færvik, the petrol station, the house on the other side, where the girls in the class had got so excited at the party the night before I left, the supermarket, which I could remember them building.

There was nothing. But lives were still being lived in these houses, and they were still everything for the people inside. People were born, people died, they made love and argued, ate and shat, drank and partied, read and slept. Watched TV, dreamed, ate an apple gazing across rooftops, autumn winds shaking the tall slim pine trees.

Small and ugly, but all there was.

An hour later I was sitting at the living-room table, alone, eating shrimps at top speed, served by Geir’s father, who wasn’t having any himself but wanted me to have a Sørland experience before I left. Then I shook hands, thanked them for having me, got into the car beside Geir again and was driven to the airport. We took the route via Birkeland because I wanted to see what my other childhood home, the one in Tveit, was like now.

Geir pulled up outside the house. He laughed.

‘Did you live *there*?’ In the middle of the forest? It’s completely isolated! There isn’t a soul here! So deserted . . . Pure *Twin Peaks*, if you ask me. Or *Pernille and Mr Nelson*, if you can remember the TV programme? It frightened the life out of me when I was a child.’

He continued to laugh as I pointed out places. And I had to laugh too because I saw them with his eyes. All these derelict old houses, these wrecks of cars on the drives, lorries parked outside, the distances between houses and the evident poverty. I tried to explain to him how nice our house had been, how good living here had been, that everything was here, but . . .

‘Come on!’ he said. ‘Living here must have been penal servitude.’

I didn’t answer, I was piqued, I felt the need to put up a defence. But I couldn’t be bothered. It was the same here, the inner experience, which made everything glow with meaning, it had no counterpart on the outside.

We shook hands in the car park, he got back into his car and I walked towards the departures hall. The flight was to Oslo, where I would change and fly to Billund in Denmark, where I would change again for Kastrup, Copenhagen. I didn't get home until ten in the evening. Linda hugged me when I arrived, a long, passionate hug, we sat down in the living room, she had made something to eat, I told her about the trip, she said the last day had been better, but she had realised we would have to do something to break the vicious circle we were in, I agreed, it couldn't go on, it couldn't, we had to find a way out and make a new path. At half past eleven I went into the bedroom and switched on my computer, opened a new document and began to write.

> *In the window before me I can vaguely see the image of my face. Apart from the eyes, which are shining, and the part directly beneath, which dimly reflects light, the whole of the left side lies in shade. Two deep furrows run down the forehead, one deep furrow runs down each cheek, all filled as it were with darkness, and when the eyes are staring and serious, and the mouth turned down at the corners it is impossible not to think of this face as sombre.*
>
> *What is it that has etched itself into you?*

The next day I continued. The idea was to get as close as possible to my life, so I wrote about Linda and John sleeping in the adjacent room, Vanja and Heidi, who were at the nursery, the view from the window and the music I was listening to. The next day I went to the allotment cabin, I wrote more there, some ultra-modernistic-style passages about faces and the patterns that exist in all big systems, sand heaps, clouds, economies, traffic, occasionally went into the garden to smoke and watch the birds flying hither and thither in the sky, it was February and there was no one around in the enormous allotment compound, just row upon row of small well-kept doll's houses in small gardens, so perfect they looked like living rooms. In the evening a huge flock of crows flew over, there must have been several hundred, a dark cloud of flapping wings drifting past and flying on. Night fell, and apart from what was lit up by the light streaming out of the open door at the other end of the garden, everything around me was dark. So still was I, where I sat, that a hedgehog shuffled by half a metre from my feet.

'Well, hello there,' I said and waited until it had reached the hedge before getting up and going in. The next day I began to write about the spring dad moved out from mum and me, and even though I hated every sentence I decided to persist, I had to come to terms with it, to tell the story I had tried for so long to tell. Back at home I continued with some notes I made when I was eighteen and for some reason had not disposed of, 'bags of beer in the ditch' caught my eye, a reference to one New Year's Eve when I was a teenager, I could use that as long as I wasn't too bothered and shelved any idea of aiming for the sublime. The weeks passed, I wrote, walked the children to the nursery or collected them, spent the afternoons with them in one of the many parks, cooked dinner, read to them and put them to bed, worked on reader reports and other odd jobs in the evenings. Every Sunday I cycled to Limhamnsfältet and played football for two hours, that was my only leisure activity, everything else was either work or children. Limhamnsfältet was an enormous grassy area outside the town, by the sea. Since the end of the 1960s a motley collection of men have gathered there every Sunday at a quarter past ten. The youngest are sixteen or seventeen while the oldest, Kai, is closer to eighty – he is on the wing and the ball has to be played to his feet, but if he gets it, there is still enough football left in him to whip in a centre, and now and then he even scores a goal. But the majority of the players are between thirty and forty, come from all walks of life and all they really have in common is the joy of playing football. The last Sunday in February Linda and the children came along, Vanja and Heidi cheered me on for a bit, then they went to the play area by the beach while I carried on playing. There had been a ground frost, the usually soft layer of grass was rock hard, and when after half an hour I was sent flying by a tackle and landed smack on my shoulder I realised at once that something was wrong. I stayed down, the others gathered round, I was nauseous with the pain, hobbled slowly, shoulder hunched, to behind the goal, the others knew that this wasn't just a little knock and the game was called off, it was half past eleven anyway.

Fredrik, a fifty-something writer and classic poacher who still bangs in goals in Swedish non-league football, drove me to hospital while Martin, a two-metre-plus giant of a Dane I knew through the nursery undertook to inform Linda and the children about what had happened. A & E was full, I took a number from the machine and sat down to wait, my shoulder burned and there was a stab of pain every time I moved it, but it was bearable for the half-hour it would take before it was my turn. I explained the situation to the nurse in reception, who came out to give me a quick examination, grabbed my arm and moved it slowly to the side. I screamed from the top of my lungs. AAAAAAgggghhh! Everyone stared at me. A man approaching forty wearing an Argentina national shirt and football boots, his long hair tied with an elastic band in a knot like a pineapple on top of his head, howling with pain.

‘You’d better come with me,’ the nurse said. ‘So we can have you examined properly.’

I went into a room nearby, she asked me to wait, a few minutes later another nurse came, she made the same movement with my arm, I screamed again.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘But I can’t help it.’

‘No problem,’ she said, gently removing my tracksuit top. ‘We’ll have to take your shirt off as well,’ she said. ‘Do you think that’ll be OK?’

She pulled at the sleeve, I screamed, she paused, tried again. Took a step back. Looked at me. I felt like an overgrown child.

‘We’ll have to cut it off.’

Now it was my turn to look at her. Cut up my Argentina shirt?

She came back with some scissors and cut up the sleeves, then asked me to sit on a bed once the shirt was off and stuck a needle in my lower arm just above the wrist. She was going to give me a bit of morphine, she said. After it was done, although I noticed nothing, she pushed me in a wheelchair into another room, perhaps fifty metres deeper into the labyrinthine building, where I was left alone to wait for an X-ray, not without some dread because I thought my shoulder must have been dislocated and, if so, I knew putting it back would be painful. But it was a fracture, the doctor confirmed. It would take between eight and twelve weeks to heal. They gave me some painkillers, a prescription for more, tied a bandage in a taut figure of eight over and under the shoulders, hung my tracksuit top on me and sent me home.

When I opened the door to the flat Vanja and Heidi came towards me at a run. They were excited, daddy had been to hospital, it was an adventure. I told them and Linda, who followed with John on her arm, that I had broken my collarbone and had a sling, it was nothing major, but I couldn’t lift or carry or use my arm for the next two months.

‘Are you serious?’ Linda asked. ‘Two months?’

‘Three at worst,’ I said.

‘You must never play football again, that’s for definite,’ Linda said.

‘Oh?’ I said. ‘So that’s your decision, is it?’

‘It’s me who has to put up with the consequences,’ she said. ‘How am I going to take care of the children on my own for two months, if I might ask?’

‘It’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘Relax. I’ve broken my collarbone after all. It hurts, and it’s not as if I did it on purpose.’

I went into the living room to sit down on the sofa. I had to make every movement slowly and plan it in advance. Every little deviation sent a pain through me. Agh, Ohh, Oooh, I said, slowly lowering myself. Vanja and Heidi watched with saucer eyes.

I smiled at them while trying to put the big cushion behind my back. They came up close. Heidi ran her hand across my chest as if to examine it.

‘Can we have a look at the bandage?’ Vanja asked.

‘Afterwards,’ I said. ‘It hurts a little to take clothes off and put them back on, you see.’

‘Food’s up!’ Linda shouted from the kitchen.

John was sitting in his baby chair banging his knife and fork on the table. Vanja and Heidi stared at me and my slow, laborious movements as I sat down.

‘What a day!’ Linda said. ‘Martin didn’t know a thing, only that you’d been taken to A & E. He brought us home, luckily, but when I was opening the door the key broke. Oh my God. I visualised us having to stay with them tonight. But then I double-checked my bag, and there it was, Berit’s key. What a stroke of luck! I hadn’t hung it up. And then you come home with a broken collarbone . . .’

She looked at me.

‘I’m so tired,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘It’ll probably only be the first few days that I can’t do anything. And then one arm will be perfectly OK.’

After eating I lay down on the sofa with a cushion behind my back watching an Italian football match on TV. In the four years we’d had children I had only done something like this once. At the time I was so ill I couldn’t move, I lay on the sofa for a whole day, saw ten minutes of the first Jason Bourne film, slept for a bit, saw ten minutes, slept for a bit, threw up intermittently, and even though my whole body ached and basically it was absolutely unbearable, I still enjoyed every second. Lying on the sofa and watching a film in the middle of the day! Not one single obligation! No clothes to be washed, no floor to be scrubbed, no washing-up to be done, no children to look after.

Now I had that same feeling. I was *not* in a position to do anything. However much my shoulder burned and stung and ached, the pleasure at being able to lie in total peace was greater.

Vanja and Heidi circled round me, coming close every so often and gently stroking my shoulder, then they went out of the room to play, and came back. For them this was probably unprecedented, I mused, me being completely passive and still. It was as though they had discovered a new side to me.

When the match was over I went for a bath. We didn't have a holder for the showerhead, we had to hold it in one hand, and that option was out of the question now, so all I could do was run the bath and climb into the tub with difficulty. Vanja and Heidi watched me.

'Do you need any help with washing, daddy?' Vanja asked. 'Can we wash you?'

'Yes, that would be nice,' I said. 'Can you see the cloths there? Take one each, and then dip it in the water and rub some soap into it.'

Vanja followed the instructions precisely, Heidi copied her. And they stood there, leaning over the edge of the bath and washing me with their cloths. Heidi laughed, Vanja was serious and business-like. They washed my arms, neck and chest. Heidi was bored after a few seconds and ran into the living room while Vanja stayed for a while longer.

'Is that good?' she asked at length.

I smiled. That was what I usually asked.

'Yes, it's great,' I said. 'I don't know what I'd do without you!'

She brightened up, and then she ran into the living room as well.

I wallowed in the water until it turned cold. First football on TV, then a long bath. What a Sunday!

Vanja came in a couple of times to see. I supposed she was waiting for the bandage to be put on. She spoke Swedish of course, still with Stockholm intonation patterns, but when I had been with her for a morning or an afternoon, or she felt close to me for some other reason, words from my dialect appeared more frequently in her conversation. Very often she would say *mæ* instead of the Swedish *mig*, me. '*Lyft upp mæ!*' Lift me up, she would say, for example. I laughed every time.

‘Can you go and get mummy?’ I said.

She nodded and ran off. I got out of the bath gingerly, and had dried myself by the time she came back.

‘Could you put the bandage on?’ I asked.

‘No problem,’ she said.

I explained how it was supposed to be, and said she had to pull it hard, otherwise it wasn’t doing its job.

‘Harder!’

‘Doesn’t it hurt?’

‘A bit, but the tauter it is the less it hurts when I move.’

‘OK,’ she said. ‘If you say so.’

And then she pulled from behind.

‘Aaaaagh!’ I said.

‘Was that too hard?’

‘No, that was good,’ I said. I turned towards her.

‘I’m sorry I was so grumpy,’ she said. ‘But I had such a terrible vision of the future, me doing everything on my own for months on end.’

‘It won’t be like that though,’ I said. ‘I’ll be able to take them to school and pick them up as usual within a few days, I’m sure.’

‘I know it hurts, and it’s not your fault. But I’m just so tired.’

‘I know. It’ll be fine. Things’ll sort themselves out.’

On Friday Linda was so tired that I went with John to pick the girls up from the nursery. Going there was easy, I pushed John in the buggy with my right hand while walking behind as carefully as I could. The way back was more problematic. I pulled John after me with my right hand, clutching the injured left hand to my side and somehow shunting Vanja and Heidi in the double buggy with my whole body. Occasional pains shot through me and I had no defence except to emit little screams. It must have been a bizarre sight, and people did stare at us as we trundled along. It was also a strange experience for me during those weeks. Not being able to lift or carry and finding it difficult to sit down and get up gave me a sense of helplessness that went beyond physical restrictions. Suddenly I had no authority, no strength, and the feeling of control I had taken for granted until now became manifest. I sat still, I was passive, and it was as though I had lost control of my surroundings. So, had I always felt I controlled them and had power over them? Yes, I must have done. I didn’t need to make any use of the power and the control, it was enough to know that it existed, it permeated everything I did and everything I thought. Now it was gone, and I saw it for the first time. Even stranger was the fact that the same applied to writing. Also with it I had a sense of power and control, which disappeared with the broken collarbone. Suddenly I was *under* the text, suddenly *it* had power over *me*, and it was only with the greatest effort of will that I managed to write the five pages a day I had set myself as a goal. But I managed, I managed that too. I hated every syllable, every word, every sentence, but not liking what I was doing didn't mean I shouldn't do it. One year and it would be over, and then I would be able to write about something else. The pages mounted, the story advanced and then one day I came to another of the places where I had made a note in the book I had kept for the last twenty years, about a party dad had held for friends and colleagues the summer I turned sixteen, a gathering which in the late-autumn darkness merged into one with my own enormous pleasure and dad crying, it was so emotional, such an impossible evening, everything converged there, and now at last I was going to write about it. Once it was done, the rest would be about dad's death. This was a heavy door to open, it was hard being inside, but I approached it in the new way: five pages every day, regardless. Then I got up, switched off the computer, took the rubbish with me, disposed of it in the basement and went to collect the children. The horror lodged in my chest dissipated when they came running towards me across the playground. They competed with each other, seeing who could shout loudest and give me the biggest hug. If John was with us he sat smiling and shouting, for him his two sisters were the tops. They scattered their lives around him, he sat lapping it all up, and copied whatever he could, and even Heidi, who could still become so jealous of him that she would scratch or knock or thump him if we didn't keep an eagle eye open, didn't hold any fears for him, he never viewed her with fear. Did he forget? Or was there so much goodness there the rest was lost in it?

One day in March the telephone rang while I was working, the number was unfamiliar, but as it didn't come from Norway, but was Swedish, I took it anyway. It was a colleague of my mother's, they were at a seminar in Gothenburg, mum had fainted in a shop and been taken to hospital, where she was now in intensive care. I rang, she'd had a heart attack, was being operated on now and was out of danger. Late that night she rang me herself. I could hear she was weak and perhaps a touch confused. She said the pain had been so great she would rather have died than gone on living. She hadn't fainted, she had just fallen over. And not in a shop but the street. While she was lying there, she said now, convinced that this was the end, the thought had gone through her head that she'd had a fantastic life. When she said that I froze.

There was something so good about it.

In addition, she said it had been particularly her childhood that had flashed through her mind as she lay there about to die, as a kind of sudden insight: she'd had an absolutely brilliant childhood, she had been free and happy, it had been fantastic. In the ensuing days what she had said kept returning to me. In a way I was shocked. I could never have thought that. If I keeled over now, and had a few seconds, perhaps minutes, to think before it was all over I would think the opposite. That I hadn't accomplished anything, I hadn't seen anything, I hadn't experienced anything. I want to live. But why don't I live then? Why, when I'm on board a plane or in a car imagining it's going to crash or have a collision, why do I think that's not so bad? That it doesn't matter? That I might just as well die as live? For this is what I think more often than not. Indifference is one of the seven deadly sins, actually the greatest of them all, because it is the only one that sins against life.

Later that spring, when I was nearing the end of the story about dad's death, the terrible days spent at the house in Kristiansand, mum came to visit me. She had been at another seminar in Gothenburg and came over to see us afterwards. Two months had passed since she fell over in the same town. If she had fallen over at home it is unlikely she would have survived, she lived alone, and if, contrary to expectation, she had got help it was a forty-minute drive to the nearest hospital. In Gothenburg she had been attended to at once, and in no time at all she was on the operating table. Now it transpired the heart attack hadn't come out of the blue. She'd had pains, terrible intermittent pains, but she thought it was stress, pushed it to the back of her mind, thinking she would go and see the doctor when she got home, and then she fell over.

One morning she was knitting while I sat writing and Linda was out with John after having taken the girls to the nursery. After a while I went in to see how she was and she started talking unbidden about dad. She said she had always wondered why she stayed with him, why she didn’t take us and leave him, was it because she hadn’t dared? Some weeks earlier she had talked to a friend about it, she told me, and suddenly she had heard herself say she loved him. Then she glanced at me.

‘I *did* love him, Karl Ove. I loved him a lot.’

She had never said that before. She hadn’t even been close to it. Indeed, I couldn’t recall her ever using a word like love before.

It was a shock.

What is going on? I thought. What is going on? For something around me was changing. Or was it changing inside me, so that now I could see something I hadn’t seen before? Or had I set something in motion? Because I talked to her and Yngve a lot about the time with dad. Suddenly it was close to me again.

That morning she went on to tell me about the first time they had met. She had been working at a hotel in Kristiansand during the summer when she was sixteen, and one day at a terrace restaurant in a large park, in the shade of a tree, her friend had introduced her to her boyfriend and his pal.

‘I didn’t quite catch his name, and for a long time I thought it was Knudsen,’ she said. ‘And at first I liked the other one better, you know. But then I fell for your father . . . It’s such a good memory. The sun, the grass in the park, the trees, the shade, all the people there . . . We were so young, you know . . . Yes, it was an adventure. The beginning of an adventure. That was how it felt.’

About the Author

Karl Ove Knausgaard’s first novel, *Out of the World*, was the first ever debut novel to win The Norwegian Critics’ Prize, and his second novel, *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven*, was widely acclaimed. *A Death in the Family*, the first of the *My Struggle* cycle of novels, was awarded the prestigious Brage Award. The *My Struggle* cycle has been heralded as a masterpiece wherever it appears.

Don Bartlett lives in Norfolk and works as a freelance translator of Scandinavian literature. He has translated, or co-translated, a wide variety of Danish and Norwegian novels by such writers as Per Petterson, Lars Saabye Christensen, Roy Jacobsen, Ingvar Ambjørnsen, Jo Nesbo and Ida Jessen.

Also by Karl Ove Knausgaard

A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven
A Death in the Family: My Struggle Book 1

MY STRUGGLE

BOOK 3

KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD

"*My Struggle* is a truly original and enduring and great work of literature."
—RIVKA GALCHEN, *THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW*

Praise for *My Struggle*

"Perhaps the most significant literary enterprise of our time."

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"Why would you read a six-volume, 3,600-page Norwegian novel about a man writing a six-volume, 3,600-page Norwegian novel? The short answer is that it is breathtakingly good, and so you cannot stop yourself, and would not want to . . . Arrestingly beautiful."

—LELAND DE LA DURANTAYE, *The New York Times Book Review*

"*My Struggle* is a revolutionary novel that is highly approachable, even thrilling to read. The book feels like a masterpiece—one of those genuinely surprising works that alters the tradition it inherited."

—MEGHAN O'ROURKE, *Bookforum*

"I fell into the first two books of *My Struggle* as if I were falling into a malarial fever. I did little else for four days except devour them, leaving email unanswered, dogs unwalked, dishes piling up in the sink. The steady headlamps of [Knausgaard's] prose stun and mesmerize you, as if you were a lumbering mammal caught in the middle of a highway."

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—SAM SACKS, *The Wall Street Journal*

"Reading Knausgaard is like the first time one looks at Google Earth: from space you can zoom in on the continent, then the country, then the town where you grew up; you can click on 'street view' and walk up to the house where you were born. It's all there, just keep clicking, you might even see, one imagines, your younger self climbing a tree or disappearing around the corner on a BMX." —BEN LERNER, *London Review of Books*

"What others might cast off, [Knausgaard] picks up, wipes clean, narrates in real time, and seals in amber."
—TED WEESNER, *The Boston Globe*

"Halfway through, this series is starting to look like an early-twenty-first-century masterpiece." —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"Karl Ove Knausgaard's epic autobiography is narcissistic, indiscreet, and a remarkable work of art."
—CHRISTIAN LORENTZEN, *Slate*

"Beautifully rendered and, at times, painfully observant, [Knausgaard's] book does a superlative job of finding that 'inner core of human existence.'" —BRIAN P. KELLY, *The Wall Street Journal*

"The book kept me up till two almost every morning for a week . . . [Knausgaard is] real and singleminded in his storytelling. I don't read Norwegian, but it's hard to believe that the translator, Don Bartlett, could have made such vital, humane prose—over such a long stretch—unless he was hewing close to a work of genius." —LORIN STEIN, *The Paris Review*

"A living hero who landed on greatness by abandoning every typical literary feint, an emperor whose nakedness surpasses royal finery." —JONATHAN LETHEM, *The Guardian*

"Free-form, fear-filled, densely descriptive . . . Karl Ove Knausgaard [is] Norway's biggest literary star since Ibsen."

—LEO ROBSON, *New Statesman*

"Steadily absorbing, lit up by pages of startling insight and harrowing honesty, *My Struggle* introduces into world literature a singular character and immerses us in his fascinating Underground Man consciousness." —PHILLIP LOPATE

"The second volume surpasses the first in original ideas about society and love and childhood and friendship. Karl Ove—with his shyness, his passion, his honesty—can take on any subject and make it his own." —EDMUND WHITE

"A literary event the likes of which we probably will not see again in our lifetimes." —JASON DIAMOND, *Flavorwire*

"Knausgaard's thinking is magnificently unbridled."

—*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany)

"Compelling, rewarding, maddening and often breathtaking."

—STUART EVERS, *The Observer* (London)

"[Knausgaard's] preternatural facility for description, the dreamy thickness of his prose, speaks not only to the sheer pleasure his fiction affords, but to the philosophical stakes of that pleasure." —MARK SUSSMAN, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

"A masterpiece of staggering originality, the literary event of the century . . . Life here and now, examined at a fever pitch, your daily recollections recounted in exhausting but exhilarating detail." —ARLICE DAVENPORT, *The Wichita Eagle*

"The alchemy by which Knausgaard transforms the personal and mundane into the universal and perennially significant . . .

springs from his intensity of relation to his subject-matter, his rightful conviction that his own life-journey, however idiosyncratic, belongs to others also. In Don Bartlett's lively vernacular translation, *My Struggle* will, I am convinced, outlive the furore, welcoming or hostile, of its first appearance."

—PAUL BINDING, *The Spectator*

"I can't stop, I want to stop, I can't stop, just one more page, then I will cook dinner, just one more page . . ."

—*Västerbottens-Kuriren* (Sweden)

"*My Struggle*, the extraordinary six-volume, lightly fictionalized memoir by Karl Ove Knausgaard, is a literary project that flies in the face of every known commercial principle, and yet the author is a rock star: 450,000 copies sold in Norway alone—one copy for every nine adults of the population."

—EMMA BROCKES, *The Guardian*

"[*My Struggle*] achieves an aching intimacy, one that transcends the personal and makes Knausgaard's pursuit of grand artistic ideals, his daily joys and misgivings, strangely familiar."

—MATTHEW LOVE, *Time Out New York*

"*My Struggle* teems with . . . 'sensory bridges' that interweave description and reflection in an unaffected yet poetic fashion. Out of the ashes of his childhood and the cooling cinders of his youth, Knausgaard has fashioned a memoir that burns with the heat of life."

—CHRISTOPHER BYRD, *Barnes & Noble Review*

"[*My Struggle*] has the effect . . . of spurring the reader to think autobiographically: trying to recover the past while realising that its essence is out of reach. And that is ultimately what makes these memoirs so compelling."

—ANDREW NEATHER, *London Evening Standard*

"[Knausgaard is] amplifying his life, playing it as loud as he can, trying to get inside it—and letting its vibrations get inside of him." —JOSHUA ROTHMAN, *Page-Turner* (blog), *The New Yorker*

"Via his visceral, immersive art, Knausgaard makes the heart visible as he conjures 'the intensity that only exists in childhood.' With skin-tingling immediacy, *Boyhood Island* transmits 'the excitement that exists in the unseen and the hidden.' Join Karl Ove on 1970s Tromøya and you might never want to leave." —BOYD TONKIN, *The Independent*

"I read [Books One and Two] hungrily and find myself already missing Knausgaard just a few days after turning *A Man in Love*'s last page, searching the Web for inexpensive crash courses in Norwegian, mostly just wishing volume three were available in English now." —JONATHAN CALLAHAN, *The Millions*

"Karl Ove Knausgaard is a writer strong enough to survive the hype . . . Brutally frank about the frustrations of marriage, work and parenthood, it's often horrifying and deeply funny."
—ANTHONY CUMMINS, *The Observer* (London)

"Knausgaard's workmanlike prose remains far more lucid and charming than most books you'll read this year . . . If Knausgaard keeps this up, the series' final three volumes will be fit for devouring." —SCOTT ESPOSITO, *SFGate*

"Powerfully alive . . . Knausgaard is intense and utterly honest, unafraid to voice universal anxieties . . . He wants us to inhabit the ordinariness of life, which is sometimes visionary, sometimes banal, and sometimes momentous, but all of it perforce ordinary because it happens in the course of a life, and happens, in different forms, to everyone . . . There is something ceaselessly compelling about Knausgaard's book."
—JAMES WOOD, *The New Yorker* (selected as a Book of the Year)

“*My Struggle* is unexpectedly entrancing—the combination of detail and intimacy creates an illusion of being inside somebody else’s brain.” —ROB BRUNNER, *The Q* (blog), *GQ*

“What’s notable is [Knausgaard’s] ability, rare these days, to be fully present in and mindful of his own existence. Every detail is put down without apparent vanity or decoration, as if the writing and the living are happening simultaneously. There shouldn’t be anything remarkable about any of it except for the fact that it immerses you totally. You live his life with him.”

—ZADIE SMITH, *The New York Review of Books*

My
Struggle

My Struggle

BOOK THREE: BOYHOOD

Karl Ove Knausgaard

TRANSLATED FROM

THE NORWEGIAN BY DON BARTLETT

Farrar, Straus and Giroux ◆ New York

Farrar, Straus and Giroux
18 West 18th Street, New York 10011

Copyright © 2009 by Karl Ove Knausgaard
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Printed in the United States of America
Originally published in Norwegian in 2009 by Forlaget Oktober,
Norway, as Min kamp 3
English translation originally published in 2014 by Harvill Secker,
an imprint of Random House, Great Britain
First published in the United States in 2014 by Archipelago Books, New York
First Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition, 2015

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Knausgård, Karl Ove, 1968–
[Min kamp. 3. English]
My struggle. Book three, Boyhood / Karl Ove Knausgaard ; translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett. — First Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition.
pages cm
First published as Min kamp Tredje bok by Forlaget Oktober in 2009.
ISBN 978-0-374-53416-5 (pbk.) — ISBN 978-0-374-71114-6 (ebook)
I. Bartlett, Don, translator. II. Title. III. Title: Boyhood.

PT8951.21.N38 M5613 2015
839.823'74—dc23

2014023374

Designed by Abby Kagan

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My Struggle

One mild, overcast day in August 1969, a bus came winding its way along a narrow road at the far end of an island in southern Norway, between gardens and rocks, meadows and woods, up and down dale, around sharp bends, sometimes with trees on both sides, as if through a tunnel, sometimes with the sea straight ahead. It belonged to the Arendal Steamship Company and was, like all its buses, painted in two-tone light-and-dark-brown livery. It drove over a bridge, along a bay, signaled right, and drew to a halt. The door opened and out stepped a little family. The father, a tall, slim man in a white shirt and light polyester trousers, was carrying two suitcases. The mother, wearing a beige coat and with a light-blue kerchief covering her long hair, was clutching a stroller in one hand and holding the hand of a small boy in the other. The oily, gray exhaust fumes from the bus hung in the air for a moment as it receded into the distance.

"It's quite a way to walk," the father said.

"Can you manage, Yngve?" the mother said, looking down at the boy, who nodded.

"Course I can."

He was four and a half years old and had fair, almost white hair and tanned skin after a long summer in the sun. His brother, barely eight months old, lay in the stroller staring up at the sky, oblivious to where they were or where they were going.

Slowly they began to walk uphill. It was a gravel road, covered with puddles of varying sizes after a downpour. There were fields on both sides. At the end of a flat stretch, perhaps some five hundred meters in length, there was a forest that sloped down to pebbled beaches; the trees weren't tall, as though they had been flattened by the wind blowing off the sea.

On the right, there was a newly built house. Otherwise there were no buildings to be seen. The large springs on the stroller creaked. Soon the baby closed his eyes, lulled to sleep by the wonderful rocking motion. The father, who had short, dark hair and a thick, black beard, put down one suitcase to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"My God, it's humid," he said.

"Yes," she replied. "But it might be cooler nearer the sea."

"Let's hope so," he said, grabbing the suitcase again.

This altogether ordinary family, with young parents, as indeed almost all parents were in those days, and two children, as indeed almost every family had in those days, had moved from Oslo, where they had lived in Thereses gate close to Bislett Stadium for five years, to the island of Tromøya, where a new house was being built for them on an estate. While they were waiting for the house to be completed, they would rent an old property in Hove Holiday Center. In Oslo he had studied English and Norwegian during the day and worked as a nightwatchman, while she attended Ullevål Nursing College. Even though he hadn't finished the course, he had applied – and had been accepted – for a middle-school teaching job at Roligheden Skole while she was to work at Kokkeplassen Psychiatric Clinic. They had met in Kristiansand when they were seventeen, she had become pregnant when they were nineteen, and they had married when they were twenty, on the Vestland smallholding where she had grown up. No one from his family went to the wedding, and even though he is smiling in all the photos there is an aura of loneliness around him, you can see he doesn't quite belong among all her brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, male and female cousins.

Now they're twenty-four and their real lives lie before them. Jobs of their own, a house of their own, children of their own. There are the two of them, and the future they are moving into is theirs, too.

Or is it?

They were born in the same year, 1944, and were part of the first post-war generation, which in many ways represented something new, not least by dint of their being the first people in this country to live in a society that was, to a major degree, planned. The 1950s were the time for the growth of systems – the school system, the health system, the social system, the transport system – and public departments and services, too, in a large-scale centralization that in the course of a surprisingly short period would transform the way lives were led. Her father, born at the beginning of the twentieth century, was raised on the farm where she grew up, in Sørbøvåg in the district of Ytre Sogn, and had no education. Her grandfather came from one of the outlying islands off the coast, as his father, and his before him, probably had. Her mother came from a farm in Jølster, a hundred kilometers away, she hadn't had any education either, and her family there could be traced back to the sixteenth century. As regards his family, it was higher up the social scale, inasmuch as both his father and his uncles on his father's side had received higher education. But they, too, lived in the same place as their parents, Kristiansand, that is. His mother, who was uneducated, came from Åsgårdstrand, her father was a ship's pilot, and there were also police officers in her family. When she met her husband she moved with him to his hometown. That was the custom. The change that took place in the 1950s and 1960s was a revolution, only without the usual violence and irrationality of revolutions. Not only did children of fishermen and smallholders, factory workers and shop assistants start at university and train to become teachers and psychologists, historians and social workers, but many of them settled in places far from the areas where their families lived. That they did all this as a matter of course says something about the strength of the zeitgeist. Zeitgeist comes from the outside, but works on the inside. It affects everyone, but not everyone is affected in the same way. For the young 1960s mother, it would have been an absurd thought to marry a man from one of the neighboring farms and spend the rest of her life there. She wanted to get out! She wanted to have her *own* life. The same was true for her brothers and sisters, and that was how it was in families countrywide. But why did they want to do that? Where did this strong desire come from? Indeed, where did *these new ideas* come from? In her family there was no tradition of anything of this kind: the only person who had left the area was her uncle Magnus, and he had gone to America because of the poverty in Norway, and the life he had there was for many years hardly distinguishable from the life he'd had in Vestland. For the young 1960s father, things were different: in his family you were expected to have an education, though perhaps not to marry a Vestland farmer's daughter and settle on an estate near a small Sørland town.

But there they were, walking on this hot, overcast day in August 1969, on their way to their new home, him lugging two heavy suitcases stuffed with 1960s clothes, her pushing a 1960s stroller with a baby dressed in 1960s baby togs, white with lace trim everywhere, and between them, tripping from side to side, happy and curious, excited and expectant, was their elder son, Yngve. Across the flat stretch they went, through the thin strip of forest, to the gate that was open and into the large holiday center. To the right there was a garage owned by someone called Vraaldsen; to the left large red chalets around an open gravel area and, beyond, pine forest.

A kilometer to the east stood Tromøya Church, built in 1150 of stone, but some parts were older and it was probably one of the oldest churches in the country. It stood on a small mound and had been used from time immemorial as a landmark by passing ships and charted on all nautical maps. On Mærdø, a little island in the archipelago off the coast, there was an old *skippergård*, a residence testifying to the locality's golden age, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when trade with the rest of the world, particularly in timber, flourished. On school trips to the Aust-Agder Museum classes were shown old Dutch and Chinese artifacts going back to that time and even further. On Tromøya there were rare and exotic plants that had come with ships discharging their ballast water, and you learned at school that it was on Tromøya that potatoes were first grown in Norway. In Snorri's Norwegian-king sagas the island was mentioned several times; under the ground in the meadows and fields lay arrowheads from the Stone Age and you could find fossils among the round stones on the long, pebbled beaches.

However, as the incoming nuclear family slowly walked through the open countryside with all their bags and baggage it wasn't the tenth or the thirteenth, the seventeenth or the nineteenth centuries that had left their marks on the surroundings. It was the Second World War. This region had been used by German forces; they had built the barracks and many of the houses. In the forest there were low-lying brick bunkers, completely intact, and on top of the slopes above the beaches several artillery emplacements. There was even an old German airfield in the vicinity.

The house where they were going to live during the coming year was a solitary construction in the middle of the forest. It was red with white window frames. From the sea, which could not be seen, though only a few hundred meters down the slope, came a regular crashing of waves. There was a smell of forest and salt water.

The father put down his suitcases, took out the key, and unlocked the door. Inside, there was a hall, a kitchen, a living room with a wood burner, a combined bath and washroom, and on the first floor, three bedrooms. The walls weren't insulated; the kitchen was equipped with the minimum. No telephone, no dishwasher, no washing machine, no TV.

"Well, here we are," the father said, carrying their suitcases into the bedroom while Yngve ran from window to window peering out and the mother stood the stroller with the sleeping baby on the doorstep.

Of course, I don't remember any of this time. It is absolutely impossible to identify with the infant my parents photographed, indeed so impossible that it seems wrong to use the word "me" to describe what is lying on the changing table, for example, with unusually red skin, arms and legs spread, and a face distorted into a scream, the cause of which no one can remember, or on a sheepskin rug on the floor, wearing white pajamas, still red-faced, with large, dark eyes squinting slightly. Is this creature the same person as the one sitting here in Malmö writing? And will the forty-year-old creature who is sitting in Malmö writing this one overcast September day in a room filled with the drone of the traffic outside and the autumn wind howling through the old-fashioned ventilation system be the same as the gray, hunched geriatric who in forty years from now might be sitting dribbling and trembling in an old people's home somewhere in the Swedish woods? Not to mention the corpse that at some point will be laid out on a bench in a morgue? Still known as Karl Ove. And isn't it actually unbelievable that one simple name encompasses all of this? The fetus in the belly, the infant on the changing table, the forty-year-old in front of the computer, the old man in the chair, the corpse on the bench? Wouldn't it be more natural to operate with several names since their identities and self-perceptions are so very different? Such that the fetus might be called Jens Ove, for example, and the infant Nils Ove, and the five- to ten-year-old Per Ove, the ten- to twelve-year-old Geir Ove, the twelve- to seventeen-year-old Kurt Ove, the seventeen- to twenty-three-year-old John Ove, the twenty-three- to thirty-two-year-old Tor Ove, the thirty-two- to forty-six-year-old Karl Ove – and so on and so forth? Then the first name would represent the distinctiveness of the age range, the middle name would represent continuity, and the last, family affiliation.

No, I don't remember any of this, I don't even know which house we lived in, even though Dad pointed it out to me once. All I know about that time I have been told by my parents or have gleaned from photos. That winter the snow was several meters high, the way it can be in Sørland, and the road to the house was like a narrow ravine. There Yngve is, pulling a cart with me in the back, there he is, with his short skis on, smiling at the photographer. Inside the house, he is pointing at me and laughing, or I am standing on my own holding on to the cot. I called him "Aua"; that was my first word. He was also the only person who understood what I said, according to what I have been told, and he translated it for Mom and Dad. I also know that Yngve went around ringing doorbells and asking if there were any children living there. Grandma always used to tell that story. "Are there any children living here?" she would say in a child's voice and laugh. And I know I fell down the stairs, and suffered some kind of shock, I stopped breathing, went blue in the face, and had convulsions, Mom ran to the nearest house with a telephone, clutching me to her breast. She thought it was epilepsy, but it wasn't, it was nothing. And I know that Dad thrived in the classroom, he was a good teacher, and that during one of these years he went on a trip into the mountains with his class. There are some photos from then, he looks young and happy in all of them, surrounded by teenagers dressed in the casual way that was characteristic of the early 1970s. Woolen sweaters, flared trousers, rubber boots. Their hair was big, not big and piled-up as in the sixties, but big and soft, and it hung over their soft teenage faces. Mom once said perhaps he had never been as happy as he was during those years. And then there are photos of Grandma on Dad's side, Yngve, and me – two taken in front of a frozen lake, both Yngve and I were clad in large woolen jackets, knitted by Grandma, mine mustard yellow and brown – and two taken on the veranda of their house in Kristiansand, in one she has her cheek against mine, it is autumn, the sky is blue, the sun low, we are gazing across the town, I suppose I must have been two or three years old.

One might imagine that these photos represent some kind of memory, that they are reminiscences, except that the "me" reminiscences usually rely on is not there, and the question is then of course what meaning they actually have. I have seen countless photos from the same period of friends' and girlfriends' families, and they are virtually indistinguishable. The same colors, the same clothes, the same rooms, the same activities. But I don't attach any significance to these photos, in a certain sense they are meaningless, and this aspect becomes even more marked when I see photos of previous generations, it is just a collection of people, dressed in exotic clothes, doing something that to me is unfathomable. It is the era that we take photos of, not the people in it, they can't be captured. Not even the people in my immediate circle can. Who was the woman posing in front of the stove in the flat in Thereses gate, wearing a light-blue dress, one knee resting against the other, calves apart, in this typical 1960s posture? The one with the bob? The blue eyes and the gentle smile that was so gentle it barely even registered as a smile? The one holding the handle of the shiny coffeepot with the red lid? Yes, that was my mother, my very own mom, but who was she? What was she thinking? How did she see her life, the one she had lived so far and the one awaiting her? Only she knows, and the photo tells you nothing. An unknown woman in an unknown room, that is all. And the man who, ten years later, is sitting on a mountainside drinking coffee from the same red thermos top, as he forgot to pack any cups before leaving, who was he? The one with the well-groomed black beard and the thick black hair? The one with the sensitive lips and the amused eyes? Yes, of course, that was my father, my very own dad. But who he was to himself at this moment, or at any other, nobody knows. And so it is with all these photos, even the ones of me. They are voids; the only meaning that can be derived from them is that which time has added. Nonetheless, these photos are a part of me and my most intimate history, as others' photos are part of theirs. Meaningful, meaningless, meaningful, meaningless, this is the wave that washes through our lives and creates its inherent tension. I draw on everything I remember from the first six years of my life, and all that exists in terms of photos and objects from that period, they constitute an important part of my identity, filling the otherwise empty and memoryless periphery of this "me" with meaning and continuity. From all these bits and pieces I have built myself a Karl Ove, an Yngve, a mom and dad, a house in Hove and a house in Tybakken, a grandmother and grandfather on my dad's side, and a grandmother and grandfather on my mom's side, a neighborhood and a multitude of kids.

This ghetto-like state of incompleteness is what I call my childhood.

Memory is not a reliable quantity in life. And it isn't for the simple reason that memory doesn't prioritize the truth. It is never the demand for truth that determines whether memory recalls an action accurately or not. It is self-interest that does. Memory is pragmatic, it is sly and artful, but not in any hostile or malicious way; on the contrary, it does everything it can to keep its host satisfied. Something pushes a memory into the great void of oblivion, something distorts it beyond recognition, something misunderstands it totally, something, and this something is as good as nothing, recalls it with sharpness, clarity, and accuracy. That which is remembered accurately is never given to you to determine.

In my case, any memory of my first six years is virtually nonexistent. I remember hardly anything. I have no idea who took care of me, what I did, who I played with, it has all completely gone, the years 1969–1974 are a great big hole in my life. The little I can muster is of scant value: I am standing on a wooden bridge in a sparse, high-altitude forest, beneath me rushes a torrent, the water is green and white, I am jumping up and down, the bridge is swaying, and I am laughing. Beside me is Geir Prestbakmo, a boy from the neighborhood, he is jumping up and down and laughing, too. I am sitting on the rear seat of a car, we are waiting at the light, Dad turns and says we are in Mjøndalen. We are going to an IK Start game, I've been told, but I can't remember a thing about the trip there, the soccer match, or the journey home. I am walking up the hill outside the house pushing a big plastic truck; it is green and yellow and gives me an absolutely fantastic feeling of riches and wealth and happiness.

That is all. That is my first six years.

But these are canonized memories, already established at the age of seven or eight, the magic of childhood: my very first memories! However, there are other kinds of memories. Those that are not fixed and cannot be evoked by will, but that at odd moments let go, as it were, and rise into my consciousness of their own accord and float around there for a while like transparent jellyfish, roused by a certain smell, a certain taste, a certain sound . . . these are always accompanied by an immediate, intense feeling of happiness. Then there are the memories associated with the body, when you do something you used to do: shield your eyes from the sun with your arm, catch a ball, run across a meadow with a kite in your hand and your children hard on your heels. There are memories that accompany emotions: sudden anger, sudden tears, sudden fear, and you are where you were, as if hurled back inside yourself, propelled through the ages at breakneck speed. And then there are the memories associated with a landscape, for landscape in childhood is not like the landscape that follows later; they are charged in very different ways. In that landscape every rock, every tree had a meaning, and because everything was seen for the first time and because it was seen so many times, it was anchored in the depths of your consciousness, not as something vague or approximate, the way the landscape outside a house appears to adults if they close their eyes and it has to be summoned forth, but as something with immense precision and detail. In my mind, I have only to open the door and go outside for the images to come streaming toward me. The gravel in the driveway, almost bluish in color in the summer. Oh, that alone, the driveways of childhood! And the 1970s cars parked in them! VW Beetles, Citroën DS 21s, Ford Tauneses, Granadas, Consuls, Opel Asconas, Kadetts, Ladas, Volvo Amazons . . . Well, okay, across the gravel, along the brown fence, over the shallow ditch between our road, Nordåsen Ringvei, and Elgstien, which traversed the whole area passing two estates apart from our own. The slope of rich, dark earth from the edge of the road down into the forest! The way small, thin, green stems had almost immediately begun to shoot up from it: fragile and seemingly alone in the new black expanse, and then the rampant multiplication of them the year after until the slope was completely covered with thick, luxuriant shrubbery. Small trees, grass, foxgloves, dandelions, ferns, and bushes eradicating what earlier had been such a clear division between road and forest. Up the hill, along the sidewalk with its narrow brick curb, and, oh, the water that trickled and flowed and streamed down there when it rained! The path off to the right, a shortcut to the new supermarket B-Max. The bog beside it, no bigger than two spaces in a parking lot, the birches thirstily hanging over it. Olsen's house at the top of the little hill and the road that cut in behind. Grevlingveien, it was called. In the first house on the left lived John and his sister Trude, it stood on a plot that was little more than a pile of rocks. I was always frightened when I had to walk past that house. Partly because John might be lying in ambush there, ready to throw stones or snowballs at any passing child, partly because they had an Alsatian . . . That Alsatian . . . Oh, now I remember it. What a dreadful beast that dog was. It was tied up on the veranda or in the drive, barked at all the passersby, slunk back and forth as far as its tether would allow, whimpering and howling. It was lean with yellow, sickly eyes. Once it came tearing down the hill toward me, with Trude hard on its heels and the leash dragging behind it. I had heard that you shouldn't take flight when an animal is after you, for example, a bear in the forest; the secret was to stand perfectly still and act cool, so I did, stopping the instant I saw it bounding toward me. It didn't help a scrap. It couldn't care less whether I was motionless or not, just opened its jaws and sank them into my forearm, next to my wrist. Trude caught up with it a second later, grabbed the leash, and yanked so hard it was wrenched backward. I hurried off, crying. Everything about that animal frightened me. The barking, the yellow eyes, the saliva that ran from its jowls, the round, pointed teeth, of which I now had an imprint in my arm. At home I didn't breathe a word about what had happened, for fear of being told off, because an incident like this offered so many opportunities for reproach: I shouldn't have been where I was at the time, or I shouldn't have whined or, a dog, was that any reason to be frightened? From that day on, terror had me in its grip whenever I saw the brute. And it was fatal because not only had I heard that you should stand still when a dangerous animal attacks, I had also heard that a dog can smell fear. I don't know who told me that, but it was one of the beliefs that people passed on and that everyone knew: dogs can smell if you are frightened. Then they can become frightened or aggressive themselves and go on the attack. If you're not afraid they are nice to you.

How that occupied my mind. How could they *smell* fear? What did fear *smell* like? And was it possible to pretend you weren't frightened, so that the dogs would smell that and wouldn't notice the *real* feelings that lay beneath?

Kanestrøm, who lived two houses up from us, also had a dog. It was a golden retriever called Alex and as meek as a lamb. It ambled after Herr Kanestrøm wherever he went, but also after every one of the four children if it could. Kind eyes and, somehow, gentle, friendly movements. But I was even afraid of this one. Because when you came into view on the hill and were about to go in to ring the doorbell it barked. Not tentative, friendly, or inquisitive barking, but vigorous, deep-throated, and resonant. Then I would stop in my tracks.

"Hi, Alex," I might say if no one was around. "I'm not frightened, you know. It's not that."

If someone was there I would feel forced to carry on, act as if nothing were happening, plow my way through the barking, as it were, and when the dog was in front of me, its jaws agape, I would bend down and pat it a couple of times on its side with my heart pounding and every muscle trembling with fear.

"Quiet, Alex!" Dag Lothar would say, as he came running up the narrow gravel path from the cellar door or rushing from the front door.

"You're frightening Karl Ove with your barking, you stupid dog."

"I'm not frightened," I would counter. Dag Lothar would just look at me with a kind of stiff smile, which meant "Don't give me that."

Then off we went.

Where did we go?

Into the forest.

Down to Ubekilen, to a bay.

Down to the pontoons.

Up to Tromøya Bridge.

Down to Gamle Tybakken.

Over to the plastic boat factory.

Up into the hills.

Along to Lake Tjenna.

Up to B-Max.

Down to the Fina gas station.

Unless, that is, we just ran about in the road where we lived, or hung around outside one of the houses there, or sat on the curb, or in the big cherry tree no one owned.

That was everything. That was the world.

But what a world!

An estate has no roots in the past, nor any branches into the skies of the future, as satellite towns once had. Estates arrived as a pragmatic answer to a practical question, where are all the people moving into the district going to live, ah yes, in the forest over there, we'll clear some plots and put them up for sale. The only house there belonged to a family called Beck; the father was Danish and had built the house himself in the middle of the forest. They didn't have a car, or a washing machine, or a television. There was no garden, only a drive made from pounded soil in among the trees. Piles of wood under tarpaulins and, in the winter, an upturned boat. The two sisters, Inga Lill and Lisa, went to the local middle school and looked after Yngve and me for the first years we lived there. Their brother was called John, he was two years older than me, wore strange, homemade clothes, wasn't in the slightest bit interested in what we were interested in, and devoted his attention to other matters, which he never told us about. He built his own boat when he was twelve. Not like us, not like the rafts we tried to cobble together from dreams and a lust for adventure, but a proper, real rowboat. You would have thought he would be bullied, but he wasn't, in a way, the distance was too great. He wasn't one of us and he didn't want to be. His father, the cycling Dane, who perhaps had nurtured an urge to live alone in the middle of the forest ever since his time in Denmark, must have been mortified when the plans for the estate were drawn up and approved and the first construction machinery rolled into the forest just beyond his house. The families who moved in were from all over the country and all of them had children. In the house across the road lived Gustavsen, he was a fireman, she was a housewife, they came from Honningsvåg, their children were called Rolf and Leif Tore. In the house opposite us lived Prestbakmo, he was a schoolteacher, she was a nurse, they came from Troms, their children's names were Gro and Geir. On the same side was Kanestrøm, he worked at the post office, she was a housewife, they came from Kristiansund, their children were called Steinar, Ingrid Anne, Dag Lothar, and Unni. On the other side was Karlsen, he was a sailor, she was a shop assistant, they were from Sørland, their children were Kent

Arne and Anne Lene. Above them was Christensen, he was a sailor, I don't know what she did, their children were called Marianne and Eva. On the other side lived Jacobsen, he was a typographer, she was a housewife, both were from Bergen, their children were Geir, Trond, and Wenche. Above them, Lindland, from Sørland, their children were Geir Håkon and Morten. Around there, I began to lose track, at least as far as the parents' names and jobs were concerned. The children there were: Bente, Tone Elisabeth, Tone, Liv Berit, Steinar, Kåre, Rune, Jan Atle, Oddlaug, and Halvor. Most were my age, the oldest seven years above me, the youngest four years below. Five of them would later be in my class.

We moved there in the summer of 1970, when most of the houses on the site were still being built. The shrill warning siren, which sounded before an explosion, was a common feature of my childhood, and that very distinctive feeling of doom you can experience when the shock waves from the explosion ripple through the ground causing the floor of the house to tremble was common, too. It was natural to think of connections above the ground – roads, electric cables, forests, and seas – but more disturbing to think of them being beneath the ground as well. What we stood on, shouldn't that be absolutely immovable and impenetrable? At the same time all the openings in the ground had a very special fascination for me and the other children I grew up with. It was not uncommon for us to flock around one of the many holes being dug in our area, whether for sewage pipes or electric cables, or for the foundations of a cellar, and to stare down into the depths, yellow where there was sand, black, brown, or reddish brown where there was soil, gray where there was clay, and sooner or later the bottom was always covered with an opaque layer of grayish-yellow water, its surface sometimes broken by the top of a huge rock or two. Above the hole towered a shiny yellow or orange excavator, not unlike a bird, with its bucket like a beak at the extreme end of a long neck, and beside it a stationary truck, with headlights like eyes, the radiator grille like a mouth, and the tarpaulin-covered rear, a back. In the case of large construction projects there would also be bulldozers or dump trucks, usually yellow, with enormous wheels and treads that were a hand's width. If we were lucky we would find piles of detonation cord in or near the hole, which we pinched because the cord had a high swap and utility value. Besides this, there were normally drums nearby, the height of a man, wooden bobbin-like constructions from which cables were unfurled, and piles of smooth, reddish-brown plastic pipes measuring the approximate diameter of our forearms. There were further piles of cement pipes and precast cement wells, so rough and wonderful, a bit taller than us, perfect for climbing on; long, immovable mats of old, cut-up car tires, which they used during the blasting; mounds of wooden telephone poles, green from the preservative they had been impregnated with; boxes of dynamite; sheds where the workmen changed their clothes and ate. If they were there we kept a respectful distance and watched what they were doing. If they weren't, we clambered down the holes, onto the dump-truck wheels, balanced on the piles of pipes, rattled the shed doors and peered through the windows, jumped down into the cement wells, tried to roll the drums away, filled our pockets with cable clippings, plastic handles, and detonation cord. In our world no one had greater status than these workmen; no work seemed more meaningful than theirs. The technical details were of no interest to me, they meant as little as the make of the construction machines. What fascinated me most, apart from the changes in the landscape the workmen wrought, were the manifestations of their private lives that came with them. When one of them produced a comb from his orange overalls or baggy, almost shapeless, blue trousers and combed his hair, safety helmet under his arm, amid all the droning and pounding of the machines, for example, or the mysterious, indeed almost incomprehensible, moment when the workmen emerged from the shed in the afternoon wearing absolutely normal clothes and got into their cars and drove off like absolutely normal men.

There were other workmen we watched closely, indefatigably. If anyone from Televerket appeared in the vicinity, the news spread like wildfire among the groups of children. There was the car, there was the workman, a telecom engineer, and there were his *fantastic* climbing shoes! With those on his feet and a tool belt around his waist he clicked on a harness that went around both him and the pole, and then, with a series of slow and deliberate, but for us completely mystifying, movements he began to mount the pole. How was this *possible*? Straight-backed, with no visible sign of effort, no visible use of force, he *glided* up to the top. Wide-eyed, we stared at him while he worked aloft. Not one of us would leave because soon he would be climbing down again, in the same easy, effortless, incomprehensible way. Imagine having shoes like those, with the curved metal hook that wrapped itself around the post, what couldn't you do?

And then there were the men working on the drainage. The ones who parked their cars by one of the many manhole covers in the road, which were either set in the pavement or placed on top of a brick circle somewhere close by, and who, after putting on rubber boots reaching up to their *waists*!, levered up the round, enormously heavy, metal lid with a crowbar, shifted it to the side and climbed down. We watched as first their calves disappeared from view, into the hole under the road, next their thighs, then their stomachs, then their chests and finally their heads . . . And what was there beneath if not a tunnel? Where water flowed? Where you could walk? Oh, this was just great. Perhaps one of them was over there now, beside Kent Arne's bike, which was lying strewn across the sidewalk, about twenty meters away, except that he was *under* the ground! Or were these manholes kinds of stations, like wells, where you could inspect the pipes and draw water when there was a fire? No one knew; we were always told to keep well away when they climbed down. No one dared ask them. No one was strong enough to lift off the heavy, coin-shaped metal covers on his own. So it remained a mystery, like so much else in those years.

Even before we started school we were free to roam wherever we wanted, with two exceptions. One was the main road, which ran from Tromøya Bridge to the Fina station. The other was the lake. Never go down to the lake on your own! the adults instilled in us. But, actually, why not? Did they think we would fall into the water? No, that wasn't it, someone said when we were sitting on the rocks beyond the little meadow where we sometimes played soccer and looking down over the edge of the steep cliff into the water, perhaps thirty meters beneath us. It was the water sprite. It abducted children.

"Who says so?"

"Mom and Dad."

"Is it *here*?"

"Yes."

We gazed down at the grayish surface of the water in Ubekilen. It didn't seem improbable that there was something lurking beneath.

"Only here?" someone asked. "If so, we can go somewhere else. Lake Tjenna?"

"Or Little Hawaii?"

"There are other sprites there. They're dangerous. It's true. Mom and Dad told me. They kidnap children and drown them."

"Could it come up here?"

"Dunno. No, I don't reckon so. No. It's too far. It's only dangerous by the water's edge."

I was scared of the sprite after that, but not as scared as I was of foxes, the thought of them terrified me, and if I saw a bush stir or I heard something rustle past, then I was off, running to safety, to an opening in the forest, that is, or up to the estate, where the foxes never ventured. In fact, I was so frightened of foxes that Yngve only had to say, I am a fox, and I am coming to get you – he was in the upper bunk and I was in the lower one –

and I froze in terror. No, you aren't, I would say. Yes, I am, he would say, hanging over the edge and hitting out at me. Despite this and even though he did frighten me now and then, I missed having him there when we each had our own room and suddenly I had to sleep alone. It was all right, after all, it was *inside* the house, the new room, but it wasn't as good as having him there, in the bunk above me. Then I could just ask him things, such as, "Yngve, are you frightened now?" and he might answer "No-oo, why should I be? There's nothing to be frightened of here." And I would know he was right and feel reassured.

The fear of foxes must have worn off when I was about seven. The vacuum it left, however, was soon filled by other fears. One morning I was walking past the TV, it was on although no one was watching, there was a matinee film, and there, oh no, oh no, there was a man with no head walking up a staircase! Aaagh! I ran into my room, but that didn't help, I was just as alone and defenseless there, so off I went in search of Mom, if she was at home, or Yngve. The image of the headless man pursued me, and not just in the night, which the other fearful visions I had did. No, the headless man could appear in broad daylight, and if I was alone it made no difference that the sun was shining or the birds were singing, my heart pounded and fear spread like fire to every tiniest nerve ending in my body. It upset me more that this darkness could also appear in the daylight. In fact, if there was one thing I was really frightened of, it was this darkness in the light. And the worst of it was that there was nothing I could do about it. Shouting for someone didn't help, standing in the middle of an open area didn't help, and running away didn't help. Then there was the front cover of a crime magazine that Dad once showed me, a comic he'd had when he was a child, showing a skeleton carrying a man over its back, and the skeleton had turned its head and was looking straight at me through its hollow eye sockets. I was afraid of that skeleton as well; it, too, appeared in all sorts of expected and unexpected contexts. I was also afraid of the hot water in the bathroom. Because whenever you turned on the hot tap a shrill scream traveled through the pipes, and immediately afterward, if you didn't turn it off at once, they started banging. These noises, which were one unholy racket, scared the wits out of me. There was a way of avoiding them, you had to turn on the cold water first, and then somehow fiddle with the hot tap until the temperature was right. That was what Mom, Dad, and Yngve did. I had tried, but the shrill scream that penetrated the walls and was followed by a crescendo of banging, as though something down below was working itself up into a fury, started the second I touched the hot-water tap, and I turned it off as fast as I could, and ran out, my body shaking violently with fear. So, in the morning, I either washed in cold water or took Yngve's dirty but lukewarm water.

Dogs, foxes, and plumbing were concrete, physical threats, I knew where I was with them, either they were there or they weren't. But the headless man and the grinning skeleton, they belonged to the kingdom of death, and they couldn't be handled in the same way, they could be anywhere and everywhere, in a cupboard if you opened it in the dark, on the stairs as you were going up or down, in the forest, indeed even under the bed or in the bathroom. I associated my own reflection in windows with the creatures from beyond, perhaps because they only appeared when it was dark outside, but it was a terrible thought, seeing your own reflection in the black windowpane and thinking, that image is not me, but a ghoul staring in at me.

The year we started school none of us believed in sprites, pixies, or trolls anymore, we laughed at those who did, but the notion of ghosts and apparitions persisted, perhaps because we didn't dare ignore it; dead people did exist, and we knew that, all of us. Other notions we had, coming from the same tangled realm, that of mythology, were of a happier, more innocent nature, such as that of the pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Even that autumn when we started the first class we still believed the myth enough for us to go in search of the rainbow. It must have been one Saturday in September, the rain had been pouring down all morning, we were playing on the road below the house where Geir Håkon lived, or, to be more precise, in the ditch that was flooded with water. At this exact spot the road passed a blasted rock face, and water was dripping and trickling down from its moss, grass, and soil-covered top. We were wearing rubber boots and thick, brightly colored oilskin trousers and jackets, with the hoods tied around our chins, thus displacing all sound; your own breathing and the movements of your head, where your ears met the inside of the hood, were always loud and clear while everything else was muffled and seemed to be happening a long distance away. Between the trees on the other side of the road and at the top of the mountain above us the mist was thick. The orange rooftops on both sides of the road downhill wore a dull sheen in the gray light. Above the forest at the bottom of the slope the sky hung like a swollen belly, penetrated by the pouring rain, which continued to dance on our hoods and now oversensitive ears.

We made a dam, but the sand we shoveled up kept collapsing, and when we caught sight of Jacobsen's car coming up the hill, we didn't hesitate, we dropped our spades and ran down to their house, where the car was parking at that moment. A bluish ribbon of smoke floated in the air behind the exhaust pipe. The father got out on one side, as thin as a stick, with a cigarette stub in the corner of his mouth, he bent down, pulled the lever underneath the seat, and pushed it forward, so that his two sons, Big Geir and Trond, could get out, while the mother, small and chubby, red-haired and pale, let out their daughter, Wenche, on her side.

"Hi," we said.

"Hi," said Geir and Trond.

"Where have you been?"

"To town."

"Hello, boys," their father said.

"Hi," we said.

"Do you want to hear what 777 is in German?" he said.

"Yes."

"*Siebenhundertsiebenundsiebzig*!" he said in his hoarse voice. "Ha ha ha!"

We laughed with him. His laughter morphed into coughing.

"Right then," he said when the fit was over. He inserted the key in the car-door lock and twisted. His lips kept twitching, and one eye, too.

"Where are you off to?" Trond asked.

"Dunno," I said.

"Can I join you?"

"Of course you can."

Trond was the same age as Geir and me, but much smaller. His eyes were as round as saucers, his lower lip was thick and red, his nose small. Above this doll-like face grew blond, curly hair. His brother looked completely different: his eyes were narrow and crafty, his smile was often mocking, his hair straight and sandy brown, the bridge of his nose freckly. But he was small, too.

"Put your rain jacket on," his mother said.

"I'll just get my jacket," Trond said, and ran indoors. We stood waiting without saying a word, our arms down by our sides like two penguins. It had stopped raining. A light wind shook the tops of the tall, slim pine trees scattered round the gardens below. A thin stream ran down the hill, alongside the road, taking with it little heaps of pine needles, the tiny, yellow *v*'s or bones strewn everywhere.

In the sky behind us the cloud cover had opened. The scenery around us, with all the rooftops, lawns, clumps of trees, ridges, and slopes, was now suffused with a kind of glow. From the hill above our house, which we called the mountain, a rainbow had risen.

"Look," I said. "A rainbow!"

"Wow!" Geir said.

Up at the house, Trond had closed the door. He started running toward us.

"There's a rainbow over the mountain!" Geir said.

"Shall we go and look for the pot of gold?"

"Yes, let's!" Trond said.

We ran down the slope. On Karlsen's lawn Anne Lene, Kent Arne's little sister, stood watching us. She was wearing a safety harness; it was attached to a strap so that she wouldn't run off. Her mother's red car was parked in the drive. A light shone from a wall lamp. Outside Gustavsen's house Trond slowed down.

"I'm sure Leif Tore would like to join us," he said.

"I don't think he's at home," I said.

"We can ask anyway," Trond said, walking between the two brick gateposts, which were not hung with any gates and therefore subject to my father's ridicule, and into the drive. A hollow metal globe, from which protruded an arrow, all carried by a naked man with a bent back, was cemented to the top of the posts. It was a sundial, and my father made fun of that, too, for what was the point of *two* sundials?

"Leif Tore," Trond shouted. "Are you coming out?"

He looked at us. Then we all shouted.

"Leif Tore! Are you coming out?"

A few seconds passed. Then the kitchen window was opened, and his mother stuck out her head.

"He's coming now. He's just putting on his rain gear. You don't need to shout anymore."

I had a precise picture of this pot. Large and black, with three legs, full of glittering objects. Gold, silver, diamonds, rubies, sapphires. There was one at each end of the rainbow. We had looked for it before, without any luck. It was important to be quick, rainbows never lasted long.

Leif Tore, who for a while now had been a shadow behind the yellow glass of the door, opened it at last. A wave of warm air streamed out from behind him. It was always so hot in their house. I caught a slight odor of something that was both acrid and sweet. That was how it smelled in their house. All the houses apart from ours had their own smell, this was theirs.

"What are we going to do?" he said, slamming the door behind him and making the glass rattle.

"There's a rainbow on the mountain. We're going to search for the pot of gold," Trond said.

"Come on then!" Leif Tore said, breaking into a run. We followed, down the last part of the hill and onto the road going up toward the mountain. Yngve's bike still wasn't back in its place, I could see, but both Mom's green Beetle and Dad's red Kadett were there. Mom had been doing the vacuuming when I left, it was awful, I hated the sound, it was like a wall pressing itself against me. And they opened the windows while they were cleaning, the air indoors was freezing cold, and it was as if the cold were transmitted to Mom as well, she had no space left in her for anything else when she stood leaning over the wash tub, wringing the cloth, or when she pushed the broom or the Hoover across the floor, and since it was only in this surplus space that there was room for me, I also got cold on these Saturday mornings, in fact so cold that the chill penetrated my head and even made it difficult to lie on the bed reading comics, which normally I loved, so that in the end I had no choice but to get dressed and run outside and hope there was something happening there.

Both Mom and Dad did the cleaning in our house, which was not the norm; to my knowledge none of the other fathers did it, with the possible exception of Prestbakmo, but I had never seen him do it and actually doubted whether he would submit to that kind of work.

But on this day Dad had been to town to buy crabs at the harbor, after which he had sat in his office smoking cigarettes and perhaps marking essays, perhaps reading documents, perhaps fiddling around with his stamp collection, or perhaps reading *The Phantom.*

On the other side of our creosoted garden fence, where the path to B-Max started, water from a manhole cover had flooded the forest floor. Rolf, Leif Tore's brother, had said a few days ago that it was Dad's responsibility. "Responsibility," that was not a word he would normally use, so I guessed he had got it from his father. Dad was on the local council, they were the people who made the decisions on the island, and that was what Gustavsen, Leif Tore and Rolf's father, had meant. Dad had to report the flooding so they could send someone to do the repairs. As we walked up and my attention was again caught by the unnaturally large amount of water between the small, thin trees, with the odd bit of white toilet paper floating in it, I decided to tell him if the opportunity arose. Tell him he would have to report it at the Monday meeting.

There he was! In his blue waterproof jacket, with no hood, his old jeans, which he wore whenever he was going to work in the garden, and his green knee-high boots, he rounded the corner of the house. His upper body was twisted slightly to one side as he was carrying a ladder with both hands across the lawn, and then he dug it into the ground, straightened up, and pushed it into position against the house roof.

I turned back and sped up to catch the others.

"The rainbow's still there!" I shouted.

"We can see it, too!" Leif Tore cried.

I caught up with them at the start of the path, walked behind Trond's yellow jacket between the trees, which shed a shower of rain every time anyone lifted a branch, down to the brown house where Molden lived. He didn't have any young children, only a teenager with long hair, big glasses, brown clothes, and flared trousers. We didn't even know what his name was, we just called him Molden.

The best way up to the top of what we called a mountain went past their garden, and that was the path we were taking now, slowly, because it was steep and the long, yellow grass here was slippery. Now and then I grabbed a sapling to pull myself up. Just below the summit, the mountain was bare and protruded outward, impossible to walk up, at least when it was as wet as it was now, but at the edge there was a crevice between the rock face and a gently projecting crag where you could get a foothold and easily clamber up the last few meters to the summit.

"Where's it gone?" Trond said, the first man up.

"It was right there!" Geir said, pointing a few meters along the little plateau.

"Oh no," Leif Tore said. "It's down there. Look!"

Everyone turned and looked down. The rainbow was over the forest, a long way down. One end was above the trees below Beck's house, the other near the grassy incline down to the bay.

"Shall we go down then?" Trond said.

"What if the treasure's still here?" Leif Tore said, in the dialect we spoke. "We could at least have a peek."

"It isn't," I said. "It's only where the rainbow is."

"Who took it then? That's what I'd like to know," Leif Tore said.

"No one did," I said. "Are you stupid or what? No one brings it either, if that's what you think. It's the rainbow."

"You're the one who's stupid," Leif Tore said. "It can't just disappear all on its own."

"It seems it can," I said.

"No, it can't," Leif Tore said.

"Yes, it can," I said. "Take a look, then. See if you can find it!"

"I want to look, too," Trond said.

"Me, too," Geir said.

"Count me out," I said.

They turned and walked away, glancing from side to side. I wanted to go with them, I could feel myself drawn, but it wasn't possible now. Instead I looked at the view. It was the best vantage point anywhere. You could see the bridge almost rising from the treetops, you could see the sound, where there were always boats crossing, and you could see the big, white gasometers on the other side. You could see the island of Gjerstadholmen, you could see the new road, the low concrete bridge it crossed, you could see Ubekilen Bay from the landward side. And you could see the estate. All the red and orange roofs among the trees. The road. Our garden, Gustavsen's garden; the rest was hidden.

The sky above the estate was almost completely blue now. The clouds toward the town, white. While on the other side, behind Ubekilen, they were still heavy and gray.

I could see Dad down there. A tiny, tiny little figure, no bigger than an ant, on top of the ladder against the roof.

Could he see me up here? I wondered.

A gust of wind blew off the sea.

I turned to watch the others. Two yellow dots and one light green one moving to and fro between the trees. The rocky plateau was dark gray, much like the sky beyond, with yellow and, in some places, whitish grass in the cracks. A branch lay there, all its weight resting on the many needle-thin side branches in such a way that the thick main stem didn't touch the ground. It looked strange.

I had hardly ever been in the forest that lay ahead. The farthest I had gone on the path was to a large, uprooted tree, perhaps thirty meters inside. From there you could see down a slope where nothing grew but heather. With the tall, slim pine trees on both sides and the denser-growing spruces like a wall beneath, it resembled a large room.

Geir said he saw a fox there once. I didn't believe him, but foxes were no laughing matter, so for safety's sake we had taken with us a packed lunch and bottles of juice to the edge of the mountain, where the whole of the world as we knew it lay beneath us.

"Here it is!" Leif Tore shouted. "Wow! The pot of gold!"

"Wow!" Geir shouted.

"You can't fool me!" I shouted back.

"Yippeeeee!" Leif Tore cried. "We're rich!"

"I don't believe it!" Trond shouted.

Then it all went quiet.

Had they really found it?

Of course not. They were trying to trick me.

But the end of the rainbow had been on this precise spot.

What if Leif Tore was right and the treasure hadn't disappeared with the rainbow?

I took a few steps forward and tried to see through the juniper bushes they were standing behind.

"Ohhh, man! Look at this!" Leif Tore said.

I made up my mind in a flash and hurried over, dashing between the trees and past the bushes, then stopped.

They looked at me.

"Gotcha! Ha ha ha! We gotcha!"

"I knew all the time," I said. "I was just coming to get you. The rainbow will be gone if we don't hurry."

"Oh, yes," said Leif Tore. "We really fooled you. Admit it."

"Come on, Geir," I said. "Let's go and look for the pot of gold down there."

Feeling uncomfortable, Geir looked at Leif Tore and Trond. But he was my best friend and joined me. Trond and Leif Tore ambled along after us.

"I need a piss," Leif Tore said. "Shall we see who can piss the farthest? Over the edge? It'll be one great big long jet!"

Piss outdoors when Dad was down there and might be able to see?

Leif Tore was already out of his waterproof pants and fumbling with his fly. Geir and Trond had taken up positions on either side of him and were wriggling their hips and pulling down their trousers.

"I can't piss," I said. "I've just had one."

"You haven't," Geir said, turning toward me with both his hands around his willy. "We've been together all day."

"I had a piss while you were looking for the treasure," I said.

The next second they were enveloped in a cloud of steam as they pissed. I stepped forward to see who won. Surprisingly, it was Trond.

"Rolf pulled his foreskin back," Leif Tore said, closing his fly. "So he pissed much farther from the get-go."

"The rainbow's gone," Geir said, shaking his dick for a last time before tucking it back.

Everyone looked down over the edge.

"What shall we do now?" Trond said.

"No idea," said Leif Tore.

"Let's go to the boathouse, shall we?" I suggested.

"What can we do there?" said Leif Tore.

"Well, we can climb onto the roof," I said.

"Good idea!" Leif Tore said.

We zigzagged down the slope, fought our way through the dense spruce forest, and arrived five minutes later on the gravel road that ran around the bay. The grassy hill on the other side was where we usually went skiing in the winter. In the summer and autumn we seldom went there – what was there to do? The bay was shallow and muddy, no good for swimming, the jetty was falling to pieces, and the little island off the coast was covered with shit from the colony of gulls nesting there. When we wandered around there it was mostly because we were at loose ends, like this morning. High above us, between the sloping field and the edge of the forest, there was an old, white house in which an old, white-haired lady lived. We knew nothing about her. Not her name, nor what she did there. Sometimes we peered into the house, laid our hands against the window, and pressed our faces against the glass. Not for any particular reason, nor out of curiosity, more because we could. We saw a sitting room with old furniture or a kitchen with old utensils. Near the house, past the narrow gravel road, there was a red barn seemingly on the verge of collapse. And at the very bottom, by the stream running down from the forest, there was an old, unpainted boathouse with tarred felt on the roof. Along the bed of the stream grew ferns and some plants with, relative to their thin stems, enormous leaves; if you swept them aside with your hands, in that swimming stroke the way people do, to see past the unresisting foliage, the ground appeared naked, as though the plants were deceiving us, pretending they were lush and green while in reality, beneath the dense leaves, there was almost nothing but soil. Farther down, closer to the water, the earth or clay or whatever it was was a reddish color, reminiscent of rust. Occasionally a variety of things got caught there, a bit of a plastic bag or a condom, but not on days like today, when the water gushed out from the pipe under the road in an enormous torrent and only abated when it reached the little delta-like area where the water fanned out before it met the bay.

The boathouse was gray with age. In some places you could insert a hand between the planks, so we knew what the inside looked like, without any of us having been in there. After peering through these gaps for a while we directed our attention to the roof, which we were going to try to climb. In order to do so we would have to find something to stand on. Nothing in the immediate vicinity was of any use, so we snuck up to the barn and sniffed around there. First of all, we made sure there were no cars up behind the house, there was one there sometimes, the owner was a man, perhaps her son, he would occasionally stop us crossing the drive when we wanted to extend our ski run, which she never did. So we kept an eye open for him.

No car.

Some white cans strewn by the wall. I recognized them from my grandparents' farm; it was formic acid. A rusty oil drum. A door hanging off its hinges.

Over there, though! A pallet!

We lifted it. It had almost grown into the ground. Full of woodlice and small spiderlike insects crawling all over the place as we lifted. Then we carried it between us all the way across the field and down to the boathouse. Leaned it against the wall. Leif Tore, acknowledged to be the bravest among us, was the first to have a go. Standing on the pallet, he managed to get one elbow on the roof. With his other hand he took a firm grip on the edge of the roof, and then he *launched* one leg into the air. He got it over the edge, for an instant it rested on the roof, but as soon as his body followed, he lost his grip and plunged like a sack of potatoes, unable to break his fall with his hands. He hit the pallet with his ribs and slid down to the ground.

"Agh!" he screamed. "Oh, shit. Ooohh. Ow! Ow! Ow!"

He slowly got to his feet, studied his hands, and rubbed one buttock.

"Oooh, that hurt! Someone else can try now!"

He looked at me.

"My arms aren't strong enough," I said.

"I'll give it a shot," Geir said.

If Leif Tore was known for being brave, Geir was known for being wild. Not by nature, because had it been up to him he would have stayed at home drawing and pottering about to his heart's content all day long, but when he was challenged. Perhaps he was a bit gullible. That summer he and I had built a cart, with a great deal of help from his father, and when it was finished I got him to push me around, just by saying it would make him strong. Gullible but also foolhardy, sometimes all boundaries ceased to exist for him, then he was capable of anything.

Geir chose a different method from Leif Tore's. Standing on the pallet, he grabbed the protruding roof with both hands and tried to *walk* up the wall, with all of his weight invested in the fingers he was holding on with. That was, of course, stupid. Even if he had managed it, he would have been standing horizontal to the ground *under* the roof, in a much worse position than when he started.

His fingers slipped and he plunged butt first onto the pallet, after which he hit the back of his head.

He gave an involuntary grunt. When he stood up I could see that he had really hurt himself. He took a few determined paces to and fro, grunting. *Nghn!* Then he mounted the pallet again. This time he adopted Leif Tore's method. Once he had his leg over the edge, a series of electric charges seemed to shoot through him, his leg banged against the roofing felt, his body writhed, and hey presto, there he was, kneeling on the roof and looking down on us.

"Easy!" he said. "Come on! I can pull you up!"

"You cannot. You aren't strong enough!" Trond said.

"We can give it a try at any rate," Geir said.

"You'd better come down," Leif Tore said. "I have to go home soon anyway."

"Me, too," I said.

He didn't seem disappointed, though, up there. Determined would be a more accurate term.

"I'll jump down then," he said.

"Isn't it a bit high?" Leif Tore said.

"Not at all," Geir said. "Just have to put my mind to it."

He squatted down and stared at the ground while taking deep breaths as though intending to dive into water. For a second all the tension in his body was gone, he must have changed his mind, but then he braced himself and he jumped. Fell, rolled around, bounced up again like a spring, and started brushing his thigh to signal composure, almost before he was upright.

Had I been the only one of us to climb the roof, it would have been a great triumph. Leif Tore would never have given in. Even if he had spent all night climbing up and falling off he would have gone on trying to reduce the imbalance that had suddenly become apparent. Geir was different though. In fact, he could pull off the most amazing feats, like jumping five meters through the air into a snowdrift, something no one else would dare, and it meant nothing to him. It was of no real consequence. Geir was just Geir, whatever he got it into his head to do.

Without another word, we walked up the hill. In some places the water had carried parts of the road surface along with it, in others there were long sunken dips. We stopped for a while and pressed our heels into an especially soft patch, the wet gravel oozed over the edge of our boots, it was a good feeling. My hands were cold. When I squeezed them my fingers left white marks in the red flesh. But the warts, three on one thumb, two on the other, one on an index finger, three on the back of my hand, didn't change color, they were a dull reddish-brown color as always and covered with a layer of small dots you could scratch off. Then we went into the other part of the field, the bit that came to an end by a stone wall and the forest behind it; it was as though it was bordered by a long ridge, quite steep, perhaps ten meters high, clad with a line of spruce trees, broken occasionally by a knoll of bare rock. Walking here or in similar areas, I often happily indulged the notion that the countryside resembled the sea. And that fields were the surface of the sea with mountains and islands rising from them.

Oh, to sail in a boat through the forest! To swim among the trees! Now *that* would be something.

We sometimes used to drive to the far side of the island when the weather was good, park the car on the old shooting range, and walk down to the sea-smoothed rocks, our regular spot, not so far from Spornes beach, where of course I would have preferred to be, as there was sand and I could wade out to a depth that suited me. By the rocks the water was immediately very deep. There was, however, a little inlet, a kind of narrow cleft that filled up with water, which you could climb down into, where you could swim, but it was small and the sea bottom was uneven, covered with barnacles, seaweed, and shells. The waves beat against the rocks outside, causing the water to rise inside, sometimes up to your neck, and the Styrofoam floats on the life jacket I wore were lifted up to my ears. The sheer walls amplified the gurgling and slopping of the water, making them somehow sound hollow. Terrified, I would stand there, suddenly incapable of drawing breath in any other way than with great, shuddering gasps. It was just as creepy when the waves receded and the water level inside sank with a slurp. When the sea was calm, Dad would sometimes inflate the yellow-and-green raft, which I was allowed to lie on and float close to the shore, where, with my bare front stuck to the wet plastic and my back hot and dry from the burning sun, I would splash around, paddling with my hands in the water, which was so fresh and salty, watching the seaweed languidly sway to and fro along the rocks it was attached to, looking for fish or crabs or following a boat on the horizon. In the afternoon the Danish ferry came in, we could see it in the distance when we arrived, and it would be in the Galtesund strait when we left, white, enormous, towering above the low islands and reefs. Was it MS *Venus*? Or was it *Christian IV*? Kids all along the southern and western sides of the island, and presumably also the kids living on the other side of Galte Sound, on the, for us, foreign island of Hisøya, would go swimming when it came because its wake was immense and notorious. One afternoon, as I was paddling around on the raft, the sudden waves made me sit up and I toppled into the water. I sank like a stone. The water would have been about three meters deep there. I thrashed around with my arms and legs, shouted in panic, swallowed water, which only increased my fear, but it didn't last more than twenty seconds because Dad had seen everything. He dived in and dragged me to the shore. I regurgitated some water, I was very cold, and we went home. I hadn't been in any real danger and the incident had no lasting effect, except to leave me with the feeling I had as I walked up the hill to tell Geir what had happened: the world was something I walked on top of, it was impenetrable and hard, it was impossible to sink through it, no matter if it rose in steep mountains or fell in deep valleys. Of course I had known it was like that, but I had never felt it before, the sense that we were walking on a surface.

Despite this incident and the unease I could occasionally feel when I was paddling in the narrow inlet, I always looked forward to these trips. Sitting on a towel beside Yngve and scanning the light-blue, mirror-glass sea that only ended on the horizon, where big ships glided slowly past like hour hands, or looking at the two lighthouses on Torungen, the white a sharp contrast with the bright-blue sky: not much was better than that. Drinking pop that had been in the red-checked cooler bag, eating cookies, perhaps watching Dad as he walked to the edge of the rocks, tanned and muscular, and dived into the sea two meters below a second later. The way he shook his head and stroked back the hair from his eyes when he emerged, the rush of bubbles around him, a rare gleam of pleasure in his eyes as he swam to shore with those slow, ponderous lunges of his arms, his body bobbing up and down in the swell. Or walking to the two sinkholes nearby, one a man's depth with distinct spiral marks in the rock on the way down, filled with salty seawater, covered by green sea plants and at the bottom clusters of seaweed, the second less deep but no less beautiful for that. Or up to the shallow, extremely salty, hot pools that filled the hollows in the rock, refreshed only when there were storms, the surface thick with tiny, swirling insects and the bottom bedecked with yellow, sickly-looking algae.

On one such day Dad decided to teach me how to swim. He told me to follow him down to the water's edge. Perhaps half a meter below the surface, a small, slippery ridge overgrown with seaweed jutted into the sea, and that was where I was to stand. Dad swam out to a reef four or five meters from the shore. And turned to face me.

"Now you swim over here to me," he said.

"But it's deep!" I said. Because it was, the seabed between the two reefs was barely visible, it was probably three meters down.

"I'm here, Karl Ove. Don't you think I could rescue you if you sank? Come on, swim. It's not in the slightest bit dangerous! I know you can do it. Launch yourself and do the strokes. If you do that you can swim, you know! Then you can swim!"

I crouched down in the water.

The seabed was a greenish glimmer a long way down. Would I be able to float over that?

My heart only beat this hard when I was frightened.

"I can't," I shouted.

"Course you can!" Dad shouted back. "It's so easy! Just push off, do a couple of strokes, and you'll be here."

"I can't!" I said.

He studied me. Then he sighed and swam over.

"Okay," he said. "I'll swim beside you. I can hold a hand under your tummy. Then you *can't* sink!"

But I *couldn't* do it. Why didn't he understand?

I started to cry.

"I can't," I said.

The depth of the water was in my head and in my chest. The depth was in my arms and legs, in my fingers and toes. The depth filled all of me. Was I supposed to be able to *think* that away?

There weren't any more smiles to be seen now. With a stern expression he clambered onto the land, walked over to our things, and returned with my life jacket.

"Put this on then," he said, throwing it to me. "Now you *can't* sink even if you tried."

I put it on, even though I knew it didn't change anything.

He swam out again. Turned to face me.

"Try now!" he said. "Over here to me!"

I crouched down. The water washed over my trunks. I stretched my arms under the water.

"That's the way!" Dad said.

All I had to do was push off, do a few strokes, and it would all be over.

But I couldn't. I would never ever be able to swim across that deep water. Tears were rolling down my cheeks.

"Come on, boy!" Dad shouted. "We haven't got all day!"

"I CAN'T!" I shouted back. "CAN'T YOU HEAR?"

He stiffened and glared at me, his eyes furious.

"Are you being belligerent?" he said.

"No," I answered, unable to suppress a sob. My arms were shaking.

He swam over and took a firm grip of my arm.

"Come here," he said. He tried to tow me out. I twisted my body toward the shore.

"I don't want to!" I said.

He let go and took a deep breath.

"You don't say," he said. "We know that much."

Then he went to where we had left our clothes, lifted the towel with both hands, and rubbed his face. I took off the life jacket and followed him, stopping a few meters away. He raised one arm and dried underneath, then the other. Bent forward and dried his thighs. Threw the towel down, picked up his shirt, and buttoned it while surveying the perfectly calm sea. Then he pulled on a pair of socks and stuck his feet in his shoes. They were brown leather shoes without laces, which matched neither the socks nor his bathing trunks.

"What are you waiting for?" he said.

I pulled the light-blue Las Palmas T-shirt I had been given by my grandparents over my head and laced up my blue sneakers. Dad tossed the two empty pop bottles and the orange peel into the cooler bag, slung it over his shoulder, and set off, the wet towel crumpled up in his other hand. He said nothing on the way to the car. Opened the trunk, put in the cooler bag, took the life jacket from my hands, and placed it next to the bag together with his towel. The fact that I also had a towel didn't seem to enter his head and I certainly didn't intend to bother him with that.

Even though he had parked in the shade, the car was in the sun. The black seats were boiling hot and burned against my thighs. I wondered briefly whether to put my wet towel over the seat. But he would notice. Instead I placed my palms downward and sat on them, as close to the edge as I could.

Dad started the car and drove off at walking speed; the whole of the open gravel area, known as the firing range, was full of large stones. The road he took afterward was pitted with potholes, too, so he drove equally slowly along there. Green branches and bushes brushed the hood and roof, sometimes there was the odd *thump*, as a branch hit the car. My hands were still stinging, but less so now. It was only then it struck me that Dad was also wearing shorts on a red-hot seat. I glanced at his face in the mirror. It was grim and uncommunicative, but there was no indication that his thighs were burning.

When we came out onto the main road below the church he accelerated away and drove the five kilometers home at far above the speed limit.

"He's frightened of water," he told my mother that afternoon. It wasn't true, but I said nothing. I wasn't stupid.

A week later my grandparents on my mother's side came to visit us. It was the first time they had been to Tybakken. Back on their farm in Sørbøvåg they weren't the slightest bit out of place, they fit in perfectly, Grandad with his blue overalls and black narrow-brimmed hats, long brown rubber boots, and constant spitting of tobacco, Grandma with her worn but clean, flowery dresses, gray hair, and broad body, and hands that always trembled slightly. But when they got out of the car in the drive in front of our house, after Dad had picked them up from Kjevik, I could see at once they didn't fit in. Grandad was wearing his gray Sunday suit, light-blue shirt, and a gray hat, in his hand he held his pipe, not by the stem, the way Dad did, but with his fingers round the bowl. He used the stem to point with, I noticed, when later they were being shown around our garden. Grandma wore a light-gray coat, light-gray shoes, and on her arm she carried a bag. No one dressed like that here. You never saw anyone dressed like that in Arendal, either. It was as though they came from another era.

They filled our rooms with their strangeness. Mom and Dad suddenly behaved differently, too, mostly Dad, who behaved just as he did at Christmas. His invariable "No" became "Why not?"; his ever-watchful eyes became affable, and a friendly hand could even be placed on my or Yngve's shoulder as a casual greeting. But even though he chatted to Grandma with interest, I could see that in fact he wasn't interested, there were always brief moments when he looked away, and then his eyes tended to be utterly lifeless. Grandad, cheerful and enthusiastic, but somehow smaller and more vulnerable here than he was at home, never appeared to notice this trait of Dad's. Or perhaps he just ignored it.

One evening when they were with us Dad bought some crabs. For him they were the apotheosis of festive food, and even though it was early in the season there was meat in the ones he had managed to find. But my grandparents, they didn't eat crab. If Grandad got crabs in the net, well, he would throw them back. Dad would later tell stories about this, he viewed it as comical, a kind of superstition, that crabs should be less clean than fish, just because they crawled over the seabed and didn't swim as they pleased through the water above. Crabs might eat dead bodies, since they eat everything that falls to the bottom, but what were the odds of *these* crabs having chanced upon a corpse in the depths of the Skagerrak?

One afternoon we had been sitting in the garden drinking coffee and juice, afterward I had gone to my room, where I lay on my bed reading comic books, and I heard Grandma and Grandad coming up the stairs. They didn't say anything, trod heavily on the steps, and went into the living room. The sunlight on the wall of my room was golden. The lawn outside had great patches of yellow and even brown, although Dad switched on the sprinkler the instant the local council gave permission. Everything I could see along the road, all the houses, all the gardens, all the cars, and all the tools leaning against walls and doorsteps, was in a state of slumber, it seemed to me. My sweaty chest stuck uncomfortably to the duvet cover. I got up, opened the door, and went into the living room, where Grandma and Grandad were sitting in their separate chairs.

"Would you like to watch TV?" I asked.

"Yes, the news is on soon, isn't it?" Grandma said. "That's what interests us, you know."

I went over and switched on the TV. A few seconds passed before the picture appeared. Then the screen slowly lit up, the *N* of *Dagsrevyen* grew larger and larger as the simple xylophone jingle sounded, *ding-dong-ding-dooong*, faint at first, then louder and louder. I took a step back. Grandad leaned forward in his chair, the pipe stem pointing away from his hand.

"There we are," I said.

Actually, I wasn't allowed to turn on the TV, nor the large radio on the shelf by the wall, I always had to ask Mom or Dad if they could do it for me when there was something I wanted to see or listen to. But now I was doing it for Grandma and Grandad, surely Dad wouldn't object to that.

All of a sudden the picture started flickering wildly. The colors became distorted. Then there was a flash, a loud *puff!*, and then the screen went black.

Oh no.

Oh no, oh no, oh no.

"What happened to the TV?" Grandad asked.

"It's broken," I said, my eyes full of tears.

It was me who had broken it.

"It can happen," Grandad said. "And actually we like the news on the radio better."

He got up from his chair and shuffled over to the radio with his small steps. I went into my room. Chill with fear, my stomach churning, I lay down on the bed. The duvet cover was cool against my hot, bare skin. I took a comic from the pile on the floor. But I was unable to read. Soon he would come in, go over to the TV, and switch it on. If it had broken while I had been alone perhaps I could have acted as if nothing had happened, then he would have thought it had stopped working of its own accord. Although probably he would have figured out that it was me even so, because he had a nose for anything untoward, one glance at me was enough for him to know something was wrong and he put two and two together. Now, however, I couldn't feign ignorance, Grandma and Grandad had been witnesses, they would tell him what had happened, and if I tried to hide anything it would make matters much, much worse.

I sat up on the bed. I had a knot in my stomach, but there was no hint of the warmth and softness that illness brought with it, it was cold and painful and so tight that no tears in the world could undo it.

For a while I sat crying.

If only Yngve had been at home. Then I could have stayed with him in his room for as long as possible. But he was out swimming with Steinar and Kåre.

A sense that I would be nearer to him if I went into his room, even though it was empty, brought me to my feet. I opened the door, tiptoed along the landing, and into his room. His bed had been painted blue, mine orange, in the same way as his cupboard doors were blue and mine were orange. The room smelled of Yngve. I went to the bed and sat down.

The window was ajar!

That was more than I had dared hope for. Now I could hear their voices down on the terrace without their knowing I was here. If the window had been closed I would have revealed my presence when I opened it.

Dad's voice rose and sank in the calm manner it did when he was in a good mood. Now and then I caught Mom's brighter, gentler voice. From the living room came the sound of the radio. For some reason I had the impression that my grandparents were asleep, each in their separate chairs, their mouths open and their eyes closed, perhaps they often sat like that in Sørbøvåg when we visited them.

There was a *clink* of cups outside.

Were they clearing the table?

Yes, because afterward I heard the *flip-flop* of Mom's sandals as she walked around the house.

At once I wanted to have her for myself! Then I would be able to tell her first!

I waited until I heard the door below being opened. Then, as Mom came upstairs carrying a tray of cups, dishes, glasses, and the shiny coffeepot with the red lid atop a garland of clothespins that Yngve had made at Mom's arts and crafts workshop I went out onto the landing.

"Are you inside in this hot weather?" she said.

"Yes," I answered.

She was about to walk past, but then she stopped.

"Is there something the matter?" she asked.

I looked down.

"Is there?"

"The TV's busted," I said.

"Oh no," she said. "That's a pity. Are Grandma and Grandad in there?"

I nodded.

"I was just about to go and get them. It's such a fantastic evening. You come out, too, come on. You can have some more juice if you want."

I shook my head and went back into my room. Stopped inside the door. Perhaps it would be wisest to join them outside? He wouldn't do anything if they were there, even if he found out I had broken the TV.

But that in itself could make him even more furious. Last time we had been to Sørbøvåg everyone had been sitting round the dinner table, and Kjartan had been saying that Yngve had had a fight with Bjørn Atle, the boy on the neighboring farm. Everyone had laughed at that, Dad too. But when Mom had taken me to the shop and the others were having a midday nap, and Yngve had gone to bed to read a comic, Dad had gone in, lifted him up, and shaken him about because he had been fighting.

Nope, the best would be to stay here. If Grandad or Mom said the TV was broken he might lose his temper while he was sitting there with them.

I lay back down on my bed. My chest trembled uncontrollably; another flood of tears was set in motion.

Ohhhh. Ohhhh. Ohhhh.

He would be coming soon.

I knew it.

Soon he would be here.

I put my hands over my ears and closed my eyes and tried to pretend nothing existed. Only this darkness and this breathing.

But a feeling of defenselessness overcame me, and I did the opposite, knelt on the bed and looked out of the window, at the flood of light falling across the landscape, the glowing roof tiles and glinting windowpanes.

The door downstairs was opened and slammed.

I cast around wildly. Got up, pulled the chair from under the desk, and sat down.

Footsteps on the stairs. They were heavy; it was him.

I couldn't sit with my back to the door and got up again. Perched on the edge of the bed.

He thrust open the door. Took a step inside and stopped, looked at me.

His eyes were narrow, his lips clenched.

"What are you doing, boy?" he said.

"Nothing," I said, eyes downcast.

"Look at me when you talk to me!" he said.

I looked at him. But I couldn't. I looked down again.

"Something wrong with your ears as well?" he said. "LOOK AT ME!"

I looked at him. But his eyes, I couldn't meet them.

He took three quick strides across the floor, grabbed my ear, and twisted it as he dragged me to my feet.

"What did I tell you about switching on the TV?" he said.

I fought for breath and was unable to answer.

"WHAT DID I SAY?" he said, twisting harder.

"That I . . . that I sh . . . sh . . . shouldn't do it," I said.

He let go of my ear, grabbed both of my arms, and shook me.

"NOW LOOK AT ME!" he yelled.

I raised my head. Tears almost blurred him out.

His fingers squeezed harder.

"Didn't I tell you to keep away from the TV? Eh? Didn't I tell you? Now we'll have to buy a new TV and where will we get the money from? Can you answer me that, eh!"

"No-o-o-o," I sobbed.

He threw me down on the bed.

"Now you stay in your room until I tell you otherwise. Have you understood?"

"Yes," I said.

"You're grounded tonight, and you're grounded tomorrow."

"Okay."

Then he was gone. I was crying so much I couldn't hear where he went. My breathing was jerky, as though it was moving up a staircase. My chest was trembling, my hands were trembling. I lay there crying for twenty minutes perhaps. Then it started to ease. I knelt on the bed and gazed out of the window. My legs were still shaking, my hands were shaking, but it was loosening its hold on me, I could feel, it was as though I had entered a quiet room after a storm.

From the window I could see Prestbakmo's house and the entire front of their garden, which bordered ours, Gustavsen's house and the front of their garden, a bit of Karlsen's house, and a bit of Christensen's at the top. I had a view of the road as far as the mailbox stand. The sun, which seemed to become a touch fuller in the afternoon, hung in the sky above the trees on the ridge. The air was perfectly still, not a tree or a bush stirred. People never sat in their front gardens, that would be "displaying yourself," as Dad would say, making yourself visible to all; behind the houses was where all the garden furniture and the grills were in this neighborhood.

Then something happened. Kent came out of the door of Karlsen's house. I saw just his head above the parked car, the coruscating white hair gliding along like a puppet in a puppet show. He was gone for a few seconds, then he reappeared on his bike. He stood up on the pedals, jerking them backward to brake, shot out onto the road, and built up a pretty good speed before braking hard and swerving and coming to a halt in front of Gustavsen's house. He had lost his father, who had been a sailor, two years ago. I could barely remember him; in fact, I had only one image of him, once when we were walking down the hill, it was sunny and cold, but there was no snow, I was holding my small orange skates with three blades and straps to attach them to your shoes, so we must have been on our way to Lake Tjenna. I could also remember when I found out that he had died. Leif Tore had been standing by the line of concrete barriers that separated Nordåsen Ringvei from Elgstien, just outside our house, and had said that Kent Arne's father was dead. While he was telling me we looked up at their house. He had been trying to pull someone out of a tank that was being cleaned, it had been full of gas and they had fainted, and then he, too, had lost consciousness and died. We never talked about Kent Arne's father when he was there, or about death. Another man had just moved in, whose name, strangely enough, was also Karlsen.

If Dag Lothar was number one, then Kent Arne was number two, even though he was a year younger than us and two years younger than Dag Lothar. Leif Tore was number three, Geir Håkon number four, Trond number five, Geir number six, and I was number seven.

"Leif Tore, are you coming out?!" Kent Arne shouted in front of the house. Soon after he emerged, wearing only blue denim shorts and sneakers, got on Rolf's bike, and they cycled down the hill and were gone. Prestbakmo's cat lay motionless on the flat rock between Gustavsen's and Hansen's properties.

I lay back on the bed. Read some comics, got up, and flattened my ear against the door to hear if anything was happening in the living room, but not a sound, they were still outside. My grandparents were visiting, so it was unthinkable that I wouldn't be given any supper. Or was it?

Half an hour later they came upstairs. One of them went into the bathroom, which was adjacent to my room. It wasn't Dad, I could tell that from the footsteps, which were lighter than his.

But I couldn't tell whether it was Mom, Grandma, or Grandad, until the flushing of the toilet was followed by a loud banging from the hot-water pipes, which only Grandma or Grandad could have caused.

Now I was seriously hungry.

The shadows that descended over the ground outside were so long and distorted that they no longer bore any resemblance to the forms that created them. As though they had sprung forth in their own right, as though there existed a parallel reality of darkness, with dark-fences, dark-trees, dark-houses, populated by dark-people, somehow stranded here in the light, where they seemed so misshapen and helpless, as far from their element as a reef with seaweed and shells and crabs is from the receding water, one might imagine. Oh, isn't that why shadows get longer and longer in the evening? They are reaching out for the night, this tidal water of darkness that washes over the earth to fulfill for a few hours the shadows' innermost yearnings.

I looked at my watch. It was ten minutes past nine. In twenty minutes it would be bedtime.

In the afternoon, the worst part of being grounded was that you couldn't go out and you stood at the window watching everyone else outside. In the evening, the worst part was that there was no clear dividing line between the various phases that usually constituted an evening. After sitting up for some hours I simply pulled off my clothes and got into bed. The difference between the two states, which was normally so great, was almost completely eradicated when you were grounded, and that led to my becoming aware of myself in a way that I normally didn't. It was as if the person I was *while* doing whatever I was doing, such as eating supper, brushing my teeth, washing my face, or putting on my pajamas, not only revealed itself but also filled my whole being, as if all of a sudden there was simply *nothing* else. I was exactly the same person when I was sitting on the bed fully dressed as I was lying in it without my clothes on. In fact, there were no real dividing lines or transitions.

It was an irksome feeling.

I went to the door and placed my ear against it again. At first it was quiet, then I heard some voices, then it was quiet again. I cried a few tears, then I took off my T-shirt and shorts and got into bed with the duvet drawn up to my chin. The sun still shone on the wall opposite. I read some comics, then I put them on the floor, and closed my eyes. My last thought before I fell asleep was that it hadn't been my fault.

I woke up, looked at my wristwatch. The two luminous snakes showed it was ten minutes past two. I lay quite still for a while in an attempt to work out what had woken me. Apart from my pulse, which throbbed as if whispering in my ear, everything was silent. No cars on the road, no boats in Tromøya Sound, no planes flying overhead. No footsteps, no voices, nothing. Nor from our house.

I raised my head a little so that my ears weren't touching anything and held my breath. After a few seconds I heard a noise from the garden. A noise so high-pitched that at first I didn't catch it, but the moment I became aware of it I was terrified.

Eeee-eeee-eeeeee-eeeee. Eeeeeee-eeee-eeeeeee. Eeeeee.

I sat up on my knees, drew the curtain to the side, and peered through the window. The lawn was bathed in a weak light: the moon above our house was full. A gust of wind made it look as if the grass were racing away. A white plastic bag caught on the end of the hedge was flapping, and it struck me that someone who didn't know that wind existed would have thought that the bag was moving of its own accord. As though I were perched high above the ground, the tips of my toes and fingers tingled. My heart was beating fast. The muscles in my stomach tightened, I swallowed, and swallowed again. Night was the time for ghosts and apparitions, night was the time for the headless man and the grinning skeleton. And all that separated me from it was a thin wall.

There was that sound again!

Eeee-eeeeeeeee- eee-eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee-eee-eeeeeee.

I scanned the gray lawn outside. Over by the hedge, perhaps five meters away, I caught sight of Prestbakmo's cat. It was lying stretched out in the grass and smacking something with its paw. Whatever it was smacking, a gray lump, like stone or clay, was thrown a few meters closer to the window. The cat rose and followed. The lump lay still in the grass. The cat tentatively hit out at it a few more times, moved closer with its head, and seemed to nudge it with its nose, then opened its jaws and took it in its mouth. When the squeaking started again I guessed it was a mouse. The sudden noise appeared to confuse the cat. At any rate it tossed its head and flung the mouse in the air. This time it didn't stay where it landed, it made a headlong dash across the lawn. The cat stood watching, motionless. It looked as if it was about to let the mouse go. But then, just as the mouse reached the bed by the gate to Prestbakmo's garden, it set off. Three bounds and the cat had caught it again.

In the room beside mine I heard Dad's voice. It was low and mumbling, without beginning or end, the way it often sounded when he was talking in his sleep. A moment later someone got up from his bed. From the lightness of foot I realized it was Mom. Outside, the cat had started jumping up and down. It looked like some kind of dance. Another gust of wind swept through the grass. I looked up at the pine tree and saw its tender branches bending and swaying, slim and black against the heavy, yellow moon. Mom opened the door to the bathroom. When I heard her lower the toilet seat I put my hands over my ears and started to hum. The sound issuing from her after that, a kind of hiss, as if she were letting off steam, was awful. Usually I shut out Dad's thunderous torrents, too, even though they weren't quite as difficult to endure as Mom's hissing. *Aaaaaaaaaaagh*, I said, slowly counting to ten and watching the cat. Apparently tired of the game, it grabbed the mouse in its jaws and dashed through the hedge, across the road and into Gustavsen's drive, where it dropped the mouse on the ground by the trailer and stood staring at it. The mouse lay as still as any living creature could. The cat jumped onto the wall and slunk toward one of the globe-shaped sundials on the gatepost at the end. I took my hands away from my ears and stopped humming. In the bathroom the cistern flushed. The cat turned sharply and stared at the mouse, which still hadn't moved. A jet of water from the tap splashed against the porcelain sink. The cat jumped down from the wall, strolled into the road, and lay down like a small lion. Just as Mom pressed the handle and opened the door a twitch went through the mouse, as though the sound had released an impulse in it, and the next moment it set off on another desperate flight from the cat, which had obviously reckoned on this eventuality as it required no more than a fraction of a second to switch from resting to hunting. But this time it was too late. A sheet of white Eternit cladding left lying on the lawn was the mouse's salvation as it squeezed itself underneath a second before the cat arrived.

The animals' fleet movements seemed to linger on in me; long after I had gone back to bed my heart was still racing. Perhaps because it, too, was a little animal? After a while I changed position again, put the pillow at the foot of the bed, and drew the curtain to one side so that I could look up at the sky bestrewn with stars, so like grains of sand, a beach with a perimeter, invisible to us, against which the sea beat.

But what actually lay beyond the universe?

Dag Lothar said there was nothing. Geir said there were burning flames. That was what I believed, too; the image of the sea was more because the starry sky looked the way it did.

Mom and Dad's bedroom was quiet again.

I pulled the curtain to and closed my eyes. Charged with the silence and darkness of the house, I was soon fast asleep.

When I got up next morning Grandma and Grandad were sitting with Mom in the living room drinking coffee. Dad was walking across the lawn with the sprinkler in his hand. He placed it at the edge of the lawn so that the thin jets of water, which resembled a waving hand, not only fell on the grass but also the vegetable garden below. The sun's rays, on the other side of the house now, above the forest to the east, flooded into the garden. The air seemed to be as still as it had been the previous day. The sky was hazy; it almost always was in the morning. Yngve was sitting at the breakfast table. The white eggs in the brown egg cups reminded me that it was Sunday. I sat down in my regular place.

"What happened yesterday?" Yngve asked in a subdued voice. "Why were you grounded?"

"I broke the TV," I said.

He sent me a quizzical look, holding a slice of bread to his mouth.

"Yes, I put it on for Grandma and Grandad. Then it went *puff*. Haven't they said anything?"

Yngve took a large bite from the slice of bread, which he had spread with clove cheese, and shook his head. I sliced the top off the egg with my knife, opened it like a lid, scooped out the soft white with a spoon, reached for the salt shaker, and tapped it with my forefinger so that only a sprinkling came out. Spread margarine onto some bread and poured a glass of milk. Downstairs, Dad opened the door. I ate the white of the egg, poked the spoon into the yolk to see whether it was hard- or soft-boiled.

"I've been grounded for today as well," I said.

"The *whole* day? Or just the evening?"

I shrugged. The egg was hard-boiled, the yellow yolk disintegrated against the edge of the spoon.

"The whole day, I think," I said.

The road outside was empty and gleamed in the sun. But in the ditch beneath the dense branches of the spruces it was dark and shadowy.

A bicycle came tearing down the hill at full speed. The boy sitting on it, he must have been fifteen, had one hand on the handlebars and the other on the red gasoline canister he had tied to the luggage rack. His hair was black and fluttered in the wind.

On the stairs came the sound of Dad's footsteps. I sat up straight in my chair, cast a hurried glance across the table to see if everything was in place. A bit of the hard-boiled egg had ended up on the table. I quickly brushed it off the edge into my waiting hand and immediately put it on the plate. Yngve delayed the moment until it was almost too late to push his chair into the table and sit up straight, but only almost, for when Dad came in his back was erect and his feet were firmly planted on the floor.

"Pack your swimming trunks, kids," he said. "We're off to Hove for the day."

"Me, too?" I wanted to ask, but I held back, because he might have forgotten he had grounded me and the question would have jolted his memory. Also, if he remembered but had changed his mind, it would be best not to mention it, as it could be interpreted as his having made a mistake yesterday, his having done something wrong, and I didn't want him to think that. So I went for my trunks and a towel from the line in the boiler room, put them in a plastic bag with the diving goggles, which would come in handy if we were going to one of the two beaches in Hove, and sat down in my room to await departure.

Half an hour later we left for the far side of the island, on what was perhaps the best day of the year, with the sea so calm it barely made a sound and therefore lent the surroundings, the previously so silent bare rocks and the previously so silent forest above, a semblance of something unreal, such that every footstep on the rocks and every *clink* of a bottle sounded as if it was the very first time, and the sun, which was at its zenith in the sky, appeared as something deeply primitive and alien on this day, when you could see the sea curve and disappear down into the depths beyond the horizon, above which the sky floated so airily with its light, soft, misty blueness; and Yngve and I and Mom and Dad put on our swimsuits and each of us in our own way dipped our bodies, hot from the sun, into the lukewarm water, while Grandma and Grandad sat there in their finery, apparently unmoved by their surroundings and our activities, as though the 1950s and Vestland were not only features that had stamped themselves on them superficially, through their clothes, behavior, and dialect, in other words externally, but also internally, to the depths of their respective souls, to the innermost core of their respective characters. It was so strange to see them there, sitting on the rocks, squinting into the bright light coming at us from all directions, it seemed so alien.

The day after, they went home. Dad drove them to Kjevik, grabbed the opportunity to visit his own parents while he was there while Mom took Yngve and me to Lake Gjerstad, the idea being that we could swim and eat cookies and relax, but first of all Mom couldn't find a road to the lake, so we had to go on a long detour through a forest full of scrub and thickets; secondly, the part of the lake we arrived at turned out to be green with algae and the rocks slippery; and thirdly, it started to rain almost as soon as we had put down the cooler bag and the basket with the cookies and oranges.

I felt so sorry for Mom, who had wanted to take us on a nice trip, but it hadn't worked out. There was no way to express this to her. It was one of those things you had to forget as quickly as possible. And that was not at all difficult; there were so many new experiences in store for us during those weeks. I would soon be starting school, and as a result so many new objects would become mine. Above all, a satchel, which, the next Saturday morning, I went to Arendal with Mom to buy. It was square, blue and all shiny and glossy, with white straps. Inside, there were two compartments, where I immediately put the orange pencil case I had also been given, containing a pencil, a pen, an eraser, and a pencil sharpener, and one of the notebooks we had bought, with orange and brown squares on the front, the same as on Yngve's, plus some comics I put in to plump it up. There, nestling against the leg of the desk, it stood every night when I went to bed, not without some mental anguish for me, for there was still quite a time to go to the big day when I, along with almost everyone I knew, would be starting the first class. We had already been to school for a day, that past spring, we had had a chance to meet the woman who was to be our teacher and to do a bit of drawing, but this was different, this wasn't anywhere near the same, this was the real thing. There were those who said they hated school, indeed, almost all the older children said they hated school, and strictly speaking we knew we should, too, but at the same time it was so alluring, what was about to happen, we knew so little and we expected so much, in addition to the fact that starting school in itself elevated us into the same league as the older children, from one day to the next, in one fell swoop we were like them, and *then* we could certainly afford to hate school, but not now. . . . Did we talk about anything else? Hardly. In fact the school we applied to, Roligheden, where both Dad and Geir's father worked and where all the older children went, had no room for us, the year's intake was too big, too many families had moved into the area, so we had to go to a school on the east of the island, five or six kilometers away, with all the kids we didn't know from around there, and we were to be transported by bus. It was a great privilege and an adventure. Every day a bus would come to pick us up!

I was also given a pair of light-blue trousers, a light-blue jacket, and a pair of dark-blue sneakers with white stripes over the instep. Several times, when Dad was out, I put on my new clothes and paced in front of the hall mirror, sometimes with the satchel on my back, so when the day finally arrived and I posed on the gravel outside the door for Mom to take a photograph of me, it wasn't just the excitement and the uncertainty giving me butterflies but also the strange, almost triumphant, feeling I would have when I wore particularly attractive clothes.

The evening before, I'd had a bath, Mom had washed my hair, and when I woke in the morning it was to a quiet sleeping house, with a sun that was still climbing behind the spruce trees down beyond the road. Oh, what a pleasure it was to take my new clothes out of the wardrobe and put them on at last! Outside, the birds were singing, it was still summer, behind the veil of mist the sky was blue and immense, and the houses that now stood quiet on both sides of the road would soon be teeming with impatience and anticipation, like on Independence Day. I took the comics out of my satchel, hung it on my back, adjusted the straps, and took it off again. Pulled the zipper on the jacket up and down and speculated: it looked best with the zipper up, but then you couldn't see the T-shirt underneath . . . Went into the living room, looked out of the window at the sun, a reddish-yellow, fiery orange behind the green trees, went into the kitchen without touching anything, peered across at Gustavsen's house, where there was no sign of life. Stood in front of the hall mirror, pulling the zipper up and down . . . the T-shirt looked so good . . . it would be a shame if it couldn't be seen . . .

Brush my teeth! I could do that.

Into the bathroom, out with the brush from the tooth glass, a drop of water and on with the white toothpaste. I brushed energetically for several minutes while studying myself in the mirror. The sound of the brush against my teeth seemed to fill the whole of my head from the inside, so I didn't notice that Dad was up until he opened the door. He was wearing only underpants.

"Are you brushing your teeth before you've had breakfast? How stupid can you be? Put that brush down right now and go to your room!"

As I set foot on the red wall-to-wall carpet on the landing he slammed the door behind him and started pissing loudly into the toilet bowl. I knelt on my bed and looked up at Prestbakmo's house. Was that two heads I could see in the darkness of the kitchen window? Yes, it had to be. They were up. It would have been good to have a walkie-talkie so that I could talk to Geir! That would have been perfect!

Dad left the bathroom and went into the bedroom. I could hear his voice, and then Mom's. So she was awake!

I stayed in my room until she was up and on her way to the kitchen, where Dad had already been clattering around for a while. In the shelter of her back I sat down at my place. They had bought cornflakes, we almost never had them, and after she had put out a bowl and a spoon for me, and I had poured milk over the golden, somewhat perforated, irregularly formed flakes, I came to the conclusion that cornflakes were best when they were crispy, before the milk had soaked into them. But after I had been eating for a while and they were beginning to go soft, filled as it were with both their own taste and that of the milk, plus the sugar, of which I had sprinkled a liberal quantity, I changed my mind; *that* was when they were at their best.

Or was it?

Dad went into the living room with a cup in his hand, he didn't usually have breakfast, but sat in there smoking and drinking coffee instead. Yngve came in, sat down on his chair without saying a word, poured out some cornflakes and milk, sprinkled sugar over the top, and started wolfing it down.

"Looking forward to it?" he said at length.

"A little," I said.

"It's nothing to look forward to," he said.

"Yes, it is," Mom said. "You certainly looked forward to starting school anyway. I can remember it well. Can you?"

"Ye-es," Yngve said. "I suppose I can."

He cycled to school, usually a little while before Dad left, unless Dad had some work to do before the first lesson, that is, which was sometimes the case. Yngve was not allowed to have a lift, except on very special occasions, such as when it had snowed a lot overnight, because he wasn't to have any advantages just because his father was a teacher at the school.

When breakfast was finished and they had left, I sat with Mom in the kitchen. She read the newspaper, I chatted.

"Do you think we'll have to write in the first lesson, Mom?" I asked. "Or is it usually math? Leif Tore says we'll have drawing so that we can relax a bit at the beginning, and not everyone can write. Or add and subtract. Only me actually. As far as I know at least. I learned when I was five and a half. Do you remember?"

"Remember when you learned to read? What do you mean?" Mom said.

"That time outside the bus station when I read the sign? 'Kaffe-fetteria?' You laughed. Yngve laughed, too. Now I know it's called 'kafeteria.' Shall I read some headlines?"

Mom nodded. I read aloud. Bit staccato, but everything was correct.

"You managed that nicely," she said. "You'll do really well at school."

She scratched an ear as she read, the way only she could, she held her ear between her fingers and moved them back and forth incredibly fast, just like a cat.

She put down the newspaper and looked at me.

"Are you looking forward to it?" she asked.

"And how," I said.

She smiled, patted me on the head, got up, and started to clear the table. I went to my room. School didn't begin until ten o'clock as it was the first day. Nevertheless, we ended up being short of time, which was often the case with Mom, she was pretty absentminded when it came to matters like this. From the window I saw the excitement mounting outside the houses where there were children starting school, that is, in the families with Geir, Leif Tore, Trond, Geir Håkon, and Marianne, hair was combed, dresses and shirts were straightened, photographs taken. When it was my turn to stand outside, smiling at Mom, with one hand shielding my eyes from the sun, which had moved above the tops of the spruce trees by this time, everyone had gone. We were the last, and all of a sudden we were late, so Mom, who had taken the day off work for the occasion, hurried me along, I opened the door of the green VW, pushed the seat forward, and got in the back while she rummaged for the key in her shoulder bag and inserted it in the ignition. She lit a cigarette, reversed after casting a quick glance over her shoulder, put the car in first gear a few meters up the hill, and drove down. The roar of the engine resounded off the brick walls. I moved to the middle of the car so that I could see between the two seats at the front. The two white gas holders across Tromøya Sound, the wild cherry tree, Kristen's red house, then the road down to the marina where we almost never went, along the route where in the course of the next six years I would become familiar with every tiniest clearing and stone wall, and out to the small places on the east of the island, where Mom didn't know her way, which made her a bit agitated.

"Was it this way, Karl Ove, do you remember?" she said, stubbing out the cigarette in the ashtray as she peered into the mirror.

"I don't remember," I said. "But I think so. It was on the left, anyway."

Below, there was a shop by a quay and a clump of houses encircling it, no school. The sea was a deep blue, bordering on black beneath the shadow of the buildings; untouched by the high temperatures, this fullness distinguished it from most of the other colors in the landscape, which were as though bleached after the weeks-long heat wave. The sea's cool blue contrasted with the yellow and brown and the faded green.

Now Mom was driving along a gravel road. Dust whirled up behind us. As the road narrowed and nothing of any significance seemed to lie ahead, she turned and drove back. On the other side, down by the water, there was another road she tried. That didn't lead to any school, either.

"Are we going to be late?" I asked.

"Maybe," she replied. "Fancy not bringing a map with me!"

"Haven't you been here before then?" I said.

"Yes, I have," she said. "But my memory's not as good as yours, you know."

We drove up the hill we had come down ten minutes earlier and turned onto the main road by a chapel. At every sign and crossroads she slowed down and leaned forward.

"There it is, Mom!" I shouted, pointing. We still couldn't see it, but I remembered the green to the right; the school was at the top of the gentle gradient that followed. A narrow gravel road led down to it, there were lots of parked cars, and as Mom turned into it, I spotted the school playground swarming with people and a man everyone was staring at was gesticulating on top of a rock, beneath the flagpole.

"We've got to hurry!" I said. "They've started! Mom, they've started!"

"Yes, I know," Mom said. "But we have to find somewhere to park first. There, maybe. Yes."

We had ended up right down by the woodwork-room-cum-gym hall. A large, white building from the olden days, and outside it, on the pavement, Mom parked the car. We weren't exactly familiar with the school layout, so instead of going to the end and taking the shortcut across the soccer field, we followed the road on the other side up to the playground. Mom scooted along, with me in tow. The satchel bumped up and down so wonderfully as I ran, every bump reminding me of what I had behind me, shiny and glossy, and hot on the heels of that thought, the light-blue trousers, the light-blue jacket, the dark-blue shoes.

When we finally reached the playground, the crowd was slowly moving into the low school building.

"We seem to have missed the welcome ceremony," Mom said.

"That doesn't matter, Mom," I said. "Come on!"

I caught sight of Geir and his mother, ran over to them with Mom holding my hand, they smiled in greeting, and we went up the steps in the middle of the crowd of parents and children. Geir's satchel was identical to mine, as most of the boys' satchels were, whereas, from what I could glean in passing, the girls sported quite a wide variety.

"Where are we going? Do you know?" Mom asked Martha, Geir's mother.

"I'm afraid I don't." Martha laughed. "We're following their teacher."

I looked in the direction she nodded. And there, sure enough, was our Frøken. She stopped in front of the staircase and said that all those who were in her class should go ahead, and Geir and I ran down the stairs, through all the people, and along the corridor to the end. But Frøken stopped in front of a room close to the staircase, making us not the first, as we had imagined, but almost the last.

The room was full of children dressed in smart clothes and their mothers. Through the windows you looked down onto a narrow field; the forest was close behind. Frøken stood at her desk, which was on a little dais; on the blackboard was written *HELLO, CLASS 1B* in pink chalk with a flowery border around it. On the wall above the desk there were maps and charts.

"Hello, everyone," Frøken said. "And welcome to Sandnes School! My name is Helga Torgersen, and I'm going to be your class teacher. I'm really looking forward to this, I can tell you! We're going to have a lot of fun. And do you know what? You are not the only ones who are new to this school. I am new, too. You are my very first class!"

I looked around me. All the adults were smiling. Almost all the children were craning their necks and glancing at one another. I knew Geir Håkon, Trond, Geir, Leif Tore, and Marianne. And the boy who used to throw stones at us and had that frightening dog. I had never seen the others before.

"Now we are going to do a roll call," Frøken said from the dais. "Do you know what a roll call is?"

No one answered.

"You call out a name and the person with that name answers," I said.

Everyone looked at me. I put on a broad smile over my protruding teeth.

"That's correct," Frøken said. "And we start with the letter A. That's the first letter in the alphabet, you see. You'll learn all about that later. So, A. Anne Lisbet!"

"Yes," said a girl's voice, and everyone turned toward the sound, I did, too.

The voice belonged to a thin girl with shiny, black hair. She looked like an Indian.

"Asgeir?" Frøken said.

"Yes!" said a boy with big teeth and long hair.

After the roll call we sat down at our desks while our parents stood by the wall. Frøken gave everyone a recorder, an exercise book and a notebook, a schedule with our lessons printed on it, as well as a money box and a leaflet with a picture of a yellow ant on it from a local savings bank. Then she told us about some of the events that would be taking place during the autumn, one of which was a swimming class to be held in a pool at a school on the next island, as there wasn't a swimming pool on Tromøya. She handed out a piece of paper with a slip you could fill in and return if you were interested. Then we did some drawing, with our parents still there watching, and then it was over. The following day school would start in earnest, we would catch the bus on our own, and be there for three hours without our parents breathing down our necks.

As we left the classroom I was still wide-eyed with all the newness and strangeness, and the feeling continued when everyone in the new class got into their respective cars with their parents, normally it was only on the seventeenth of May that there was this level of synchronous vehicle activity, that a location was left simultaneously by so many children, but as we were driving home disappointment began to set in, and I became more and more dejected the closer we came to home.

Nothing had happened.

I could read and write, and I had counted on having a chance to show that on the first day. A bit at least! And I had been looking forward to having break time, to the bell ringing at the end of one lesson and the start of the next. To using my new pencil case and the compartments in the satchel.

No, the day hadn't lived up to my expectations, and I had to take off the clothes I looked so good in and hang them up in their place in my wardrobe, to await future formal occasions. I sat on the kitchen stool chatting to Mom while she made dinner, it was rare I had her to myself in the middle of the day, and on top of this she had been with me where it counted most, so I exploited the opportunity for all it was worth, and babbled away.

"I wish we had a cat I could play with," I said. "Can't we have a cat?"

"That would be nice," Mom said. "I like cats. They're good company."

"So is it Dad who doesn't like them then?"

"I don't know," Mom said. "He's just not that interested, I think. And he probably thinks they're a bit too much work."

"But I can take care of it," I said. "That's no problem."

"I know," Mom said. "We'll have to wait and see."

"Wait and see, wait and see," I said. "But if Yngve wants a cat, that'll make three of us."

Mom laughed.

"It's not that simple," she said. "You'll have to be patient. Who knows what will happen."

She put the peeled carrot on the board and chopped it up, lifted the board, and slid the pieces into the large pot where there were already bones and bits of meat. I looked out of the window. Through the many small holes in the orange curtain Mom had crocheted I could see the road outside was empty, which it invariably was in the middle of the day.

There was a sudden pungent smell of onions, and I turned to Mom, who was peeling one with her arms outstretched and her eyes full of tears.

When I turned back I saw Geir come bounding down the hill. He had also changed into his normal clothes. A second later I heard a crunch of gravel through the half-open window as he walked up the drive.

"Karl Ove, are you coming?" he shouted.

"I'm going out for a bit," I said to Mom, slipping off the stool.

"Fine," she said. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know."

"Don't go far then."

"No, I won't," I said, and hurried down, opened the door so that Geir wouldn't think the house was empty and go away, said hi, and put on my sneakers.

"I've got a box of matches," he whispered, patting his shorts pocket.

"You haven't!" I also whispered. "Where did you get hold of them?"

"Home. They were in the sitting room."

"You just took them?"

He nodded.

I straightened up and went out, closing the door after me.

"Let's set fire to something," I said.

"Yes, let's," he said.

"What then?"

"Doesn't matter, does it. We'll just find something. The box is half full. We can set fire to a lot of things."

"But we'll have to go somewhere no one can see the smoke," I said. "Up on the mountain maybe?"

"Okay."

"And we'll need something to put the fire out with," I said. "Just a sec. I'll get a bottle of water."

I opened the door again, kicked off my shoes, and went upstairs to Mom, who turned to me as I walked in.

"We're going for a walk," I said. "I need a bottle of water."

"Wouldn't you prefer juice? You can take some, you know. It's still your first school day!"

I hesitated. It had to be water. But that might make her suspicious because I always preferred juice to water. I looked at her and said, "No, Geir's got water, so that's what I want, too."

My heart beat faster as I spoke.

"As you like," she said. She found an empty juice bottle in the cupboard under the sink, dark green glass, almost opaque, she filled it with water, screwed on the top, and passed it to me.

"Would you like some *smørbrød* as well?"

I considered her offer.

"No," I said. "I mean yes. Two with liver paste."

As she took the bread and started to cut it, I pushed the window farther open and poked my head out.

"Be down in a minute!" I shouted. Geir looked up at me with grave eyes and nodded.

After she had made and wrapped the *smørbrød*, I put them in a plastic bag with the bottle and hurried back down. Soon we were on our way up the hill. The heat had made the edge of the road soft and crumbly. It was harder where the cars went. Sometimes we lay down on the pavement like cats and let the heat give us a good baking. But now we had other things on our minds.

"Can I see them?" I asked.

Geir stopped and dug the box up from his pocket. I shook it a little. Full. Then I opened it. All the matchheads were red.

Start a fire, start a fire.

"It's a new box," I said, giving it back. "Won't they notice you've taken it?"

"I don't think so," he said. "And if they do I'll just say it wasn't me. They can't *prove* anything."

We had reached Molden's house and set off up the path. The grass was dry and yellow, brown in places. In Geir's house it was his mother who was strict and his father who was nice. In Dag Lothar's they were both nice, perhaps the father was a tiny bit stricter. With all the others, it was the father who was strict and the mother who was nice. But no one was as strict as Dad, that was for sure.

Geir stopped and bent forward with the box of matches in his hand. He took out a match and was about to strike it against the side.

"What are you doing?" I said. "Not here! Everyone can see!"

"Hee hee hee," he giggled. But straightened up anyway, put the match back in the box, and walked on.

At the top of the hill we turned and cast our gaze across the sea as usual. I counted four small, white triangles in Tromøya

Sound. A larger boat with what looked like an excavator on board. There were two small boats moored on Gjerstadholmen.

Start a fire, start a fire.

As we continued into the forest my stomach was churning with excitement. Sunbeams lay on the forest floor like small, quivering creatures of light between the shadows of branches. We stopped by the huge roots of an upturned tree, I took the bottle of water from my bag, and held it at the ready while Geir leaned forward, struck a match, and held the small, almost invisible flame to one of the wispy blades of grass growing there. It caught fire at once. Spread to the grass beside it. When the flame was as broad as an adult's hand I sprayed water over it. A thin ribbon of smoke floated through the air, alone as it were, independent of what had just happened.

"Do you think anyone could see?" Geir asked.

"You can see smoke from an incredible distance," I answered. "Indians saw smoke signals from kilometers off."

"It caught fire straightaway," Geir said. "Did you see?"

He smiled and quickly ran a hand through his hair.

"Yes," I said.

"Shall we try somewhere else?"

"Yes, but this time I want to light the match."

"Okay," he said, handing me the box and scouring the area for another suitable spot.

Geir was always impatient before any activity and totally absorbed when in the thick of it. Of all the boys I knew he was the one most in thrall to his imagination. Whenever we played – explorers, sailors, Indians, race car drivers, astronauts, robbers, smugglers, princes, monkeys, or secret agents, for example – he could keep at it for hours, unlike Leif Tore or Geir Håkon, who were soon bored and wanted to do something else, completely untouched by the gleam that imagination could bring to bear on everything, but Geir was more than happy with the object itself, such as the old car wreck in the clump of narrow willow trees on the flat stretch between the playground and the soccer field, in which the seats, the steering wheel, gearshift, pedals, dashboard, glove compartment, and doors were still intact, where we used to play so often, and they just pretended it was a car, which of course it was, pressed the clutch, pulled the gearshift, turned the wheel, adjusted the broken side mirrors, jumped up and down on the seats to give the illusion of speed while Geir would be entertained by any embellishments you could add, such as being on the run after a bank robbery, and the windows, which were still a shower of glass fragments strewn across the black-rubber floor mats, had been shot to pieces; then one of us would drive and the other wriggle out through the window onto the roof to open fire on our pursuers, a game that could be extended to include parking the car in a garage and getting out to share the swag, or even further, for weren't the pursuers close on our heels as we slunk between the trees on our way home in the glow of the evening sun? Or else we might be in a moon-mobile and the landscape around us was actually lunar landscape where, after getting out of the car, we were unable to walk in a normal fashion, we had to hop – or it was one of the many streams we were surrounded by, and of all the boys I knew, only Geir would be interested in following it to find the source. What we did most often was to go out in search of new places or to one of the places we had already found. It might be a big old oak with a hollow trunk; a deep pool in a river; a cellar in an unfinished house that was full of water; the concrete foundations of the enormous bridge pylon; or the first few meters of the thick cable stays that ran from the bottom of an anchoring in the forest up to the top and that you could climb; a ramshackle shed with planks that were slippery and dark with decay between Lake Tjenna and the road on the other side, which so far was the farthest outpost of our explorations, we had never ventured any farther; the two dumped cars; the little pool with the three islands no bigger than tufts of grass, one almost completely covered by a tree, and where the water was so deep and black, even though it was right next to a road embankment; the white, crystalline rock from which you could hammer small chunks, beside the path to the Fina station; the boat factory on the other side of Tromøya Bridge beyond Gamle Tybakken, all the factory buildings there, the shells of the boats, the rusty block and tackle and the machines, the smell of oil and tar and salty water, which was so good. We crisscrossed this area, which extended over one or two kilometers in all directions, nearly every day, and the whole point of what we found or visited was that it was secret and it was ours. With the other children we played flip the stick or kick the can, kicked a soccer ball around or went skiing; when we were alone we searched out places with features that attracted us. That was how it was with Geir and me.

But on this day the magic lay in what we were doing, not where we were.

Start a fire, start a fire.

We walked over to a spruce tree a few meters away. The branches hanging just above the ground were gray and bare and looked extremely old. I broke off a bit between my thumb and first finger. It was brittle and crumbled easily. Grass grew sparsely on the small mound where the tree stood, between a patch of dry soil and a mass of desiccated, orangey spruce needles. I knelt down, drew the red match head across the black abrasive surface, and put the flame into the grass, which immediately caught fire. At first the flame was invisible, no more than a quiver of air above the blades of grass, which soon curled and crumpled. But then the tuft caught fire, and from there the flame spread, both quickly and slowly, like a swarm of frightened ants fleeing quickly if you see them as individuals, slowly if you view them as a group. All of a sudden the flames were up to my waist.

"Put it out! Put it out!" I shouted to Geir.

He shook the bottle over the fire, which hissed and shrank, while I beat the low flames in the grass at the edge with my hand.

"Phew!" I said a minute later, when the fire was out.

"That was close!" Geir laughed. "It really got a hold there!"

I stood up.

"Do you think anyone could see it? Shall we go to the cliff edge and see if anyone's looking up here?"

Without waiting for an answer I rushed across the soft moss and heather-covered forest floor between the trees. The sudden fear seemed to contract my insides, and whenever my thoughts turned to what had happened it was as if a ravine opened in me. It was bottomless. Oh, what would happen now? What would happen now?

At the cliff edge I stopped and put a hand to my brow to shield my eyes. Dad's car was in the drive. He was nowhere to be seen. But he could have been outside and gone in. Gustavsen was walking across the grass. He could have seen and told Dad. Or would tell him later.

The very thought of Dad, the fact that he existed, caused fear to pump through my body.

I turned to Geir, who sauntered over with my plastic bag dangling from one hand. Down below, a child resembling Geir Håkon's little brother was playing in the sand by the concrete barriers between our road and Elgstien. A car came up the hill, encased in itself like an insect, the black windshield its expressionless eye, turned left, and disappeared from view.

"We can't go straight down anyway," I said. "If someone's seen the smoke they'll put two and two together."

Why had we done it? Why, oh why?

"They can see us here, too," I said. "Come on!"

We descended the tree-clad slope beneath us. When we were at the bottom we stumbled homeward through the forest, which was perhaps ten meters from the road. We stopped by the big spruce beside the wide, shallow, turbid stream where all the colors were green and murky, its bark stained with sticky resin, not unlike burned sugar in color, with the pungent smell of juniper. Between the slender trunks of the nearby rowan trees you could see our house. I glanced at my hands to see if there was any soot on them. Nothing. But there was a faint burned smell, so I plunged them in the water and rubbed them dry on my trousers.

"What shall we do with the box of matches?" I said.

Geir shrugged.

"Hide it, I s'pose."

"If they find it, don't say anything about me," I said. "About what we did."

"Course not," Geir said. "Here's the bag, by the way."

We started to walk up to the road.

"Are you going to set fire to anything else today?" I said.

"I don't think so," he said.

"Not even with Leif Tore?"

"Maybe tomorrow," he said. And his face brightened. "Should I take the matches to school with me, what do you think?"

"Are you out of your mind?!"

He laughed. We reached the road, and crossed it.

"See you!" he said, running up the hill.

I passed Mom's VW, parked on a patch of scorched yellow grass just outside the fence, beside the gray garbage can, and stepped onto the gravel. I felt the fear rising in me again. Dad's red car gleamed in the fierce sunshine. I looked down, unwilling to meet the gaze that might await me in the kitchen window. The mere thought of it sent waves of despair shooting through me. When I reached the front doorstep and couldn't be seen from the windows on the first floor I clasped my hands together and closed my eyes.

Almighty God, I uttered silently. Let me get through this and I promise I'll never do anything wrong again. Never ever. I promise by all that is holy. Amen.

I opened the door and went in.

It was cooler in the hall than outside, and after the bright sunshine, almost completely dark. The smell of stew lay heavy in the air. I bent down and untied my shoelaces, carefully placed my shoes by the wall, slunk upstairs, trying to make my face appear normal, and stopped on the landing in a quandary. What would I normally do, go up to my room right away or go into the kitchen to see if dinner was ready?

Voices, the clinking of cutlery on plates.

Was I late?

Had they already started eating?

Oh no, oh no.

What should I do?

The notion of turning on my heel, calmly walking outside, up the hill and into the forest, never to return, came as a joyful clarion call amid all the tension.

Then they would be sorry.

"Is that you, Karl Ove?" Dad shouted from the other side of the door.

I swallowed, shook my head, blinked a few times, and took a deep breath.

"Yes," I said.

"We're eating!" he shouted. "Come on in!"

God had heard my prayer and done as I asked. Dad was in a good mood, I could see that as soon as I entered, he was leaning back in the chair with his legs stretched out, his arms wide apart, and his eyes glinting with mischief.

"What was so good that you lost track of time?" he said.

I sat down next to Yngve. Dad was sitting at the end to the right, Mom at the end to the left. The Formica table with a gray-and-white marble pattern and gray edging, shiny legs, and gray rubber feet was set: brown dinner plates, green glasses with "Duralex" written on the bottom, a basket of crispbread, a big pot from which protruded a wooden ladle.

"Been out with Geir," I said, leaning forward to check if there was a piece of meat in the ladle I lifted out a moment later.

"Where did you go then?" Dad asked, lifting his fork to his mouth. Something pale yellow, perhaps onion, was lodged in his beard, on his chin.

"Down to the forest."

"Oh yes?" he said, chewing several times and swallowing, his eyes trained on me the whole time.

"I thought I saw you on your way up the hill?"

I sat transfixed.

"It wasn't us," I said at length.

"Nonsense," he said. "What devilry were you up to there since you won't admit that's where you were?"

"But we weren't on the hill," I said.

Mom and Dad exchanged glances. Dad said no more. I could move my hands again. I filled my plate and started eating. Dad helped himself to another portion, still with the same apparent gliding movements. Yngve had finished eating, and sat next to me looking down in front of him, one hand resting on his thigh, the other on the edge of the table.

"And how was the schoolboy's first day?" Dad asked. "Did you get any homework?"

I shook my head.

"Was the teacher nice?"

I nodded.

"What was her name again?"

"Helga Torgersen," I said.

"That's right," Dad said. "She lives . . . did she say?"

"In Sandum," I said.

"She seemed so lovely," Mom said. "Young and pleased to be there."

"But we got there late," I said, relief spreading through my body at the turn the conversation had taken.

"Oh?" Dad said, looking at Mom. "You didn't mention that?"

"We got lost," she said. "So we arrived a few minutes late. But I don't think we missed anything important. Did we, Karl Ove?"

"No," I mumbled.

"Don't talk with your mouth full," Dad said.

I swallowed.

"All right," I said.

"And what about you, Yngve?" Dad said. "Any surprises on the first day?"

"No," Yngve said, sitting up straight in his chair.

"You have soccer practice today, don't you?" Mom said.

"Yep," Yngve said.

He had changed teams, had left Trauma, which was the island team where all his friends played, with its fantastic uniform, blue shirts with a white diagonal stripe, white shorts, and blue-and-white socks, for Saltrød, a club in a little town just across Tromøya Sound. Today was his first session there. He would have to cycle over the bridge alone, which he had never done before, and all the way to the training ground. Five kilometers, he had said it was.

"Didn't anything else happen at school today then, Karl Ove?" Dad said.

I nodded and swallowed.

"We're going to have a swimming class," I said. "Six lessons. At another school."

"There you go," Dad said, running the back of his hand across his mouth, but without removing the ribbon of onion from his beard. "That's not a bad idea. You can't live on an island and not be able to swim."

"And it's free, too," Mom said.

"But I need a swimming cap," I said. "Everyone does. And maybe some new swimming trunks? Not shorts, but the kind . . . well."

"We can find a cap for you. But your shorts will have to do you for now," Dad said.

"And goggles," I said.

"Goggles as well?" Dad said, looking at me with a teasing expression. "We'll have to see about that."

He shoved his plate away and leaned back.

"Great meal, Mom!" he said.

"Thanks, Mom," Yngve said, and snuck off. Five seconds later we heard the sound of his bedroom door being closed.

I stayed at the table for a little longer, in case Dad wanted to chat with me. He gazed out the window for a while, at the four boys hanging over the handlebars of their bikes by the second crossroads, then he got up, put his plate in the sink, took an orange from the cupboard, and went down to his study, the newspaper folded under his arm, without saying another word to anyone. Mom started clearing the table and I went to Yngve's room. He was packing his bag. I sat down on his bed and watched. He had real soccer cleats, a pair of black Adidas with screw-on studs, decent Umbro shorts, and some yellow-and-black IK Start socks. Mom had bought black-and-white Grane socks for him at first; he didn't want them, so he gave them to me. But the best equipment he had was the Adidas tracksuit, it was blue with white stripes, in some smooth, shiny material, not that matte, crepe, elastic, gymsuit-style material that all tracksuits used to be made of. Sometimes I sniffed it, buried my nose in the smooth material, because it smelled wonderful. Perhaps I thought that because I wanted one myself so much the smell was imbued with my own desire, perhaps I thought it because the smell, so thoroughly synthetic, didn't remind me of anything else – it didn't seem to belong to this world. That in some way it bore a promise of the future. In addition to this tracksuit, he also had some blue-and-white Adidas wet-weather gear.

He said nothing as he packed. Pulled the big red zipper and sat down at his desk. Looked at the schedule lying on it.

"Did you get any homework?" I said.

He shook his head.

"We didn't either," I said. "Have you covered your books yet?"

"No, we've got the whole week to do it."

"I'm going to do it tonight," I said. "Mom's going to help me."

"Good for you!" he said, getting up. "I'm off. If I'm not back before midnight the headless man's devoured me. I'd like to see how he manages that!"

He laughed and went downstairs. I watched him from the bathroom window, saw him put first one foot on the pedal, then shove off with the other and swing it over the crossbar and pedal as fast as he could in the highest gear until he reached the hill at such a speed that he could freewheel down to the crossroads.

When he had disappeared from view I went onto the landing, stood motionless for a moment to locate Mom and Dad. But all was silent.

"Mom?" I called softly.

No answer.

I went into the kitchen, she wasn't there, then into the back room, she wasn't there, either. Could she have gone to their bedroom?

I went there and stood outside the door for a moment.

No.

In the garden perhaps?

From various windows I scoured all four sides of the garden without catching a glimpse of her.

And the car was parked outside, wasn't it?

Yes, it was.

Not knowing where she was somehow loosened my hold on the house, it was slackened in a confusing, quite disturbing way, and to counter it I went into my room and sat down on the bed to read some comics; that was when it struck me that of course she was downstairs in Dad's office.

I almost never set foot in there. The few times I had, it had been to ask about something, if I could stay up and watch a particular TV program, for example, after knocking first and waiting for him to say, "Come in." Knocking on the door came at a great cost, often so high that I preferred to go to bed without seeing the program. On a couple of occasions he had actually asked us to come in, when he wanted to show us something or give us something, such as envelopes with stamps on them. We put them in the sink in the spare kitchen, which, as far as I knew, was used exclusively for that purpose, to dissolve the gum, and, after drying them for a few hours, we were able to put them in our albums.

Otherwise I never went there. Even when I was on my own at home it never occurred to me. The risk that he would find out was much too great, he would discover anything untoward that was going on, he would sniff it out by some means or other, however well I tried to cover my tracks.

As he had with the hill when we were having dinner. Even though he hadn't seen anything, only us on our way up, he knew we had been doing something wrong. Had he not been in such a good mood he would have brought everything into the open.

I lay on my stomach and started reading a *Tempo*. It was Yngve's, he had borrowed it from Jan Atle, I had already read it many times. It was for older kids and for me it had a strong aura of belonging to a distant but utterly radiant world. I didn't have any particular preferences regarding the settings of the comic books – it made no difference whether it was the Second World War, as in *På Vingene* or the *Kamp* series; nineteenth-century America, as in *Tex Willer*, *Jonathan Hex*, or *Blueberry*; England between the two World Wars, as in *Paul Temple*; or the fantasy realities, which the Phantom, Superman, Batman, the Fantastic Four, and all the Disney characters appeared in – but my feelings for them were different, they aroused different emotions in me, such that some of the series in *Tempo*, for example, the one that took place on a racetrack, or some in *Buster*, for example, *Johnny Puma* and *Benny Goldenfoot*, were particularly absorbing, perhaps because they were closer to the reality that I knew existed. In the summer you could see motorcyclists wearing the leathers and helmets with Formula 1 visors, you could see the low-slung cars with all those spoilers on TV, where they occasionally crashed into the barriers or one of the other cars, rolling over and catching fire, the driver being either burned to death or emerging from the flaming wreckage and calmly walking away.

Usually I was totally engrossed by these stories, without giving them a thought, the whole point of course was that you didn't think, at least not with your own thoughts, you just followed the action. That afternoon, however, I quickly put the comic to one side, for some reason I couldn't sit still, and it wasn't much later than five o'clock, so I decided to go out again. I stopped at the top of the stairs, not a sound, she was still down below. What was she doing? She was hardly ever there. At least not at this time, I thought, bending down for my shoes in the hallway and tying the laces. I knocked on the door to Dad's study. That is, the door leading to the corridor into which three rooms opened: the bathroom, the study, and the kitchen with the little box room at the end. In fact, it was a self-contained flat, but we had never rented it out to anyone.

"I'm going out!" I shouted. "Up to Geir's!"

That is what I had been told to do, to tell them if I was going anywhere and say where.

Nevertheless, after a few seconds of silence, Dad's irritated voice sounded from inside the study.

"All right, all right!" he shouted.

A few more seconds of silence passed.

Then Mom's voice, friendlier, as if to compensate for Dad's.

"That's fine, Karl Ove!"

I shot out, closed the door carefully behind me, and ran up to Geir's. I stood outside, called a few times until his mother came around the house. She had gardening gloves on, and was otherwise wearing khaki shorts, a blue blouse, and a pair of black clogs. In her hand she was holding a red trowel.

"Hi, Karl Ove," she said. "Geir went out with Leif Tore a while ago."

"Where did they go?"

"I don't know. He didn't say."

"Okay. Bye."

I turned and walked slowly down the drive with my eyes glazed with tears. Why hadn't they called at my house?

I stopped by the barrier between the two roads. Stood for a moment stock-still, listening. Not a sound. I sat down on one of the barriers. The rough concrete chafed against my thighs. Dandelions grew in the ditch below, all gray with dust. There was a grid next to it, rusty and with a sun-faded cigarette packet stuck between the bars.

Where could they have gone?

Down to Ubekilen?

Down to the pontoons?

To the soccer field and the play area?

Had Geir taken Leif Tore to one of our places?

Up the mountain?

I scanned the mountain. No sign of them there anyway. I got to my feet and started to make my way down. At the crossroads by the cherry tree there were three ways to choose among, if you were going to the landing stages. I chose the one to the right, through the gate, along the path covered with soil and twigs beneath the deep shadows from the tops of the enormous oaks, down to the field where we usually played soccer even though it sloped on both sides and the grass was knee-high, trampled from very early spring, there were also sapling trees growing on it, past the cliff with its grayish crags, generally bare but with some low-scattered cover, and on through the forest to the road. Beyond it there was the new marina, blasted out of the rock, with three identical quays, all with wooden gangways and orange pontoons.

They weren't there, either. I walked along one pontoon anyway; a double-ender had just moored at the tip, it belonged to Kanestrøm, and I went over to see what was happening. Kanestrøm was alone on board and peered up as I stood by the bow.

"So it's you who's out and about, is it?" he said. "I've been doing a bit of fishing, as you can see."

The sun glinted on his glasses. He had a moustache, short hair, a little bald patch on top, and wore denim shorts, a checked shirt, and sandals.

"Would you like to see?"

He held up a red bucket in my direction. It was full of thin, slippery mackerel with bluish, glistening skin. Some were twitching, and the movement seemed to spread to the other bodies lying so close to one another it was as though it were one and the same creature.

"Wow!" I said. "Did you catch all of them?"

He nodded.

"All in the space of a few minutes. There was a huge shoal just offshore. Now we've got enough food for several days!"

He put the bucket down on the narrow gangway. Lifted an old gasoline canister, and put it down beside the bucket. Then some fishing lines and a can of hooks and lures. Humming an old song all the while.

"Do you know where Dag Lothar is?" I said.

"No, I'm afraid I don't," he said. "Are you looking for him?"

"Yes, sort of," I said.

"Would you like to sit at the front here?"

I shook my head.

"Not really. In fact I'm a bit busy."

"All right," he said, and stepped onto the pontoon, bent down, and grabbed his gear. I hurried off so as not to have to walk alongside him. Ran across the stony car park and balanced on the high curbstone all the way up to the main road, where a rather steep path plunged down into the forest. It led to the Rock, the place where everyone on the estate went swimming, where you could dive off a two-meter-high rock and swim across to Gjerstadholmen, on the other side of a maybe ten-meter-wide channel. Even though the water was deep and I couldn't swim, I sometimes went along because so much happened there.

Now I could hear voices from the forest. A high-pitched child's voice and a slightly deeper youth's. A second later Dag Lothar and Steinar came into view between the sun-flecked tree trunks. Their hair was wet and both of them were carrying towels.

"Hey, Karl Ove!" Dag Lothar shouted, catching sight of me. "I saw an adder on my way down here!"

"Really?" I said. "Where did you see it? Here?"

He nodded and stopped in front of me. Steinar also stopped and adopted a posture that made it obvious he had no intention of chatting, he wanted to be on his way as soon as possible. Steinar was in the eighth class at Dad's school. He had long, dark hair and a shadow on his upper lip. He played the bass and had his room in the cellar with its own entrance.

"I was running down," Dag Lothar said, pointing along the path. "As fast as I could, pretty much, and as I was charging around the bend there was an adder in front of me, on the path. I almost didn't manage to stop!"

"What happened?" I said.

If there was anything I was frightened of in this world it was snakes and worms.

"It shot off like lightning into the bushes."

"Are you sure it was an adder?"

"Absolutely. It had the zigzag markings on its head."

He smiled at me. His face was triangular, his hair blond and soft, his eyes were blue, and the expression in them frequently intense and passionate.

"You don't dare go there now, do you?"

"I don't know," I said. "Are Geir and the others down there?"

He shook his head.

"Just Jørn and his little brother, and Eva and Marianne's mom and dad."

"Can I go up with you?" I said.

"Of course," Dag Lothar said. "But I can't play. We're going to have dinner now."

"I have to go home, too," I said. "Have to cover my books."

When we reached the road outside our house and Dag Lothar and Steinar went on to their homes, I didn't go in; I stood around looking for Geir and Leif Tore instead. They were nowhere to be seen. Irresolute, I started walking. The sun, which was just above the ridge, was burning down on my shoulders. I cast a final glance along the road, in case they might have appeared, and then I ran to the path behind the house. The first part went alongside our garden fence, the second skirted Prestbakmo's stone wall, half hidden behind the many slim aspen saplings growing there, which in afternoons throughout the summer stood trembling whenever the sea breeze blew. Then the path parted company with the estate, ran through an area of dense, young deciduous trees, came to some boggy land, at the far end of which was a small meadow beneath an enormous beech tree growing at an angle to a steep incline and immersing everything around it in shadow.

It was strange how all large trees had their own personalities, expressed through their unique forms and the aura created by the combined effect of the trunk and roots, the bark and branches, the light and shadow. It was as if they could speak. Not with voices, of course, but with what they were, they seemed to *stretch* out to whoever looked at them. And that was all they spoke about, what they were, nothing else. Wherever I went on the estate or in the surrounding forest, I heard these voices, or felt the impact these extremely slow-growing organisms had. There was the spruce by the stream, below the house, so incredibly wide at the bottom of the trunk, yet with damp bark and roots that became visible, like coils of thick rope, so *far away* from it. The way the branches cascaded, pyramid-like, to the ground, at a distance apparently stocky and smooth, but, close up, covered with small, dark green, perfectly formed needles. All those dry branches, light gray and porous, that could grow within the canopy of branches that were not gray but almost totally black. The pine tree on Prestbakmo's land, long and slim like a ship's mast, with red-flecked bark and small, green, lightly swaying whorls at the end of each branch, which didn't start growing until very near the tip. The oak tree behind the soccer field, whose trunk at the bottom was more like stone than wood, but which had nothing of the spruce's compactness because the oak's branches spread outward forming a sparse vault of foliage above the forest floor, so light that you would *never* believe there was not only a connection between the lowest part of the trunk and the slender extremities of the branches, but it was also their origin and source. In the middle of the trunk there was something that resembled a grotto, as if the tree had bulged out to form a softly contoured yet hard and gnarled oval, the inner cavity the size of a small head. And the leaves, like all leaves, wherever they sprouted, repeated the same beautiful, partly curved, partly jagged pattern, both when they hung from a branch, green, thick, and smooth, and when they lay on the ground a few months later, reddish brown and brittle. Around this tree the ground was always covered with a thick carpet of leaves in the autumn, flaming yellow and green at the beginning, darker and softer as time passed.

And then there was the tree on the slope by the boggy land. I didn't know what species it was. It wasn't compact like the other large trees but grew out from four equally proportioned trunks, they wound outward, serpent-like, with grayish-green bark full of extended hollows, and in this way it covered just as large an area as an oak or a spruce, but the effect was not as magnificent, it was more subtle. From one of the branches hung a rope and a wooden bar, probably put there by the boys living on the road opposite, they lived as close to this place as we did. No one was there now, and I went up the slope under the branches, grabbed the bar with both hands, and launched myself. I did it twice more. Then I stood for a while under the tree wondering what to do next. From the house facing the slope, occupied by a couple with a small child, came the sound of voices and the clinking of cutlery. I couldn't see anything, but guessed they had to be in the garden. Somewhere in the distance there was the drone of a plane. I took a few steps into the dried-up bog, peering at the sky. A small seaplane was approaching from the coast, flying very low, the sun gleaming on the white fuselage. Once it had gone behind the ridge I broke into a run again, into the shadow of the hill on the other side, where the air was a touch cooler. I looked up at Kanestrøm's house, thinking they were probably at the table eating mackerel at this very minute, there was no one outside at any rate, and then I looked down to the path, where I knew every stone, every dip, every tuft, and every mound. If a run had been arranged here, from our house along the path to B-Max, I would have been invincible. I could have run along that path with my eyes shut. Without ever needing to stop, always knowing what was waiting around the next bend, always knowing where it was best to tread. When we raced on the road Leif Tore won every time, but I would win here, of that I had no doubt. It was a good thought, a good feeling, and I tried to hold on to it for as long as possible.

Well before I reached the soccer field I heard the voices coming from it, screams and shouts and laughter, as if from a distance, as if heard through the forest, there was something almost apelike about it. I stopped in the clearing. The field before me was swarming with children of all ages, many of whom I had barely seen before, most crowded around the ball, with everyone trying to kick it away, the hubbub drifting from place to place, backward and forward, in fits and starts. The field was dark, trampled ground in the middle of the forest, and it sloped slightly up on one side, where quite a number of roots broke through the surface. At each end there was a big goal made with wooden beams, without a net. One side was considerably truncated by protruding rock while the other extended across an uneven patch of large tufts of stiff grass. Almost all my dreams originated here. Running around in this place was bliss.

"Can I join in?" I shouted.

Every kick of the ball returned in a dull echo off the hillside.

Rolf, who was in goal, turned to me.

"You can be goalie if you like," he said.

"Okay," I said, running toward the goal, which Rolf left with a slow, rolling gait.

"Karl Ove's in goal for us!" he shouted.

I positioned myself carefully between the posts and started to follow the game, gradually distinguishing who was on my team, leaned forward, and was ready when the ball approached, and when the first shot came, a loose ball along the ground, I crouched down and took it, bounced it three times on the ground and booted it up the field. The ball gave against my foot, it was big and soft and worn, the same color as the sun-baked ground. The orange tongue flashed beneath the stitching. The ball's trajectory wasn't high, but it went a long way nevertheless, bounced on the right-hand side of the field, and it was a joy to see the pack of boys running after it. I wanted to be a goalkeeper. I went into goal as often as I could, nothing could compare with the feeling of hurling yourself at a shot and stopping it. The problem was that I could only hurl myself to one side, the left. Hurling myself to the right appeared to be contrary to the laws of nature, I couldn't do it, so if the ball came on that side I had to stick out my leg instead.

The trees cast long shadows across the field, and flickering patches of murk pursued the running boys, who merged into a mass and dispersed again and again. But some boys had started walking instead of running, some were bent over, supporting themselves on their knees, and to my disappointment I realized the game was coming to an end.

"Well, I'd better be getting home," one said.

"Me, too," a second said.

"Let's keep going for a bit," a third said.

"I've got to be off, too."

"Shall we make new teams then?"

"I'm off."

"Me, too."

Within a couple of minutes the whole scene had evaporated, and the field was empty.

The wrapping paper Mom had bought was blue and semi-transparent. We sat in the kitchen, I unrolled a piece and cut it to size; if the edge was uneven and jagged Mom straightened it. Then I placed the book on top, spread out the two winglike flaps, folded the paper over them, and taped down the corners. Mom adjusted what needed to be adjusted along the way. Otherwise she sat knitting a sweater that was meant for me. I had chosen it from one of her pattern magazines, a white sweater with dark brown edges, it was different, because the collar was high and straight and there was a split on each side at the bottom so that it hung a bit like a loincloth. I really liked the Indian style and kept a weather eye on how far she had got with it.

Mom did a lot of needlework. She had crocheted the curtains in the living room and the kitchen, and she had sewn the white curtains in our bedrooms, Yngve's with a brown hem and a brown floral print, mine with a red hem and a red floral print. In addition, she knitted sweaters and woolly hats, darned socks, patched trousers and jackets. When she wasn't doing that, or cooking and washing up, or baking bread, she read. We had whole shelves full of books, something none of the other parents had. She also had friends, unlike Dad, mostly women of the same age at her workplace, whom she visited now and then, if they didn't come here, that is. I liked all of them. There was Dagny, whose son and daughter, Tor and Liv, I went to kindergarten with. There was Anne Mai, who was fat and happy and always brought us some chocolate, she drove a Citroën and lived in Grimstad, where I had visited her once with the kindergarten. And there was Marit, who had a son, Lars, the same age as Yngve, and a daughter, Marianne, who was two years younger. They didn't come here often, Dad didn't like it, but perhaps once a month one or more of them came; then I was allowed to sit with them for a while and bask in the radiance. And occasionally in the evening we went to the arts and crafts workshop in Kokkeplassen, it was the kind of place where you could do all sorts of things, the children of other employees at my mother's workplace went there, too, and that was where we used to make our Christmas presents.

Mom's face was gentle but serious. She had tucked her long hair behind her ears.

"Dag Lothar saw an adder today!" I said.

"Oh?" she said. "Where was that then?"

"On the path to the Rock. He almost stepped right on it! Fortunately, though, it was just as frightened as he was and slithered off into the bushes."

"Lucky for him," she said.

"Were there adders when you were growing up?"

She shook her head.

"There aren't any adders in Vestland."

"Why not?"

She chuckled.

"I don't know. Perhaps it's too cold for them?"

I dangled my legs and drummed my fingers on the table while humming, *Kisses for me, save all your kisses for me, bye bye, baby, bye bye.*

"Kanestrøm caught tons of mackerel today," I said. "I saw them. He showed me the bucket. It was full to the brim. Are we going to get a boat soon, do you think?"

"Take it easy now," she said. "A boat and a cat! Well, it's not impossible, but not this year, that's for certain. Next year maybe. It all costs money, you know. But you can ask Dad."

She passed me back the scissors.

You ask Dad, I thought, but didn't say anything, trying to slide the blade of the scissors along without making a cut, but it stopped, I squeezed the handles together and made a jagged cut.

"Goodness, Yngve's late," she said, looking out of the window.

"He's in safe hands," I said.

She smiled at me.

"I suppose so," she said.

"The note," I said. "The swimming class. Can you sign it now?"

She nodded. I got up and ran along the landing into my room, took the form from my satchel, and was about to run back when the door downstairs opened and I realized what I had done as my heart skipped an extra beat.

Dad's heavy footsteps sounded on the stairs. I stood motionless outside the bathroom as his gaze met mine.

"No running indoors!" he said. "How many times do I have to tell you? It makes the whole house bang and shake. Is that understood?"

"Yes."

He came up and walked past me, his broad back in the white shirt. When I saw he was heading for the kitchen all my happiness evaporated. But I had to go back in there, where he was.

Mom was sitting as before. Dad was standing at the window, looking out. I put the form carefully down on the table.

"Here," I said.

There was one book left. I sat down and made a start on it. Only my hands moved, everything else was still. Dad was mulling over something.

"Yngve's not home yet, is he?" he said.

"No," Mom said. "I'm getting a bit uneasy."

Dad looked down at the table.

"What's that you've brought?" he asked.

"The swimming class," I answered. "Mom was going to sign it."

"Let me have a look," he said, taking the form and reading it. Then he took the pen from the table, wrote his name, and passed the form to me.

"There we are," he said, nodding in the direction of the table. "Now you take all this stuff to your room. You can finish it there. We're going to have supper now."

"Yes, Dad," I said. Put the books in a pile, rolled up the paper, and stuffed it under my arm, grabbed the scissors and the Scotch tape with one hand, the books with the other, and left the kitchen.

While I was at the desk cutting the paper for the last book, a bike rolled up on the gravel outside. Just then the front door opened.

Dad stood waiting for him in the hall when he came up the stairs.

"What time's this supposed to be?" he said.

Yngve's answer was too subdued for me to hear, but the explanation must have been good because the next moment he went into his room. I laid the book on the paper I had cut out, folded it, and placed another book on top as a weight while I tried to pick the tape free from the roll. When I finally loosened a corner and pulled some off, it tore and I had to start again.

Behind me the door opened. It was Yngve.

"What are you up to?" he said.

"Wrapping my books, as you can see," I said.

"We had buns and pop after the training," Yngve said. "In the clubhouse. And there were girls on the team. One of them was really good."

"Girls?" I said. "Is that allowed?"

"Apparently. And Karl Frederik was great."

Through the open window came the sound of voices and footsteps going up the hill. I stuck the bit of tape I had on my finger on the paper and went over to see who it was.

Geir and Leif Tore. They had stopped outside the drive to Leif Tore's and were laughing about something. Then they said bye, and Geir ran the short distance to his drive. When he turned in there and I saw his face for the first time there was a little smile on his lips. His hand was clenched around something in his shorts pocket.

I turned to Yngve.

"What position are you going to play?"

"I don't know," he said. "Probably defense."

"What color's your strip?"

"Blue and white."

"Just like Trauma's?"

"Close," he said.

"Come and eat!" Dad called from the kitchen. When we went in, there was a plate with three slices of bread on it and a glass of milk in our places. Clove cheese, brown cheese, and jam. Mom and Dad were in the living room watching TV. The road outside was gray, and so, almost, were the branches on the trees at the edge of the road, whereas the sky above the trees, across Tromøya

Sound, was blue and open, as though it arched above a different world than the one we were in.

The next morning I was woken by Dad opening the bedroom door.

"C'mon, up, sleepyhead!" he said. "The sun is shining and the birds are singing."

I pulled the duvet to the side and swung my feet onto the floor. Apart from the sound of Dad's footsteps, fading as they went down the landing, the house was perfectly quiet. It was Tuesday. Mom started work early, Yngve had to be at school early while Dad didn't have to start until the second period.

I went to the wardrobe and searched through the piles of clothes, chose a white shirt, which was the best I had, and blue cords. But the shirt was probably too smart, I thought, he would notice, perhaps ask why I was all tarted up, perhaps tell me to take it off. Better to wear the white Adidas T-shirt.

With my clothes under my arm I went into the bathroom. Fortunately Yngve had remembered to leave the water in the sink. I closed the door behind me. Lifted the toilet seat and peed. The pee was a greenish yellow, not dark yellow as it often was in the morning. Even though I tried carefully to make sure all the drops fell inside the bowl when I shook myself dry, some landed on the floor, small transparent globules of moisture on the bluish-gray linoleum. I dried the floor with some toilet paper, which I threw in the bowl before pulling the chain. With the flushing noise in my ears I stood in front of the sink. The water was a pale-green color. Small transparent flakes of God knows what were floating in it. I cupped my hands, filled them with water, leaned forward, and dipped my head in. The water was a tiny bit colder than me. A shiver ran down my spine as it settled on my skin. I soaped my hands, rubbed them quickly over my face, closing my eyes as I did so, and rinsed and dried them and my face on the light-brown towel hanging on my hook.

Finished!

I pulled the bedroom curtain aside and peered out. The trees in the forest, above which the sun had just risen, cast long, dark shadows over the shimmering pavement. Then I put on my clothes and went into the kitchen.

There was a bowl of cornflakes in my place, with a carton of milk beside it. Dad wasn't there.

Had he gone to his study to get his things together?

No. I heard him moving in the living room.

I sat down and poured milk over the cornflakes. Dipped the spoon in and put it to my mouth.

Oh my God.

The milk was off, and the taste of it, which filled all my mouth, caused me to retch. I gulped it down because at that moment my father came across the floor. In through the doorway, across the kitchen, over to the counter, and leaned against it. He looked at me and smiled. I took another spoonful from the bowl and put it to my mouth. The mere thought of the taste made my stomach turn. But I breathed through my mouth and swallowed it after only a couple of chews.

Oh, yuck.

Dad showed no signs of wanting to leave and I continued eating. If he had gone to his study I could have emptied the dish into the bin and covered it with other rubbish, but as long as he was in the kitchen, or on the first floor, I had no choice.

After a while he turned to open a cupboard door, took out a bowl of the same kind as mine and a spoon from the drawer, and sat opposite me.

He never did that.

"I'll have some, too," he said. Sprinkled some golden, crispy flakes from the box with the red-and-green cockerel on it and reached over for the milk.

I stopped eating. Knowing that a calamity was looming.

Dad placed his spoon in the bowl, filled it to the brim with milk and cornflakes, and put it to his mouth. The moment it was inside, his face contorted. He spat it out into the bowl without chewing.

"Ugh!" he said. "The milk's off! Oh, good grief!"

Then he looked at me. I would remember that look for the rest of my life. His eyes were not angry, as I had expected, but amazed, as though he was looking at something he just could not comprehend. Indeed, as though he were looking at me for the very first time.

"Have you been eating cornflakes with *sour* milk on them?" he said.

I nodded.

"But you can't do that!" he said. "I'll get you some fresh milk!"

He got up, poured the carton of sour milk into the sink, shaking his arms wildly as he did so, rinsed it, scrunched it up, put it in the trash can beneath the sink, and grabbed a fresh carton from the fridge.

"Let me have that," he said, taking my bowl, emptying the contents into the sink, scouring it with the washing-up brush, rinsing it again, and putting it back on the table in front of me.

"There we are," he said. "Now help yourself to more cornflakes and milk. Okay?"

"Okay," I said.

He did the same with his dish and we ate in silence.

Everything about school was new during this period, but all the days had the same format, and we became so familiar with it that it was only a few weeks before nothing surprised us anymore. What was said from the dais was true, and the fact that it was said there made even the most improbable probable. Jesus walking on water, that was true. God appearing as a burning bush at Moses's feet, that was true. Illnesses originating from creatures that were so small no one could see them, that was true. All beings, including ourselves, consisting of tiny, tiny particles that were smaller than bacteria, that was true. Trees needing sunlight to live, that was true. But we not only accepted what the teachers said in this way, we also accepted what they did without a word. Many of our teachers were old, born before or during the First World War, professionally active since the 1930s or 1940s. Gray-haired and dressed in suits, they never learned our names, and what they had to offer as regards knowledge and wisdom never reached us. One of them was called Thommesen. He read a book to us once a week in the break, stooped over the table, his voice a touch snuffled, his complexion pale, almost yellow, and his lips a bluish red. The book he read was about an old woman in the wilderness, impossible to understand, not a word, so the time he may have regarded as cozy, a friendly gesture toward the small schoolchildren, was for us a torment because we had to sit still while he coughed and mumbled his way through the incomprehensible story.

Another teacher was in his fifties, his name was Myklebust, from somewhere in Vestland, but he lived on the island of Hisøya and was a stern disciplinarian. In lessons with him we not only had to stand in a line and march into the classroom, once we were in, we also had to remain standing beside our desks, whereupon he, from beside his desk, would slowly scan the class until there was total silence. Then he would raise himself onto the balls of his feet, bow, and say, “Good morning, class,” or, “Good day, class,” to which we would answer, “Good morning, teacher,” or, “Good day, teacher.” He had no compunctions about slapping pupils in heated exchanges or throwing them against the wall. He often ridiculed those he didn’t like. His gym lessons were nothing short of drills. There were some women teachers of a similar age who were also strict and formal, surrounded by an aura we didn’t recognize but automatically respected and, not infrequently, also feared. One of them lifted me off the ground by my hair once after I said something inappropriate, I remember. Normally they were happy to send notes home, as detentions or early starts were impractical because of the buses.

Alongside this band of old teachers, some of whom had been on the staff all their lives, there was also a new generation, the same age as our parents or even younger. Our teacher, Helga Torgersen, was one of them. She was what we called "nice," that is, she never came down heavily on breaches of rules, never lost her temper, never shouted, never hit or pulled hair, but always solved conflicts through discussion, in a calm, controlled voice, and through involving herself as a person rather than playing the teacher role, such that there was little difference between who she was in private, when she was out with friends or at home with her husband, whom she had recently married, and who she was in the classroom. She wasn't the only one, all the young teachers were like that, and they were the ones we liked to have. The headmaster of the school was young, too, his name was Osmundsen and he was around thirty years old, had a beard, and was strong, not so different from Dad, but we were afraid of him, perhaps more than the others. Not because of anything he did, but because of what he was. If you had done something seriously wrong you were sent to his office. The fact that he didn't do any teaching on a daily basis, that he was a kind of shadowy figure in the school, did nothing to diminish our fear. He was also legendary for another reason. The year before, a slave ship had been found only a few meters off the rocks on the eastern coast of the island. It had gone aground there in 1768 and the find had been described in all the newspapers and even shown on TV. Our headmaster, Osmundsen, was one of the three divers who had found it. To me, someone who held diving in greater esteem than anything else, apart from perhaps sailing ships, he was the greatest man I could imagine. It was like having an astronaut as headmaster. Whenever I did drawings, it was always divers and wrecks, fishermen and sharks I drew, apart from sailing ships, page after page after page. Whenever I watched one of the nature programs on TV, about diving down to coral reefs or diving in a shark cage, I talked about it for weeks afterward. And here he was, the bearded man who, the year before, had broken the surface with an elephant tusk in his hands, from one of the few intact wrecks of a slave ship that has ever been found.

He came into the classroom on the second day to tell us a little about the school and which rules were important, and after he had gone Frøken said that one day in the not-too-distant future, he would come back and tell us about the wreck he had helped to find. She had been standing by the window with her hands behind her back and a smile on her face all the time he had been there, and she did the same when he returned two weeks later, as promised. My mind was ablaze with the stories he regaled us with, but I was also a tiny bit disappointed when it turned out the wreck lay in waters that were only a few meters deep. That detracted from the achievement to no small degree, I had expected a depth of say a hundred meters, with divers who had to hold the rope for a breather on their way up, taking maybe as much as an hour in all, because of the extreme pressure down below. An overwhelming darkness, flashing beams from their torches, perhaps even a little submarine or diving bell. But on the seabed near the coast, right beneath the feet of bathers, within the range of any boy with flippers and a diving mask? On the other hand, he did show pictures of the find, they had a diving boat moored some way out into the bay, they wore wetsuits and had diving cylinders, and it had all been planned down to the last detail with old charts and documents, etcetera.

Once Dad had almost been on TV, they had interviewed him and so on, about something political, but when we watched the news there was nothing, and the item didn't come the next day, either, although we all gathered again to see it. However, he had been on the radio once, interviewed in connection with a stamp exhibition, I forgot all about it, so when I arrived home that day, it had already been broadcast and he had a go at me.

Many of the teachers chattered on about my name at first, they were colleagues of my father, I suppose, and assumed I was named after him, and I really liked that, their knowing about me, that I was the son of my father. From the very first day I did my utmost at school, above all in order to be the best in the class, but also because I hoped it would reach Dad's ears how smart I was.

I loved school. I loved everything that went on there and the rooms where it went on.

Our chairs, low and old, made with iron piping, a slab of wood to sit on, and one to lean back against, our desks covered with cuts and ink from all those who had sat at them before. The board, the chalk, and the sponge; the letters that grew from the chalk in Frøken's hand, an *O*, a *U*, an *I*, an *E*, an *Å*, an *Æ*, always white, which her hands soon became as well. The bone-dry sponge that darkened and swelled when she rinsed it in the sink, the great feeling it gave you when it rubbed out everything, leaving a trail of water that remained there for a few minutes, until the board was as green and pristine as before. Frøken, who spoke in Karmøy dialect, had big glasses and short hair, wore blouses and skirts, so much she asked us about and told us. She taught us not to speak all at the same time, and not just to shout out an answer but to put our hands up and speak only after she had pointed or nodded to us. Because at the beginning a forest of hands shot up in the classroom, waving impatiently to and fro, with students shouting *me, me, me*, because she didn't ask us difficult questions, only ones everyone could answer. Then there were the breaks and all that happened in them, all the children who were there, large groups assembling and dispersing, activities blazing up and dying back. The pegs in the corridor outside the classroom where we hung our jackets, the smell of ten years of green soap, the smell of piss in the toilets, the smell of milk in the milk lockers, the smell of twenty lunch boxes with a variety of *smørbrød* being opened at the same time in a classroom. The system of monitors, whereby every week a pupil was responsible for handing out whatever had to be handed out, cleaning the board after the lesson, and collecting the cartons of milk in the long break. The feeling this gave you of being the chosen one. And the very special feeling of walking down the corridors when everyone else was sitting in class, how deserted they were, jackets hanging from the pegs on both sides, the low mumble from the rooms as you walked past, the shafts of daylight that lent the linoleum floor a dull gleam, and on sunny days caused thousands of specks of dust in the air to shimmer, like a miniature Milky Way. A door being thrown open, a boy charging out, could change the atmosphere down the entire length of the corridor, suck up all the attention and significance: suddenly he was all that counted. As though he drew in all the smells, all the dust, all the light, all the jackets, and all the mumbling, like a comet in the sky, one might imagine, where all the passing flotsam and jetsam were sucked into its long, pallid – by comparison with the shining center – tail.

I loved the moment when Geir rang the bell and we wandered up to the supermarket, the competition that had already evolved there, where you had to arrive early and put your satchel as far to the front of the queue as possible so that you could get the best seat on the bus. I loved waiting by the shop and watching the other kids drifting in from all sides. Some of them lived right at the top of the estates behind the shop, others came from down in Gamle Tybakken, and others still from the estates on the flat land beyond the hill. I especially loved watching Anne Lisbet. Not only did she have shiny black hair, she also had dark eyes and a big, red mouth. She was always so happy, she laughed so much, and her eyes, they were not only dark, they sparkled, as though she had so much happiness inside her they were always filled to the brim with it. Her red-headed friend was called Solveig, they were neighbors and were always together, just like Geir and me. Solveig was pale and had freckles, she didn't say much, but she had kind eyes. They lived on the highest estate in Tybakken, in an area I had only visited a couple of times and where I knew no one. Anne Lisbet had a sister who was one year younger, she informed us when it was her turn to talk about herself in class, and a brother who was four years younger. Another boy in the class lived up there, his name was Vemund, he was a little plump and slow, perhaps even slow-witted, he was the last to run, the weakest, threw a ball like a girl, was useless at soccer, couldn't read, but he liked drawing and most of the other things you could do sitting indoors. His mother was a big, strong, energetic woman with angry eyes and a piercing voice. His father was thin and pale and walked on crutches, he had some kind of muscle disease, and he was a hemophiliac, Vemund proudly told us. A hemophiliac, what's that? someone asked. That's when the blood doesn't stop coming out, Vemund explained. When Dad has a cut and it starts bleeding, it never stops, it just bleeds and bleeds, so he has to take some medicine or go to hospital, and if he doesn't he dies.

Anne Lisbet, Solveig, and Vemund's neighborhood, where lots of other children lived, one or two years older or younger than us, was drawn into our world when we started school. The same applied to all the other neighborhoods where my classmates lived. It was as if a curtain went up, and what we had assumed was the whole stage turned out to be only the proscenium. The house on the hillside, whose completely level garden we could see from the top, balancing as it were on the edge of a white wall that plunged straight down, maybe five meters, with a green wire fence on top, was no longer just a house but the house where Siv Johannesen lived. Fifty meters farther away, behind the dense forest, a road came to an end, and it was along there that Sverre, Geir B, and Eivind lived. A bit farther down, but in a very different area, a very different world, lived Kristin Tamara, Marian, and Asgeir.

They all had their places, they all had their friends, and in the course of a few weeks at the end of the summer everything was opened to us. It was both new and familiar, we looked similar, we did the same things and were thus open to one another. Yet at the same time each one of us had something of his or her own. Sølvi was so shy she could barely talk. Unni worked at the market with her parents and brothers every Saturday, selling vegetables they had grown themselves. Kristin Tamara wore glasses with a patch over one eye. Geir Håkon, who had always been so tough, stood writhing with embarrassment in front of the blackboard. Dag Magne had a permanent grin on his face. Geir had received the last rites when he was born because they thought he was going to die. Asgeir always smelled vaguely of piss. Marianne was as strong as a boy. Eivind could read and write and was so good at soccer. Trond was small and ran like lightning. Solveig was so good at drawing. Anne Lisbet's father was a diver. And John, well, he had more uncles than anyone else.

One day, when we had been at school for the first three lessons, and the bus had dropped us off by the supermarket at twelve, Geir and I walked home with John. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, the road dry and dusty. When we came to John's house, he asked if we wanted to go up and have some juice. We did. We followed him up to the veranda, took off our satchels, and sat down on the plastic chairs they had. He opened the door to the house and shouted.

"Mom, we want some juice! I've got some boys from the class here!"

His mother came to the door. She was wearing a white bikini, her skin was tanned, her long hair dark blond. The whole upper part of her face was covered by a pair of large sunglasses.

"How nice," she said. "I'll see if we've got some juice for you."

She went into the sitting room and disappeared through a door. There was an empty feeling about the room. It looked like ours, but there was less furniture, and there were no pictures on the walls. Two of the girls from our class walked past on the road below. John leaned over the balcony and shouted after them, saying that they looked like monkeys.

Geir and I laughed.

The girls didn't take any notice and went on their way. Marianne, who was taller than all the boys, had a high forehead, high cheekbones, and long, blond hair hanging down either side of her face, like curtains. Now and then, when she was angry or desperate, she frowned and had a very special look in her eyes, which I liked. She could also lose her temper and give as good as she got, unlike the other girls.

John's mother came out with a tray holding three glasses and a jug of juice, put a glass in front of each of us, and filled it. The ice cubes floated around close together at the top of the red juice. I watched her as she went back in. She wasn't good-looking, yet there was something about her that made you notice her and watch.

"Were you looking at my mom's ass?" John said with a loud laugh.

I didn't know what he meant. Why would I look at his mother's behind? It was embarrassing as well, because he had said it so loudly that she, too, must have heard it.

"No, I wasn't!" I said.

He laughed even more.

"Mom!" he shouted. "Come out here a minute!"

She came, still in her bikini.

"Karl Ove was looking at your ass!" he said.

She slapped his face.

John continued to laugh. I looked at Geir: he was staring into space and whistling. John's mother went inside. I emptied the glass of juice in one go.

"Would you like to see my room?" John said.

We nodded and followed him through the dark sitting room to his room. There was a poster of a motorbike on one wall and a semi-naked woman, her skin orange from all the sun, on the other.

"It's a Kawasaki 750," he said. "Would you like some more juice?"

"Not for me," I said. "I've got to be getting home for dinner."

"Me, too," Geir said.

The dog snarled at us as we left. We walked down the hill without speaking. John waved to us from the veranda. Geir waved back.

Why would I have looked at John's mother's butt? Was there something about butts I hadn't understood? Why did he shout that out at me? Why did he tell her that? Why did she slap him? And why on earth did he continue laughing afterward? How could you laugh when your mother has hit you? In fact, when anyone has hit you?

I had looked at his mother, and had a vague sense of guilt when I did so, because she was almost naked, but not at her *butt*, why would I do that?

It was the first time I had been to John's house, and it would be the last. We played soccer and went swimming with John, but he was not someone whose house we went to. Everyone was a bit frightened of him because even though we said he acted tough but actually wasn't, we all knew that in fact he *was*. He sought the company of boys in the classes above us, was the only one of us who got into fights, and was the only boy who would talk back to teachers and refuse to do what they said. He was tired in the mornings because he was allowed to go to bed whenever he liked, and when he talked about his home life in class, which we all did, it was always about some uncle staying with them. Neither he nor any of us questioned the status of these men, and why would we? John had more uncles than anyone we knew, that was all there was to say about that.

A few days later, a Saturday at the beginning of September, one of those early-autumn days the summer has stretched into and filled to saturation, when the fields are hot and dusty, the sky deep blue, and the first withered leaves whirl through the air almost in a way that is contrary to nature, as the wind is still so mild and all the faces you see are glistening with sweat, Geir and I were walking up through the estate. With us we had a packed lunch and a bottle of juice. We had planned to follow a route we had heard about, it forked left at the end of a long, flat stretch, more or less where the path to the Fina station began. To get there we had to cross land belonging to a house we knew very little about, except that the owner could get angry because one

Sunday that spring a crowd of us had been playing soccer on the grass at the far end of his property, bordered on one side by rocks and a stream on the other, when, after half an hour, he had stormed out and started yelling and shaking his fists at us almost before he was within hearing distance, whereupon we all ran away at once. But now we weren't going to play soccer, now we were only going to cross his fields, along the stream toward the path, which was actually a little track, strewn with small, flat, mostly white, stones. We came to a gate, which we pushed aside, and then we were in a part of the island where we had never been before. The track, lined by tall trees, was in shadow, and it was like walking through a tunnel. Farther down, there was a curve in the path and white rock glistened in the sunshine. That was the cliff where the stones we were walking on must have come from. We stopped in front of it. It wasn't craggy or semi-rotten, so to speak, the way some more porous rocks might be after being blasted, nor was it flaky or slightly rough, the way bare rock and several of the uncovered crags you could come across in the forest were, no, this cliff was completely smooth, almost like glass, and consisted of many slanting surfaces. Was this a vein of gemstones we had stumbled upon? It seemed like it. On the other hand, it was too close to the estate for that, there was absolutely no chance that we had discovered something no one else had, we knew that, but we still filled our knapsacks with fragments of rock. Then we continued down. The stream followed the track, higher up it ran through a deep gully, then fell, where the slope began, trickling downward through a series of small terraces. At one point, where the stream ran almost level with the track, we tried to build a dam. We carried rock after rock to it, covered the crevices between them with moss, and after perhaps half an hour we had managed to make the water flow across the track. Suddenly we heard shots. We exchanged glances. Grabbing our knapsacks, we set off at a run. Shots? Could it be hunters? After a few hundred meters the track leveled out. It lay in deep greenish-black shadow, produced by dense rows of tall, overhanging spruce trees. A hundred meters or so away we caught sight of a paved road, and we stopped, for the shots were clearer now, and they were coming from our left. We walked between the trees, across the soft cover of blueberry bushes and heather and moss, up a gentle slope, and in front of us, perhaps twenty meters below, bathed in sunshine, there was an enormous clearing full of garbage.

A dumping ground.

A garbage dump in the forest!

Some seagulls were flying over the far end. Screaming, they circled above the garbage as if it were the sea. The stench, sweet though still pungent, stung our nostrils. Then the shots rang out again. Not loud, the reports were crisp, like a kind of crackle. Slowly we made our way down to the edge of the dump, and there, a stone's throw away, we saw two men, one standing by a wrecked car, the other lying on his stomach next to him. Both had guns pointing across the dump. They fired at intervals of a couple of seconds. The man on the ground stood up, and then they went into the dump, carrying their guns. We walked over to where they had been. Between the piles of waste, which rose and fell like hills and dales, ran a path that they followed. They were dressed like proper hunters with boots and gloves. They were grown-ups but not old. Around them I saw cars, fridges, freezers, TVs, wardrobes, and dressers. I saw sofas, chairs, tables, and lamps. I saw skis and bikes, fishing rods, chandeliers, car tires, cardboard boxes, wooden chests, Styrofoam containers, and heap upon heap of fat, bulging plastic bags. What lay before us was a whole landscape of abandoned goods. Most of it consisted of bags of food leftovers and packaging, things that all households carried to the trash can every day, but in the part where they were standing, and which the two men were crossing, perhaps a fifth of the total area, larger items had been deposited.

"They're shooting rats," Geir said. "Look!"

They had stopped walking. One held up a rat by the tail. The whole of one side was shot to pieces, or so it seemed. He swung it around a few times and let go, launching it through the air. It landed on some bags and slid down between them. They laughed. The second man kicked away another rat, putting the tip of his boot underneath the corpse and flicking it.

They returned. Their eyes squinting in the bright sun, they said hello to us. They could have been brothers.

"Are you out for a walk, fellas?" one asked. He had curly red hair beneath a blue peaked cap, a broad face, thick lips with a vigorous moustache above, also red.

We nodded.

"A walk to the garbage dump! Takes all kinds, eh," the second man said. Apart from his hair color, which was blond, almost white, and his top lip, which was hairless, he was the spitting image of the first man. "Are you going to eat your packed lunches out there? On top of the piles of garbage?"

They laughed. We laughed a little, too.

"Do you want to watch us shoot some rats?" the first man said.

"Yes, love to," Geir said.

"Then you'll have to stand behind us. It's important. Okay? And stand very still so that you don't distract us."

We nodded.

This time both of them lay down. For a long time they didn't move. I tried to see what they could see. But only when the shots rang out did I see the rat, which seemed to be hurled backward along the ground, as if caught by a sudden, violent gust of wind.

They got up.

"Do you want to come and see?" one said.

"There's not a lot to see!" the second man said. "A dead rat!"

"I want to see it," Geir said.

"Me, too," I said.

But the rat wasn't dead. It was writhing on the ground. The rear part was almost completely blown away. One of the men jabbed the stock of his gun into its head, there was a soft *crunch*, and it lay still. He studied the gunstock with a concerned expression.

"Oh, why did I do that?" he said.

"You probably wanted to look like a tough guy," the second man said. "Come on. Let's go. You can wipe it when we get to the car."

They went "ashore" again, with us tagging behind.

"Do your parents know you're here?" one said.

"Yes," I said.

"Good," he said. "I suppose they said you mustn't touch anything here? It's full of bacteria and other shit, you know."

"Yes," I said.

"Great! See you, fellas."

Some minutes later a car started down on the road, and we were alone. For a while we ran around looking at things, emptying bags, pushing over cupboards to see if there was anything behind them while shouting out what we had found. A bag of recent magazines, in good condition, was my biggest find. There was a stack of *Tempo* and *Buster*, a *Tex Willer* paperback, and then some of those small, rectangular cowboy magazines from the 1960s. Geir found a slim flashlight, a small deer embroidered on linen, and two stroller wheels. When we were done looking, we sat down in the heather with our finds and ate our packed lunches.

Geir scrunched up the wax paper and threw it as far as he could. Thinking, probably, that it would end up in the middle of the garbage, more or less, but it was met by a gust of wind just as he released it, and it was so light that it didn't even reach the edge and landed in the heather.

"Let's go for a shit, eh?" he said.

"Okay," I said. "Where?"

"Dunno," he said with a shrug.

We walked around in the forest for a while looking for an appropriate spot. Shitting in the garbage dump was, for some reason, inappropriate, there was something dirty about it, it seemed to me, and that was strange, because it was all waste, the whole lot of it. But garbage, that was shiny plastic bags and cardboard boxes, discarded electrical appliances and piles of newspapers. Anything soft and sticky was wrapped. So we had to go into the forest to do it.

"Look at that tree!" Geir said.

There was a tall pine tree on its side perhaps ten meters away. We clambered up on the trunk, pulled down our trousers, and stuck out our cheeks, each holding onto a branch. Geir swung his butt just as the shit came out so that it was flung to the side.

"Did you see that?" he laughed.

"Ha ha ha!" I laughed, trying a different ploy, dropping it like a bomb from a plane over a town. It was a wonderful feeling as it came farther and farther out, the moment when it was suspended in midair until it finally let go and plunged to the ground.

Sometimes I would hold it in for days so that I could have a really big one and also because it felt good in itself. When I really did have to shit, so much that I could barely stand upright but had to bend forward, I had such a fantastic feeling in my body if I didn't let nature take its course, if I squeezed the muscles in my butt together as hard as I could and, as it were, *forced* the shit back to where it came from. But this was a dangerous game, because if you did it too many times the turd ultimately grew so big it was impossible to shit it out. Oh Christ, how it hurt when such an enormous turd had to come out! It was truly unbearable, I was convulsed with pain, it was as if my body were exploding with pain, AAAAAAGGGHHH!! I screamed, OOOOOHHH, and then, just as it was at its very worst, suddenly it was out.

Oh, how good that was!

What a wonderful feeling it was!

The pain was over.

The shit was in the pan.

Everything was peace and light throughout my body. Indeed, almost so peaceful that I didn't feel like getting up and wiping my bum. I just wanted to sit there.

But was it worth it?

I could spend the whole day dreading one of those big shits. I didn't want to go to the toilet because it hurt so much, but if I didn't it would only hurt more and more.

So in the end there was no option but to go. Knowing full well that this would hurt like hell!

Once I was so terrified I tried to find another way to get the shit out. I half stood, and then I stuck my finger up my butt, as far as it would go. There! There was the shit. As hard as a rock! When I had located it I wriggled my finger to and fro in an attempt to widen the passage. At the same time I pressed a little, and in that way, bit by bit, I managed to maneuver the shit to the side. Oh, it still hurt to work the last bit free, but not *so* much.

What a method that was!

I didn't mind so much that my finger was all brown; it was easy enough to wash it off. The smell was another matter, however, because although I scrubbed and scoured, a faint odor of shit hung around my finger all day and all night, even the next morning I could still smell it when I woke.

All these pros and cons had to be weighed up against one another.

When Geir and I had finished, we each wiped ourselves with a fern leaf, and then we went to see the result. Mine had a greenish glimmer to it and was so soft it had already spread across the ground. Geir's was light brown with a black patch at one end, harder and more lump shaped.

"Isn't it strange that mine smells good whereas yours stinks?" I said.

"It's yours that stinks!" Geir said.

"It does not," I said.

"Pooh, manohman!" he said, pinching his nose with his fingers as he poked around in my shit with a long stick.

Some flies buzzed above it. They, too, had a greenish glimmer.

"Right," I said. "Shall we go? We can see what has happened to them next Saturday, maybe?"

"I'll be away then," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"To Risør," he said. "We're going to look at a boat, I think."

We ran up to fetch our things, and then we walked home, Geir with a stroller wheel in each hand, me with a plastic bag full of comics. I made him promise he wouldn't say anything at home about where we had been because I had a suspicion they would ban us from going if they knew. I had prepared an explanation for the comics, I had borrowed them from someone called Jørn, who lived on the other estate, in case Dad found them and kicked up a fuss.

Once inside the porch, I stood still for a moment. I heard nothing unusual and bent down to untie my shoelaces.

Somewhere inside the house a door opened. I took off one shoe and put it next to the wall. The second door opened, and Dad was standing in front of me.

I put my other shoe in its place and stood up.

"Where have you been?" Dad asked.

"In the forest."

I suddenly remembered my explanation, and added, looking at the floor, "And then on top of the hill."

"What have you got in the bag?"

"Some comics."

"Where did you get them?"

"I borrowed them from someone called Jørn. He lives up there."

"Let me see," Dad said.

I passed him the bag, he eyed the contents, and took out a *Tex Willer* paperback.

"I'll have that," he said, and went back to his study.

I went into the hall and was halfway up the stairs when he called me.

Had he sussed me? Perhaps it smelled of garbage?

I turned and went back down, so weak at the knees that they could hardly carry me.

He stood in the doorway.

"You haven't had this week's pocket money," he said. "Yngve had his a while ago. Here you are."

He put a five-krone coin in my hand.

"Oh, thank you!" I said.

"But B-Max is closed," he said. "You'll have to go to the Fina station if you want to buy candy."

It was a long way to the Fina station. First of all, there was the long hill, then there was a long, flat stretch, then there was the long path through the forest, down to the gravel lane that came out by the main road, where the gas station was, which was both fantastic and bad. The hill and the flat stretch were no problem, there were lots of houses and cars and people on both sides. The path was more problematic because after only a few meters you disappeared into the trees where there were neither humans nor anything made by human hand to be seen. Just leaves, bushes, trunks, flowers, the odd bog, the odd pile of felled trees, the odd meadow. I used to sing when I walked there. *Gikk jeg en tur på stien*, I sang. Children's songs: *Fløy en liten blåfugl*, *Bjørnen sover*, and *Jeg gikk meg over over sjø og land*. When I sang it was as if I wasn't alone, even though I was. It was as if the singing was another boy. If I didn't sing, I talked to myself. Wonder whether anyone lives on the other side, I said. Or wonder whether the forest continues into eternity. No, it can't, we live on an island. So the sea is around us. Perhaps the ferry to Denmark is there now? I'd like a bag of Nox licorice, please, and a bag of Fox lemon candies. Fox and Nox, Nox and Fox. Fox and Nox, Nox and Fox.

On the right-hand side, a vast concourse opened beneath the crowns of the trees. They were deciduous, they were tall, and the tops formed such a dense canopy that the vegetation on the ground was sparse.

Straight afterward I came to the gravel lane, followed it past the old white house and the old red barn, heard the *whoosh* of the cars on the main road below, and when I reached that, fifty meters away stood the gas station in all its glory.

The four gas pumps holding their hands to their temples in their usual salute. The big white plastic sign with FINA in blue letters shone wanly at the top of the high pillar. A semi was parked there, with the driver hanging an arm out of the open window and talking to someone on the ground beneath him. Outside the kiosk there were three mopeds. A car stopped at one of the pumps, a man with a thick wallet in his back pocket got out, grabbed the nozzle, and stuck it in the tank. I stopped next to him. The pump began to burr; the numbers on what I thought of as the face sped around. It seemed to be blinking at an incredible speed. The man was looking another way while this was going on, and to me it seemed to be a gesture of nonchalance, not following what was happening. This was someone who knew what he was about.

I went to the kiosk and opened the door. My heart was beating fast, you never knew what was awaiting you in here. Would someone talk to you? Crack a joke and make all the others laugh?

"Ah, here's Knausgaard junior," they might say. "What's your father up to today? Is he at home grading papers?"

The customers who hung out went to the school where Dad taught. They wore denim, or even leather, jackets, often with brand labels sewn on. Pontiac, for example, or Ferrari or Mustang. Some of them wore scarves. All of them had their hair down over their eyes. And then they tossed their heads back when they wanted to see something. Outside they spat all the time and drank Coke. Some of them put peanuts into the bottle so they could drink and eat at the same time. Almost all of them smoked, even though it was forbidden. The youngest had bicycles, the oldest mopeds, now and then they were joined by even older boys who had cars.

This was where the bad side came in. Mopeds, long hair, smoking, malingering, playing the machines, everything that happened at the gas station was bad.

The laughter, which always met me when they realized that I was Knausgaard junior, gave me nightmares. I had no answer, I had to lower my head and make a beeline for the counter and buy whatever I was there to buy.

"Knausgaard junior is afraid!" they might shout, if they were in that mood, for they left me alone as often as they shouted at me. You never knew.

This time they left me in peace. Three of them stood around a one-arm bandit, four sat around a table drinking Coke, and then there were three girls wearing makeup and giggling at the table at the back.

I spent all my money on Fox and Nox, it wasn't a small amount, the assistant put them in a transparent plastic bag for me, and I hurried out.

Up the gravel lane, where the air was chilly as the sun had stopped shining there, onto the path. It wasn't so bad, I told myself, looking between all the tree trunks in the vast concourse beneath the branches to see if anything was moving. What should I do? I wondered. Eat the Fox and Nox alternately, or eat all the Fox candies first and then all the Nox?

To the right of me the bushes rustled.

I stopped and stared at them. Slowly retreated a couple of paces, for safety's sake.

More rustling.

What could it be?

"Hello," I said. "Is anyone there?"

Silence.

I bent down and picked up a stone. Hurled it into the bushes and then ran off as fast as my legs would carry me. When I stopped and saw no one was following me, I laughed.

"That taught you!" I said, and walked on.

As for spirits of the dead, it was best not to think about them. Keep your mind on other things at all times. Because as soon as you started thinking about the dead, about them being around you, behind that spruce tree over there, for instance, all of a sudden it was impossible to think about anything else, and you just got more and more frightened. In the end, all you could do was run, with your heart hammering away and a sort of scream echoing throughout your body.

So even though everything had been fine this time, it was still with a sense of relief that I saw the path and the estate on the flat land open in front of me.

The air, which had been clear and bright when I set out, had turned a little gray as it hovered above the land between the houses along the road.

I ran a few steps.

Two girls were standing outside one of the houses. They watched me as I came across the grass. Then they started running toward me.

What did they want?

I watched them approaching but continued to walk.

They stopped in front of me.

One was the sister of Tom, one of the biggest boys on the estate, who had his own car, red and shiny. I had never seen the other girl before. They were at least ten years old.

"Where have you been?" one said.

"Fina," I said.

"What were you doing there?" the other said.

"Nothing," I said, moving off.

They stepped to the side so that I couldn't get past.

"Get out of the way," I said. "I'm going home."

"What have you got in the bag?"

"Nothing."

"Oh yes, you have. Fox and Nox. We can see."

"And? I've bought them for my brother. He's eleven."

"Give them to us."

"No-oo," I said.

One of them, Tom's sister, made a grab for the bag. I swung it to the side. The other girl pushed with both arms and sent me flying.

"Give us the bag," she said.

"No," I said, wrapping my arms round it while struggling to get to my feet.

She pushed me again. I fell headlong and started crying.

"They're mine!" I shouted. "You can't have them!"

"Thought they were supposed to be your brother's," one of them said, grabbing the bag and yanking it out of my hands. Then they ran across the grass as fast as they could to the road, laughing all the while.

"They're mine!" I yelled after them. "They're mine!"

I cried all the way home.

They had stolen my candy. How was that possible? How could they just come up to me and *take* them? They were mine! I had been given the money by Dad and walked all the way to the Fina station and back! And they just came and took them! Pushed me over! How could they do that?

Approaching my house, I wiped my face on my sweater sleeves, blinked a few times, and shook my head a bit so that no one would see I had been crying.

Once when I was five, Trond's little sister, Wenche, threw a rock at me, right into my stomach. I burst into tears and ran over to our garden fence, where Dad was working. I was sure he would help me, but he wouldn't, on the contrary, he said not only was Wenche a girl, she was also a year younger than me, it was nothing to snivel about. He said I embarrassed him and I should fight back, surely I understood that. But I didn't. Everyone knew it was wrong to throw stones, didn't they? And that fighting back was bad, a last resort?

Not Dad, though, no. He stood there with his stern gaze, and his folded arms, looking across the road to where all the children were playing, nodded his head, and said I should carry on playing and stop bothering him.

And since it was girls who had stolen my candy, there was no hope of any help from Dad.

I stood still in the hallway, listened, removed my shoes, put them by the wall, walked carefully upstairs, and into Yngve's room while the thought of all the lost Foxes and Noxes hit me with renewed force, and again the tears began to roll down my cheeks.

Yngve was lying on his stomach on the bed reading a copy of *Buster* with his legs in the air. He had emptied a bag of candy.

"What are you crying about?" he said.

I told him what had happened.

"Couldn't you just have run off?" he said.

"No, they were in my way."

"They pushed you. Couldn't you have pushed them?"

"No, they were much bigger and stronger than me," I sobbed.

"Surely you don't have to blub like that because of it," Yngve said. "Would it help if I gave you some of mine?"

"Ye-e-s," I hiccuped.

"Not a lot, though. But some. This one and this one and this one and this one, for example. And maybe this one. There you go. Is that better now?"

"Yes," I said. "Can I sit here as well?"

"You can sit here until you've eaten these. Then you've got to go."

"Okay."

After I had eaten the candy and washed my face in cold water it felt as if I was starting afresh. Mom was in the kitchen, I could hear, she was cooking, the fan was blowing. All the time I had been upstairs I hadn't heard anything from Dad, so he must have been in his study.

I went into the kitchen and sat down on a chair.

"Did you buy some candy today?" Mom asked. She was standing by the stove and turning what was probably minced meat in the frying pan. It was sizzling and spitting. There was a pan on the other plate hissing away inaudibly, drowned by the noise of the fan.

"Yup," I said.

"Did you go all the way down to the Fina station?" She always said, "the Fina station," never just "Fina," as we did.

"Yes," I said. "What are we having?"

"Casserole with rice, I thought."

"And pineapples?"

She smiled. "No, not pineapples. That's a Mexican dish."

"Oh, yes."

There was a pause. Mom tore open a bag and poured the contents over the meat, then she measured some water in a jug and poured that on top. As soon as that was done, the water was bubbling in the pan and she poured in the rice. She sat down at the other side of the table, pressed her hands against her back, and stretched.

"What do you actually do in Kokkeplassen?" I said.

"Surely you know, don't you? You've been there many times."

"You take care of the people living there."

"Yes, you could put it like that."

"But why are they there, actually? Why don't they live at home?"

She considered that question at length. Indeed, she thought for so long that my mind was on other things by the time she answered.

"Many of the people who live there suffer from anxiety. Do you know what that is?"

I shook my head.

"It's when you're afraid of something and you don't know what it is."

"Are they afraid all the time?"

She nodded.

"Yes, they are. And then I talk to them. Do a variety of activities with them to make them less afraid."

"But . . ." I said. "Aren't they afraid of one thing in particular? Or are they just afraid?"

"Yes, that's exactly how it is. They're just afraid. But then it passes and then they move back home."

There was another pause.

"Why did you ask about that? Is it something you've been wondering about?"

"Nope. It was Frøken. We had to tell her what our parents did. I said you worked at Kokkeplassen, and she asked what you did there. I wasn't a hundred percent sure. But do you know what Geir said? He said his mother taught the people who were where she worked to tie their shoelaces!"

"That's a good way of putting it. The ones she works with aren't afraid. But they have difficulty doing the little chores we take for granted. Like cooking and washing. And getting dressed. So Martha goes there and helps them."

She got up and stirred the pot.

"They're loonies, aren't they?" I said.

"'Mentally handicapped' is the expression," she said, looking at me. "'Loony' is a very ugly word."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

A door opened on the floor below.

"I'm going to see Yngve," I said, getting up.

"You do that," Mom said.

I walked as fast as I could without running. If I set off as soon as I heard the first door I would reach Yngve's room before Dad had come up the stairs and seen me. If I set off when I heard the second door he would see me.

Now I could hear the first footstep on the stairs as I closed the door behind me.

Yngve was still on his bed reading. He had a soccer magazine now.

"Food ready soon?" he said.

"I think so," I said. "Can I borrow a comic?"

"Help yourself," he said. "But be gentle with it."

Dad walked past outside. I bent down over the pile of comic books on the shelf. He kept his comics in collections, so *The Phantom* was in a file, for example, while mine lay all strewn about. He was also a member of the *Phantom* Club.

"Can I take the whole file?" I said.

"Out of the question," he said.

"The annual then?"

"You can have that," he said. "But bring it back when you've finished!"

On Saturdays we had cold rice pudding in the morning and a hot meal in the evening, usually a casserole, always in the dining room, and not in the kitchen where we normally ate. There was a napkin by each place. Mom and Dad drank beer or wine with the food; we were given a soft drink. After eating we watched TV. More often than not there was some Broadway-style show from a studio in Oslo, with women dressed in net stockings, jackets, and hats and carrying canes, while men in dinner jackets, white scarves, and hats and carrying canes came down a white staircase singing some song or other. Frequently it was "New York, New York." Sølvi Wang, whom Mom liked, usually was featured. Leif Juster, Arve Opsahl, and Dag Frøland were other regular contributors to Saturday night TV. Wenche Myhre used to perform a sketch playing a young girl in a nursery, or there was the *Eurovision Song Contest*, which, aside from the FA Cup Final, the European Cup Final, and Wimbledon, was the pinnacle of the year's TV.

On this evening, a man dressed in rags sat on a roof singing and he had an incredibly deep voice. *Oul man rivå*, he sang. I was humming the song all evening. *Oul man rivå*, I sang as I was brushing my teeth, *Oul man rivå*, I sang as I was getting undressed, *Oul man rivå*, I sang lying in bed and going to sleep.

Mom and Dad had closed the sliding door and were in the living room sitting and chatting, smoking, listening to music, and finishing off the bottle of wine after dinner. Between the songs I could just hear Dad's rumbling voice and was aware that Mom said something in the pauses, although I couldn't hear her.

I fell asleep. When I awoke they were still there. Were they going to talk all night, or what? I thought, and fell asleep again.

The warm, bright September days were summer's last burst of energy before abruptly crumbling, and in its place came rain. T-shirts and shirts were exchanged for sweaters and long trousers, jackets were put on in the morning and, when the torrential autumn rain set in, rubber boots and raincoats. Streams swelled, gravel roads were covered in puddles, water poured down the gutters in the streets, bringing with it sand, small stones, and pine and spruce needles. Beach life stopped, people no longer went on trips in their boats on the weekends, and the traffic to and from the pontoons was all about fishing now. Dad also got out his fishing equipment, the rod, the reel, the lures, and the gaff, put on his dark-green oilskins, and chugged to the far side of the island, where some weekends he stood alone for hours, fishing for the big cod that were there during the winter season. It was very appropriate that the swimming class started at this time because there was something unnatural about the thought of swimming in an indoor pool when the sun was baking hot outside. It was every Tuesday evening all autumn, and everyone in the class had signed up. Since Mom left for work before I got up in the morning I reminded her about the course the night before, so that she would remember to buy me a swimming cap on her way home. We should have done it a long time ago, but for some reason or other it hadn't happened. When I heard her car coming up the hill I ran down into the hall and waited. She came in wearing her coat, carrying a bag over her shoulder, and, on seeing me, smiled a weary smile. No plastic bag from a sports shop in evidence anywhere. Perhaps it was in her handbag? After all, a bathing cap occupied no space.

"Have you got the cap?" I said.

"Oh no, do you know what?" she said.

"You forgot it? You didn't forget it, did you? The course is today!"

"I did. I was lost in my own world on the way back from work. But you know . . . when does it start?"

"At six," I said.

She looked at her watch.

"It's half past three now. The shops close at four. I can make it if I go now. I can do that. Tell Dad I'll be back again in an hour, will you?"

I nodded.

"Hurry up then!" I said.

Dad was in the kitchen frying chops. A cloud of cooking fumes hovered in the air above the stove. The lid on the potatoes clanked against the side of the pan with the pressure from the steam. He had the radio on and stood with his back to it, one hand holding the spatula and the other resting against the edge of the counter.

"Dad?" I said.

He swivelled round.

"What?" he said. And when he saw me, "What do you want?"

"Mom'll be back in an hour," I said. "She told me to tell you."

"Has she been here and gone off again?"

I nodded.

"Why? What for?"

"To buy a swim cap. I've got my swimming course today."

The irritation in his eyes was unmistakable. But I wasn't out of the woods yet. I couldn't just turn on my heels and go.

Then he nodded in the direction of my room, and I went, glad to have got off so lightly.

Ten minutes later he called us. We slunk onto the landing from our rooms, warily pulled our chairs back from the table, sat down, waited until Dad had put the potatoes, a chop, a little pile of browned onions, and some boiled carrots on our plates before, sitting up straight and utterly still, apart from our forearms, mouths, and heads, we started to eat. No one said a word during the meal. When our plates were empty, except for the potato skins and the bones that had been gnawed clean, we thanked Dad and went back to our rooms. From the whistling I could hear I concluded that Dad was making coffee in the kitchen. After it had stopped, he went down to his study, probably with a cup of coffee in his hand. I lay on my bed reading with my ears tuned to the noises outside the house, the drone of cars passing, and I recognized the sound of Mom's VW the moment it turned into the road farther down, Beetles were unmistakable and, had I made a mistake, nonetheless, I was absolutely certain I was right a few seconds later when it entered Nordåsen Ringvei. I got up and went onto the landing above the staircase. As Dad was in his study, it was the best place to wait.

The door opened, I heard her taking off first her boots, then her jacket, which she hung on the hat stand in the corner, and her footsteps across the carpet in the hallway below, which, as they began to climb the stairs, seemed to merge into the sight of her.

"Have you got it?" I said.

"Yes, no problem," she said.

"Can I see it?"

She passed me the white Intersport bag she was holding. I opened it and pulled out the bathing cap.

"But Mom, it's got flowers on it!" I said. "I can't wear a cap with flowers on it! That's no good! It's a woman's! You bought a woman's swimming cap!"

"Isn't it lovely?" she said.

I looked down at the cap with tears in my eyes. It was white, and the flowers decorating it were not just printed on but small, raised plastic imitations of flowers.

"You'll have to go and change it," I said.

"Karl Ove, my love, the shops are closed. I can't."

She laid her hand on my head and looked at me.

"Is it really that bad?" she said.

"I can't go to the class with this. I won't go. I'll stay at home."

"But Karl Ove," she said.

The tears were streaming down my cheeks now.

"You've been looking forward to the class so much," she said. "Surely a few flowers don't matter that much, do they? You can still go. Then we'll buy you a new cap for next time. I can use this one. I need one. And I think the flowers look lovely, I really do."

"You don't understand anything, do you," I said. "I *can't* go. That's a *woman's swimming cap*!" I shouted.

"Now I think you're being unreasonable," Mom said.

At that moment Dad's study door slammed. He could scent a scene like this from a range of several kilometers. Quick as a flash, I dried my eyes and put the cap back in the bag. But it was too late. He was already at the bottom of the stairs.

"Well?" he said.

"Karl Ove didn't like the bathing cap I bought him," Mom said. "So now he's refusing to go to the swimming class."

"What nonsense is this!" Dad said. He came up the last steps and lifted my chin with his hand.

"You're going to the class with the cap your mother has bought you. Is that understood?"

"Yes," I said.

"And don't burst into tears over such trivialities. It's pathetic."

"Yes," I said, wiping my eyes with my hand again.

"Go into your room and stay there until it's time to leave. Now."

I did as he said.

"Imagine going all the way back to town to buy it in the first place," I heard him say as they went into the kitchen.

"But he's been looking forward to this class for so long," Mom said. "It was the least I could do. I had promised him. And then I went and forgot."

An hour later Mom came in to get me. We went downstairs to the hall, I had decided not to talk to her, and said nothing, just put on my boots and anorak. In my hand I had a bag with my trunks, towel, and the swimming cap in it. Opening the door, I saw Geir and Leif Tore waiting outside, each holding a plastic bag. It was getting dark outside, and the air was heavy with drizzle. Their hair was wet; their jackets glistened in the light from the lamp above the door.

They said hello to Mom, Mom returned the greeting, and then she dashed across the gravel with us close behind. She opened the car door, pushed the seat forward, and we clambered onto the backseat.

She inserted the key into the ignition and started the engine.

"Is there something wrong with the exhaust?" Leif Tore asked.

"Yes, it's an old car," Mom said, putting the car into reverse and backing up the hill. The wipers dawdled to and fro across the windshield. The headlights lit up the black spruce trees across the road, which seemed to take a step toward us.

"Geir can swim," I said. Then I remembered I wasn't going to say anything.

"Very impressive!" Mom said. Flicked the turn-signal lever down and glanced through the right-hand window before turning onto the road and driving off to the next crossroads, where everything was repeated, just the other way around: now the lever was flicked up and she glanced through the left-hand window.

"And you, Leif Tore, can you already swim?" she said.

The roar of the engine rebounded off the blasted rock face on the other side of the road as we struggled up the hill to Tromøya Bridge. The lights at the top of the mast glowed red in the night. If you didn't know any better you would probably think they were floating in the air, I thought.

Leif Tore shook his head.

"Just a bit," he said.

The rain-filled gloom had begun to merge the sea and the uplands, I could see as we crossed the bridge. The difference could still be distinguished because the darkness of the land was a shade deeper and denser than that of the calm water, which had a kind of sheen to it. The lights, visible on both sides, seemed to hang in midair in the far distance, almost like stars in the firmament, while those closest, whose illuminated surroundings could still be made out, were set in the landscape in quite a different way. Green and red lights shone from lanterns or small lighthouses here and there. We drove down to the intersection over the bridge, houses and gardens appeared on one side, industrial buildings on the other, yellow and empty in the light of the headlights, with the dripping tarpaulin of night hanging above. The wipers were racing across the windshield; the rain was heavier now. Leif Tore said Rolf had been in the same swimming class. The teacher was an older woman, in her forties, who, according to Rolf, was very strict. But Rolf said so many things. If he got a chance to pull a fast one on Leif Tore, or anyone else, he took it. I said I didn't have any goggles with me, but I could see underwater, so it wasn't a problem. Geir showed us his. They were Speedo goggles with blue glass and white elastic.

"What about your cap?" Leif Tore said.

"My dad's. It's a bit big!" Geir laughed.

"Does your dad have a swimming cap? Mine definitely doesn't. Does yours?" Leif Tore asked, looking at me.

"I don't think so. What's the time, Mom? Will we make it?"

Mom raised her left arm and consulted her watch.

"Twenty-five to six. So we're in good time."

"Why do only women and children wear caps?" Leif Tore continued.

"They don't," I said. "Swimmers who take part in competitions wear them, too."

"I'm going to get one of those white ones with a Norwegian flag on it the next time we have any money," Geir said. "Dad promised me today. And then he said I could join a swimming club as soon as I can swim properly. In town."

"But weren't we going to join a soccer club?" I said.

"Ye-es. I can do both, can't I?" Geir said.

Mom signaled to leave the main road, drove up a gravel road leading to an unilluminated school, and parked in front.

"I think it's over there," she said, pointing to a low building behind.

"It is," Leif Tore said. "Because that's Trond and Geir Håkon over there."

"I'll be back to pick you up in about an hour then," Mom said. "Good luck!"

We piled out of the car with our bags and ran to the entrance as Mom's green Beetle turned and drove back the way we had come.

The changing room was cold, the floor a greenish color, the walls white, the light in the ceiling shrill. A number of cream-colored wooden benches ran along three of the walls, with a line of hooks above. Five of the boys had come; they chatted and laughed as they undressed. They said hi to us.

"The water in the pool's cold!" Sverre said.

"Freezing cold," Geir B added.

"Have you been in?" Leif Tore said.

"Of course," Sverre said.

I sat down on the bench and pulled my sweater over my head. Stood up and took off my trousers. The faint smell of chlorine filled me with happiness. I loved chlorine, I loved swimming pools, I loved swimming. Geir B, Sverre, and Dag Magne went into the shower naked. Trond and Geir Håkon followed. We had been told in the strictest of terms that we had to have a shower before we entered the pool. I watched them all as they stood at a distance from the shower, stretched out a hand to turn it on with as much caution as if they were dealing with an unpredictable animal, and checked the temperature of the water with the other. Once it was warm enough they stood underneath, all with their backs to the wall. Their hair stuck to their foreheads. I took off my underpants, left my clothes in a pile on the bench, and waited for Geir and Leif Tore to finish. The door opened, four new boys came in, among them John. There was something I didn't like about being naked when the new arrivals were well wrapped up, so I took the soap and towel from my bag and went into the showers, to the one farthest away, which was one of three that were unoccupied. Geir and Leif Tore came straight after me, fortunately.

Oh, how wonderful it was to stand under the hot water as the room slowly filled with steam! I could have stood there forever. But my skin went so red whenever I showered, especially my bum, which after ten minutes of really hot water looked like the rear end of one of those monkeys with red rumps. It was impossible not to notice or make a comment on, so after a couple of minutes and a quick check of the color of my backside, I turned the shower off, dried, and went into the changing room to put on my trunks. It wasn't only after a shower that it went red, it also stuck out quite a bit. Dad used to say I had a bulging bum. It was true, and it was important for me that no one noticed and made a comment. That kind of thing spread like wildfire.

I sat for a while on the bench, bent forward with my hands on my knees, watching the others coming out of the shower one by one, all with big heads, fair hair, darkened now by the water, pale skin where, after only a few weeks, the clear marks left by a T-shirt and swimming trunks were now disappearing, and skinny bodies, no one was fat in our class, not even Vemund, he was just a bit flabby and had round cheeks, but still he was called fat, the class fatty. Someone had to be. The skin on my arms was developing goose pimples in the cold air and I ran my hands over them quickly a few times. I tried to recapture the happiness the chlorine had filled me with, but now it was as if I couldn't regain it, as if it had been used up or taken over by everything else that was happening.

Through the chink in the open door I saw that the lights in the swimming pool had been switched on.

"It's starting!" someone shouted.

The few boys left in the showers hurried out. The rest put on their bathing trunks, goggles, and caps.

A whistle sounded from inside. I took the cap from my bag, crumpled it up in my hand, and went to the pool, after Geir, before John. The girls came out of their changing room opposite at exactly the same moment. The teacher stood by the edge of the pool beckoning to us. The whistle hung from a cord around her neck. She was holding a sheet of paper in a transparent plastic sleeve.

She blew the whistle again. The last boys came running out of the changing room, laughing.

"Don't run!" she yelled. "We never run in here. It's slippery and the floor's hard."

She adjusted her glasses.

"Hello and welcome to the class!" she said. "We'll be meeting here six times this autumn, and our goal is to teach everyone to swim. As this is our first lesson today, we'll take things slowly. First of all, we can play in the water for a bit, and then we'll practice some strokes on the mats you can see over there."

"On land?" Sverre said. "Are we going to learn to swim on land?"

"Yes, that's exactly what we're going to do. Now, there are some simple rules we have to follow. You always shower before getting into the pool. Is there anyone here who hasn't had a shower?"

No one said anything.

"Good! And you must all wear caps. There is to be no running, not even when we have finished. There is to be no dunking! Not under any circumstances! There is to be no jumping into the pool. Always use one of the two ladders you can see."

"Are we allowed to dive then?" John asked.

"Can you dive?" she asked.

"Yes, a bit," John said.

"No, you are not allowed to dive," she said. "Not even 'a bit.' So, no jumping, no diving, and no running. And whenever I blow this whistle you pay attention to me. Have you got that?"

"Yes."

"Right, let's start with the roll call. Answer me when I say your name."

Anne Lisbet was the first to have her name called out, as usual. She was standing right at the back in a red swimsuit, smiling, laughing almost, as she answered. I felt a tingle go through me. At the same time I dreaded my name being read out, hated the way every name was sliced off like a piece of bread and put to one side, until it was my turn. Usually I looked forward to this, sitting in class with everyone's attention drawn to me for a second, how loud and clear my voice was . . . but this was different.

"John!" she said.

"Yes, here," John said, waving his raised hand.

She sent him a sharp glance before going on to the next.

"Karl Ove!" she said.

"Yes," I said.

She looked at me.

"Where's your bathing cap? Haven't you got it with you?"

"Here," I said, raising my hand with the cap so that she could see.

"Put it on then, young man!" she said.

"I'd prefer to wait until I'm in the water," I said.

"There's no 'preferring' here. On with it!"

I unfurled it, drew apart the sides, and wriggled it into position on my head. This did not go unnoticed.

"Look at Karl Ove!" someone said.

"He's wearing a woman's cap!"

"A cap with flowers on it! That's for old biddies!"

"Now, now," said the swimming teacher. "All caps are acceptable here. Marianne!"

"Yes," Marianne said.

But I didn't escape so lightly. All around me there were grins, nudges, and amused grimaces. The cap seemed to be burning on my head.

When the roll call was over everyone went as quickly as they could to the two ladders at the corners of the pool. The water was cold, it was best to submerge your body as fast as possible, and I crouched down, launched myself, and took as many strokes as I could manage along the bottom. I could swim underwater; the problem was on top. But what a feeling it was, with the bottom only a few centimeters beneath my body and all the water above me! As I broke the surface and stood up, I searched for Geir.

"Did you borrow your mom's cap, or what?" Sverre said.

"No, I did not," I said.

Geir and Leif Tore had both taken a kickboard, they lunged forward with it in their hands, and kicked as hard as they could. I went over to them.

"Want to go a bit farther up and dive?" I said.

They nodded, and we waded off with the slow, heavy steps you take when you walk in water, until it was up under our arms.

"Is it true your eyes can be open underwater?" Leif Tore said.

"Yes," I said. "All you have to do is keep them open."

"But it'll sting!" he said.

"It doesn't sting mine," I said, happy for the opportunity he had given me to shine. For a while we tried to dive the way divers did, swimming on the surface of the water and then bobbing down with their legs in the air. None of us could do it, but Geir was quite close. He was good at everything in water.

When the whistle sounded and we assembled by the thin blue mats to practice strokes, I had almost completely forgotten about the cap. But then Marianne came over to me.

"Why do you have a woman's cap?" she said. "Did you think the flowers were so pretty, or what?"

"That's enough about the cap," the teacher said. She had been standing right behind us. "Okay?"

"Okay," Marianne said.

We lay on our stomachs on the mats, waving our arms and kicking our legs like pale overgrown frogs. The teacher walked around correcting our movements. Then we had to go into the pool again, take a kickboard, and practice our kicks. When we had been doing that for some time, the lesson was suddenly over. After a short get-together at the end of the pool, when she praised us, told us what we would be doing in the next lesson, and reminded us to have a shower, we went into the changing room. I sat down on the bench and was about to put the cap in my bag when Sverre bounded over and grabbed it out of my hand.

"Let me have a look!" he said.

"No," I said. "Give it to me."

I lunged at him, but he jumped back. He put on the cap and walked around wiggling his hips.

"Oh, what lovely flowers I have on my cap," he said in a girl's voice.

"Hand it over," I said, getting up.

He took a couple more mincing steps.

"Karl Ove's got a woman's cap, Karl Ove's got a girl's cap," he said. As I ran at him he removed the cap, dangled it in front of me, and took a couple of steps backward.

"Let me have it," I said. "It's mine!"

I made another lunge at it. Sverre threw it to John.

"Karl Ove's got a girl's cap," he chanted. I turned to him and tried to grab it. He gripped my arm and squeezed while holding the cap in front of my face.

I started to cry.

"I want it!" I shouted. "Give it to me!"

My eyes were almost blind with tears.

John threw it back to Sverre.

He held it up in the air and gazed at it.

"Look! What nice flowers!" he said. "Oh, how pretty they are!"

"Give it to him," someone said. "He's crying."

"Oh, the poor baby. Do you want this lovely cap back?" he said, and threw it to where I had been sitting. I walked back, put it in my bag, took my towel, and went in for a shower, stood under the hot jet for a brief moment, dried, dressed, and was the first to leave the changing room, found my boots among all the others in the front hall, put them on, opened the glass door, and stepped out into the playground, where the large, shallow puddles, visible only because they were a little shinier than the surrounding pavement, were lashed by rain. There wasn't a soul around. I walked toward the school building, which was almost identical to ours, and saw the green Beetle parked exactly where Mom had dropped us just over an hour ago.

I opened the door and got into the back.

"Hi," Mom said, turning to me. Her face was illuminated by the gleam of a lamp hanging over the edge of the school like a vulture.

"Hi," I said.

"Did it all go well?"

"Fine."

"Where are Geir and Leif Tore?"

"They're coming."

"Can you swim now?"

"Nearly," I said. "But we swam mostly on land."

"On land?"

"Yes, on some mats. To learn the strokes."

"Oh, I see," Mom said, turning back. The smoke from the cigarette she held in her hand hung under the sloping windshield, thick and gray. She took another drag, then pulled out the little metal ashtray and stubbed out the cigarette. From the swimming pool door swarmed a mass of kids. A car headlight swept across the pavement, then another. The two cars drove almost right up to the entrance.

"Perhaps I'd better tell them you're here," I said, opening the door.

"Geir! Leif Tore!" I shouted. "Car's over here!"

They both looked at me, but they didn't come, they stayed with the kids collecting around the entrance.

"Geir! Leif Tore!" I shouted. "Come on!"

And then they came. Said something to the others first, then they set off, side by side, at a jog across the playground. White plastic bags hanging from their hands, the only things about them that reflected any light and they resembled heads.

"Hello, Fru Knausgaard," they said, getting into the backseat.

"Hello," Mom said. "Was it good?"

"Not bad," they said. They looked at me.

"Yes, it was fun," I said. "But the teacher was strict."

"Was he?" Mom said, starting the car.

"It was a she," I said.

"Oh," Mom said.

When, four days later, I was walking up through the forest with Geir, Leif Tore, and Trond, after the brief and unsuccessful hunt for treasure at the end of the rainbow, the fantasy of being able to swim among the trees there made me pause to wonder whether I would ever be able to swim at all. Grandad couldn't swim, and at one time he had even been a fisherman. I didn't know if Grandma could, but I found it difficult to imagine her swimming.

Behind the swaying pine trees clouds scudded across the sky.

What was the time, I wondered.

"Do you have your watch on, Geir?" I said.

He shook his head.

"I do," Trond said, thrusting his hand forward and up, making his sleeve glide back, so that his watch was visible.

"Twenty-five past one, no, past two," he said.

"Twenty-five past two?" I said.

He nodded and my stomach churned. On Saturdays we had rice pudding at *one.*

Oh no, oh no.

I broke into a run, as if that would help.

"Got a rocket up your ass, or what?" said Leif Tore behind me. I craned my head.

"Lunch was supposed to be at one," I said. "I'd better go."

Up the soft fir-needle-strewn incline, over the little algae-green stream, past the tall spruce, and up the slope to the road.

Both Mom's and Dad's cars were there. But not Yngve's bike. Had he been home, eaten, and cycled off again? Or he was he late as well?

The thought, unlikely though it was, kept a little hope burning within me.

Across the road, into the drive. Dad might be behind the house, might come round the corner at any second. Might be waiting for me in the hall, might be in his study, and tear the door open when he heard me. Might be standing at the kitchen window waiting for me to appear.

I closed the door gently behind me and stood still for a couple of seconds. Footsteps on the kitchen floor above me. Dad's. I took off my boots, placed them by the wall, unbuttoned my waterproof jacket, pulled down my waterproof trousers, took them into the boiler room, and hung them on the line there. Stopped and glanced at myself in the mirror above the chest of drawers. My cheeks were red, my hair was a mess, there was some shiny snot under my nose. My teeth stuck out as always. Buckteeth, as people called them. I went upstairs and into the kitchen. Mom was doing the dishes; Dad was sitting at the table eating crab claws. Both looked at me. The pot of rice was on the stove, the orange plastic ladle protruding.

"I lost track of time," I said. "Sorry. We were having a lot of fun."

"Sit down," Dad said. "You must be hungry, I imagine."

Mom took a dish from the cupboard, filled it with rice pudding, and put a bowl of sugar, a packet of margarine, and a cinnamon shaker, which hadn't been put away with the other spices, beside it.

"What have you been up to?" she said. "Oh, you need a spoon as well."

"This and that," I said.

"You and . . . ?" Dad said, without looking at me. He folded the small white bits that stuck out from the end of the hairy orange claw to the side and put the claw to his mouth. Sucked at it with a short slurp. I could hear the meat being released and sliding into his mouth.

"Geir, Leif Tore, and Trond," I said. He broke the empty claw at the joint and began to suck on the next. I put a knob of margarine on the rice, even though it wasn't warm enough to melt, and sprinkled some cinnamon and sugar on it.

"I've cleaned the roof gutters," he said. "You should have been here."

"Oh, yes," I said.

"But now I'm going to chop a bit of wood. As soon as you've eaten up, you can join me."

I nodded and tried to look happy, but he could read my thoughts. "We'll be finished in time for the match," he said. "Who's playing today?"

"Stoke and Norwich," I said.

"Noritsch," he said, correcting my pronunciation.

"Nowitsch," I said.

I liked Norwich, I liked their yellow-and-green uniforms. I liked Stoke, too, with their red-and-white-striped shirts. But best of all I liked the Wolverhampton Wanderers, who played in gold and black and whose mascot was a wolf's head. Wolves, that was my team.

I would have preferred to lie down and read until the match started, but I couldn't say no to Dad, and bearing in mind what could have happened I had to count myself lucky.

The rice was so cold that I ate it in a couple of minutes.

"Are you full?" Dad said.

I nodded.

"Let's go then," he said.

He scooped the empty crab shells into the trash can, put the plates on the counter, and went out, with me hard on his heels. From Yngve's room came the sound of music. I looked at the door, nonplussed. How could *that* be? His bike wasn't there.

"Come on," Dad said, already on the landing. I followed him. On with my jacket and boots, out onto the gravel, wait for him.

He came a few minutes later with an ax in his hand and a playful glint in his eye. Follow him over the flagstones, then across the waterlogged lawn. We weren't allowed to walk on the grass, but when I was with him, such edicts could be lifted.

Quite a long time ago he had chopped down a birch tree by the fence in the kitchen garden. All that remained of it was a pile of logs that he wanted to split now. I wasn't supposed to do anything, just stand there and watch, to "keep him company," as he called it.

He removed the tarpaulin, took a log, and placed it on the chopping block.

"Well?" he said, raising the ax above his shoulder, concentrating for a second, and letting fly. The blade bit into the white wood. "Everything going well at school?"

"Yes," I said.

He lifted the log with the ax wedged in and hit it against the block a few times until it split into two. Held the parts and split them, placed them on the ground by the rock face, wiped his brow with his hand, and straightened up. I could see from his body that he was happy.

"And Frøken?" he said. "Torgersen was her name, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "She's nice."

"Nice?" he said, taking a new log and repeating the procedure.

"Yes," I said.

"Is there anyone who isn't nice?" he said.

I hesitated. He suspended his chopping activities for a moment.

"Well, since you say that she's nice, there must be someone who isn't nice. Otherwise the word loses all its meaning. Do you understand?"

He resumed his work.

"I think so," I said.

There was a silence. I turned away and saw the water rising above the grass beyond the path.

"Myklebust, he's not so nice," I said, turning back.

"Myklebust!" Dad said. "I know him."

"Do you?" I said.

"Sure. He comes to the meetings at the Teachers' Association. Next time I see him, I'll tell him you said he wasn't nice to your class."

"No, please don't do that!" I said.

He smiled.

"Of course I won't," he said. "Don't worry."

Then there was another silence. Dad worked, I stood there with my arms hanging down by my sides, motionless, watching. My feet were beginning to get cold. I wasn't wearing thick socks. And my fingers were beginning to get cold.

There was no one out. Apart from the occasional car that went past, there wasn't a soul around. The lights in the houses were beginning to get brighter, apparently regulated and intensified by the nascent twilight, which, in contrast with the open sky, seemed to rise from the ground. As though beneath us there was a reservoir of darkness that seeped through thousands, no, millions of tiny holes in the ground every afternoon.

I watched Dad. Sweat was running down his forehead. I rubbed my palms against each other several times. He leaned forward. Just as he was grabbing the log and about to straighten up, he farted. Caught in the act.

"You said we should only fart in the toilet," I said.

At first he didn't answer.

"It's different when you're outside in the open air," he said, without meeting my gaze. "Then you can, well, let your farts go free."

He brought down the ax onto the log and split it in half at the first attempt. The sound of the blow rebounded off the house wall and the cliff above, the latter with a strange delay, as though there were a man up there swinging an ax exactly one second after Dad.

Dad swung again and threw the four pieces of wood on the pile. Took another log.

"Could you start piling them up, Karl Ove?" he said.

I nodded and went over to the small pile.

How should I do it? What did he have in mind? Alongside the rock or coming off it? A narrow pile or a wide one?

I looked at him again. He didn't notice. I squatted and picked up a piece of wood. Placed it up against the rock, on end. Placed another piece next to it. When I had laid five in a row, I laid one crosswise on top of them. It was exactly the same length as the width of the five logs. So I laid four more on top, making two equally large squares. Now I could either make two squares next to it, identical, or start a new layer on top.

"What *are* you doing?" Dad said. "Are you completely stupid? You don't stack wood like that!"

He bent down and scattered the logs with his big hands. I watched him with tears in my eyes.

"You lay them lengthwise!" he said. "Have you never seen a woodpile before?"

He looked at me.

"Don't stand there weeping like a girl, Karl Ove. Can't you do anything right?"

Then he went on chopping. I started stacking the logs the way he told me. Sobs shook me every so often. My hands and toes were freezing. At least it wasn't difficult stacking them lengthwise. The only question was when to stop. When I had laid them all in a row I stood up with my hands down by my sides and watched him as I had done before. The glint in his expression was gone; I saw that as soon as he glanced at me from the corner of his eye. But that didn't necessarily mean something would happen, as long as I didn't say or do anything that might irritate him. At the same time the thought of the match on TV was gnawing at me. It must have started ages ago. He had forgotten about it, but I couldn't remind him, not the way the situation was. My toes and fingers were hurting me more and more. Dad just kept chopping. He paused and occasionally flicked back his hair in a typical gesture of his, a kind of slow toss of his head along with his hand.

We had just been given a post office box in Pusnes, which meant we no longer received mail in our mailbox on the hill, only a newspaper, and Dad had to drive there to collect our mail. Last Saturday I had sat in the car with him, and he had combed his hair in the mirror, perhaps for a whole minute, patting his thick, shiny locks afterward, and then got out. I had never seen that before. And when he went in, a woman had turned to look at him. She was unaware that someone who knew him was sitting in the car watching what went on. But why had she turned? Did she know him? I had never seen her before. Perhaps she was the mother of someone in his class?

I put the new logs he threw over on top of the first row. Wriggled my toes backward and forward in my boots, not that it helped, they hurt, hurt, hurt.

I was about to say that I was freezing cold, took a deep breath, but then I paused. Turned again and looked at the shiny pool that shouldn't have been there. Watched a large transparent bubble breaking the surface right above the rusty manhole cover. When I turned back, Steinar was walking along the road. He was carrying a guitar case over his back, with his head bent, his long black hair falling over his shoulders and swaying gently to and fro.

"Hello there, Knausgaard!" he said as he passed.

Dad stood up and sent him a nod.

"Hi there," he said.

"Doing a bit of wood chopping, I see!" Steinar said, without slowing down.

"I am," Dad said.

He resumed work. I paced backward and forward, backward and forward.

"Stop doing that," Dad said.

"Okay, but I'm freezing cold!" I said.

He sent me an icy stare.

"Oh, you're fweezing, are you?" he said.

My eyes filled with tears again.

"Stop parroting me," I said.

"Oh, so I can't pawwot you now?"

"NO!" I yelled.

He stiffened. Dropped the ax and came toward me. Grabbed my ear and twisted it round.

"Are you talking back to me?" he said.

"No," I said, looking down at the ground.

He twisted harder.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

I raised my head.

"Do not talk back to me! Have you got that?"

"Yes," I said.

He let go, turned, and put another log on the block. I was crying so much I could barely breathe. Dad ignored me and kept on chopping. There were only a couple of logs left now, then he was finished.

I walked back to the low stack of wood and added the new logs. Wriggled my toes in my boots. The tears receded, there was just the odd surreptitious aftershock in the form of an untimely and wholly uncontrollable sob. I dried my eyes on my sleeve, Dad tossed four logs over, I put them on the stack, when a thought fluttered in to lift me out of my misery. I wouldn't watch the soccer. I would go straight to my room and let Yngve and him watch it without me.

Yes.

Yes.

"There we are," he said, throwing over the last four. "That's us finished."

I followed him without a word, took off my boots and my coat and hung it up, went upstairs, gathered from the noise in the living room that Yngve was watching the match, and went into my room.

I sat down at my desk and pretended to read.

Just so that he got the message.

He did. A few minutes later he opened the door.

"The match has started," he said. "Come on."

"I don't want to see it," I said, without meeting his eyes.

"Are you being headstrong now?" he said.

He came into the room, grabbed my arm, and dragged me to my feet.

"Come on," he said. He let go of my arm.

I stood still.

"I DON'T WANT TO SEE THE MATCH!" I said.

Without another word, he grabbed my arm again and dragged me crying out of my room, through the hall, and into the living room, where he hurled me onto the sofa next to Yngve.

"Now you sit there and watch the game with us," he said. "Have you got that?"

I had thought of closing my eyes if he forced me into the living room, but now I didn't dare.

He had bought a bag of glacier mints and a bag of English chocolate toffees. The toffees were my favorite, but the glacier mints were good as well. As usual, he had the bags next to him on the table. Now and then he threw one to me and Yngve. Today he did the same. But I wouldn't eat them; I left them untouched in front of me. In the end, he reacted.

"Eat your candy," he said.

"I don't feel like them," I said.

He stood up.

"Now you eat your candy," he said.

"No," I said, and started crying again. "I don't want to. I don't want to."

"Now you EAT them!" he said. He grabbed my arm and squeezed.

"I-don't-want-any . . . candy," I gasped.

He seized the back of my head and pressed it forward, almost down to the table.

"There they are," he said. "Can you see them? Eat them. Now."

"Okay," I said, and he let go. Stood over me until I had unwrapped a chocolate-coated toffee and put it in my mouth.

The next day we were going to Kristiansand to visit my father's parents. We often did that on the Sundays when IK Start was playing at home. First of all, we had dinner there, then Yngve, Dad, and Grandad went to the match, sometimes Mom did as well, while I stayed with Grandma because I was too small.

Both Mom and Dad had put on better clothes than usual. Dad wore a white shirt, a brown tweed jacket with brown patches on the elbows, and light-brown cotton slacks, Mom wore a blue dress. Yngve and I wore shirts and cords, Yngve's were brown, mine were blue.

Outside, the sky was overcast, but the clouds were of the fluffy whitish-gray variety that, while they may have shut out the sky, did not carry rain. The road was dry and gray, the gravel dry and blue gray, and the trunks of the pines standing tall at the top of the estate dry and reddish.

Yngve and I got into the back, Mom and Dad the front. Dad lit a cigarette before starting the car. I was behind him, so he couldn't see me unless I leaned to the side. As we reached the crossroads below the slope up to Tromøya Bridge I folded my hands and said to myself, "Dear God, please don't let us crash today. Amen."

I prayed like this whenever we went on longer trips because Dad drove so fast, he was always above the speed limit, always overtaking other cars. Mom said he was a good driver, and he was, but every time the car accelerated and we crossed the white line, a feeling of terror took me in its grip.

Speed and anger went hand in hand. Mom drove carefully, was considerate, never minded if the car in front was slow, she was patient and followed. That was how she was at home as well. She never got angry, always had time to help, didn't mind if things got broken, accidents happened, she liked to chat with us, she was interested in what we said, she often served food that was not absolutely necessary, such as waffles, buns, cocoa, and bread fresh out of the oven, while Dad on the other hand tried to purge our lives of anything that had no direct relevance to the situation in which we found ourselves: we ate food because it was a necessity, and the time we spent eating had no value in itself; when we watched TV we watched TV and were not allowed to talk or do anything else; when we were in the garden we had to stay on the flagstones, they had been laid for precisely that purpose, while the lawn, big and inviting though it was, was not for walking, running, or lying on. Yngve and I had never celebrated a birthday at home, and that was rooted in the same logic, it was unnecessary, a cake with the family after dinner was sufficient. We weren't allowed to have friends at home and that was also another aspect of the same logic, because why would we want to be indoors, where we only made a mess and created havoc, when the world outside existed? Our friends would have been able to tell their parents how we lived, and that may well have been a factor; actually the same logic applied here, too. Actually it explained everything. We weren't allowed to touch any of Dad's tools, not a hammer, not a screwdriver, not a saw or a pair of pliers, a snow shovel or broom, nor were we allowed to cook in the kitchen, nor even cut a slice of bread, nor switch on the TV or radio. If we had been allowed to do that, the house would have been turned upside down, whereas the way it was organized now everything was orderly, as it should be, and if anything was used, by him or Mom, it was done in a methodical, appropriate fashion. It was the same with driving: he wanted to progress as speedily as possible, with the fewest possible hold-ups, from one point to the next. In this case, from Tromøya to Kristiansand, the hometown of this thirty-year-old schoolteacher.

Time never goes as fast as in your childhood; an hour is never as short as it was then. Everything is open, you run here, you run there, do one thing, then another, and suddenly the sun has gone down and you find yourself standing in the twilight with time like a barrier that has suddenly gone down in front of you: Oh no, is it already *nine* o'clock? But time never goes as slowly as in your childhood either, an hour is never as long as it was then. If the openness is gone, if the opportunities to run here, there, and everywhere are gone, whether in your mind or in physical reality, every minute is like a barrier, time is a room in which you are trapped. Is there anything worse for a child than to sit in a car for a whole hour, on a journey he knows inside out, on the way to something he's looking forward to? In a car full of cigarette smoke from two parents and with a father who hisses with irritation every time you shift position and happen to nudge his seat with your knee?

Oh, how slowly time went. Oh, how slow the landmarks were in appearing outside the window. Up the steep hill from the center of Arendal, through the residential district to Hisøy Bridge, along the whole length of the island coastline, past Kokkeplassen Sanatorium, where Mom worked, down the hill and past the shops there, over the bridge crossing the Nidelva River, and then the endless plains with houses and woods and fields to Nedenes. We weren't even in Fevik yet! And from there it was still a long way to Grimstad, not to mention how far it was from Grimstad to Lillesand, and from Lillesand to Timenes, and from Timenes to Varodd Bridge, and from Varodd Bridge to Lund . . .

We sat at the back, silent, gazing out at the varied rolling countryside the road wound its way through. Past straits with islets and skerries, into the dense forests, past rivers and waterfalls, residential and industrial quarters, farms and fields, all so familiar that at any moment I knew what was coming next. Only when we drove past the zoo did we emerge from our torpor because who knew whether an animal or two might appear from behind the tall, long wire fences, free of charge! Then we were past it, and we sank back into our torpor. For an hour we sat in the backseat without moving, for an entire endless hour, before the town began to take shape around us, and the center of gravity shifted from the car journey to our imminent visit to our grandparents. Entering the town was like entering time, the clock started ticking again, there was the Oasen shop, farther down our cousins, Jon Olav and Ann Kristin, the children of Mom's sister, Kjellaug, and her husband, Magne; there were the chestnut trees along the road, the tall, dirty brick buildings behind them, there was the chemist, there was the kiosk they called Rundingen, there were the traffic lights, there was the music shop, there were the white timber houses, there was the narrow road, and then, all at once on the left-hand side, Grandma and Grandad's yellow house.

Dad drove some way past the house, down the hill, and then reversed into the lane opposite. Only then could he drive up the short, steep drive.

Grandma's face appeared in the kitchen window. When we had got out of the car, which was parked close to the wooden garage door with its black wrought-iron fittings, and were heading for the red brick steps, she opened the door.

"There you are!" she said. "Come on in!" And when we were in the small hallway:

"Oh, how I've been looking forward to seeing you two boys!"

She gave Yngve a long hug and rocked him back and forth. He looked away, but he liked it. Then she gave me a long hug and rocked me back and forth. I also looked away, but I liked it, too. Her cheek was warm, and she smelled nice.

"We might have seen a wolf in the zoo!" I said as she let go of me.

"Did you?" she said, ruffling my hair.

"No, we didn't," Yngve said. "It was just in Karl Ove's imagination."

"Oh no?" she said, ruffling his hair. "Well, it's good to see you boys anyway!"

We hung up our jackets inside, where there was an open built-in wardrobe, walked across the wall-to-wall carpet and up the staircase. On the first floor, the posh living room was on the right and the kitchen on the left. This living room was used only on Christmas Eve and other formal occasions. By the short wall there was a piano on which there stood three photos of the sons of the house wearing student caps, and above them hung two paintings. Against the long wall there were dark display cabinets, with some souvenirs from their travels arranged on top, among them a shining gondola and a golden-brown glass teapot with a very long spout, adorned with what I assumed were diamonds and rubies. At the back of the room there were two leather sofas, between them a corner cupboard decorated with painted roses and in front a low table. Through the large windows you had a view of the river and the town beyond. However, on a normal visit, which this was, we didn't go in there, we took the door to the left, to the kitchen and the two living rooms below, the lowest of which was connected to the best room via a sliding door above a little staircase. Half of the long wall was taken up by a window, through which you saw first the garden, then the river stretching out to meet the sea and, farthest away, the white Grønningen Lighthouse, towering over the horizon.

It smelled good there, not only in the kitchen, where Grandma was making meatballs and gravy, which she did better than most, but everywhere there was a fragrance that underlay all the others and was constant, a vaguely fruity sweetness I associated with this house whenever I met it outside, for example when Grandma and Grandad were visiting us, because they brought the fragrance with them, it was in their clothes, I noticed it as soon as they stepped into our hall.

"Well," Grandad said as we went into the kitchen. "Was there much traffic on the way here?"

He was sitting on his chair, legs slightly apart, wearing a gray cardigan over a blue shirt. His stomach hung over the waistband of the dark-gray trousers. His hair was black and combed back, apart from one lock, which had fallen over his forehead. A half-smoked, unlit cigarette hung from his mouth.

"No, went like clockwork," Dad said.

"How did you do with the soccer pools yesterday?" Grandad said.

"Not too well," Dad said. "Seven right was all I managed."

"I got two tens," Grandad said.

"That's pretty good," Dad said.

"I slipped up on numbers seven and eleven," Grandad said. "The second one was annoying. The goal was scored after full-time!"

"Yes," Dad said. "I didn't get that one, either."

"Did you hear what one student said to Erling the other day?" Grandma said from the stove.

"No. What?" Dad said.

"He came into class in the morning, and this student asked, 'Have you won the pools or what?' 'No,' Erling said. 'Why do you ask?' 'You look so happy,' the student said."

She laughed. "You look so happy!" she repeated.

Dad smiled.

"Anyone for a cup of coffee?" Grandma asked.

"Yes, please. I'd love one," Mom said.

"Let's sit in the living room then," Grandma said.

"Could we go upstairs and get some comics?" Yngve said.

"You can," Grandad said. "But don't make a mess!"

"Nope," Yngve said.

Treading carefully, for this was not a house you could run in either, we went into the corridor and up the stairs to the second floor. Apart from Grandma and Grandad's bedroom there was a big attic room there, and along the wall cardboard boxes containing old comics, going right back to when Dad was a child in the 1950s. There was a variety of other objects as well, among them an ancient mangle for wringing tablecloths and bed linen, an old sewing machine, a number of old games and toys, including a tin spinning top, and something that was meant to be a robot made of the same material.

But it was the comics that appealed to us. We weren't allowed to take them home with us, we had to read them there, and we read plenty from the time we arrived to the time we left. Taking a pile each, we went downstairs and found a chair, and didn't look up until food was on the table and Grandma called us to eat.

After the meal Grandma washed up while Mom stood next to her, drying. Grandad sat at the table reading a newspaper, Dad stood by the window in the living room looking out. Then Grandma came in and asked if he would like to join her in the garden, there was something she wanted to show him. Mom and Grandad sat at the table, they chatted a bit, but mostly they were silent. I got up to go to the bathroom. It was on the ground floor, I didn't like it and I had held on for as long as I could, but now I was bursting. Out into the corridor, down the creaking wooden stairs, a quick dash across the carpeted hall surrounded, as it were, by three empty rooms behind closed doors, and into the bathroom. It was dark. In the seconds before the light came on I was shaking inside. But even with the light on, I was afraid. I peed down the side so that the splash of the pee hitting the water would not prevent me from hearing anything. I also washed my hands before flushing the toilet because the moment I pressed the lever at the side of the cistern I would have to rush out as fast as I could, as the noise was so loud and eerie that I couldn't be in the same room. I stood at the ready, with my hand around the little black ball for a couple of seconds. Then I flushed, darted into the hall, also scary, because every slightest thing there silently "transmitted itself," and set off up the stairs, not able to run, of course, with a sensation that something down below was following me, until I entered the kitchen and the presence of the others broke the spell.

Outside, in the lane; the stream of people on their way from town to the stadium had increased, and soon also Dad, Mom, and Yngve would be getting ready to go. Grandad always cycled there and left a little later than the others. He was wearing a gray coat, a rust-colored scarf, a grayish cloth cap, and black gloves, I could see him from the window, as he freewheeled down the hill. Grandma took out some rolls from the freezer, we were going to have them when the others returned home, and put them on the counter.

She sent me a mischievous look.

"I've got something for you," she said.

"What's that?" I said.

"Wait and see," she said. "Cover your eyes!"

I covered my eyes, and heard her rummaging about in the drawers. She stopped in front of me.

"Now you can look!" she said.

It was a bar of chocolate. One of those triangular ones you don't see often that are so good.

"Is it for me?" I said. "All of it?"

"Yes," she said.

"What about Yngve?"

"No, not this time. He's been allowed to see the match. You have to have a treat as well!"

"Thank you very much," I said, tearing off the cardboard packaging to reveal the bar wrapped in silver paper.

"But don't say anything to Yngve, okay?" she said with a wink. "It's our secret."

I munched the chocolate as she sat doing a crossword.

"We're getting a telephone soon," I said.

"Are you?" she said. "Then we can talk to each other."

"Yes," I said. "We're actually at the end of the waiting list, but we're getting it anyway because Dad's in politics."

She laughed.

"In politics, Karl Ove?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "He is, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. He is indeed."

"Are you enjoying school?" she said.

I nodded.

"Yes, very much."

"What do you like best?"

"The breaks," I said, knowing that would make her laugh, or at least smile.

When I had finished the chocolate and she was immersed in the crossword again, I went up to the loft and brought down some of the games.

After a while she looked at me and asked me if we shouldn't go to the match as well. I wanted to go. We got dressed, she took her bike from the garage, I sat on the luggage rack, she sat on the saddle but kept one foot on the ground and turned to me.

"Ready?" she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Hold on tight, here we go!"

I wrapped my arms around her. She pushed off with her foot, put it on the pedal, and freewheeled down the little hill, turned right, and started pedaling.

"Are you okay?" she asked, and I nodded until I realized she couldn't see me, and said, "Yes, I'm fine."

And I was. It felt good holding her, and cycling with her was fun. Grandma was the only person who touched Yngve and me, the only person who gave us hugs and stroked our arms. She was also the only person who played with us. Dad might do it at Christmas, but we always did the things he wanted to do, like playing Mastermind or chess or Chinese checkers or Yahtzee or crazy eights or poker with matchsticks. Mom joined in when we played, but we did most things with her, either on the kitchen table at home or at the arts and crafts workshop in Kokkeplassen, and it was fun, but not like with Grandma, who didn't mind doing what we were doing and followed with interest when Yngve showed her something from his chemistry set, for example, or helped me when I was doing a jigsaw puzzle.

The wheels went more and more slowly until they almost stopped completely and Grandma got off and pushed the bike to the crest of the hill.

"You just stay where you are, if you want," she said.

I sat gazing over the town while Grandma pushed the bike, a trifle out of breath. Reaching the top, she got back on the saddle and it was a gentle downhill ride all the way to the stadium. A sudden huge groan erupted, as if from an enormous animal, and then there was clapping. Few sounds were so irresistible. Grandma cycled down to one end of the stadium, rested the bike against the wooden fence, and let me stand on the luggage rack for a few minutes while she held me so that I could see what was happening on the field. The players were a long way away, all the details eluded me, apart from the yellow-and-white shirts against the green of the turf and all the spectators standing around the field, a black surging mass, but I caught the mood, I inhaled it and in the days to come I would savor it in my mind.

Back home, she began to prepare the meal we would have before leaving, and not long afterward the door in the hall opened, it was Grandad, his expression was grim, and when Grandma saw it she said, "So they lost?"

He nodded, sat down on his chair, and she poured him some coffee. I never quite understood what the power relationship was between Grandma and Grandad. On the one hand, she always served him food, cooked all the meals, did all the washing up and the housework, as though she were his servant; on the other hand, she was often angry or irritated with him, and then she gave him a mouthful or made a fool of him, she was sharp and not infrequently sarcastic, while he said very little, preferring not to respond. Was it because he didn't need to? Because nothing of what she said altered anything important? Or because he couldn't? If Yngve and I were present during such sparring, Grandma would wink at us, as if to say this wasn't serious, or use us in her sally against him by saying such things as "Grandad can't even change a lightbulb properly," while Grandad, for his part, would look at us, smile, and shake his head at Grandma's antics. I never saw any form of intimacy between them, other than in their verbal exchanges or the closeness that was evident when she served him.

"They lost, I heard?" she said again when Mom, Dad, and Yngve came up the stairs ten minutes later.

"Yes, they did. 'Eternally owned is but what's lost,'" Dad quoted. "Or what do you reckon, Dad?"

Grandad growled something or other.

When we left in the evening we were given a bag of plums, a bag of pears, and a bag of bread rolls. Grandad, reluctant to leave his chair, said goodbye to us upstairs while Grandma came down with us, gave us each a long hug, stood on the front doorstep, and waved until she could no longer see us.

Strangely enough, the journey back always seemed much faster than the journey there. I loved traveling in a car at night, with the dashboard lit, the muted voices from the front seats, the gleam of streetlamps as we passed beneath, washing over us like breakers or waves of light, the long, completely dark stretches that cropped up intermittently, where all you saw, all that existed, was the pavement lit up by the headlights and the countryside they illuminated on the bends. Sudden treetops, sudden crags, sudden sea inlets. It was always a particular pleasure to arrive at the house in the night as well, to hear footsteps on the gravel and the sharp slam of car doors and the rattle of keys, to see the light in the hall come on, revealing the presence of all the familiar objects. The shoes with the grommets as eyes and the tongue as a forehead, the chilly gaze from the white two-holed electric sockets above the baseboard, the hat stand in the corner, with its back turned. And in my room: the pens and pencils assembled like a gang of schoolchildren in the pen stand, some insolently leaning against the edge, ready at any moment to discharge a gobbet of spit to prove they were not interested in anyone or anything. The duvet and the pillow that were either tidy and puffed up, looking like something that shouldn't be touched, a coffin or a capsule in a spaceship, or else were molded in the shape of my last movements, happy to be rearranged, but with no real inclination in that direction. The fixed stare of the lamps. The mouth of the keyhole, the two screw eyes of the metal fitting, the long, oddly positioned nose of the handle.

I brushed my teeth, shouted goodnight to Mom and Dad, and got into bed to read for half an hour. I had two favorite books, which I tried to quarantine long enough to be able to read them again in the same way I had the first time, but it never worked, I picked them up again much too soon. One was *Doctor Dolittle*, which was about a doctor who could talk to animals and one day went on a long voyage with them, to Africa, where, after being hunted and captured by some Hottentots, he finally found what he was looking for, the rare sausage animal that had two heads, one at each end. The second book was *Gangles*, which was about a girl who would stand on fountains of water and allow herself to be hurled into the air, and who, after several misadventures, ended up balancing above the sea on a spout of water blown out by an enormous whale. Tonight, however, I chose another book from the pile, *The Little Witch*, which was about a witch who was too small to join the coven in Bloksberg, but who snuck in anyway. She did lots of things she wasn't supposed to do, like witchcraft on Sundays, which was almost unbearable to read about, she shouldn't have done it, she would be caught . . . and indeed she was, but everything turned out fine in the end. I read a few pages, but as I knew the story so well I looked at the pictures instead. After flicking through it, I turned off the light, rested my head on the pillow, and closed my eyes.

I had almost let go, perhaps I had even fallen asleep, because it was as though I had suddenly been brought back to my bed and my room, summoned by a ring at the front door.

Diing-dong.

Who on earth could that be? No one rang our doorbell, except guests we were expecting, which in nine out of ten cases were Grandma and Grandad, plus the occasional salesman, or one of Yngve's friends. But none of them would ring so late at night.

I sat up in bed. Heard Mom padding along the landing and down the stairs. Muffled voices from below. Then she came back up, exchanged a few words with Dad, which I didn't catch, went downstairs, and must have put on her coat there because straight afterward the front door was slammed shut, and straight after that her car started up.

What in the world? Where was she going *now*? It was nearly *ten o'clock*!

A few minutes later Dad went downstairs as well. But he didn't go out, he went into his study. When I heard that I got up, carefully opened the door, and snuck along the landing into Yngve's room.

He was lying on his bed reading. Still dressed. He smiled when he saw me and sat up.

"You're only wearing your underpants," Yngve said.

"Who was that at the door?"

"Fru Gustavsen, I think," he said. "And all the kids."

"Oh? Why? And why did Mom go? Where did she go?"

Yngve shrugged.

"I think she drove them to some relatives."

"Why?"

"Gustavsen's drunk. Didn't you hear him shouting at them a while ago?"

I shook my head.

"I was asleep. But was Leif Tore with them? And Rolf?"

Yngve nodded.

"Jeez," I said.

"Dad'll be coming back up," he said. "You'd better go to bed. I'll turn out the lights too now."

"Okay. Good night."

"Good night."

In my room, I drew the curtains aside and looked across to Gustavsen's house. I couldn't see anything unusual. Outside, at least, everything was still.

Herr Gustavsen had been drunk before, he was well known for it. One night that spring a rumor had spread that he was drunk, and three or four of us crept into their garden and stood by the living-room window looking in. But there was nothing to see. He was sitting on the sofa gazing into the distance without moving. At other times we had heard him shouting and yelling, through the open windows and on the lawn. Leif Tore just laughed. But perhaps this was something different? Escaping from him, they'd never done that before.

When I next woke it was morning. Someone was in the bathroom, I could hear, probably Yngve, and from the road outside, along the three-meter-high wall surrounding Gustavsen's property and supporting the level lawn, came the drone of Mom's car. She had to go to work early today. Yngve closed the bathroom door, returned to his room, and then went downstairs.

The bike!

Where was his bike?

I had completely forgotten to ask him.

But that had to be the reason he was leaving so early; he couldn't cycle, he had to walk to school.

I got up, took my clothes into the bathroom, washed in the water he had remembered to leave, today, too, dressed, and went to the kitchen where Dad had made three *smørbrød* and put them on a plate in my place, as well as a glass of milk. The milk carton, the bread, the cheese, sliced meat, and jams had been cleared away. He was sitting in the living room, listening to the radio and smoking.

Outside it was raining. A steady drizzle, broken by intermittent gusts of wind, pitter-pattering against the windows and sounding like tiny drumming fingers.

Monday was the only day no one was at home when I came back from school. So I had my own key, which I carried on a piece of string around my neck. But there was a problem with the key: I couldn't get it to open the door. The first Monday it had been raining and I bounded across the gravel in rubber boots and rain gear, the key nestling in my hand, overjoyed at the imminent prospect and filled with pride. I managed to get the key into the lock, but not to turn it. It would not budge however much force I used. The key was unmovable. After ten minutes I started crying. My hands were red and cold, the rain was bucketing down, and all the other children had been at home for ages. At that moment one of the neighbors I didn't know so well passed – she was old and lived with her husband in the house at the very top by the forest above the soccer field – on her way down the road, and when I saw her, I didn't hesitate, because she had no connection with my parents, I dashed over and asked, with tears running down my cheeks, if she could help me with the lock. She could. And for her it was no problem at all! She fiddled with the key and it turned. And, hey presto, the door was open. I thanked her and went inside. Knowing there was nothing wrong with the key, there was something wrong with me. The next time this happened it wasn't raining, so I left my satchel by the step and ran up to Geir's. Dad made a comment about the satchel when he came home, I wasn't to leave it lying around, so the following Monday, when the weather was also dry, I simply took it with me, under the pretext of having to do some homework with Geir and thus needing my satchel close at hand.

In the meantime, I had worked out a method I could use when the weather got worse during autumn and winter, like today. In the boiler room there was a little window, more like a hatch, but not so small that I couldn't crawl through. It was positioned about half a meter above my head. I had worked out that if I opened the window in the morning, and there was no great risk involved because the window stayed close to the frame even when the two catches were undone, I could pull over the trash can when I got home, stand on it, wriggle through into the boiler room, open the door from the inside, put the trash can back, close the window, and be indoors without anyone realizing I couldn't get the key to turn. The sole doubt in my mind was when to undo the catches. However, if it was raining, it would be the most natural thing in the world to go into the boiler room, because that was where my rain gear usually hung, and all I had to do was lift the catches, impossible to see unless you stood close to the door. And I wasn't so stupid that I would touch anything with Dad around in the hall!

I ate the three *smørbrød* and drank the glass of milk. Brushed my teeth in the bathroom, collected my satchel from my room, went downstairs and into the hot, narrow room with the two water cylinders. I stood absolutely still for two seconds. As there was no sound of footsteps on the stairs, I stretched up and unhooked the catches. Then I donned my rain gear, slipped on my satchel, went into the hall where my boots were, a pair of blue-and-white Viking rubber boots that I had been given despite my wanting white ones, shouted goodbye to Dad, and ran out, up to Geir's, he poked his head out of the window and called that he was still having breakfast but would be down soon.

I walked over to one of the gray puddles in Geir's family's drive and started throwing stones in it. Their drive wasn't covered in gravel as most of the others were, nor brick paving like at Gustavsen's, but compacted reddish earth full of small, round stones. This wasn't all that was different about them. At the back of the house they didn't have a lawn but a little patch where they had planted potatoes, carrots, swedes, radishes, and various other vegetables. On the forest side they didn't have a wooden fence, as we did, or wire netting, as many others did, but a stone wall that Prestbakmo had built himself. Nor did they throw all their garbage in the trash can, as we did; they kept all their milk and egg cartons to use in a variety of ways and they put all their food remains on a compost heap by the stone wall.

I straightened up and glanced at the cement mixer. The round green drum was partially covered by a white tarpaulin and it looked like a headscarf. Her mouth was open, it was big and toothless; what was it she could see that surprised her so much?

Down the hill came Geir Håkon's father in his green Ford Taunus. I waved; he lifted his hand from the steering wheel in a fleeting response.

I was suddenly reminded of Anne Lisbet. The thought soared from my stomach and spread like an explosion of joy in my chest.

She hadn't been at school on Friday. Solveig had said she was ill. But today was Monday. She was bound to be better now.

Oh, please let her be better!

I was dying to go up to B-Max and see her.

Her black glittering eyes. Her happy voice.

"Geir! Come on!" I shouted.

I heard his muffled voice from behind the door. The next instant he tore it open.

"Want to take the path?" he said.

"Sure," I said.

So we ran behind the house, scrambled over the stone wall, and joined the path. From being no more than a mass of tufts with small dried-up channels in between, the bog was now full of water, impossible to cross dry-shod, even in boots, because your foot would sink in a puddle to way above the boot top, but we tried anyway, balancing on the quivering tufts, jumping to the next, slipping, putting out a hand to save ourselves and feeling the ground give, the water seeming to *creep* up our sweaters under the sleeves of our jackets. We laughed and shouted, telling each other what had happened, crossed the now muddy and slippery soccer field, and went between the deciduous trees to the right, up the broad avenue that might once have been a cart track, it was broader than a path at any rate and covered with a carpet of leaves. Red, yellow, and brown, they lay there, with the occasional splash of green. At the top there was a tiny field, the grass was long here, a yellowish white, and lay flat, plastered to the ground. Above it a bare tor towered, on which there stood an old telegraph pole. The former cart track continued for a while, then disappeared, devoured by the new main road running past, maybe twenty meters from the field. Below lay the forest, mostly oak trees, between two of them there was an abandoned car, in much worse condition than the one where we normally played, perhaps a hundred meters lower down, but no less appealing for that, in fact the contrary: hardly anyone ever played here.

Oh, the smell of an abandoned car in a wet forest! The smell of the synthetic material on the torn seats, moldy and mildewed, but still sharp and fresh compared with the heavy, musty smell of rotting leaves emanating from the ground all around them. The black window seals that had come loose and hung from the roof like tentacles. All the glass that had been smashed to pieces and largely lost in the soil, although there were scattered fragments on the floor mats or in the door openings, like small matte diamonds. And, oh, the black floor mats! Shake them and a whole horde of creepy crawlies ran for cover. Spiders, daddy longlegs, and woodlice. The resistance of the three floor pedals, which you could hardly move. The raindrops that fell through a window onto your face whenever the wind forced them off track or shook them from the leaves of the swaying branches above.

Sometimes we found objects lying around and about near the car: a lot of bottles, some bags of car or porn magazines, empty cigarette packets, empty plastic bottles of windshield fluid, the odd condom, and once we found a pair of underpants still full of shit. We laughed about that for a good long time, about someone shitting themselves and then coming here to throw away their underpants.

But we used to have a shit in the forest when we were on our walks. We would climb up trees and shit from there, squat on top of a cliff and shit over the edge, or on the bank of a stream and shit in it. All to see what happened and how it felt. What color the turds were, whether they were black, green, brown, or light brown, how long and fat they were, and what happened when they lay there glistening on the forest floor, between heather and moss, whether there would be flies swarming around them or beetles climbing over them. Also the smell of shit was sharper, stronger, and more distinct in the forest. Now and then we revisited places where we'd had a shit, to see what had happened to it. Sometimes they had vanished, sometimes there were only dry remains, and at other times they lay flat as though they had melted in a pool.

But now we had to go to school and there was no time for such activities. Down the hill, across the playground, which consisted of little more than a rusty climbing frame, a rusty swing, and a rotting sandpit with next to no sand in it. Up the steep slope, over the high concrete barriers, across the road, and B-Max stood in front of us. The line of satchels in the queue was already long. Some girls were skipping despite the pouring rain; others stood under the overhanging roof in front of the shop. But where was Anne Lisbet? Wasn't she here?

At that moment the bus came up the hill. Geir and I crossed the road and reached the bus stop as it turned into the paved shoulder outside the supermarket. We got on last and sat right at the front. The big windows misted up with the moisture we brought in with us. Many of the kids started drawing in the condensation. The driver closed the doors and set off toward the main road. I knelt on my seat and scanned the back of the bus. She wasn't there, and it was as if all meaning had leaked from the world. Now I would have to go all day without seeing her and perhaps the following day as well. Solveig wasn't there either, so it wouldn't be possible to find out how ill she was or for how long.

Ten minutes later the bus stopped outside the school, we ran across the playground and into the wet-weather shelter, where we huddled with almost all the other pupils until the bell went and we lined up. I knew most of them by appearance now, some also by name and reputation. We had gymnastics with the parallel class, who had an advantage over us, as they came from this area and were on home ground. This was their school, the teachers were their teachers, to them we were just some kind of immigrant, without any rights. But they were also tougher than we were, that is, they had more fights, they caused more trouble and mouthed off more, at least some of them did, which only the toughest of us, viz Asgeir and John, stood up to. The rest of us were pushed around as they pleased. Any second you could feel an arm around your throat, and then a jerk and you were on the floor. Any second a fist could hit you in the shoulder, where it hurt most, as you lined up or were on the way to the classroom. Any second someone could stamp on your toes in a soccer game. But they quickly learned they couldn't bully John or Asgeir because they retaliated and gave as good as they got. These boys, who lived on the east of the island, also dressed differently from us, at least some of them did. Their clothes were older and seemed more used, as though they only wore hand-me-downs, and not just from one brother but two or maybe even three . . . Geir's and my greatest fear was that some of these boys would find us when we were in our secret place. But they didn't represent much of a problem, you only had to be on your guard when you were out and everything was usually fine. Perhaps the most significant consequence was that we stuck together more and saw ourselves as a unit and the classroom as a bastion of security.

The bell rang, we lined up, and Frøken, tall and thin as ever, appeared at the top of the stairs with her slightly lopsided gait and nervous hand movements, and we marched down to the classroom, where, after hanging up our outdoor clothes on the pegs outside, we at once sat down in our places.

"Anne Lisbet's sick today as well!" someone said.

"And Solveig."

"And Vemund."

"And Leif Tore," Geir said.

Then I remembered what had happened the night before.

"Vemund's sick in the head!" Eivind said.

"Ha ha ha!"

"No, no, no," Frøken said. "We are not nasty to anyone in this class. And certainly not behind their backs!"

"Leif Tore's father was drunk yesterday!" I said. "My mom had to drive them to a relative's house. That's why he isn't here today!"

"Shhh," Frøken said, looking at me, holding a finger to her lips and shaking her head. Then she wrote something in her book before scanning the class.

"Anyone else away? No? So, let's get started, shall we?"

She stepped forward and perched on the edge of her desk. "This week we're going to learn about farms. Has anyone ever been to a farm?"

Oh, I shot up my arm as high as I could, almost standing up, shouting, *Me, me, me! I have!*

I wasn't the only person to have something to say about the topic. And it wasn't my hand Frøken pointed to but Geir B's.

"I've ridden a horse in Legoland," he said.

"But that's not a *farm*," I screeched. "I've been to a farm lots of times. Grandma and Grandad – "

"Was it your turn, Karl Ove?" Frøken said.

"No," I said, eyes downcast.

"It's true that Legoland is not a farm," she continued. "But horses are on farms, that's true, Geir. Unni?"

Unni, who was that?

I turned. Ah, that's the girl who was always giggling. Chubby with blond hair.

"I live on a farm," she said with flushed cheeks. "But we haven't got any animals. We grow vegetables. And Dad sells them at the market in town."

"But I've been to a farm *with animals*!" I said.

"Me, too," Sverre said.

"And me!" said Dag Magne.

"You'll have to wait your turn," Frøken said. "Everyone has to have a chance."

She pointed to five other people before I was finally able to take my hand down and say what I had to say. Well, Grandma and Grandad had a farm, it was big, they had two cows and a calf, and they had hens. I had collected the eggs many times, and I had seen Grandma milking the cows in the morning. First she shoveled away the muck, and then she fed them, and then she milked them. Sometimes they lifted their tails and had a piss or a shit.

A wave of laughter rolled toward me. Emboldened by it, I continued. And once, I said, sitting there in class, my face crimson, one of the cows pissed on me!

I looked around and lapped up the ensuing laughter. Frøken said nothing, she pointed to someone else, but I could see from her face that she didn't believe me.

When everyone who wanted to say something had had a turn, she read a passage from a book about Ola Ola Heia. She asked us questions about what she had read out, completely ignoring me until the bell rang, when she asked me to stay behind.

"Karl Ove," she said. "Wait here. I need to have a word with you."

I stood beside her desk while the others hurried out. When we were alone she perched on the edge of her desk and looked at me.

"We can't tell everyone all the things we know about one another," she said. "What you said about Leif Tore's father, for example. Don't you think Leif Tore would be upset about that?"

"Yes, he would," I said.

"He wouldn't want anyone else to know. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said, starting to cry.

"We all have private lives," she said. "Do you know what that is?"

"No," I said, sniffling.

"It's everything that happens at home, in your home, my home, their homes, everyone's home. If you see what happens in other people's homes, it's not always nice to tell others. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"Good, Karl Ove. Don't be upset. You didn't know. But now you do! So off you go."

I scampered up the stairs, through the hall, and onto the playground. Cast an eye over the various groups standing there. Some girls were doing French skipping with elastic, some with a rope, some were playing tag. Down on the soccer field I saw a mass of players in front of the nearest goal. The center of the field was covered in a pool of yellowish mud. Geir, Geir Håkon, and Eivind were standing by the bench below the little rock with the flagpole on it, and I ran over to join them. They were playing with Geir Håkon's boat cards.

"Have you been crying?" Eivind said.

I shook my head. "It's the wind," I said.

"What did Frøken say then?"

"Nothing much," I said. "Can I have a card?"

"You've been crying," Eivind said.

Along with Sverre and me, Eivind was the best in the class. He was the best at math, Sverre was next best, and I was third best. I was best at reading and writing, Eivind was next best, and Sverre third best. But Eivind was much faster than me, and of the boys in the class only Trond was faster than him. I was the sixth fastest. And he was stronger than me. I was the next weakest, only Vemund was weaker, and since he was the fattest and the dumbest boy in the class, it wasn't a very good situation, no one took any notice of him. Even Trond, the smallest boy in the class, was stronger than me. I was the third tallest in the class, a bit taller than him. I was the fourth best at soccer; ahead of me were Asgeir, Trond, and John, while Eivind was fifth best. I was better at drawing than him, but not as good as Geir, who could draw everything as it really was, and Vemund. As for throwing a ball, I was next to last, again only Vemund was worse than me.

"The wind was in my eyes as I came down the steps," I said. "I wasn't crying. Can I have a card too?"

The first card I took was SS *France*, the world's biggest passenger liner, which walloped everybody else in all categories.

In the next lesson we wrote letters of the alphabet in our notebooks: *u* as in *kui*, *a* as in *lam*, *å* as in *gås*. For homework we had to write the same letters in our notebooks. Frøken asked whether anyone lived near the students who were absent today and, if so, could they pass on the homework.

But I didn't become aware of the opportunity that had presented itself until the next and final lesson, which was gymnastics, as I was running round and round the tiny gymnasium. I could walk up to Anne Lisbet's and tell her what we had to do for homework! The thought made me flush with pleasure. As soon as we had dressed and left the changing room, on the way up to the place where we lined up to wait for the bus, I told Geir about my plan. He wrinkled his nose, go to Anne Lisbet's, why? We had never been there, that was one thing. And Vemund lived there, that was another. Couldn't Vemund take the homework? You don't understand, I said. The whole point is that *we* do it!

He still hemmed and hawed, but after I had put a bit more pressure on him, he agreed to go with me.

Instead of making everyone get off at B-Max, this morning the bus went up through the estate and dropped us off on the way. It did that now and then, and it was a strange sight every time, because the enormous bus didn't belong there, on the narrow roads, it towered over everything like a liner in a canal. We stood on the sidewalk watching it go up the hill, as it groaned with the effort and released clouds of greasy fumes in its wake.

"Shall I go up or will you come down?" I said.

"You come up," Geir said.

"Okay," I said, walking in the drive, which as fortune would have it was clearly empty. It was no longer raining, but everything I saw was wet. On the dark-brown wall there were extensive patches of black damp, on the brick doorstep all the little hollows were full of water, on the spade leaning against the wall raindrops hung trembling from the handle. I unzipped my jacket and took out the key to see if I could perhaps get it to open the door today. But the same happened, the key went in, but the little drum that was supposed to rotate didn't budge. I looked up the road. No one there. So I went to the garbage can by the fence, took out the black half-empty bag, and put it on the ground, grabbed the garbage can by the handles, and lifted it. It was heavier than I had anticipated, and I had to put it down several times on the way to the house. Still there was no one to be seen on the hill. A car came past, but it wasn't anyone I knew, so I carried the can across the lawn and placed it under the window. Clambered on top, lifted the window, and pushed my head and shoulders through. The feeling of losing control, because I couldn't see if anyone was watching me, all I saw was the empty room in front of me, dark and hot, filled me with panic. I twisted and turned, and when I had half my body in, I grabbed the metal pipe on the tank and pulled myself through.

Down to the floor, off with my boots – which I carried through the hall and put on again on the porch – open the door and out again. Hollow with fear and tension, I looked down the hill. No cars, nothing. As long as he stayed away for the next two minutes, and didn't come home because he had forgotten something, or because he was ill, which never happened, Dad was never ill, everything would be fine.

A little gasp of joy escaped my lips. I hurried over to the garbage can, carried it to its place, put the garbage bag back in, folded it over the edge, and dashed back to the window. To my horror, I saw that the container had left marks in the grass. Quite deep marks, too. I ran my hand over the grass and tried to ruffle it to cover the patches where the edge had sunk in and formed a ridge in the muddy soil. Straightened up and regarded my handiwork.

You could still see it.

But if you had no idea it was there, perhaps it was more difficult to see?

Dad saw everything. He would see it.

I crouched down and ruffled the grass some more.

There.

That would have to do.

If he saw it I could always deny all knowledge. I doubted he would be able to imagine I had carried the garbage can onto the lawn and put it under the window to climb in. No, if he saw the mark it would be a mystery to him, utterly unfathomable, and so long as I denied all knowledge in a normal voice and with a normal expression he would have nothing else to go on.

I wiped my moist, dirty hands on my thighs and went up to my room with my satchel. Opened the wardrobe door and was about to put on my white shirt, warmed by the happy thought that Anne Lisbet would think it looked good, when I came to my senses and dropped the idea, in case Dad asked why I had changed clothes and I got myself into a tangle that he would be able to unravel.

Then I locked the front door, climbed up onto the hot water tank, turned around, stuck my feet through the window, gently lowered myself until I let go, and landed on the ground with a bump.

Picked myself up, down to the drive as fast as possible, acting as if nothing had happened.

There were no cars to be seen now. John Beck, Geir Håkon, Kent Arne, and Øyvind Sundt were standing at the crossroads. When they saw me they cycled over. I stood still, waiting for them.

"Have you heard?" Geir Håkon said, braking just in front of me.

"Heard what?"

"A workman on Vindholmen was cut in two by a steel cable early today."

"Cut in two?"

"Yes," John Beck said. "The wire snapped while towing. One end hit a man and cut him in two. Dad told me. Everyone was given the day off."

I imagined a man on a tug being cut in two, the top half, the part with the head and arms, standing beside the bottom half, the part with the legs.

"You still have a puncture?" Kent Arne said.

I nodded.

"You can sit on the back of mine."

"I'm off to see Geir," I said. "Where are you going?"

Geir Håkon shrugged.

"Down to the boats maybe?"

"Where are you two going?" Kent Arne said.

"To see someone in the class about homework," I said.

"Who, if I might ask?" Geir Håkon said.

"Vemund," I said.

"Do you two hang out with *him*?"

"Nope," I said. "Just today. I've got to get going."

I ran up the hill and shouted for Geir, who came out right away with a slice of bread in his hand.

Twenty minutes later we walked past B-Max again, along a flat stretch that, after a bend, ascended to the highest point on the estate where the road began that led to where Anne Lisbet, Solveig, and Vemund lived. It was also possible to get to it by walking in the opposite direction from our house because the road that linked all the side roads and housing areas on the estate went in a circle, inside which was our own circular Ringvei. As if that wasn't enough, the main road outside also went in a circle, around the whole island. So we lived inside a circle inside a circle inside a circle. A hundred meters past the supermarket the two outermost roads ran parallel, but you couldn't see that because they were separated by a rock face, perhaps ten meters high, molded into a brick wall. Above this wall was a green wire fence, beyond that there was a rocky slope, and then came the road we were following. But even though we couldn't see the cars whizzing past beneath us we could hear them. The sound of the cars was exciting, and we climbed down to the fence. At first we heard them as a faint drone as they came up the hill from the Fina station, then the volume rose and rose until they were racing past beneath us, the roar of their engines amplified by the rock face. We decided we would throw stones at them. As we couldn't see the cars, the trick was to time the sounds exactly. We each took a stone in our hands and waited for the next car. The stones were big, bigger than our hands, but not so heavy that we couldn't heave them over the fence, from where they fell vertically, ten meters down to the carriageway. Geir started. He threw as the car was beneath us, and missed, of course, we heard the faint, hollow *clunk* as it landed on the pavement and rolled downward. When it was my turn, however, I threw much too soon; when the stone hit the road the car was probably fifty meters away.

A woman walked along the sidewalk carrying a bag in each hand. She stopped and spoke to us, even though we had never seen her before.

"What are you doing down there?" she said.

"Nothing much," Geir said.

"Come on up," she said. "It's steep and dangerous there."

She set off walking again, but kept an eye on us, so we did as she said and went up.

We balanced on the curb all the way up to Vemund's house. Outside, his sister was on her knees playing in a sandpit. Her waterproof jacket and bottoms were yellow, the bucket blue, and the spade green.

"Want to go and see Vemund first?" Geir said.

"No, let's not," I said. "Let's start with Anne Lisbet."

The sound of her name was electric, thousands of crackling nerve channels opened inside me as I articulated the words in my mouth.

"What is it?" Geir said.

"What's what?" I said.

"You went a bit funny."

"Funny? No. I'm quite normal."

After a few steps up the road, covered on one side by a film of water running downward, so thin that it quivered rather than ran, we could see the gable end of the house where Anne Lisbet lived. It was situated at the top of a hill, with a lawn at the front, trees below. A window on the top floor, there was a light on, was that her room perhaps? On the other side of the road was Myrvang's house and the house where Solveig lived, below them the forest, green and dark and wet. We passed them, and the road ended in a gravel cul-de-sac on the edge of the forest. From there a drive led to Anne Lisbet's house. A light shone above the front door.

"Will you ring?" I said when we were there.

Geir stretched up on his toes and pressed the doorbell. My heart was fluttering. A few seconds passed. Then her mother opened the door.

"Is Anne Lisbet in?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

"We're from her class," Geir said. "We've brought her homework."

"How nice of you," she said. "Would you like to come in?"

She had blond hair and blue eyes, so completely different from Anne Lisbet, but she was good to look at as well.

"Anne Lisbet!" she called. "You've got visitors from your class!"

"Coming!" Anne Lisbet called from above.

"Isn't she ill?" I said.

Her mother shook her head.

"Not anymore. We were just keeping her here for another day to be on the safe side."

"Oh, yes," I said. Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Anne Lisbet appeared. She was holding a slice of bread in one hand and smiling at us with her mouth full.

"Hi!" she said.

"We thought you were ill," I said.

"We've brought you the homework," Geir said.

She was wearing a white sweater with a high neck and a red pattern, and blue trousers. The skin above her lips was as white as milk.

"Wouldn't you like to go outside and play?" she said. "I've been indoors all day. And all day yesterday, too!"

"Sure," I said. "Is that all right, Geir?"

"Why not," Geir said.

She put on her white boots and the red raincoat. Her mother went upstairs.

"See you, Mom!" she called, and ran out. We ran after her.

"What should we do?" she said, stopping where the gravel finished and suddenly turning to us. "Want to go down to Solveig's?"

We did. Solveig came out, Anne Lisbet suggested doing some skipping, so we stood there, Geir and I, with elastic around our legs while Solveig and Anne Lisbet hopped and skipped to and fro in accordance with the intricate patterns they mastered to such perfection. When it was my turn Anne Lisbet showed me what to do. She placed her hand on my shoulder and a quiver ran through me. Her dark eyes sparkled. She burst into laughter when I messed it up, and, oh, I smelled the fragrance of her hair as it flew past my face.

It was absolutely fantastic. Everything was absolutely fantastic. Above us the cloud thickened, the gray had taken on a tinge of bluish black, the sky was like a wall above the forest, soon afterward it began to rain. We put up the hoods on our rain jackets and continued to skip. The rain fell on our hoods and ran down our faces, the gravel crunched beneath our feet, the lamp on top of the pole at the end of the cul-de-sac suddenly came on. A little while later a car approached slowly.

"That's Dad!" Anne Lisbet said.

The car, a Volvo Estate, stopped at the end of the drive, and a large, powerful man with a black beard stepped out. He waved to her, she ran over to him, he bent down and gave her a hug, then went in.

"We're having dinner now," she said. "What was for homework?"

I told her. She nodded, said bye, and was gone.

"I have to go, too," Solveig said, standing there with her sad eyes and rolling up the elastic.

"Us, too," I said.

When we reached the crossroads I suggested running all the way to the shop, which we did. There, Geir suggested we didn't go home via Grevlingveien, nor through the forest, but take the main road down to Holtet. Which we did. A path led from there up through the heath to Ringveien, which we then followed home. But after we had gone a few meters along the road, something strange happened. The bus came down, instinctively I turned, and in the window, only a little way from me, at the same height, sat Yngve!

What on earth was he doing there? Was he going to Arendal? Now? What was he going to do there?

"That was Yngve," I said. "He was on the bus."

"Oh yes," Geir said, not very interested. We crossed the lawn outside the house there and walked onto the road.

"That was really fun up there," Geir said.

"Yes," I said. "Shall we go up again later?"

"Yes," Geir said. "But perhaps it's best not to tell anyone? After all, they're girls."

"Well, there's no reason why we should."

From the top of the hill I could see that Dad's car was parked outside our house. Geir's father was home, too. They were teachers and finished work earlier than other fathers.

I recalled the garbage can I had used to get indoors.

"Shall we do something else?" I said. "Go somewhere else? Down to the tree swing?"

Geir shook his head.

"It's raining. And I'm hungry. I'm going home."

"Okay," I said. "Bye."

"Bye," Geir said, and ran to his house. He slammed the door so hard the glass rattled. I gazed across at Gustavsen's house. There was a light on in the kitchen. Had they come back home or was it the father? They had a garage, so it was impossible to know whether the car was there or not.

I turned and looked up the hill. Marianne's father took off the lid of the garbage can and threw in a scrunched-up plastic bag. He was wearing a woollen cardigan and was unshaven. He always looked angry, but I wasn't sure if he was, I had never spoken to him or heard anything about him. He was a seaman and away for large parts of the year. When he was at home he was there all the time.

He closed the door without noticing me.

From the crossroads came an enormous yellow truck with rocks on the back. The ground vibrated as it passed. Thick smoke rose from an exhaust pipe at the front.

Yngve had once shown me a picture of the biggest vehicle in the world. It was in a book about the Apollo program he had borrowed from the library. Everything about it was the biggest in the world. It had been especially built to transport the rocket the few kilometers to the launch pad. But it was as slow as it was big and moved at a snail's pace, Yngve said.

The most appealing part was the launch itself. I could look at photos of it any number of times. Once I had seen it on TV, too. You might expect the rocket to shoot off from the platform at an incredible speed, but that was not the case; on the contrary, for the first few meters it rose very slowly, the fire and the smoke it emitted formed a kind of cushion underneath, which it seemed to rest on for a brief instant before gently moving upward, almost waveringly, with a colossal roar that could be heard from a distance of several kilometers. And then it soared faster and faster until its speed was as mind-blowing as you had imagined, and it flew like an arrow or lightning into the crystal-blue sky.

Sometimes I imagined a rocket being launched from this forest. Hidden behind a mountain, it would be erected in secret and one day we would see it rise slowly, very slowly, above the trees just down there, pure and white against the green and gray, with a cloud of fire and smoke beneath it, and then it would be clear of them, almost hanging in the sky for a moment, before gaining speed and soaring faster and faster upward with the roar from the gigantic engines reverberating between our houses.

It was a good thought.

I jogged down to the house, crossed the gravel to the door, opened it, and was taking off my boots on the doormat when Dad came into the hall from his study.

I glanced up at him.

He didn't look particularly angry.

"Where have you been?" he said.

"Playing with Geir," I said.

"That wasn't what I asked you," he said. "*Where* have you been?"

"We were up at B-Max," I said. "Behind it."

"Oh," he said. "What were you boys doing there?"

"Nothing much," I said. "Playing."

"You'll have to go back," he said. "We need some potatoes. Can you buy some, do you think?"

"Yes," I said.

He took his wallet from his rear pocket and produced a banknote.

"Let me see your pockets," he said.

I stood up and thrust forward my hips.

He passed me the note.

"Put this in your pocket," he said. "And don't hang around."

"Okay," I said. He went back to the kitchen. I put my boots back on, closed the door gently behind me, and set off at a run.

Yngve came home shortly before we were to have dinner and just made it to his bedroom before Dad shouted that the food was ready. He had fried some chops and onions and boiled some cauliflower and potatoes. Mom informed us that we were going to have a cleaning woman, an old lady called Fru Hjellen, who would come once a week, and she would be popping by this afternoon. Mom had rung her from work, she said, she had seemed very nice. I knew Dad didn't want a cleaning woman, he had mentioned it once, but now he was quiet, so I supposed he must have changed his mind.

I was looking forward to her coming. The few times we had visitors it was always fun, perhaps because when they came they filled the house with something new and different. And it was good because they always showed Yngve and me some attention. "So those are your boys, are they?" they would say, if they had never seen us before, or, "How tall they've grown," if they had, and sometimes they even asked us questions, such as how school was going or about soccer.

After eating I slipped into Yngve's room. He took a cassette from the rack, it was Status Quo, *Piledriver*, and put it in the recorder.

"I saw you on the bus," I said. "Where were you going?"

"To town," he said.

He lay on the bed and started reading a comic.

"What did you do there?"

"That's enough questions," he said. "I had to buy a part for my bike."

"Is it *broken*?"

He nodded. Then he looked me in the eye.

"Don't tell anyone. Not even Mom," he said.

"Cross my heart and hope to die," I said.

"It's up at Frank's. You know the part the handlebars are attached to, well, it broke. But his father promised he would fix it for me. I get it back tomorrow."

"Imagine if Dad had seen you," I said. "In Arendal. Or someone he knows had seen you."

Yngve shrugged and continued reading. I went into my own room. After a while the doorbell rang. I waited until Mom was downstairs in the hall before leaving my room. Shortly afterward an elderly, somewhat plump or perhaps I should say broad, lady with gray hair and glasses came up the stairs.

"This is Karl Ove," Mom said. "Our younger son."

I nodded to her. She smiled.

"My name's Fru Hjellen," she said. "I'm sure we'll become good friends."

She patted my shoulder. I felt a warmth suffuse my whole body.

"Our elder son, Yngve, is in his room," Mom said.

"Should I get him?" I said.

Mom shook her head. "No need."

She started showing her around, and I went back to my room. Outside, dusk was falling. The rain was drumming softly on the roof and wall. The gutters were swirling and gurgling. Large raindrops hit the window and rolled down in patterns it was impossible to predict. The headlights from a car lit up the spruce tree above the mailbox stand. Jacobsen returning from work. The green boxes and the stand to which they were attached glinted silently in the glare. *No, no*, they said. *Not the light, not the light*. I lay down on my bed and thought about Anne Lisbet.

Tomorrow we would go there again. But first of all I wanted to see her at school! And it was enough to see her. I needed no more than that for the pleasure to spread through every part of my body. One day I would ask her to go out with me. One day I would be in her room and she would be in mine. Even though I wasn't allowed to have anyone in my room, she would be allowed to come here, I would fix that. Even if we had to climb in through the little window in the boiler room!

I sat down at my desk, took the books from my satchel, and did my homework. Fru Hjellen left, and then I heard Yngve going to the kitchen. It was Monday today, and every Monday he had started making scones or waffles in the evening. I would sit in the kitchen with Mom while he worked, it was warm there, the aroma of scones or waffles was good, and we talked about everything under the sun. After Yngve had finished we ate the scones with butter, which melted on them, and brown cheese, or waffles with butter and sugar, which also melted, and drank tea with milk. Now and then, but not often, Dad joined us. By and large, though, he went back down to his study pretty quickly.

I did my homework at breakneck speed. I could do the letters, of course, it was just a question of scribbling down enough of them, and then I went into the kitchen, too. A light shone from the empty oven. Yngve stood stirring a bowl on the counter with his sleeves rolled up and an apron on. Mom sat knitting.

"Haven't you finished yet?" I said, sitting down at my place.

"Another day or two," she said, pulling at the wool, as though she were in a boat and jig fishing. "It depends on how much I get done."

"Geir and I were up at Anne Lisbet and Solveig's today," I said.

"Oh?" Mom said. "Who are they? Some girls in your class?"

I nodded.

"Have you started playing with girls now?" Yngve said.

"Yes. And?" I said.

"Are you in love or what?"

I glanced at Mom hesitantly, then at Yngve.

"I think so," I said.

Yngve laughed.

"You're only seven! You can't be in love!"

"Don't laugh at him, Yngve," Mom said.

Yngve blushed and studied the bowl in front of him.

"Feelings are feelings whether you're seven or seventy. It means the same, you know."

There was a silence.

"But it can't go anywhere!" Yngve said.

"You might be right about that," Mom said. "But you can feel something for others despite that, can't you?"

"You were in love with Anne," I said.

"I was not," he said.

"You said you were."

"Well, never mind," Mom said. "How's the mix going? Will it be ready soon?"

"Think so," Yngve said.

"May I have a look?" Mom said, putting her knitting in the basket at her feet and getting up.

"Will you grease the tray, Karl Ove?"

She took the little pan with the melting butter off the heat, passed me a brush, and took the baking tray from the drawer at the bottom of the stove. The butter was ready; you could see that by the color: there were several inlets and some large lagoons of light brown in the thin yellow liquid. If you heated it slowly the color became fuller and purer. I dipped the brush in the pan and swept it over the baking tray. Butter heated slowly could make the bristles stiffen, so you had to dab rather than stroke it on, whereas with a thin brown liquid it was easier to cover a surface. It took ten seconds and the tray was ready. I sat down again and Yngve started shaping the scones. Downstairs a door opened. Straight afterward came the sound of Dad's heavy footsteps on the stairs. I straightened up in my chair. Mom sat down again, put her knitting on her lap, and looked up as Dad appeared in the doorway.

"Everything's in full swing here, I can see," he said, tucking his thumbs through the loops of his belt and pulling up his trousers. "Soon be something to eat, I presume."

"In a quarter of an hour or so," Mom said.

"Are those scones you're making, Yngve?" he said.

Yngve just nodded without looking up.

"Good," Dad said. He turned and went into the living room. The floor creaked lightly under his weight. He stopped by the television, switched it on, and ensconced himself in the brown leather chair.

I knew that voice. It was the man on the doctor program. A bit hoarse, it sounded rusty, it issued from a face that always leaned backward as though addressing itself to the ceiling while his eyes always looked down, as though to direct his voice to the right place.

I got up and went into the living room.

The screen showed an open wound with blood and skin and flesh surrounded by blue linen.

"Is that an operation?" I said.

"It is indeed," Dad said.

"May I watch?"

"Yes, I don't think there would be any harm in that."

I perched on the edge of the sofa. You could see deep into the body. There was a kind of shaft into it, held open by several metal clips, revealing a layer of flesh that the blood appeared to have just left, and a glistening, membrane-like organ at the very bottom, also stained with blood, all illuminated by a sharp, almost white, light. A pair of rubber-gloved hands rummaged around, apparently at home in these surroundings. Occasionally you saw a fuller picture. Then it became clear the shaft had been opened in a patient lying on a table otherwise completely covered by a blue plastic-like material and that the hands belonged to a surgeon who constituted the focal point of a circle of five people, all dressed in green, the two in the center leaning over the body under a saurian lamp, the other three next to them with trays of instruments and all sorts of equipment I had never seen before.

Dad got up.

"No, I can't watch this," he said. "How can they show this on TV on a Monday night!"

"Can I watch it anyway?" I said.

"Yes, of course," he said, heading for the staircase.

The membrane at the bottom was pulsating. Blood streamed over it, and it sent the blood back, then seemed to rise, until the blood washed across again and once more it had to send it back and once more it had to rise.

Suddenly I realized this was a heart I was watching.

How incredibly sad.

Not because the heart was beating and couldn't escape, it wasn't that. The point was that the heart should not be seen, it should be allowed to beat in secret, hidden from our sight, it was obvious, you understood that when you saw it, a little animal without eyes, it should pound and throb inside your chest unseen.

But I kept watching. Medical programs were my favorite on TV, and especially the few that showed operations. A long time ago I had decided I would be a surgeon when I grew up. Mom and Dad sometimes mentioned this to others, it was intended to be amusing because I'd said it when I was so small, but I really meant it, that was what I wanted to do when I grew up, cut up other people and perform operations on them. I often did drawings or paintings of operations with blood and knives and nurses and lamps, and Mom had asked me many times why I drew and painted so much blood, why couldn't I choose something else, houses and grass and sun, for example, and that was fine by me, but it wasn't what I *wanted* to do. Divers, sailing ships, rockets, and operations, they were what I wanted to draw and paint, not houses and grass and sun.

When Yngve was very small and they lived in Oslo he had said he wanted to be a garbage collector when he grew up. Grandma laughed a lot about that and often mentioned it. In the same breath she said Dad had wanted to be an odd-job man when he was small. She laughed just as much about that, sometimes so much tears rolled down her cheeks, even though she must have said it a hundred times. My wanting to become a surgeon wasn't funny in the same way, it carried a different message, but then I was also a lot older than Yngve had been when he said he wanted to be a garbage collector.

Step by step all the clips and tubes were removed from the shaft in the body. Then the host of the show came on camera and talked about what we had just seen. I got up and went back into the kitchen, where the scones were cooling down on the tray on top of the stove, a pan of hot water for tea was steaming beside them, and Mom was setting the table with plates, cups, knives, and a variety of spreads.

The next day the temperature had fallen and the rain had stopped. My winter boots from last year were too small, and Mom found some woolen socks I could wear inside my rubber boots instead. The blue Puffa jacket still fit, so I wore that for the first time since last year. And then, as soon as I was out of the house, there was a blue bobble cap that I pulled down so far over my face that it formed a black ceiling to my vision. Anne Lisbet was wearing a light-blue Puffa jacket, in smooth, shiny material, unlike mine, which was coarse and matte, a white cap from which her black hair protruded, a white scarf, blue trousers, and a brand-new pair of red boots. She was standing with some girls and didn't return my gaze when I looked at them.

The color of her jacket was just incredibly attractive.

I wanted one like it.

When we got to school and everyone had left their satchels in a line, I suggested to Geir that we steal their caps. He would take Solveig's and I would take Anne Lisbet's. She was standing with her back to us, and when I grabbed it, she whirled around with a scream. I waited until her eyes met mine, and then I ran off. I didn't run so fast that she couldn't catch me or so slowly that everyone would see I was waiting.

I could hear her footsteps on the pavement behind me.

And then she wrapped her arms around me.

Oh! Oh! Oh!

Her wonderfully thick down jacket pressed against mine, she smiled, and shouted, *Let me have it, let me have it*, and I simply couldn't drag the moment out any longer by holding the cap high above her head, the joy inside me was too strong, I just gave it to her and stood still and watched her put it on her head and walk away.

Then she turned and smiled at me!

And her eyes, oh, her eyes, so black and beautiful, they were gleaming! It was like entering a zone of shining light against which everything outside paled and lost meaning. The bell rang, we marched up the stairs, along the corridor, sat down at our desks, and took out our books. And I did what we were told, listened when we had to listen, chatted away as usual, drew my sunken wrecks and swimming frogmen, ate my packed lunch and drank my milk, played soccer at recess, sat beside Geir, and sang in the bus on the way home, ran through the flock of children with my satchel hanging off my back down the last hill, present in both body and soul, yet absent, because inside me there suddenly existed a new sky under whose vaults even the most familiar of thoughts and actions appeared new.

When we went to see Anne Lisbet that day she was standing in the middle of a crowd of kids on the cul-de-sac outside her house. Two of them were swinging a rope between them like a machine, it lashed the ground like a whip, and one after the other they slipped in, stood, and jumped up and down a few times, then slipped out, so that the next person could step in. She was wearing the same cap and the same scarf, and she smiled at us as we stopped in front of them.

"Join in, come on!" she said.

We got in line. I wanted to impress her so much, just slip into the spinning corridor the rope drew in the air, but I didn't manage more than two jumps before it hit my calf and I was out.

Strangely, Geir, whose motor control was not that great and whose arms and legs flapped about wildly, managed very well. Jump, jump, jump, jump, jump – and then he hurled himself out with such force and determination that he had to take a few extra steps to prevent himself from stumbling, not dissimilar to a runner throwing himself at the tape.

Now she would think that Geir was better than me.

The somberness of that thought was gone the very next moment because it was her turn. She ran in and danced inside the rope, an absolute virtuoso, her weight was first on one leg, then on the other while she stared straight ahead, as though her head had nothing to do with what her body was doing. But as she jumped out, no longer needing to concentrate, it was me she looked at and sent a smile to. *Did you see that?* her smile said. *Did you see me just now?*

The water covering the largest sunken areas of the cul-de-sac where we were standing was almost yellow. In the smaller puddles it was a greenish gray, like the surrounding gravel, only a shade lighter. And shinier, of course. From the forest below came the babbling of a stream. The drone of a machine was also audible. I had never been there before, and walked over to the edge to look down. From the house above me on the edge of the forest, a broad, rocky slope fell away sharply. Beneath it there was a yellow bog. Behind that, pines huddled together. Between the trunks I could see a green workmen's shed and a yellow generator. That was what was making the noise.

Then some drilling started. I couldn't see who was doing it, but the sound, such a monotonous *rat-a-tat-tat*, with that brittle, almost singing tone of metal on rock lying like a veil over it, was unmistakable. I knew it through and through.

I turned back and saw Geir nodding his head in time with the rope to adapt to the rhythm for his turn. But this time he didn't do so well, his foot got tangled at once, and as the two rope swingers resumed their mechanical motions, he shuffled over toward me. Behind him Anne Lisbet slipped in. But as soon as she was in position the rope hit her on the arm. She seemed almost to have done it on purpose.

"Are you coming, Solveig?" she said.

Solveig nodded and left the line. Both of them came over to us.

"What do you want to do?" Anne Lisbet said.

"Maybe go and look for some bottles?" I said.

"Yes, let's!" Geir said.

"Where, though? Where are there any bottles?" Anne Lisbet said.

"Along the main road," Geir said. "And in the forest behind the play area. Around the sheds. Sometimes by the Rock. Never in the autumn, though."

"At the bus stop," I said. "And under the bridge."

"Once we found a whole *bag* full," Geir said. "In the ditch near the shop. We made four kroner on the deposits!"

Solveig and Anne Lisbet looked at him, impressed. Even though the bottle idea had been my suggestion! I had come up with it, not Geir!

Without thinking, we had started to walk. The sky was as gray as dry cement. Not a breath stirred the trees; everything was still, brooding, as if turned in on itself. Except for the pines, that is: they were as open and free and sky-embracing as ever. Standing more as though they were in repose. It was the spruces that were turned inward, swallowed up by their own darkness. The deciduous trees, with their thin trunks and splayed branches, were nervous and wary. The old oaks, of which there were quite a few on the slope beyond the road, where we were heading now, were not afraid but lonely. They could endure the loneliness, though; they had stood there for so many years and would stand there for so many more to come.

"There's a pipe there that goes under the road," Anne Lisbet said, pointing to the slope running down alongside the road. It was covered with black soil, laid recently, because no flowers had come up yet.

We walked down. And, sure enough, a pipe did go under the road, made of concrete, perhaps a little more than half a meter in diameter.

"Have you ever crawled through it?" I said.

They shook their heads.

"Why don't we?" Geir said. He leaned over with one hand on the edge of the pipe and peered into the darkness.

"What if we get stuck inside?" Solveig said.

"*We* can do it," I said. "So you can cross the road and wait for us."

"Do you dare?" Anne Lisbet said.

"Of course," Geir said. He glanced at me. "Who'll go first?"

"You can," I said.

"Okay," he said, bending down and squeezing into the pipe. It was too narrow to scramble through on all fours, I could see, but not so narrow that you couldn't wriggle through. After a few seconds of twisting and turning his whole body had disappeared. I looked at Anne Lisbet, leaned forward, and stuck my head in the pipe. A smell of something fusty, like mildew, filled my nostrils. I placed my elbows on the bottom and edged the rest of my body forward, moving like a grub. When all of my body was inside, I raised myself as far as was possible, and with my forearms, knees, and feet pushing against the cement wriggled into the gloom. For the first few meters I could see the shadowy figure of Geir in front of me, but then the darkness deepened and he was gone.

"Are you there?" I shouted.

"Yes," he answered.

"Are you scared?"

"A little. And you?"

"Yes, a little."

Suddenly everything vibrated. A car or a truck must have driven over us a long way up. What if the pipe broke? What if it caved in and we were stuck in it?

The tips of my fingers and toes began to tremble with a faint sense of panic. I knew this feeling, it could arise when I was climbing a mountain and then I would be paralyzed. Frightened out of my wits, I would stand perfectly still, incapable of ascending or descending, in full knowledge of the fact there was only one way to go, only my own movements could get me out of this. I couldn't move, I had to move, but I couldn't, had to, couldn't, had to, couldn't.

"Are you still scared?" I said.

"A little. Did you hear the car? Here comes another!"

Again the pipe vibrated around me.

I kept quite still. There was water lying in several places at the bottom of the pipe and it was advancing up my trousers.

"I can see light!" Geir said.

I thought of the enormous weight on the pipe. It was only a few centimeters thick. My heart was pounding. Suddenly I wanted to stand upright. The urge grew wildly inside me, but collided with the recognition that it was impossible, the concrete was wrapped around my body like a cocoon. I couldn't move.

Sometimes Yngve would sit astride me while I was lying under the duvet. He would hold me so firmly that I couldn't move at all. The duvet was tight across my chest, my hands were locked in his, and my legs were rendered useless under his weight and the taut duvet. He did it because he knew I absolutely hated it. He did it because he knew that after a few seconds of being held captive I would panic. That I would summon all my strength in an attempt to break free, and when I couldn't, when he held me in his grip, I would begin to scream as loudly as I could. I screamed and screamed like a being possessed, and I was, I was possessed by terror, I couldn't break free, I was stuck, completely and utterly stuck, and I screamed from the bottom of my lungs.

Now I could feel the same grip around my heart.

I couldn't move.

Panic was growing.

I knew I mustn't think about not being able to stand up, I should crawl forward patiently and everything would be fine. But I couldn't. All I could think of was that I couldn't move.

"Geir!" I shouted.

"I'm nearly out!" he shouted back. "Where are you?"

"I'm stuck!"

Silence for some seconds.

Then Geir shouted, "I can come and help you! I just have to get out and turn first!"

The panic attack was like an exhalation of breath, because it was out of me now. I moved my arms forward and dragged my knees after. The material of my jacket scraped against the pipe above. Only a few centimeters above that there were tons of rocks and earth. I stopped. My legs and arms had gone weak. I lay down flat.

What would Anne Lisbet and Solveig think about me now?

Oh no, oh no.

Then the panic returned. I couldn't move. I was trapped. I couldn't move! I was trapped! I couldn't move!

Somewhere in the darkness in front of me something moved. Cloth scraped against cement. I heard Geir breathing, it was unmistakable: he would often breathe through his mouth.

Then I saw him, a white face in the blackness.

"Are you stuck?" he said.

"No," I said.

He grabbed the sleeve of my jacket and pulled. I raised my back and moved first one arm forward, then the other, one leg, then the other. Geir wriggled backward without letting go of my sleeve, and even though he wasn't pulling me, because of course I was scrabbling my way through, it felt like he was, and the sight of his white face, pointed like a fox's and unusually concentrated, meant that my mind was no longer on the pipe and the darkness and not being able to move, and so I could move, little by little over the damp concrete, which became lighter and lighter until Geir's feet were out of the hole, followed by his torso, and I could poke my head out into daylight.

Anne Lisbet and Solveig were standing close together by the opening and looking at me.

"Did you get stuck?" Anne Lisbet said.

"Yes," I said. "For a while there, but Geir helped me."

Geir brushed down his hands. Then he brushed the knees of his trousers. I straightened up. The space beneath the gray sky was vast. All the shapes were razor sharp.

"Why don't we go down to Little Hawaii?" Geir said.

"Good idea," I said.

It was wonderful to run on the forest floor. The surface of the water in the little lake was completely black. The trees rising from the two small islands were still. We jumped over to our respective islands. Anne Lisbet and I on one, Solveig and Geir on the other.

Anne Lisbet's lips seemed so vital; they opened and smiled with such ease, now and then of their own accord when her eyes remained unmoved. They seemed to obey the slightest impulse of her mind. She thought of something, they spread across her hard white teeth, soft and red, occasionally followed by an exclamation or a glow of happiness in her eyes, occasionally unconnected with anything else.

"You're sailors," she said out of the blue. "And you come home to us. We haven't seen each other for ages. Shall we play that?"

I nodded. Geir nodded, too.

The two girls jumped onto land and went a little way into the forest.

"You can come now!" Anne Lisbet shouted.

We moored, leaped ashore, and walked toward them. But we weren't quick enough for them, Anne Lisbet was impatiently dancing from one foot to the other, she set off running, toward me, and when she reached me she threw her arms around me and hugged me and pressed her cheek against mine.

"I have missed you so much!" she said. "Oh, my darling husband!"

She took a step back.

"Again!"

I ran back to the lake, jumped onto the little island, waited until Geir was on the other one, then we repeated our actions with one difference, this time we ran as fast as we could to the girls.

Again she wrapped her arms around me.

My heart was racing, for I was not only standing on the ground in a forest with the sky far above me, I was also standing on the ground inside myself and looking up into something light and open and happy.

Her hair smelled of apples.

Through the material of her thick, padded jacket I could feel her body. Her cold, smooth face against mine, almost glowing.

We did this three times. Then we delved farther into the forest. After only a few meters it sloped down, and as the trees growing there were mostly deciduous, the ground was covered with red, yellow, and brown leaves, a floor to the bare walls of trunks. There was the sound of a rushing stream somewhere nearby. The forest tapered to a path running steeply down to the main road, which we couldn't see until we came out a couple of meters above it.

On the other side, a field sloped down, beyond lay Tromøya Sound, as gray as clay, while the sky that opened above was a shade lighter.

The traffic was fast moving, and we kept to the ditch as we walked along. The bottles we usually found here were always new and shiny while those we found in the woods were often covered in grass and had leaves stuck to them, sometimes they were also full of little insects and lifting them up was like lifting up a bit of the field.

Today, however, there were no bottles to be seen. When we reached Larsen's house – a dilapidated, shedlike construction that had once been part of a farm but was now squeezed into a corner between the forest and the road, whose owner was a teacher at the same school as Dad and according to rumors had turned up for work drunk several times – we crossed the road and followed the steep gravel road down to Gamle Tybakken. We looked for bottles on the way, but our efforts became more and more halfhearted. Soon we came to a built-up area. Old white houses set far back in well-established gardens full of fruit trees and fruit bushes. Where we were walking, the colors were so sharp, all the leaves were brilliant yellow and piercing red, and so matte in the sky's pale, slightly frigid gray, it gave me a sense I was walking at the bottom of a tin can, with the sky the lid and the hills that rose all around me the sides. After a few hundred meters we walked past a large property with a lawn stretching up toward the forest above. The house at the top was surprisingly small, considering the size of the land. A narrow gravel track led up to it, and we stopped by the mailbox at the end because, outside the house, beside a large stream that plunged down from the forest, an old lady was pulling at a tree that had got wedged in it.

The tree was perhaps three times bigger than her, with a broad panoply of thin branches around it.

Somehow or other she noticed us standing there because the very next moment she straightened up and looked across at us. She waved. But not in greeting, she was pointing to herself, she was beckoning us to come over.

We ran as fast as we could up the gravel track, across the soft, wet lawn and stopped in front of her.

"You look strong," she said. "Can you help an old lady, do you think? I need to get this tree out of the stream. It's gotten stuck."

Flattered, we got down to work. Geir waded into the water as far as he could and grabbed a branch, I did the same on the other side while Anne Lisbet and Solveig pulled the trunk. At first it wouldn't budge, but then Geir began to shout, Heave-ho! Heave-ho! to make us pull in unison and bit by bit we managed to drag it out. When it was free the current caught the end and pushed it onto our side, but we held on and hauled it onto dry land.

"Oh, how wonderful!" the old lady said. "Many, many thanks! I would never have managed that on my own, you know. You are so strong! Well done. Wait here and I'll give you a little something as a sign of gratitude."

She scurried off to the house with her head bowed and disappeared through the front door.

"What do you think we'll get?" I said.

"Few cookies maybe," Geir said.

"Or a bag of bread rolls," Anne Lisbet said. "Mom always keeps some handy."

"I think apples," Solveig said. And when she said that, I agreed wholeheartedly because beyond the gravel track there were lots of apple trees.

But when the old lady reappeared, with her head still bowed, she came toward us empty-handed. Hadn't she found anything?

"Now look here," she said. "This is for you with my thanks. Who's going to take care of it? It's for all of you."

She held out a coin. It was five kroner.

Five kroner!

"I can look after it," I said. "Thank you very much!"

"It's me who should thank you," the old lady said. "All the best now!"

Elated, we sprinted down the hill. Then without a second thought we walked back the way we had come, discussing what we would do with the money. Geir and I wanted to go to the shop straightaway and buy candy with it. Anne Lisbet and Solveig also wanted to buy candy, but they didn't want to go to the shop now, it would soon be dinner and they had to go home. We decided to save the money for the day after and then buy candy.

Anne Lisbet and Solveig took the path home. Geir and I continued along the main road to the shop. Standing outside, we couldn't wait as we had agreed, the five-krone coin was burning a hole in our pockets, it was all we could think about. Waiting to spend it was simply not an option, so we decided to buy the candy now and save it until the following day and surprise Anne Lisbet and Solveig with it.

And so we bought it.

However, after we had done so and started walking to the road, Geir's father came along in their Beetle. He pulled over beside us, leaned over the seat, and opened the door.

"Hop in," he said.

"Can Karl Ove come, too?"

"No, not this time, we're not going home. We're going to town. Another time, Karl Ove!"

"Okay," Geir said. Turned to me and said in his dramatic whisper, "Don't eat any of the candy!"

I shook my head and stood watching until Geir was in and the car had driven off. Then I ran to the concrete barriers, jumped over them, scampered down the slope and into the play area, past the wreck of a car, across the soccer field, through the forest, and along the edge past the bog. Just before I could be seen from our house I stopped and divvied up all the candy, which until then had been in one bag, and put it into the four pockets of my jacket. I threw the bag away and ran onto the road, down the side of the house – there was a light on in the living-room window – and into the drive. Dad's car was there and, leaning against the wall in its usual place, Yngve's bike!

The little metal part holding the handlebars in position had a very different, and much brighter, gleam than the metal around it. Surely Dad couldn't help but notice?

I opened the door and went in. If Dad met me I would just hang up my jacket as normal. If he stayed in his study or in the living room, I would go upstairs wearing my jacket, hide the candy in my room, and then go back down with the empty jacket. If he met me then and asked why I was still wearing my jacket I would say I'd had to go to the toilet urgently.

The house was quiet.

There he was. Upstairs in the living room.

I carefully removed my shoes and walked through the hall, up the stairs, and into the bathroom. Opened my fly, wriggled out the wiener, and peed. Pulled the chain, washed my hands in cold water, dried them, and waited for the flush to stop before I opened the door. Cast a fleeting glance into the living room, nothing, went into my room, pulled the duvet aside, emptied my pockets of all the candy, covered it again, and went onto the landing.

"Karl Ove, is that you?" Dad said from the living room.

"Yes," I said.

He came out.

"Where have you been?" he said.

"Gamle Tybakken with Geir," I said.

"What were you doing there?"

His mouth was a straight line. His eyes were cold.

"Nothing much," I said, so happy my voice held firm. "Walking around, that was all."

"Why are you wearing your jacket?"

"I had to go to the bathroom. I'll take it off now."

I continued down the stairs. He went back to the living room. I hung up my jacket and quickly returned, unhappy at the thought that all that candy was lying there unprotected. Switched on the small, round metal lamp on the desk. The long, slim bulb filled the empty space it resided in with its yellow light. Sat down on the bed. Straightened the duvet over the candy.

What now?

Contrasting feelings coursed through me. One minute I was on the verge of tears, the next my chest was bursting with happiness.

I took out a book about space Dad had had as a child and which I had been allowed to borrow the previous time I was ill. It was crammed with drawings of how space travel would be in the future. Astronauts' equipment, the shape of rockets, and the surfaces of planets.

Dad strode along the landing.

He opened the door and eyed me. Without making a move to come in or say anything.

I closed the book and sat up straight. Glanced in the direction of the candy.

It was impossible to see there was anything underneath the duvet.

"What have you got there?" Dad said.

"Where?" I said. "What do you mean? I haven't got anything."

"Under the duvet," Dad said.

"I haven't got anything under the duvet!"

He eyed me again.

Then he walked over to the bed and tore the duvet aside.

"You're lying to me!" he said. "Are you lying to your own father?"

He grabbed my ear and twisted it round.

"I didn't mean to!" I said.

"Where did you get the candy? Where did you get the money to buy it?"

"An old lady gave it to me!" I said, starting to cry. "I haven't done anything wrong!"

"An old lady?" Dad said. He twisted harder. "Why would an old lady give you money?"

"Ow! Ow!" I yelled.

"Be quiet!" he said. "You lied to me, didn't you?"

"Yes, but I didn't mean to!"

"Look at me when I'm talking to you. Did you lie?"

I raised my head and looked at him. His eyes were smoldering with anger.

"Yes," I said.

"So now you tell me where you got the money from. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I got it from an old lady! We did her a favor!"

"Who?"

"Geir and I and A – "

"You and Geir and who?"

"No one. Just me and Geir."

"You little liar. Just you come here."

He twisted my ear around again while pulling my hand and forcing me to stand up. I gasped and sobbed and my insides went hollow.

"Down to my study," he said, without letting go of my ear.

"I . . . haven't . . . done . . . anything . . . wrong," I said. "We . . . were . . . given . . . the money."

He pushed open the first door so hard that it slammed against the wall. Dragged me in through the second and onto the floor. Then he let go.

"How did you get the money?" he said. "And don't you tell me any lies!"

"We helped . . . an old lady."

"To do what?"

"There was . . . a tree. A tree . . . stuck in a stream. We pulled . . . it out."

"And she gave you money for that?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Five kroner."

"You're lying, Karl Ove. Where did you get the money from?"

"I AM NOT LYING!" I yelled.

His hand shot out and slapped me on the cheek.

"Do not shout!" he hissed.

He stood up.

"But there is a way to find out," he said. "I'll ring the old lady and ask her if it's true."

He looked me in the eye as he said it.

"Where does she live?"

"In . . . Gamle Ty . . . bakken," I said.

Dad went to the telephone on his desk, lifted the receiver, and dialed a number. Held the receiver to his ear.

"Oh, hello," he said. "My name's Knausgaard. I'm ringing about my son. He says you gave him five kroner today. Is that correct?"

There was a pause.

"You didn't? You didn't have two boys helping you today? You didn't give them five kroner? Oh yes, I see. I apologize for the intrusion. Thank you very much. Goodbye."

He cradled the receiver.

I couldn't believe my own ears.

He looked at me.

"She hasn't seen any boys. And she definitely didn't give anyone five kroner."

"But it's true. We *were* given five kroner."

He shook his head.

"That's not what she said. So. That's enough lying. Where did you get the money from?"

Another deluge of tears swept through me.

"From . . . the . . . old . . . lady!" I sobbed.

Dad stared at me.

"We're not going to get any further with this," he said. "Now you go and throw the candy in the bin. And you stay in your room for the rest of the evening. Then I'll have a chat with Prestbakmo in a bit."

"But it's not mine!" I said.

"It's not yours? You've told me *you* were given five kroner? Wasn't it your money after all?"

"It's Geir's as well," I said. "I can't throw the candy away."

Dad stared at me with his mouth agape and a furious glare.

"You do as I say," he said at length. "Now I don't want to hear a single word more from you. Have you got that? You steal, you lie, and on top of all that you talk back! So. Get up there."

With him right behind me, I gathered up all the candy in my hands, threw it in the kitchen trash can, and went back to my room.

That autumn and winter we went up to see Anne Lisbet and Solveig as often as we could. We stumbled around playing in the darkness, our rain gear glistening with rain in the gleam of our flashlights, which shone narrow tunnels of light into the forest below their houses, we sat in one of their bedrooms drawing and listening to music, we went to the boat factory and the big quay there, up the hill behind, where none of us had been before, and we went down into the forest below the bridge next to the immense concrete foundations.

One Saturday we wandered down to the secret dumping ground. They were just as eager as we had been, and Geir and I dragged four chairs and a table, a lamp, and a chest of drawers into the trees, we arranged them as if we were in a living room, and it was absolutely fantastic because we were outside in the forest, in the sunlight, yet inside a living room, and we were there with Solveig and Anne Lisbet.

The tingle of excitement I felt when I looked at her never waned, she was so beautiful it hurt. Her thick, light-blue jacket with the shiny material. The white cap. The rim of wool around the top of her boots. Her face when for some reason she sent us a fierce look. Her smile, as radiant as a billion diamonds.

When the snow began to fall we wandered around searching for suitable places to jump from, slide down, or dig holes in. Her hot, red cheeks then, the gentle but distinct smell of snow that changed so much according to the temperature, but that was everywhere around us nevertheless; all the possibilities that existed. Once the mist hung between the trees, the air was thick with drizzle and we were wearing waterproof clothing that was so frictionless on the snow we could slide down it like seals. We climbed to the top of the slope, I lay on my front, Anne Lisbet sat astride me, Solveig astride Geir, and we slid down on our stomachs all the way to the bottom. It was the best day I had ever experienced. We did it again and again. The feeling of her legs clamped round my back, the way she held my shoulders, the howls of delight she gave when we picked up speed, the fantastic somersaults when we reached the bottom, rolling around with our legs and arms entwined. All while the mist hung motionless amid the wet, dark green spruce trees, and the drizzle in the air lay like a thin film of skin on our faces.

We discovered lots of new places that winter, such as the deciduous forest below the road, which surrounded the whole estate and the area above the Fina station, two places that had been totally separate in our consciousness but that were now suddenly connected. The old gravel lane that led down there, the last part of which we had joined when we were going to the Fina station, also had a top end, where the children we had never seen lived, they also had a soccer field in the forest, small, it was true, but with decent goals. Or the road below Anne Lisbet and Solveig's, where the houses highest up were only a stone's throw away from theirs. Dag Magne, who was in our class, turned out to be Solveig's neighbor. It came as a surprise that their houses were so close to one another, they belonged to two different worlds and there was a belt of forest between them. Presumably it was the forest that had deceived us. It was no more than twenty, perhaps thirty meters wide, but it represented so much more than houses that, emotionally, the distance felt like several hundred meters. This was the same across the whole estate, and not only there, it was like that by the dumping ground, too, for if you took the road from Færvik and continued straight on, which very few people did, instead of turning right onto the road to Hove, you were there. And if you bore right at the end of the long, flat stretch, on the road east toward the school, it was only a couple hundred meters before the dumping ground revealed itself in all its glory between the trees. Areas that had previously been isolated, in their own worlds, so to speak, were suddenly connected. How many people knew that Lake Tjenna was actually located right by Lake Gjerstad? Lake Gjerstad, which you could walk to from Sandum, on the other side of the island! Or reach via a shortcut off the road to school!

Another surprise was that Fru Hjellen, our houskeeper, lived with her husband in the house next to Anne Lisbet's. They had no children, she was always happy to receive visitors, and I went there both on my own and with the other three. When she cleaned our house I told her all sorts of things, even things I didn't tell

Mom and Dad. She taught me how to open the front door with the key I had been given – the trick was to pull it out a *tiny* bit after fully inserting it and *then* turn.

And so it was Fru Hjellen I confided in when one of the rocks we regularly dropped on cars from the road below us finally hit one. I was the one who dropped it. We were standing by the green fence, Geir had just missed his car, when I picked up a stone and waited for another car to come. The stone was bigger than my hand and so heavy that I pushed it rather than dropping it. There, a car was coming round the bend. Racing across the flat stretch. Now!

The stone flew through the air. The instant it left my hand I knew it was going to hit. However, I had not anticipated the *bang* on the car roof would be so loud. Nor that the very next second there would be a squeal of brakes and locked tires screaming across the pavement.

Geir looked at me with terrified eyes.

"Let's scram!" he said.

He crawled up the rocks, dashed across the road, climbed up the little knoll, and was gone.

Absolutely paralyzed, I didn't move. I simply couldn't move a muscle. I was too frightened. Even when I heard a car door slamming below, the engine starting, and the car heading for where I was standing. I didn't move.

Thirty seconds later the car came up the road. With tears running down my cheeks and my legs trembling so much I could barely stand, I watched it stop on the road three meters above me. The driver didn't open the door and get out; he hurled it open and leaped out, his face red with fury.

"Did you throw that rock?" he yelled, already on his way down the slope.

I nodded.

He grabbed both my arms and shook me.

"You could have killed me, do you understand? If the rock had hit the windshield! Do you understand! And whatever happens, the car's a WRITE-OFF! Do you know how much it costs to repair a roof? Oh, this is going to cost you a bundle!"

He let go of me.

I was crying so much I couldn't see.

"What's your name?" he said.

"Karl Ove," I said.

"Surname?"

"Knausgaard."

"Do you live here?"

"No."

"Where do you live then?"

"Nordåsen Ringvei," I said.

He straightened up.

"You'll be hearing from me," he said. "Or your father will be hearing from me, I should say."

He took the slope in one stride with his long legs, got into his car, slammed the door hard, and drove off with a jerk.

I sat down on the ground sobbing. All hope was gone.

A moment later Geir called from the terrain above. He came sprinting down, bursting with questions about what had happened and what had been said. I knew he was glad it was me who had thrown the rock and that I had given my name. But what he wanted to know most was why I hadn't run. After all, we'd had plenty of time to get away. If I'd run he would never have caught me and never known it was me who had dropped the stone.

"I don't know," I said, drying my tears. "But I couldn't. Suddenly I couldn't move."

"Are you going to tell your mom and dad?" Geir said. "That'd be best. If you tell them the truth they'll be angry, but it'll be over and done with quickly. If you don't say anything and he rings, it'll be worse."

"I don't dare," I said. "I can't tell them."

"Did you tell him your father's name?"

"No, just mine."

"But your name's not in the phone book!" he said. "And he'll have to ring your dad. But you didn't tell him his name!"

"No," I said, with a flicker of hope.

"In that case, definitely don't tell them anything," Geir said. "Perhaps nothing will come of it!"

When I got home, Fru Hjellen was there. She could see I had been crying and asked me what was wrong. I asked her not to say a word to anyone. She promised. Then I told her. She stroked my cheek and said it would be best if I told my parents. But I didn't dare, I told her, and so we left it at that. Whenever the phone rang in the following days, I froze in a fear that was greater than any I had ever experienced. An immense darkness hung over those days. But it was never him on the phone, it was always someone else, and I was beginning to believe that everything would pass and disappear of its own accord.

Then he called.

The phone rang, Dad picked it up downstairs, perhaps three minutes went by before the handset upstairs clicked, which meant he had rung off. He came upstairs, his footsteps firm and laden with determination. On his way to see Mom. The voices from the kitchen were loud. I sat in bed crying. A few minutes later my bedroom door opened. Both of them came in. That never happened. Their faces were grave and somber.

"A man has just called me, Karl Ove," Dad said. "He told me you dropped a big stone on his car and destroyed the roof. Is that true?"

"Yes," I said.

"How could you *do* such a thing?" he said. "What's wrong with you? You could have killed him! Don't you understand? Don't you understand how serious this is, Karl Ove?"

"Yes," I said.

"If the stone had gone through the windshield," Mom said, "he could have driven off the road or collided with another car. He could have died."

"Yes," I said.

"Now I have to pay for the repairs. Which will run into several thousand kroner. And that's money we don't have!" Dad said. "Where do you think that's going to come from, eh?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Oh, you accursed boy!" he said, turning away.

"And then you didn't say a word," Mom said. "It's more than a week since it happened. You have to tell us when this kind of thing happens. Do you understand? Promise me you will."

"Yes," I said. "But I told Fru Hjellen."

"Fru *Hjellen*?" Dad said. "And not us?"

"Yes."

He looked at me with those cold, angry eyes of his.

"Why did you do it?" Mom said. "How could you even think of dropping stones on cars? You must have known it was dangerous?"

"We didn't think we would hit anything," I said.

"We?" Dad said. "Were there more of you?"

"Geir was with me," I said. "But I dropped the stone that hit the car."

"Looks like I'll have to have a chat with Prestbakmo as well," Dad said, glancing at Mom. Then he turned to me.

"You're grounded today and for two more days. No pocket money for this week or the following one. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Then they went out.

It had all passed. This, too. It had been the darkness between the act and the revelation, when everything appeared normal but wasn't, which had been so terrible. When everything trembled behind the static façade of everyday normality. Once, about a year earlier, a similar situation had made me run away. Then it had been not a rock but a knife that had led to the misfortune. All the other children had been given scout knives, except me. I was too small and too irresponsible. But then one day, in an act that bore some resemblance to a ceremony, Dad presented me with a knife.

They trusted me, he said. I hid my disappointment that it was a girl's knife he had bought and that the scout in the picture on the sheath wore a skirt, not trousers, these were details you could not expect an adult to understand, and I allowed my pleasure at receiving the knife to predominate because now I could cut and carve and chop and throw with the others. All I needed to do was keep the sheath out of their sight. That day I carved a sword with Leif Tore. A long piece of wood I sharpened at the end like a bradawl and a short piece nailed on as a handle. Swords in hand, we roamed the estate. Finding two girls, each with a doll's stroller, we snuck after them for a while before we launched an attack, imagining we were pirates and they were ships, and again and again we ran our swords through the leather hoods of the strollers. The girls shouted and screamed, we retreated, they said they would tell on us, we began to worry about what we had done, and kept a wary eye on them. First of all, they went home, then they came out, and started to walk toward Gustavsen's house and ours. Terrified of the consequences, we decided to run away. We climbed the mountain, went into the forest at the top, and walked as far as we could, that is, to the cliff above Lake Tjenna. Neither Leif Tore nor I had been there before. It was a long way from home and I thought we could sleep there and leave the following morning. We sat on the edge looking over. The sun hung low in the sky behind us; the countryside that spread out around us was golden in the sunshine. We sat there for half an hour perhaps. Then Leif Tore wanted to go home. He was hungry, he said. I tried to persuade him, we had run away after all, we couldn't go back, but he stuck to his guns, he didn't want to sleep outdoors under any circumstances, so I went back with him. Dad was waiting for me in the garden when I arrived home. He grabbed my arm in an iron grip, dragged me to my room, and told me I was grounded. The knife was confiscated, even though that wasn't what I had used but a sword. They didn't understand the difference. Stabbing with a knife was unthinkable. The sword was made of wood, it was what we had used for the attack, and they should have confiscated that. But they took the knife. I heard them talking about it. "Look," Dad had said. "Look at the sheath. It's completely ruined." He was referring to all the holes I had made to hide the fact that the scout was wearing a skirt and not trousers, but he interpreted it as a sign that I was careless and immature. Sitting there in my room, grounded for that night and the following one, I watched Leif Tore playing outside. He had been given a slap and that was that. Slaps didn't bother him.

But it passed. Everything passed. The girls got new strollers, the motorist got a new roof, the grounding came to an end, pocket money was reinstated, the road outside the house was packed with children in the evening, and the forest below was always open, day and night, winter and spring. Anne Lisbet and Solveig didn't come down to us, we always went up to them, and in that way we had two worlds: one outside our houses, where we joined the gatherings of kids every evening, kicking a soccer ball, playing in the road, building dens in the forest below, running round and poking our noses in every nook and cranny of the estate, and when the cold came and the water froze, skating on Tjenna, with the wonderful sound of steel blades on ice, resounding against the low hills bordering the lake, and every day was filled with such intense pleasure – and another world up there with them, where everything appeared to resemble what we had at home because here too children were throwing themselves into everything you could throw yourself into, here too they kicked a soccer ball in the road, played games in the dark, here too they skipped, here too they skated when the water froze and skied when snow fell, yet it was different. The pleasure was somehow elsewhere, not in what we did but in who we did it with. So intense was the pleasure that it was often there even when they weren't. One evening we played table tennis in Dag Lothar's garage, one evening we snuck around a couple of workmen's sheds by a new road in the forest, one evening we sat in Geir's bedroom playing Chinese checkers, one evening I would be getting undressed by my bed and the thought of Anne Lisbet and her whole being could suddenly strike me with such force that I was left reeling with happiness and longing. Furthermore, it was not just her in those feelings, there was also her beautiful mother and her broad-shouldered father, who was a diver and had a couple of yellow oxygen bottles in the cellar bathroom, her little sister and brother, all the rooms in their house, and the pleasant fragrance that filled them. There were all the things she had in her room, so different from those that occupied mine, lots of dolls, dolls' clothes, a lot of pink and frills. And there was what we did together, which her joy and enthusiasm heightened and added gloss to. Especially at school, where we kept to ourselves until a particular situation brought us together, it might be in a circle when we played *Ta den ring og la den vandre* and it was me she gave the ring to, or when it was me she caught while singing the last line of "*Bro bro brille*" and clasped her arms around or when I chased her in tag and she deliberately slowed down so that I could catch her. Oh, had it been up to me I could have run after Anne Lisbet all my life as long as I was allowed to wrap my arms around her at the end.

Did I know that it couldn't last?

No, I didn't. I thought it would just go on and on forever. Spring came, and with it a lightness: one day I put on my new sneakers, and running in them after months of trudging around in various kinds of boots was like flying. Puffa pants and jackets, which made all movement so awkward and clumsy, were replaced by light trousers and light jackets. Gloves, scarves, and caps were packed away. Skis and skates and sleighs and sleds were put into sheds and garages; bikes and soccer balls were taken out, and the sun, which for so long had hung low in the sky and whose rays had been for the eyes only, rose higher and higher with every day that passed and was soon so hot that the jackets we put on in the morning were stuffed in our satchels when we returned from school at midday. But during these weeks the most telling sign of spring was the reek of burning garden refuse wafting across the estate. The cool evenings, the bluish darkness, the cold emanating from ditches still littered with the remains of snowdrifts, as hard as ice and studded with grit, the constant buzz of children's voices outside, children running after a soccer ball in the road, others cycling up and down ditches or doing wheelies on the sidewalk, everything bubbled with life and lightness, you had to run, you had to cycle, you had to shout, you had to laugh, all with the pungent yet rich smell of burning spring grass that was suddenly everywhere in your nostrils. Now and then we ran up and watched: the low, dense flames like little orange waves, damp almost with the intensity of color brought out by the evening gloom, tended by a proud mother or father, often with a rake over their shoulder and gloves on their hands, like some kind of lower-middle-class knight. Now and then there were real bonfires they kept watch over, when all the trash they had collected in the garden during the winter was burned.

What was it about fire?

It was so alien here, it was so profoundly archaic that nothing about it could be associated with its surroundings: what was fire doing side by side with Gustavsen's trailer? What was fire doing side by side with Anne Lene's toy shovel? What was fire doing side by side with Kanestrøm's sodden and faded garden furniture?

In all its various hues of yellow and red it stretched up to the sky, consuming crackling spruce twigs, melting hissing plastic, switching this way, switching that, in totally unpredictable patterns, as beautiful as they were unbelievable, but what were they doing here among us ordinary Norwegians on ordinary evenings in the 1970s?

Another world was revealed with the fire, and departed with it again. This was the world of air and water, earth and rock, sun and stars, the world of clouds and sky, all the old things that were always there and always had been, and which, for that reason, you didn't think about. But the fire *came*, you saw it. And once you had seen it you couldn't help seeing it everywhere, in all the fireplaces and wood-burning stoves, in all the factories and workshops, and in all the cars driving round the roads and in garages or outside houses in the evening, for fire burned there, too. Also cars were profoundly archaic. This immense antiquity actually resided in everything, from houses – made of brick or wood – to the water flowing through the pipes into and out of them, but since everything happens for the first time in every generation, and since this generation had broken with the previous one, this lay right at the back of our consciousness, if it was there at all, for in our heads we were not only modern 1970s people, our surroundings were also modern 1970s surroundings. And our feelings, those that swept through each and every one of us living there on these spring evenings, were modern feelings, with no other history than our own. And for those of us who were children, that meant no history. Everything was happening for the first time. We never considered the possibility that feelings were also old, perhaps not as old as water or the earth, but as old as humanity. Oh no, why would we? The feelings running through our breasts, which made us shout and scream, laugh and cry, were just part of who we were, more or less like fridges with a light that came on when the door was opened or houses with a doorbell that rang if it was pressed.

Did I really think it would last?

Yes, I did.

But it didn't. One day toward the end of April I told Anne Lisbet we were going to go up to their place after school, and she said we couldn't come.

"Why not?" I said.

"Someone else is coming over," she said.

"Who?" I said, thinking perhaps it was an uncle or an aunt.

"It's a secret," she said, smiling her sly smile.

"Someone from the class?" I said. "Marianne or Sølvi or Unni?"

"It's a secret," she said. "You and Geir can't come. Bye!"

I went over to Geir and told him what she had said. We decided to sneak over after school and spy on them. After dropping off our satchels at home we took the other way up, cut through the building site in the forest below, where the foundations for the new houses had already been built, crept through the trees, over the bog, and up to the cul-de-sac between their houses.

No one.

Were they indoors?

We couldn't ring the bell, of course; we weren't supposed to be there. We walked down. Geir had the brilliant idea of ringing the bell at Vemund's house. He came out and stood in the doorway with that same stupid expression on his round face. Yes, they had gone down the hill some time ago.

Alone?

No, they were with two others.

Who?

'Fraid he hadn't seen.

Boys or girls?

Boys, he thought. At first he had assumed it was us, as we were here so much, but now he could see of course it must have been someone else!

He laughed. Geir laughed, too.

Who could it be?

And what were they doing with them?

"Come on, let's follow them," I said to Geir.

"But they didn't want us with them," Geir said. "Wouldn't it be better to go to Vemund's for a while?"

I stared at him, my eyes as wide as they could be.

"Okay," he said.

"Don't say anything to the others," I said to Vemund. He nodded, and then we walked across their property and down to the road.

Where could they be?

For all we knew, they could have gone all the way down to the shop. But something told me they would stay near the house.

We joined the road below theirs. Four of them. They should be easy to see and hear.

"Should we go up?" I said, stopping at the crossroads where one road led up to Dag Magne's and theirs.

Geir shrugged.

We walked up the gentle slope. Dag Magne's house lay in a little dip. There was a garage adjacent to it, full of bikes and tools and car tires. Under the veranda there was a pile of wood.

Reaching the summit of the slope, we saw Dag Magne in a window looking out at us. To avoid giving the impression that we were on our way to see him we cut across their property without looking at him and down into the forest on the other side. Spring was in the air, the grass that had been white for so long was turning green, but there were no leaves on the trees, so we could see a long way into the young forest.

There. Directly below the slope to Solveig's house I saw something blue and red moving.

"There they are," Geir said.

We stopped and stood still.

They were laughing and chatting excitedly.

"Can you see who it is?" I whispered.

Geir shook his head.

We went closer. Hiding behind trees as far as we could. When we were about twenty meters away, we crouched down behind a rock.

I poked my head up and watched them.

It was Eivind and Geir B with them.

Eivind and Geir B.

Oh God, would you believe it! Eivind and Geir B, they were in our class! They were neighbors and best friends, and lived just along from Sverre, who lived just along from Siv, whose house we could see from our road.

What was the difference between them and us?

There was almost no difference!

They were best friends, we were best friends. Eivind was one of the best students in the class; I was one of the best students in the class. Geir B and Geir both just hung out with us two.

But Eivind was better looking than me. He had curly hair, high cheekbones, and narrow eyes. I had protruding teeth and a protruding bum. And he was stronger than me.

Now he was hanging from a dead tree trying to break it. Geir B was on the other side pushing as hard as he could. Anne Lisbet and Solveig stood watching.

They were showing off.

Oh flippin' hell!

What should we do? Go over and act cool? Make a group of six?

I turned to Geir.

"What shall we do?" I whispered.

"I don't know," he whispered back. "Beat them up?"

"Ha ha," I whispered. "They're stronger than us."

"We can't stay here all day, anyway," he whispered.

"Should we get out of here?"

"Yes, let's go."

As carefully as we had come, we crept off. At the crossroads, Geir asked if I wanted to go up to Vemund's.

"No way!" I said.

"I'll go then," he said. "See you."

"See you."

After a few meters I turned and watched him. He had found a twig and was whacking one knee and then the other as he walked on the sidewalk alongside the wall. I cried almost all the way home and kept to the path past the soccer field so that no one would see.

This happened on a Friday. Early on the Saturday morning I ran up to Geir's, but he was going to Arendal with his parents. Mom and Dad were cleaning the house and vacuuming, Yngve had caught the bus to Arendal with Steinar, so I was left to my own devices. I went into the bathroom and locked the door, rummaged through the dirty linen basket and found my ugly brown cords, which were filthy around the knees. I put them on, ran into my room, and searched for my disgusting yellow sweater, put it on, went downstairs unobserved and into the boiler room, where my rubber boots were, the ugliest footwear I possessed, carried them into the hall, and put them on. From the hook I grabbed the thin gray jacket I had been given last spring, too small now and pretty grubby, on top of which the zipper didn't work, so I would have to walk with it undone. That suited me fine because the yellow sweater underneath would be visible then.

Dressed like this, in the ugliest clothes I could muster, I set off for the estate where Anne Lisbet lived. With eyes downcast all the while, I wanted people who saw me to realize how upset I was. And if I bumped into Anne Lisbet, which was the object of the exercise, I wanted her to see what she had done. The filthy, ugly clothes I was wearing, the drooping head, all of this was for her benefit, so that she would understand.

I didn't want to ring, or else I would have to talk to her. No, the whole point was that she would happen to catch a glimpse of me and realize for herself how upset I was about what she had done.

When I reached Vemund's house, and there was still no sign of her, I entered the road leading to her house, even though it could ruin my plan, because what was I actually coming here for, if not to meet them?

To meet Bjørn Helge perhaps?

He was a year younger, and the idea of playing with him was inconceivable. Although he played soccer and was quite grown-up for his age.

I stood for a moment at the cul-de-sac wondering whether to go up to Bjørn Helge's. But just seeing the house where she lived upset me, so after a while I went down into the forest, past the newly blasted building sites. The construction machines and portacabins stood idle, staring ahead through vacant, black windows onto the road along the flat land. I looked for a while at the new parish hall that was being built, then at the field where we used to play soccer and the gate to the path leading to the garbage dump, which was a hundred meters farther on. Slowly I began to descend. In the middle of the hill I walked past, hidden behind rocky outcrops and trees, lived Eivind and Geir B. We had been up there a couple of times to play, and in the winter before the snow fell we had taken them to Lake Tjenna and gone skating. Once we had also been to Geir B's birthday party. And once to Sverre's. That time I had lost the ten kroner that had been meant for him, the envelope was empty when I arrived dressed in my Sunday best, I began to cry, it wasn't good, it wasn't good at all, but there was a reason, ten kroner was a lot of money. His father fortunately went with me to find it, we walked back up the road I had come along, and there, bright blue on the black pavement, was the ten-krone note. So they could no longer think I had tricked them, taken the money myself, and pretended I had lost it.

On a lawn in a garden by the road stood the boy with the long, black hair and the Indian features playing keepie-uppie with a soccer ball.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said.

"How many can you do?" he said.

"Four," I said.

He laughed. "That's nothing."

"How many can you do then?"

"Did sixteen not long ago."

"Show me," I said.

He dropped the ball and placed his foot on top. With one swift flick he sent the ball into the air. One, two, three kick-ups and then the ball was too far from him and the last kick, a wild lunge with his leg, sent the ball into the hedge.

"That was four," I said.

"It's because you're watching," he said. "You make me think about what I'm doing. I'll have another go. Will you wait?"

"Yes."

This time he got the ball up to knee height, and then it was easy, the ball went from knee to knee five times before he lost control.

"Eight," I said.

"Yes," he said. "But now I'll show you."

"I've got to run," I said.

"Okay," he said.

His father, a fat man with glasses and thick, gray hair, was in the window watching us. I ran across the road, suddenly realized what clothes I was wearing, slowed down, and started to walk with my head bowed again.

When I came down the hill Dad was reversing the car out of the drive. He waved me over, leaned across the seat, and opened the door.

"Jump in," he said. "We're going to town."

"But my clothes," I said. "Can I change first?"

"Nonsense," he said. "Jump in, now!"

I pulled the little lever at the side of the seat and was about to push it forward.

"Sit in the front," he said.

"In the front?" I said.

This never happened.

"Yes," he said. "We haven't got all day! Come on now!"

I did as he said. After I had closed the door he put the car in gear and we set off down the hill.

"Your clothes are a bit dirty," he said. "But we're only going for a little trip. It won't matter."

I started fiddling with the seat belt and didn't see a lot until it had clicked into position and we were on Tromøya Bridge.

"I felt like going to the fish market," he said. "And the record shop. Do you want to join me?"

"Yes," I said.

He steered with one hand on the wheel. The other was on the gearshift, a cigarette burning between his fingers. He drove fast as always.

For a long time we said nothing.

On the left was Vindholmen, and the shipyard with the huge cranes like monitor lizards and the fiberglass hall. The parking lot outside was just under half full. There was an enormous oil platform in the sound. A Condeep platform that was due to be towed out the following week.

After we had driven through the little tunnel and come into the town of Songe, he glanced at me.

"Have you been out with Geir today?" he said.

"No," I said. "They're in Arendal."

"We might bump into them then."

There was another silence.

It bothered me; he was in such a good mood and didn't deserve to be met with silence. But what could I say?

After a while I thought of something.

"Where are you going to park?"

He shot me a sidelong glance.

"We'll find somewhere," he said.

"Maybe in Skytebanen? There's always room on Saturdays."

"That's the last resort," he said.

He found a parking spot in Tyholmen. He set off at a good clip between the tall timber houses, and I had to jog to keep up. I was ashamed of my clothes, I looked like such an idiot in them, and I kept a close eye on the people we passed to see if they were staring or laughing.

At the fish market Dad scanned the glass counters while waiting his turn.

"Let's have some shrimp, shall we, eh, Karl Ove?" he said.

I nodded.

"And perhaps that piece of cod?"

I didn't say anything.

He smiled and looked at me.

"I know you don't like cod, but it's good for you. When you grow up you'll get a taste for it."

"I doubt it," I said.

I felt like chatting and telling stories, the way I did with Mom, but I couldn't even get off the ground with him. However, I was glad he had brought me along and it was important he knew that.

When it was his turn and he pointed out what he wanted to the assistant, one of the other women behind the counter stared at him. Realizing that I was watching her, she lowered her gaze and continued to pack the fish on the cutting board in front of her. There was something about Dad, in the crowd by the counter, his pointing and talking, that made me think he wanted to dispel from his mind everything that existed around him. Not his appearance, not the face dominated by the beard, not the light-blue eyes, not the slightly curled lips, nor his tall, slim body, there was something else, something he "radiated."

"There we are," he said as he received his change and held the white bag of fish and shrimp in his hand. "Let's go then!"

Outside, beneath the gray sky, with people packing all the sidewalks and pedestrian areas, as always on Saturdays, we walked around Pollen, the central bay area, heading for the record shop, I did a few skips beside him, to show him I was happy. When he looked at me I smiled. The wind coming off the sound ruffled his hair and he patted it back in place.

"Could you carry the bag for me for a bit?" he said inside Musikkhjørnet. I nodded and held it in my hand while he nimbly flicked through the records.

My parents used to play music when we had gone to bed, especially on Friday and Saturday evenings. Often it was the last thing I heard before I fell asleep. Every now and again he played records when he was alone in his study. Steinar had told me once that he had brought a Pink Floyd LP into the classroom and played it. He had said this with awe in his voice.

"Wouldn't you like to choose a cassette?" Dad remarked, without taking his eyes off the records he had in front of him.

"But I don't have a cassette recorder," I said.

"You can borrow Yngve's," he said. "And then we'll see you get one of your own for Christmas. It's good to have a few cassettes lying around. No point having a recorder without any cassettes!"

Shyly I went over to the cassettes, which were not in boxes like the records but in racks on the wall. One was full of Elvis cassettes. I picked out one with the cover showing him in a leather suit, sitting with a guitar in his lap and smiling.

Dad bought two records, and when he placed them on the counter he told the assistant that I would point out a cassette I wanted. He came over to the rack with a little key in his hand. I indicated the Elvis cassette, he unlocked the glass door, took it out, and put it in its own little bag beside Dad's big bag.

"Good choice," Dad said as we walked toward the car. "You know Elvis was number one when I was growing up. Elvis the Pelvis, we called him. I still have some of his old records. They're at Grandma and Grandad's. Perhaps we should bring them back next time we go? So that you can listen to them?"

"Yes, that would be good," I said. "Maybe Yngve would like it, too."

"They must be worth a mint today," he said. Stopped and took the keys from his pocket. I looked over at the massive oil tankers laid up in Galtesund, on the Tromøya side of the strait. They were so big that, set against the low hills, they seemed to come from another world.

Dad opened the door on my side.

"Can I sit in front on the way home, too?" I said.

"You can. But only today, okay?"

"Okay," I said.

He put the bags on the backseat and lit a cigarette before strapping himself in, which I had already done, and started the car. On the way home I sat partly looking at the cover of the cassette and partly out of the window. There was a line of traffic the entire length of Langbrygga, it started moving more freely in the bay around the headland, with Bai Radio and TV on one side and the fish auction hall, with its low, white-brick buildings and fluttering flags on the other. Across the sound and its choppy white-tipped waves lay Skilsø, a collection of timber houses situated along a hill, with a ferry terminal below, beyond which was Pusnes Mekaniske Verksted, marine suppliers, and then it was mostly forest along the coast of the island, while on the mainland, where the road wound up and down, there were houses and jetties all the way to the gas station, after which came Songe, Vindholmen, and the road that led to Tromøya Bridge. All ruffled and tousled, as it were, by the wind from the south. As we drove, the thought of Anne Lisbet crept up on me and darkened my mood. Perhaps it was the Condeep platform that had triggered it because I had been thinking of going with Geir and the girls up to Tromøya Bridge and watching it being towed out to sea. Now I wouldn't. Or would I? She still hadn't been to my room, which I imagined every night before going to sleep, that one day she would be sitting there, on my bed, surrounded by my things, and the thought always set off fireworks of joy in my brain, Anne Lisbet, here, next to me!

Why should Eivind suddenly visit her instead of me? We'd had so much fun!

Eivind had to go. We had to get back together.

But what could be done?

Beneath us Tromøya Sound stretched to the east and the west. A double-ender was coming in, approaching land, I saw a figure standing at the stern with the tiller in his hand.

Dad indicated left and slowed down, waited for two passing cars, and then he crossed the road and arrived at the last hill up toward our house. Leif Tore, Rolf, Geir Håkon, Trond, Big Geir, Geir, and Kent Arne were playing soccer in the road. They glanced at us as we passed them and parked in the drive.

I raised a hand to them as I got out.

"Gonna join in?" Kent Arne shouted.

I shook my head.

"I've got to eat."

As we walked toward the house, out of sight of the boys in the road, Dad grabbed my hand.

"Let me have a look," he said. "So the warts haven't gone yet?"

"No," I said.

He let go.

"Do you know how to get rid of them?"

"No."

"I'll tell you. I have an old method. Come into the kitchen afterward and I'll tell you. You want to get rid of them, don't you?"

"You bet."

The first thing I did upstairs was to throw the trousers and the sweater in the dirty linen basket and put on the clothes I was wearing earlier. Then I propped the cassette, face up, against the wall on my desk so that I could see it wherever I was in the room, and went to the kitchen, where Dad was sitting with a little bowl of shrimp in front of him. Rice pudding was cooking on the stove; Mom was in the living room watering the flowers.

"We can just fit this in before we eat," Dad said. "It's a kind of magic. My grandmother did it for me when I was small. And it worked. My hands were covered with warts. After a few days they were all gone."

"What did she do?"

"You'll see," he said. He got up, opened the fridge, and took out something wrapped in white paper that he placed on the table and unfolded. There was bacon inside.

"First of all, I'm going to grease your fingers with the bacon. And then we'll go into the garden and bury the bacon. Then, in a few days' time, your warts will be gone."

"Is that true?"

"Yes! That's what's so strange! But they do disappear. Just wait and see! Pass me your paws."

I gave him one hand. He held it in his, took a rasher of bacon, and carefully rubbed it around all the fingers, the palm, and the back of my hand.

"Now the other one," he said. I gave him my other hand and he took another rasher and did the same. "Have I greased everything now?"

I nodded.

"Let's go outside then. Now you have to carry the bacon and bury it."

I followed him downstairs, put my boots on without touching them with my hands – I had the rashers of bacon in them – and walked behind him – he was carrying a spade – around the house into the kitchen garden by the fence bordering the forest. He thrust the spade into the ground, pressed with his foot, and began to dig. After a few minutes he stopped.

"Drop the bacon in there then," he said.

I did as he said, he filled in the hole, and we left.

"Can I wash my hands now?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," he said. "The bacon we buried will remove the warts."

"How long does it take?"

"We-ell . . . a week or two. It depends on how much you believe."

After dinner I went into the road. No one was playing soccer any longer, but Geir Håkon, Kent Arne, and Leif Tore were still outside, they were running at the wall alongside the road to see how far they could climb before they fell. If they ran fast enough they managed three, perhaps four, steps before gravity took hold and dragged them down. If they got too far up they landed on their backs, so this was an activity that required caution. I was wary at the first attempt, my only attempt, in fact, because straight afterward Geir Håkon was too ambitious and fell in the ditch with a thump, knocking all the air out of his lungs. He filled them again and let out a loud, tremulous howl while fighting off tears, which purged us of any desire we had to continue.

Geir Håkon got to his feet, averted his face, and, with his back to us, recovered his regular breathing. When he turned, everyone could see he had been crying, but no one said a word.

Why not?

If it had been me, they would have said something.

"What shall we do now?" Kent Arne said.

At that moment Kleppe came down the hill on his bike. He was wobbling from side to side, dressed in a black jacket and black cap, his bloated red features sagging and drooping, a bit like the two B-Max bags he had hanging from either side of the handlebars. He was the father of Håvard, a boy living in the house farthest from ours, who was already seventeen, someone we admired but seldom saw. The father, it was rumored, was a boozer. When he turned into the road where we were I saw my chance. I ran beside him for a little way pretending to be looking inside the bags on the handlebars.

"He's got beer bottles in the bags!" I shouted to the others and stopped.

Kleppe did not so much as send me a glance. But the others laughed.

The next day we sat in Geir's bedroom and wrote a love letter to Anne Lisbet. His parents' house was identical to ours, it had exactly the same rooms, facing in exactly the same directions, but it was still unendingly different, because for them functionality reigned supreme, chairs were above all else comfortable to sit in, not attractive to look at, and the vacuumed, almost mathematically scrupulous, cleanliness that characterized our rooms was utterly absent in their house, with tables and the floor strewn with whatever they happened to be using at that moment. In a way, their lifestyle was integrated into the house. I suppose ours was, too, it was just that ours was different. For Geir's father, sole control of his tools was unthinkable, quite the contrary, part of the point of how he brought up Geir and Gro was to involve them as much as possible in whatever he was doing. They had a workbench downstairs, where they hammered and planed, glued and sanded, and if we felt like making a soap-box cart, for example, or a go-kart, as we called it, he was our first port of call. Their garden wasn't beautiful or symmetrical as ours had become after all the hours Dad had spent in it, but more haphazard, created on the functionality principle whereby the compost heap occupied a large space, despite its unappealing exterior, and likewise the stark, rather weed-like potato plants growing in a big patch behind the house where we had a ruler-straight lawn and curved beds of rhododendrons.

Geir's room was where mine was, his sister, Gro, had her room where Yngve's was, and his parents had theirs between the two, exactly the same as in our house. Geir walked freely from room to room, ran up and down the stairs, and if he felt like a *smørbrød* he helped himself to whatever was in the fridge and made one. The same applied to me in his house, I could run between their rooms if I wanted or make myself something to eat with Geir. Often we sat in the living room listening to a Knutsen & Ludvigsen record he had, and laughed at it, or at him, because not only did he know all the lyrics, he could also perform them with the same tones and mannerisms. He was hopeless at soccer, hopeless at all ball games, there was something about his coordination that wasn't quite right, there was something about his enthusiasm that wasn't quite right, he never burned with a passion to play, as I often did, and playing soccer on a field for an entire afternoon but still yearning for more when darkness fell and everyone had left was completely alien to him. He wasn't much good at school, either. He was poor at reading, poor with figures, could seldom reproduce anything he had read or heard in the lesson, though he coped well for all that, nothing depended on soccer or school as far as he was concerned. He was good at imitating people and had started to attract whole crowds around him at school. He liked that, laughter would egg him on to become more and more adventurous, as though it were a kind of fuel, but not even that was important to him. He seemed to have his own small worlds. Such as drawing. He could sit for a whole day in his room drawing. Or building model airplanes, which he often did. His laughter was raucous and it could turn hysterical. Perhaps more than anything else, he liked farting; at any rate there was a lot of experimentation and discussion about it.

Having an older sister was perhaps the reason he wasn't drawn to the girls' world in the same way that I was, not initially anyway. But the idea of a love letter excited him. I would write the letter and he would add a drawing, which showed a boy trampling on a heart and two boys standing by watching. Beneath it I wrote in a red felt pen, *Eivind breaking our hearts.* The letter itself consisted of five lines.

Dear Anne Lisbet
Our hearts are broken
Come back to us
Can you hear
We love you so much

We couldn't hand this letter and the drawing to her. For all we knew, she might show them to people, perhaps even people at school, and then we would become a laughingstock. Instead we decided to *show* them to her. With the letter and drawing rolled up like a treaty in our hands, we walked to her house. Up along the rock from Fru Hjellen's, into her garden, under her window. We threw some gravel up and she appeared. First we held the drawing and the letter up for her to see, then we tore them into pieces and stamped on them, and then we walked off. Now at least she knew how we felt. Now it was up to her.

Geir stopped at the crossroads.

"I'm going up to Vemund's," he said. "Coming?"

I shook my head. On the way down I thought I should go and visit a new friend, too. Dag Magne perhaps? But that would seem out of character, so I went home instead. Lay down on the bed reading until Yngve came in and asked if I wanted to play soccer with him in the road. I did. There was nothing I liked more than doing things with Yngve. Indoors we usually played games or listened to music together, while outdoors, we went our separate ways, him with his friends and me with mine, apart from during the holidays when we went swimming or played soccer or table tennis or badminton and in cases like now, when he was bored and had no one else to play with other than me.

For more than an hour we kicked a ball back and forth between us. For a while Yngve took shots at me in goal and I practiced goal kicks. Then we did some passing.

As if by a miracle my warts disappeared. They got smaller and smaller, and then, perhaps three weeks later, they had completely gone. My hands were so smooth it was hard to imagine they had ever been any different.

But Anne Lisbet didn't come back. Whereas before she had squealed with pleasure whenever I had taken her cap or pulled her scarf or covered her eyes from behind, now she was irritated or even angry. I felt a stab of pain when I saw her and Solveig going to the bus accompanied by Eivind and Geir B, and every night before I went to sleep I imagined a situation in which I rescued them or somehow stood in a light that enabled her to see the error of her ways and return to me, unless, that is, I was imagining I was dead, and the immense sorrow that would overwhelm her, and the remorse when she realized that what she actually wanted – to be with me – was no longer possible, as I was lying in a coffin bedecked with wreaths and flowers. Death was generally a sweet thought at that time because it was not only Anne Lisbet who would regret what she had done but also Dad. Standing by my coffin, weeping for me, the prematurely departed. The whole estate would be there, and all the opinions they had held about me would have to be reevaluated because now I was gone and the person I had really been would appear in the utmost clarity for the first time. Yes, death was sweet and good and of great comfort. However, even if I was upset about Anne Lisbet, she was still there, I saw her every day at school, and as long as she was at school, there was hope, though precious little. The darkness that thinking about her could generate inside me was therefore of a different order from the other darkness that sometimes came over me, which had a depressing and burdening effect on everything, and which Geir also felt, it transpired. One evening we sat in his room and he asked me what was up with me.

"Nothing much," I said.

"You're so quiet!" he said.

"Oh, that," I said. "I'm just fed up."

"What about?"

"I don't know. There's no particular reason. I'm just fed up."

"I feel like that sometimes, too," he said.

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"You're just fed up for no particular reason?"

"Yes. I'm like that, too."

"I didn't realize," I said. "Didn't realize others could feel like that, too."

"That's what we'll have to call it," he said. "*Like that*. We can say it when we're in that mood. 'I'm like that today,' we can say, and then the other person will understand right away."

"That's a good idea," I said.

There were other new words being added as well, for example, the one Yngve taught me, the real name for fucking was "intercourse," and this knowledge was so shocking that I took Geir to the top of the mountain before I dared tell him. "It's called *intercourse*," I told him, "but don't say you heard it from me! You've got to promise me!" He promised. He was spending more and more time at Vemund's house, and Vemund was coming down to see him now and then. I simply didn't understand that and I told him so. Why do you spend time with Vemund? He's fat and stupid and the worst in the class. He never really gave me a decent answer, just said he liked being there. Why? I said. What do you do that's so fantastic? Well, Geir said, we sit and draw most of the time . . . Even in lessons it was Vemund he turned to when we had to work in pairs, instead of me, which he had done automatically before. I joined him a couple of times at Vemund's, also to be close to Anne Lisbet, but I found what they did boring and when I said so and suggested something else they stuck together and wanted to continue what they were doing. That was fine by me, if he wanted to be with the class dunce, let him. Besides, we were still neighbors, it was still me he came to in the afternoons, and that spring we started going to soccer together. Almost all the kids in our road did. The training sessions were in Hove, and Mom and Geir's mom took turns driving us there. Mom bought me a tracksuit when it started. It was my first, and I had great hopes before the day, imagining a sparkly-blue Adidas one, like Yngve's, or even better, a Puma, or at least a Hummel or an Admiral. But the one she bought wasn't a brand name. It was brown with white stripes, and even though I considered the color ugly, that wasn't the worst thing about it. The worst was that the material wasn't shiny but matte, a bit coarse, and it didn't hang off your body, it clung to you, making my butt stick out even more than usual. When I put on the tracksuit that was all I could think about. Even when I ran onto the field and training began, it was all I could think about. My butt is sticking out like a balloon, I would think, running after the ball. My tracksuit is brown and ugly, I would think. I look like an idiot in it, I would think. An idiot, an idiot, an idiot.

However, I never said this to Mom. I pretended to be happy when I was given it because it had cost a lot of money, she had gone all over Arendal looking for it, and if I said I didn't like it, she would first think I was ungrateful and then she would be sad that she had bought the wrong thing. And I didn't want that. So I said, How nice. Great. Really. Just what I wanted.

The odd thing about the training sessions that spring was that there was such a big difference between the person I was inside and the person I was on the field. Inside myself I was full to the brim with thoughts and emotions about scoring and dribbling, about the terrible tracksuit I had, and my big butt and, by extension, my protruding teeth – whereas on the field, running around, I was, to all intents and purposes, completely invisible. There were so many kids on the field, an enormous melee of arms, legs, and heads following the ball like a swarm of mosquitoes, and the coaches didn't know the names of more than a handful of them, the ones from their immediate neighborhood presumably, their sons, and their friends. The first time I stood out from the crowd was an evening when someone had kicked the ball into the forest behind the goal, where it was lost, and everyone was ordered over to look for it. Two, perhaps three, minutes of intensive searching followed. No one could find the ball. Then suddenly I saw it in front of me. Under a bush, it glowed, white and wonderful, in the dusk. I knew this was my opportunity, I knew I ought to shout, "Got it!" and carry it with me onto the field, so that the rightful credit fell to me, but I didn't dare. Instead I just kicked it onto the field. "There's the ball!" someone shouted. "Who found it?" someone else shouted. I emerged from the forest with all the others and said nothing, so it remained a mystery.

The second time was a similar situation, though even more flattering to me. I was running in a pack of players, maybe ten to twelve meters from the goal, the ball landed among us, everything was a vortex of limbs, and when the ball came free, a meter from me, I booted it as hard as I could and it rocketed in by the bottom of the post.

"Goal!" they roared.

"Who scored it?"

I said nothing, did nothing, stood stock-still.

"Who scored? No one?" the coach called. "No, okay! Let's carry on!"

They might have thought it was an own goal and that was why no one owned up to the shot. Even though I didn't dare say I had scored, it was my very first goal, and the thought of that burned inside me for the rest of the session, and in the car on the way home. The first thing I said when we ran to the car, where Mom was waiting, was that I had scored.

"I scored a goal!" I said.

"Oh, great!" Mom said.

When we returned home and I was sitting at the kitchen table to eat supper, I said it again.

"I scored today!"

"Was it a match?" Yngve said.

"No," I said. "We haven't had any matches yet. It was training."

"Then it means nothing," he said.

A couple of tears detached themselves and rolled down my cheeks. Dad looked at me with that stern, annoyed expression of his.

"For Christ's sake, you can't cry about THAT!" he said. "There must be SOMETHING you can take without blubbering!"

By then the tears were in full flow.

Crying so easily was a big problem. I cried every time anyone told me off or corrected me, or when I thought they would. Usually it was Dad. He only had to raise his voice to make me cry, even though I knew he hated me doing it. I couldn't help myself. If he raised his voice, and he often did, I began to cry. I seldom cried because of Mom. Through the whole of my childhood it had only happened twice. Both times during the spring when I started soccer training. The first was the most disturbing. I had been down in the forest with a gang of kids, we were standing in a sort of circle, Yngve was there, Edmund from his class was there, as well as Dag Lothar, Steinar, Leif Tore, and Rolf. Tongues were going nineteen to the dozen. Gulls were screaming from Ubekilen, the sky was still light, although darkness was creeping across the hill and beneath the trees above the forest floor. The conversation turned to school and teachers, skipping classes, detentions, and having to report to school early. Then it moved to a boy in Yngve's class who was extremely intelligent. I had just been listening, happy to be with the older boys, but there was a sudden lull in the conversation that I was able to fill.

"I'm the best in my class," I said. "At least at reading and writing and natural and social sciences. And local history."

Yngve stared at me.

"Don't brag, Karl Ove," he said.

"I'm not bragging. It's true!" I said. "There is no doubt about it! I learned to read when I was five, before anyone else in the class. Now I can read fluently. Edmund, for example, is four years older than me, and he can't read at all! You said that yourself! That means I'm smarter than him."

"Stop that bragging right now," Yngve said.

"But it's true," I said. "Isn't it, Edmund? It's true that you can't read, isn't it? That you have a special teacher? Your sister's in my class. She can't read, either. Or only a little. That's not a lie, is it?"

Now something strange happened: Edmund had tears in his eyes. He wrenched himself away and set off up the slope.

"What do you think you're doing?" Yngve hissed at me.

"But it's true," I said. "I'm the best in my class and he's the worst."

"Go home," Yngve said. "Now. We don't want you here with us."

"It's not up to you," I said.

"Shut your mouth and go home!" he snapped, putting his hands on my shoulders and shoving me.

"Okay, okay," I said, and set off up the hill. Crossed the road, slipped through the door, and took off my outdoor clothes. It was true what I had said, so why had he shoved me?

Tears were in my eyes as I lay on my bed and opened a book. It was unfair, what I had said was true, it was so unfair, so unfair.

Mom came home from work, brewed up some tea, and prepared a bite to eat. Yngve was still out, so we ate alone. She asked if I had been crying, I said yes, she asked why, I said Yngve had pushed me, she said she would take the matter up with him. I showed her a letter I had written to Grandad, she said he would really like it, gave me an envelope, I put the letter in, she wrote down the name and address and promised to post it the following day. When it was done I went for a rest. I heard Yngve come home while I was reading, the footsteps up the staircase and into the kitchen where Mom was. Now she would tell him he shouldn't push me and tell me to shut up, I thought, lying there, and I imagined Yngve's bowed head. Then came the sound of their voices and footsteps on the landing, and the door was opened.

I could see at once that Mom was angry and sat up.

"Is it true what Yngve has told me?" she said. "That you made a fool of Edmund because he can't read?"

I nodded.

"Sort of," I said.

"Don't you understand that Edmund was upset? Don't you understand that you mustn't talk about other people in that way?"

She stepped forward until her face was in front of mine. Her eyes were narrow; her voice was loud and sharp. Yngve stood behind her, watching me.

"Karl Ove, don't you?" she said.

"He cried," Yngve said. "And it was you who made him cry. Do you understand?"

And suddenly I did understand. What Mom said cast an implacable light over what had happened. *Edmund* was the one she felt sorry for, even though he was four years older. He was upset and I was the one who had upset him.

I started crying as I had never done before.

Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, I sobbed. *Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh.*

Mom leaned over and stroked my cheek.

"Sorry, Mom," I wept. "I'll never do it again. Never, ever. I promise you with all my heart."

The loud sobs and my shouted rather than spoken apologies pacified my mother but not Yngve; several days were to pass before the events receded into the past for him. And that despite Edmund not being central to his life, not one of his best friends, just someone who was in his class. I both understood and I didn't.

The second time Mom made me cry was when we went out one evening, she wanted to buy something from the Fina station and preferred to walk there, and I, who loved having her to myself, joined her. I took a flashlight along, the path was dark, but before we got there I shone the flashlight through the darkened living-room window of a house we passed.

"Don't do that!" Mom hissed. "There are people living there! You can't invade their privacy like that!"

I shone the flashlight on the ground at once, and fought back tears for a few seconds, until I had to admit defeat and they streamed out amid great gasps and sobs.

"Was that so upsetting?" Mom said, looking at me. "I had to tell you. Surely you understand. What you did wasn't very polite."

I started crying not because I had been told off but because *she* had told me off.

But at least she didn't get angry because I was crying.

Outside the house I hardly ever cried. Unless, of course, I hurt myself, everyone did, no one could restrain the tears then. The fact that no one was exactly beating a path to our door says more about other things, over which I had no control. I quarreled a lot with the others, especially Leif Tore, we disagreed on a wide range of matters, including who gave the orders, and even though we were similar in that neither of us would yield it was still him everyone wanted to play with and not me. As long as there were lots of us, such as when we built dens down in the spruce forest or played soccer on the field, it wasn't noticeable, it was only when there were three or four of us that it became apparent. Nor was it a problem when I was with older boys, such as Dag Lothar, I just sort of adapted, followed his example without a protest, didn't say a word, and it felt natural, after all he was a year older. Once I pointed out to Geir that Dag Lothar told me what to do, and I told Geir what to do and Geir told Vemund what to do. He went sullen and said I didn't tell him what to do. Yes, I do, I said. I say what we're going to do. But you don't *tell* me what to do, Geir said. What difference does it make? I said. I said Dag Lothar told me what to do. And that you tell Vemund what to do. So what difference does it make if I tell you what to do? Well, it evidently did make a difference. Geir's face went all stiff in the way it did, his body had that mutinous look and soon he was gone. Others got annoyed about even less. Like the time when Geir Håkon, Kent Arne, Leif Tore, and I were standing by the road one early afternoon after school, alone on the estate, and a huge truck drove past with a load of boulders from some blasting work they were doing farther up.

"Did you see that?" I said. "It was a Mercedes!"

I wasn't interested in cars, boats, or motorbikes, I knew nothing about them, but as all the others did, I had to make an effort now and then, just to show that I, too, was clued in.

"No, it wasn't," Geir Håkon said. "Mercedes doesn't make trucks."

"Didn't you see the star then?" I said.

"Are you blind or what? That was not a Mercedes star," he said.

"Yes, it was," I said.

Geir Håkon snorted. For a moment his puffy cheeks were even fatter than usual.

"Anyway, Mercedes does make trucks. I've read about it in a book I have."

"I'd like to see that book," Geir Håkon said. "You're lying through your teeth. You know nothing about trucks."

"And I suppose you do, just because your dad works on construction machines?" I said.

"Yes, as a matter of fact I do," he said.

"Oooh," I said sarcastically. "You think you know all about slalom skis, too, just because your dad has bought you a pair. But you can't slalom. You're useless at skiing. So what are you doing with all that gear if you can't use it? Everyone says you're spoiled. And you are. You get everything you point a finger at."

"I do not," he said. "You're just jealous."

"Why would I be jealous of you?" I said.

"Give it a rest, Karl Ove," Kent Arne said.

Geir Håkon had not only averted his face now but his whole body.

"Why should *I* give it a rest, and not Geir Håkon?" I said.

"Because Geir Håkon's right," Kent Arne said. "It wasn't a Mercedes. And he's not the only person who has slalom skis. I've got some, too."

"That's just because your dad's dead," I said. "That's why your mother buys you all sorts of things."

"That's not why," Kent Arne said. "It's because she wants me to have them. And we can afford it."

"But your mother works in a shop," I said. "You don't exactly earn a lot of money there."

"Is being a *teacher* any better?" Leif Tore said, who wanted to put in his two cents now. "Don't you think we've seen the wall at your place? It's full of cracks and falling down because your father didn't know it needed reinforcement. He only used cement! How stupid can you get?"

"And then he reckons he's something special because he's on the council," Kent Arne said. "Salutes us with one finger and stuff when he drives past. So you can just shut up."

"Why should I shut up?"

"Well, in fact, you don't have to. You can stand here and rattle on as you usually do. We definitely don't want to play with you."

And then they ran off.

The disagreements never lasted long, a few hours later I was playing with them again, if I wanted, but there was something awry, I was finding myself in situations with my back against the wall more and more often, the others were moving away more and more often when I approached, even Geir, in fact, on occasion I realized they were actually hiding from me. On the estate when anyone said something about someone it was immediately repeated by others, and then it suddenly became something everyone said. About me it was said that I always knew best and I was always boasting. But I did know best, I knew much more than the others, so why should I pretend anything else? If I knew something, it was because that was how it *was*. And as far as boasting was concerned, *everyone* boasted, all the time. Dag Lothar, for example, whom everyone liked, didn't he start every other sentence with "I don't mean to brag but . . ." and go on to tell us about something good he had done or something good someone had said about him?

Yes, he did. So this wasn't about what I did but about the person I was. Why otherwise would Rolf call me "Mr. Pro" when we played soccer in the road? I hadn't done anything special, had I? You think you're so good at soccer, don't you, he said, eh, Mr. Pro? But all I had done was to say what was what, and why shouldn't I if I went to a soccer camp and actually *knew*? We shouldn't run around in a pack, we had to spread out and then pass the ball or dribble, not mill around the way we did.

But I also had the last word that spring. For when the lessons at school were reorganized to make preparations for the end-of-the-year celebrations and Frøken handed out booklets of the play that we were to perform for all the parents on the biggest day of the year, namely the last, who was allocated the principal role but me?

Not Leif Tore, not Geir Håkon, not Trond, and not Geir.

But me.

Me, me, me.

None of them would be capable of learning so many lines by heart, it was something only Eivind and I, and perhaps Sverre, of the boys, could do, and the fact that Frøken chose me in the end was by no means fortuitous.

I was so happy when she told me that I didn't know what to do with myself.

Every day of the last week we rehearsed, every day I was the center of attention in the class, Anne Lisbet's, too, and when the final day arrived, in radiant sunshine, all the parents came as well. Dressed in their finest outfits, they sat on chairs by the wall, took photos, were hushed when we enthusiastically said our lines, and burst into applause at the end.

Then we played recorders, sang, were presented with our grade books, Frøken wished us a good summer, and we ran out into the playground and down to the waiting cars.

Grade book in hand, I stood impatiently with Geir in front of Mom's Beetle. She strolled along with Martha, they were chatting and laughing and didn't see Geir and me until they were a few meters away.

Mom was wearing beige trousers and a rust-red sweater with the sleeves turned up over her forearms. Her hair hung a long way down her back. On her feet she wore a pair of light-brown sandals. She had just turned thirty-two, while Martha, who was wearing a brown dress, was two years older.

They were young women, but we didn't know that.

Mom rummaged through her bag for the car key.

"You were all so good," Martha said.

"Thank you," I said.

Geir said nothing, just squinted into the sun.

"Oh, here it is," Mom said at length. She unlocked the car and we got in, adults in the front, children in the back. They both lit up cigarettes. And then we drove home in the sunshine.

That evening I stood in the doorway watching Mom drying her hair in their bedroom. Occasionally, when Dad wasn't there, I followed her round the house and talked her ears off. Now I was quiet, the whine of the hairdryer made it impossible to speak, instead I watched her as she bent her head and lifted her hair up with a brush in one hand to the dryer in the other. She sent me sporadic glances and smiled. I went into the room. On the little table by the wall there was a letter. I didn't mean to pry, but even at some distance I could see the first name was Sissel, Mom's name, and that the full name was longer than Mom's, because between "Sissel" and "Knausgaard," which I recognized rather than read, there was a third name. I went closer. "Sissel Norunn Knausgaard," it said.

Norunn?

Who was that?

"Mom!" I said.

She lowered the hairdryer, as though that would make my voice clearer, and looked at me.

"Mom," I said again. "What does that envelope say? What kind of name is that?"

She switched off the hairdryer.

"What did you say?"

"What kind of name is that!"

I nodded toward the envelope. She leaned over and took it.

"That's my name."

"But it says Norunn! Your name's not Norunn!"

"Yes, it is. It's my middle name. Sissel Norunn."

"Has it always been your name?"

I felt my chest tighten with despair.

"Ye-es. All my life. Didn't you know?"

"No! Why didn't you say?"

Tears were running down my cheeks.

"But, darling," Mom said, "I didn't think it mattered. Sissel is the name I use. Norunn is just a middle name. A kind of extra name."

I was shaken to the core. Not by the name in itself, but by the fact that I hadn't known it. That she'd had a name I didn't know.

Was there anything else I didn't know?

A month later, in the middle of the long summer holiday, we drove up to Sørbøvåg by Åfjorden in Ytre Sogn, where my mother's parents lived, and we stayed there for two weeks. I had been looking forward to this so much that on the morning we were due to leave and I was woken at the crack of dawn, there was a tinge of unreality about it. The trunk was packed to the gunnels, Mom and Dad sat at the front, Yngve and I in the back, we would be in the car all day and evening, and even the most familiar sight, the road down to the crossroads and up to Tromøya Bridge, seemed cast in a different light. Now it didn't belong to the house and our existence in it, now it belonged to the great expedition we had set out on, which lent every crag and every rock, every islet and every skerry, excitement and anticipation.

When we came to the crossroads by the bridge I folded my hands as usual and said the short prayer that had worked every time so far:

Dear God,
Please don't let us crash.
Amen.

We drove across the mainland, through vast, monotonous, coniferous forests, past Evje with its long, low military barracks and pine plains, past Byglandsfjord and the campsite, up into Setesdalen, with its age-old enclosed fields and farms and the many silversmith signs, along a road that in some places almost seemed to go through people's drives. Slowly buildings disappeared, it was as if the houses lost their hold on us and fell by the wayside one by one, like children fell off the enormous inner tube someone had roped to a boat earlier that summer. As the boat's speed increased only the tube was left. I saw glinting sandbanks along the sides of the river, green-clad hills rising more and more steeply, the occasional enormous, bare mountainside, in every shade of gray, with some flame-red pine trees on top. I saw rapids and waterfalls, lakes and plains, everything bathed in the glow of the clear, bright sun, which, as we drove, had risen higher and higher in the sky. The road was narrow, and it gently and unobtrusively followed all the countryside's dips and climbs, curves and bends, with trees like a wall on both sides in some places, towering over everything in others, in sudden and unexpected vantage points.

Sporadically, rest areas appeared during the journey, small graveled areas beside the road where families could sit and eat at rough-hewn timber tables, their cars next to them, generally with doors and trunks open, under the shade of trees, often close to a lake or a river. Everyone had a thermos on the table, many had a cooler bag, some also a Primus stove. "Aren't we going to stop for a break soon?" I would ask after seeing such a rest area because breaks, alongside ferry crossings, belonged to the high points of the journey. We, too, had a cooler bag in the trunk; we, too, had a thermos, juice, and a little pile of plastic glasses, cups, and plates with us. "Don't pester me," Dad would say then, desperate to cover as many kilometers as he could in one go. That meant that, at the very least, we would have to drive to the end of Setesdalen, past Hovden and Haukeligrend and up Mount Haukeli, before the question of a break even came into consideration. Then we would have to find a suitable place because we would not take the first opportunity, oh no: if the stops were few and far between, then the location of the rest area had to be something special.

In the uplands the terrain was completely flat. There wasn't a tree or a bush to be seen anywhere. The road continued dead straight. Some areas were littered with boulders strewn across the ground, covered with a kind of coating I thought might have been lichen or moss. Others were unbroken rock face, clean, scrubbed. Here and there water sparkled, snow glinted. Dad drove faster as there was such a clear view. At intervals, along the roadside, we saw tall poles, and Yngve said it was quite incredible, they were markers and so high because the snow in winter could reach up to the top. That was several meters!

The sun shone, the mountain plateau stretched in all directions, and we, we were racing ahead. One rest area after another was left in our wake until, without warning, Dad signaled, braked, and pulled in.

It was situated right next to a lake, oval and utterly black. Beyond it the ground rose gently while at the side there was a big snowdrift, bluish in color and hollow underneath where the water disappeared down an opening.

Around us it was perfectly still. After so many hours with the regular hum of the engine the silence felt artificial, as though it didn't belong to the landscape but to us.

Dad opened the trunk, took out the cooler bag, and put it on the coarse wooden table, where Mom immediately began to unpack it as he fetched the thermos and the bag with the cups and plates. Yngve and I ran to the water, bent down, and dipped a hand. It was freezing cold!

"How about a swim here, boys?" Dad said.

"Oh no, it's freezing!" I said.

"Sissies," he said.

"But it's fr*eee*zing!" I said.

"Yes, I'm sure it is. I was only joking. We haven't time for a swim anyway."

Yngve and I walked over to the snowdrift. It was so solid we couldn't make snowballs from it, as we had hoped. And walking across the top, with the water underneath, wouldn't be in the cards if Mom and Dad were there.

I broke off a clump and threw it into the lake, where it bobbed up and down like a mini iceberg. Now at least, when we were home, I could say we had thrown snowballs in the middle of July.

"Come and eat," Mom called.

We sat down. We each had a packed lunch. Three slices of bread with boiled egg on top. In addition, there was a package of cookies on the table. In our glasses there was juice. The plastic gave it a different taste, but I liked it, it reminded me of the trips we used to have when we picked berries and went on camping holidays. We hadn't had that many, there'd been basically only one, last summer when we went to Sweden with Grandma and Grandad. A car raced up from behind me, it was as though the sound vibrated as it increased in volume, then after a kind of *boom* it went quieter again until it was gone. Steam rose from Mom and Dad's coffee. A car towing a trailer came from the other direction. I watched it as I finished my juice. It was creeping along. Then it signaled. As it pulled over into the rest area Dad turned.

"What's that idiot doing?" he said. "There's only one table here. Can't he see?"

He turned back, put his coffee cup down, and took the fox-emblazoned pouch of tobacco from his breast pocket.

The car with the trailer stopped only a few meters from us. The door opened and a fat man dressed in a pair of beige shorts and a yellow T-shirt, with a brown bucket hat, emerged. He opened the door of the trailer and disappeared inside as a woman came out of the other car door. She was also fat and wore light-gray elasticized slacks with a crease and a woolen sweater. From her mouth hung an unlit cigarette, her hair was big and gray and yellow, and over her eyes she wore a pair of large glasses with tinted lenses. She went to stand by the lake, lit her cigarette, and gazed across as she smoked.

I started on the last slice of bread.

The man reemerged with a camping table in his hands. He erected it between the car and our table. Dad turned again.

"Haven't they got any manners?" he said. "We're sitting here eating and he's intruding."

"It doesn't matter," Mom said. "It's beautiful here."

"It *was* beautiful here," Dad said. "Until that fathead came."

"He can hear you," Mom said.

The man put a clinking cooler bag down beside the table. The woman went over to him.

"They're Germans," Dad said. "They don't understand. We can say whatever we like."

He took a last swig from his cup and jumped to his feet.

"Well, we'd better be moving on."

"The boys haven't finished eating yet," Mom said. "We're not in *such* a hurry, are we?"

"In fact, we are," Dad said. "Eat up, come on. Be quick about it."

He flicked his half-smoked cigarette to the ground, took the glasses and cups to the lake, rinsed them, and put them in the bag with the plates and thermos. Zipped up the top of the cooler bag and put everything in the trunk. The man and woman said something I didn't understand as they stared up the gentle slope on the other side of the lake. He was pointing. Something was moving in the distance. Mom scrunched up the wax papers from the *smørbrød*, put them in a bag, and got up.

"Let's go then," she said. "We'll have to eat the cookies the next time we stop."

That was what I had feared.

Dad pushed the seat forward for me and I got in. After the fresh air outside, the smell of smoke inside hit you. Yngve clambered in through the other door. He wrinkled his nose.

"I don't think the car-sickness tablets are working anymore," he said.

"Say if you feel sick," Mom said.

"It would help if you didn't smoke all the time," he said.

"That's enough of that," Dad said. "Don't whine. We're on holiday."

Slowly the car pulled out onto the road. I glanced across, past the lake, up to the spot where the man had been pointing. There was something there. A gray patch in all the green, moving slowly. What on earth could it be?

I nudged Yngve and pointed through the window when I had his attention.

"What's that?" I said.

"Reindeer maybe," he said. "We saw them last year, too. Don't you remember?"

"Oh yes," I said. "But they were much closer. These ones are so small they're like mice!"

Then we sank into the trancelike state car travel can induce.

We crossed the rest of the mountain range, descended into Røldal, and drove on to Odda, the dirty little town at the end of Hardangerfjord, which despite its run-down, polluted appearance still shared some of the magic the far end of the mountains evoked, so dizzyingly and, at bottom, incomprehensibly different from the world we had left only a few hours earlier. While Sørland for the most part consisted of low crags and knolls, small bedraggled forests with a wide-ranging selection of trees standing side by side in countryside that was both wide open and restricted, and while on the island where I lived the tallest mountain was no more than 120 meters high, this countryside here, which you always stumbled on, was remarkable for its *immense* mountains, so dominating in their purity and simplicity that all other details of the surroundings were forced to adjust to them, they disappeared, utterly and completely: who cared about a birch tree, however tall, when it stood beneath one of these endlessly beautiful and eternally immutable mountains? The most conspicuous difference, however, was not the dimensions but the colors, which seemed deeper here – nowhere is the color green so deep as in Vestland – or so clear – even the sky, even its blue was deeper and clearer than the blue of the sky where I came from. The sides of the valley were green and cultivated, in the spring and early summer the blossoming fruit trees a Japanese white, the mountain peaks a hazy blue, snow-tipped here and there, and, oh, between the ridges, which rose in a long line on both sides, lay the fjord itself, greenish in some places, bluish in others, gleaming in the sun everywhere, as deep as the mountains were high.

To travel in a car through this landscape was always overwhelming because nothing of what you had seen so far prepared you for what was waiting here. And then, as we drove along the northern side of the fjord, all the other unfamiliar features appeared, like the electric fences, like the red barns, like the old, white timber houses, like the cows grazing, like the long rows of hay-drying racks scattered across the sides of the valley. Tractors, forage harvesters, manure cellars, long brown boots on doorsteps, shady farmyard trees, horses, shops in the basements of normal houses. Children selling wild cherries or strawberries from small stands with handwritten signs along the road. Life here was different from life at home: I could see a stooped old woman wearing a flowery dress and a neckerchief, you didn't see that where I came from, or a stooped old man in blue overalls and a black peaked cap in some field or along some gravel track. But however much of an impression the places here made on me, the unusual names they bore played a part, of course – Tyssedal, Espe, Hovland, Sekse, Børve, Opedal, Ullensvang, Lofthus, and Kinsarvik, which because of the strange sound was my favorite: all right, *vik* was an inlet, but a *kinsar*, what on earth was *that*? – and however bright the colors and however different the myriad of details, an atmosphere of extravagance also hung over these regions, not over the people and their activities but over the space they moved in, it seemed much too big for them, perhaps it was the flood of sunlight that did it, perhaps the blueness of the vast sky or perhaps the range of mountains stretching up into it, or else it was simply the fact that we were only passing through, we didn't stop anywhere, apart from at the bus shelter where Yngve staggered out to throw up, we didn't know anyone here and were in no way connected with what we saw. For when we did finally reach Kinsarvik and left the car, which Dad had parked in the queue, this sense of extravagance was no longer noticeable; on the contrary, everything seemed nice and cozy here with the sound of car radios, doors being opened and closed, people stretching, walking to and fro, children quietly kicking a ball about next to the queue or doing what Yngve and I were doing, walking to the kiosk at the end to see whether there was anything we could spend some of our holiday money on.

An ice cream?

Oh yes.

Yngve bought an ice cream in a boat-shaped wafer, I bought a tub with a little red spatula and we ambled over to the quay with them in our hands. We sat on a brick wall and looked down at the water and the seaweed lying in wet, greasy clusters against the rocks. In the distance we saw the ferry arriving. The air smelled of salty water, seaweed, grass, and exhaust fumes, and the sun burned our faces.

"Are you still feeling sick?" I said.

He shook his head.

"Too bad we forgot the soccer ball," he said. "But they've probably got one in Våjen."

He said Våjen the way Grandma did.

"Yes," I said, squinting into the sun. "Do you think we'll get on this one?"

"Don't know. Hope so."

I dangled my legs. Loosened a big chunk with the spatula and put it in my mouth. It was so big and cold that I had to jiggle it to and fro with my tongue to prevent the icy texture from becoming intolerable. While doing this, I turned and glanced at our car. Dad was sitting with the door open and one leg on the ground, smoking. The sun glinted on his sunglasses. Mom was standing beside him with a basket of wild cherries on the roof and helping herself every now and then.

"What shall we do tomorrow?" I said.

"I'm going to be with Grandad in the cowshed anyway. He said he would teach me everything so that I can take over one day."

"Do you think it's possible to swim there now?"

"Are you out of your mind?" he said. "It's as cold in the fjord as it was in the mountain lake."

"Why is that?"

"It's so far north of course!"

Some of the cars started their engines. The bow doors of the ferry opened. Yngve got up and walked toward the car. I ate my ice cream as quickly as possible and followed him.

After the ferry trip to Kvanndal the next high point of the journey was climbing Vikafjellet. The steep, narrow road wound upward, round and round, round and round, so steep in some places I was frightened the car would tip over and fall backward.

"There are probably quite a few tourists who get a bit of a shock here," Dad said as we drove up and I sat trembling and peering down at the precipice beneath us. "They use the brakes to slow down, you see. That could be fatal."

"What do we use?" I said.

"We use the gears," he said.

We weren't tourists, we knew what was what, we weren't the motorists you saw behind clouds of steam issuing from an open hood at the roadside. But immediately afterward things almost did go wrong, because at the next hairpin bend we met a car towing a trailer, we were only a few meters away from a collision, but Dad jumped on the brakes and the other car did the same. Dad reversed down until the road was wide enough for both of us. The other driver waved to us as he passed.

"Did you know him, Dad?" I said.

In the mirror I saw he was smiling.

"No, I didn't know him. He waved to thank me for making room for him."

Then it was on to the next mountain, and down to the next fjord. The mountains here were as high as by Hardangerfjord, but they were gentler in a way, not as steep, and the fjord here was wider, at some junctures almost like a lake. What's the problem? the Hardangerfjord mountains said. Take it easy, these mountains said. Everything's hunky-dory.

"Shall we take turns sleeping?" Yngve said.

"Fine by me," I said.

"Great," he said. "Me first then?"

"Okay," I said. And he laid his head on my lap and closed his eyes. It was good to have him sleeping there, his head was nice and warm, and it was as though something was going on in two places at once, the countryside outside the window, which was changing constantly and I never took my eyes off it, and Yngve's head asleep on my lap.

When we parked in the queue for the next ferry, he woke up. We stood on the deck and enjoyed the wind blowing into our faces. Half an hour later we were back in the car and it was my turn to rest my head on Yngve's lap.

I woke up and knew we were getting close. The nearer we got to the sea, the lower the uplands and the denser the vegetation, but of course nowhere near Sørland's scrubbed-clean terrain and gnarled qualities. None of the roads here had stuck in my mind; I looked out of the window without connecting what I saw with anything until I suddenly recognized Lihesten, the vertical drop that plunged several hundred meters on the other side of the fjord from my grandparents' house. We'd had the mountain in front of us for ages, but it was unrecognizable from all other angles except the one we had now, as we approached it from the side. The excitement constricted my chest. We were there! Oh yes, there's the waterfall! There's the chapel! There's the hotel! There's the Salbu sign! And there's the house! Grandma and Grandad's house!

Dad slowed down and turned into the gravel path. It led first past the neighbor, and then through the gate, with the shed on the right, up the last steep incline to the front of the house. I opened the door almost before the car had stopped and jumped out. On the other side of the enclosed field I saw Grandad. He was standing by the beehives in his beekeeper outfit. White overalls, white hat with a long, white veil around his head. All his movements were slow, also the hand he raised to greet us. It was as if he was submerged beneath water or on an alien planet with different gravity. I lifted my hand and waved, then I ran into the house. Grandma was in the kitchen.

"We almost crashed into a car on Vikafjellet! We were climbing like this," I said, depicting the gradient on the yellow vinyl tablecloth with my finger while she smiled at me with her warm, dark eyes.

"And then a car with a trailer came. Like this . . ."

"I'm glad you got here safe and sound," she said. Mom came in through the other door. In the hall I could hear what must have been Dad carrying in all the baggage. Where was Yngve? Had he gone over to Grandad? With all the bees buzzing around?

I dashed out onto the drive. Nope. Yngve was helping Dad to unload the car. Grandad was still there in his white spacesuit. With infinite patience he lifted some frames from the hive. The sun had gone from the farm, but was shining on the spruces growing on the slope behind the pond. A light wind blew past the house, rustling the treetops above me. Kjartan walked over from the cowshed. He was wearing overalls and boots. Longish black hair, square glasses.

"Good evening," he said, stopping by the car.

"Oh, hi, Kjartan," Dad said.

"Good trip?" Kjartan said.

"Yes, it was fine."

Kjartan was ten years younger than Mom, so in his early twenties that summer. There was something stern, almost angry about him, and even though I had never experienced his anger, I was still afraid of him. He was the only one of the children to live at home: Kjellaug lived in Kristiansand with her husband, Magne, and their two children, Jon Olav and Ann Kristin, who would soon be coming here, while the next youngest, Ingunn, was a student and lived in Olso with Mård and their two-year-old daughter, Yngvild. Kjartan and Grandma quarreled a lot, he was not as she would have liked her only son to be, I gathered. The idea was that he would take over the smallholding when the time came. Now he was training to become a pipe fitter on ships and planning to work at a yard somewhere in their county of Hordaland. But the most important thing to know about Kjartan, which was frequently mentioned when talk turned to him, was that he was a communist. A fervent communist. When he discussed politics with Mom and Dad, which he was wont to do on their visits, for some reason their conversations always ended up there, and his somewhat shy, evasive eyes changed and became fiery. At home when the subject of Kjartan came up, Dad tended to laugh at him, mostly to tease Mom, who was not exactly a communist, but who nonetheless disagreed with Dad on most matters concerning politics. Dad was a teacher and voted for Venstre, a center party.

"I'd better take this off and have a shower so I don't smell of cowshed, now that we have such refined company," Kjartan said. "I think there is food for you in there."

Even outside I could hear the stairs creak when he went up to the bathroom on the first floor. How the stairs creaked here!

And indeed a table had been set for us in the living room. There was a pile of still-hot pancakes and a dish of griddle cakes, as well as bread and various spreads. Mom shuttled to and fro between living room and kitchen. Although she had left home when she was sixteen, married Dad, given birth to Yngve when she was twenty, and lived with her own family ever since, she merged into the household effortlessly as soon as she arrived. Even the way she spoke changed and became much more like the way her parents spoke. With Dad it was the opposite: he was always lost in the background. When he was talking to Grandad, who loved chatting and had a story for every occasion, often from his own experience, there was something formal about Dad that made him so alien but which I still recognized, it was the manner he adopted when he spoke to other parents and colleagues. Grandad wasn't polite in that way, he was completely and utterly himself, so why would Dad sit there nodding and saying, I see, oh yes, really, mhm, mhm? Mom was different here, too, she laughed and chatted more, and these changes amounted to a plus for us, in fact, an enormous plus: Dad was in the background, Mom was livelier, and there were no house rules, and unlike where we came from, here we could do as we liked. If one of us knocked over a glass of milk it wasn't a catastrophe, Grandma and Grandad understood that accidents can happen, we could even put our feet on the table here, well, if Dad wasn't in the room at that point, of course, and we could sit on the brown sofa with orange and beige stripes, as slumped as we wanted, even lie on it if we felt like it. And all the work they did, we did, too, on our own minor scale. We were not unwanted. On the contrary, it was expected of us that we would help as far as we could. Rake the mown hay on the field, lay it on the drying rack, collect the eggs, shovel muck into the cellar, set the table for meals, and pick red currants, black currants, and gooseberries when they were ripe. The doors here were open and people came in without even knocking, they just shouted from the hallway and were suddenly in the living room, made themselves at home and drank coffee with Grandad, who didn't bat an eyelid, just started chatting as though their conversation had only been interrupted for a few seconds. These people who came were strange, one in particular, a fat-bellied, sloppily dressed, and slightly malodorous man with a high voice who used to wobble up the hill on his moped in the evening. His accent was so broad I barely understood half of what he said. Grandad's face lit up when he came, but whether that was because he liked him all that much was hard to say as his face lit up whenever anyone came. I was sure he liked us although I doubted whether the thought had ever struck him; we existed, that was enough for him. For Grandma it must have been different, at least it appeared so from the interest she showed when we talked.

Mom stood staring at the table, probably to check that everything was there. Grandma took the coffeepot off the stove in the kitchen and the steadily increasing noise of the whistle died with a little sigh. Dad deposited the luggage in the room above our heads. Grandad came into the hall after hanging up his beekeeper outfit in the basement.

"The Norwegian population is going through a growth spurt, I see!" he said when he saw us. He came over and patted me on the head as though I were some kind of dog. Then he patted Yngve's head and sat down as Grandma came in from the kitchen carrying the coffeepot, and Dad and Kjartan both came down the stairs.

Grandad was small, his face was round, and apart from a thin wreath of white hair around his head he was bald. The corners of his mouth were often stained with tobacco juice. The eyes behind his glasses were sharp, but were totally transformed once he took them off. Then they were like two small children who had just woken up.

"Looks like I came at just the right moment," he said, putting a slice of bread on his plate.

"We heard you in the basement," Mom said. "Nothing to do with luck."

She turned to me.

"Do you remember the time we heard you in the hall ten minutes *before* you arrived?"

I nodded. Dad and Kjartan sat down on opposite sides of the table. Grandma went to pour coffee into the cups.

Grandad, who was spreading butter over the bread with his knife, looked up.

"You heard him *before* he came?"

"Yes, strange, isn't it?" Mom said.

"That's a *vardøger*, that is. A kind of guardian angel," Grandad said. "It means you'll have a long life."

"Is that what it means?" Mom said with a laugh.

"Yes," Grandad said.

"Surely you don't believe that, do you?" Dad said.

"Did you two hear him when he wasn't there?" Grandad said. "That's what's remarkable. Is it so remarkable that it has some significance?"

"Hm," Kjartan said. "You've become superstitious in your old age, Johannes."

I looked at Grandma. Her hands were trembling, and as she poured, the pot was moving up and down so much it was only with the greatest effort of will that she managed to direct the jet from the spout into the cup without spilling the coffee. Mom looked at her, too, and was on the point of getting up, presumably to take over, only to lean back and reach for the bread basket instead. It was both painful to watch Grandma because she was so slow – in fact some coffee did end up in a saucer – and also unheard of that she, an adult, was unable to manage such a simple task as pouring coffee without spilling it, and the strangeness of seeing someone with hands shaking nonstop, almost with a mind of their own, meant that I couldn't take my eyes off her.

Mom placed her hand on mine.

"Wouldn't you like a griddle cake?" she said.

I nodded. She reached for one and put it on my plate. I spread a thick layer of butter on it and sprinkled sugar. Mom lifted the jug of milk and filled my glass. The milk came straight from the cowshed; it was warm and yellowish with tiny lumps floating round. I looked at Mom. Why had she filled my glass? I couldn't drink that milk, it was disgusting, it had come straight from the cow, and not just any cow but one standing outside and pissing and shitting.

I ate the griddle cake and took another while Dad asked Grandad some questions, which he answered in his own time. Kjartan sighed louder than he would have if he'd been alone. Either he had heard all this before or he didn't like what he heard.

"We were thinking of going up Lihesten this year," Dad said.

"Is that so?" Grandad said. "Well, it's a good idea. Yes, it's nice there. You can see over seven parishes from the top."

"We're looking forward to it," Dad said while Mom and Grandma were talking about an oak and a holly tree they had brought from Tromøya the previous year that they were now growing here.

I decided I would go and have a look at them.

Dad's glare stopped me in my tracks.

"Aren't you going to drink your milk, Karl Ove?" he said. "It's straight from the cow, you know. You won't get better milk anywhere."

"I know," I said.

As I didn't make a move to drink it, he fastened his eyes onto mine.

"Drink the milk, boy," he said.

"But it's warm," I said. "And there are lumps in it."

"Now you're offending your grandparents," Dad said. "You have to eat and drink whatever you're served. And that's that."

"The boy's used to pasteurized milk," Kjartan said. "From a carton in the fridge. They sell it in the shop here, too. Of course he can have some of that! We can buy it tomorrow. He's not used to milk straight from the cow."

"That seems unnecessary," Dad said. "The milk here is just as good. If not better. What nonsense to buy milk just because he's pampered."

"I like pasteurized milk best myself," Kjartan said. "I agree wholeheartedly with your son."

"Okay," Dad said. "Just so long as you're not taking the side of the underdog as usual. But this is more about manners."

Kjartan smiled and studied the table. I put the glass of milk to my mouth, stopped breathing through my nose, tried to think about something other than the white lumps, and drank it all in four long swigs.

"See," Dad said. "It was good, wasn't it?"

"Yes," I said.

After the meal we asked if we were allowed to go for a little walk even though it was late. We were. On with our shoes, into the yard, and down the road to the barn. The dusk was tenuous and hung like a spider's web all around us. The shapes were intact; the colors were absent or had gone gray. Yngve undid the catch of the cowshed door and pushed. The door was stuck and he had to put all his weight behind it to open up. Inside it was dark. Dim light from the dirty peepholes above the stalls made it possible for us to glimpse contours. The cows, lying in their stalls, stirred when they heard us. One turned its head.

"It's okay, cows."

It was nice and warm inside. The small calf, which was isolated in a kind of pen on the other side of the muck channel, was stamping around. We leaned over toward it. It looked at us with frightened eyes. Yngve patted it.

"Don't be scared, little calf," he said.

It wasn't only the door that was overgrown; all the walls and the floor and the windows were as well, as though the room had sunk at some point and was now submerged beneath water.

Yngve opened the barn door. We climbed into the hay that was lying there, clambered up onto the barn bridge, and opened the door to the small henhouse. The floor was covered with sawdust and feathers. The chickens sat motionless on the roosts staring straight ahead.

"Doesn't look like there are any eggs," Yngve said. "Want to go up and have a look at the minks, too?"

I nodded. When he pushed the tall barn door to, a white cat shot past us like an arrow and disappeared under the bridge. We went down and called it, knowing it was hiding somewhere, and finally we gave up and headed for the three mink huts that stood to the far west of the property, right by the forest. The acrid smell that met us as we approached was almost unbearable and I started breathing through my mouth.

There was a rustling and a banging in all the cages as we stopped in front of them.

How unpleasant it was.

It was darker here by the forest. The minks' claws clinked against the metal of the cages as they paced back and forth. We went up close to one. The black animal shrank as far back as it could, turned its head, and hissed at us. Its teeth shone. Its eyes were black like black stones and when, twenty minutes later, I was lying on the bed in our room on the first floor, alongside Yngve, who had his head on the pillow at the other end and was reading a soccer magazine, it was them I was thinking of. Of them moving back and forth in the cages all night while we slept. Suddenly voices were raised in the living room beneath us. It was Mom and

Dad talking with Kjartan. Raised voices didn't mean anything worrying; on the contrary, there was something reassuring about them. They wanted something, and they wanted it so much it couldn't be whispered or mumbled, it had to be shouted.

The next morning Grandad came in and asked if we would like to help pull up the fishing nets. We did, and a few minutes later we followed him down the path to the fjord, carrying an empty, white tub between us.

The boat was moored to a red float in the water. The mist was so dense it seemed to be hovering in the air. Grandad pulled the boat ashore, we jumped on board, and after he had shoved off with an oar against the bottom Yngve sat down on the thwart by the oarlocks and began to row. Grandad sat at the stern directing him whenever necessary; I sat in the bow looking into the mist. Lihesten, on the other side, was almost completely lost from view, visible only as something hard and gray in all the moist haze.

"It's very unusual for there to be mist here," Grandad said. "And especially at this time of year."

"Have you been to the top of Lihesten, Grandad?" Yngve said.

"Oh yes, you bet I have," Grandad said. "Many times. But it's a few years now since the last time."

He sat forward with his arms over his thighs.

"Once I went there as part of a rescue mission. It was Norway's first real plane crash. Have you heard about it?"

"No," Yngve said.

"It was misty, like now. The plane flew straight into Lihesten. We heard the bang, you see. We didn't know what it was, though. But then the plane was reported missing, and the local police chief needed men to go up with him. So I went."

"Did you find it?" I said.

"Yes, but there were no survivors. I saw the captain's head. That's a sight I'll never forget. His hair was perfect! Combed back. Not a strand out of place. No, I'll never forget that."

"Where did it crash? Into the wall of the mountain?" Yngve said.

"No, we can't see it from here. But there's a pinnacle on the plateau. It crashed there. We had to climb up to the wreck. Bit to port!"

Yngve's eyes narrowed, presumably trying to work out which side port was.

"That's it, yes," Grandad said. "You're a good oarsman, Yngve! Well, it was a big affair at that time. It was in all the papers. And there was lots of talk about it on the radio."

In front of us, the float above the net shone red through all the gray.

"Grab it, will you, Karl Ove!" Grandad said. I leaned over with a pounding heart and caught it in both hands. But it was slippery and I lost hold at once.

"Scoop your hands underneath," Grandad said. "Let's try again! Row back a bit. That's it, yes."

This time I managed to bring it on board. Yngve drew in the oars. Grandad began to drag in the net. The fish were revealed first as small, twinkling lights deep in the black depths, then they grew in size and clarity until a moment later they were dragged wriggling over the side. So shiny and clean with their gray-brown or bluish markings on their spines, their yellow eyes, pale red mouths, and razor-sharp fins and tails. I held one of them in my hands, where it writhed with such force it was hard to imagine it could be the fish I saw lying still on the boards at my feet the very next moment.

Grandad patiently extricated them from the mesh of the net and threw them into the tub. We had twenty. Mostly saithe but also the odd cod and pollock, plus two mackerel.

When Yngve began to row back I suddenly heard a simultaneous low *whoosh* and *splash*, not unlike the noise yachts make when they travel at speed, and I turned my head. Perhaps thirty meters away I could see some dark dorsal fins moving through the water.

I was scared.

"What's that?" Yngve said, raising the oars. "Over there."

"Where?" Grandad said. "Oh! Porpoises. They've been here a few days now. It's quite rare, but not that unusual. Have a good look at them. Seeing porpoises is a good omen, you know."

"Is it?" I said.

"Oh yes," he said.

Grandad gutted the fish over the sink in the basement, which was more like a grotto than a room in the house. The concrete floor was often wet and slippery, the ceiling was so low that Dad couldn't stand up straight – not a problem for Grandad as he was quite short – and the shelves on the walls were crammed with all sorts of objects and tools that had accumulated over their many years there. When he had finished, and the fish that only a few hours earlier had been alive and wriggling were in the freezer wrapped in plastic, we helped him to clean the net, standing in the rain on the grass by the shed, until Mom called us in for dinner.

After eating they usually had a nap. Dad, restless already after just one day, beckoned to me from the hall.

"Join me for a walk," he said.

I put on my boots and waterproof jacket and followed him across the fields. He walked with long strides and appeared to assimilate the countryside in long panoramic sweeps of his eyes. The mist hung over the spruce forest in front of us. The water in the lake shone black between the tree trunks. A tractor came down the road on the other side.

"Are you enjoying yourself here?" Dad said.

"Ye-es," I said, unsure where this was leading.

He stopped.

"Could you imagine living here?"

"Ye-es," I said.

"We might take over the farm here one day. Would you like that?"

"Living here?"

"Yes. When the time comes it's a real possibility."

I thought Kjartan would take over the farm, but I didn't say so, it would have ruined a wonderful moment for him.

"Come on, let's have a look around," he said, striding out again.

Live there?

Oh, that was certainly a novel idea. It was impossible to visualize Dad there, in that house, surrounded by those things. Dad drying hay? Dad mowing hay and putting it in the silo? Dad spreading muck on the fields? Dad sitting in his chair in the living room listening to the weather forecast?

Even though history didn't exist for me when I went there as a child and everything belonged to the moment, I could still feel its presence. Grandad had lived there all his life, and in some way or other that influenced the image I had of him. But if there was one image or notion that embodied Grandad, it was not everything he had done in his life, of that I knew very little, and the little I did know, I had nothing to compare it with, no, the one thing that embodied Grandad was the little two-stroke tractor he used for a multitude of purposes. That tractor was the very essence of Grandad. It was red and a bit rusty, needed to be kick-started, and had a small gear stick, a column with a black ball on top, on one hand lever, while the accelerator was on the other. He used it for mowing, walking behind it while an enormous scissor-like attachment on the front cut down the grass in its path. And he used it to transport heavy items; then he put a trailer on the back with a green seat, from which he steered what all of a sudden had become a truck-like vehicle. There was little I rated higher than being with him then, sitting on the back and chugging toward the two shops in Vågen, for example, where he would collect cans of formic acid or sacks of feed or artificial manure. The vehicle was so slow you could walk beside it, but that didn't matter, speed wasn't of any consequence, all the rest was: the rattle of the engine, the exhaust fumes that smelled so good and wafted across the road as we drove, the feeling of freedom in the trailer, being able to hang over one side, then the other, all the things there were to see on the journey, including Grandad's slight figure and his peaked cap in front of me, and getting out at the shop, where the Bergen boat docked, and being able to walk around, often with an ice cream in our hands while Grandad did whatever he had to do.

They also had a handcart with which they used to transport heavy items over short distances, such as the milk canisters that were trundled down to the milk ramp by the road for collection. The cart was made of metal and the wheels were as big as those on a bike. Other things no one else had at home were: scythes, the three big ones with wooden shafts and the small ones that you had to bend down to use, and the big whetstone outside the shed, where they were sharpened; the pitchforks with their three long, thin prongs. The flat, heavy shovels used to toss cow muck into the cellar, which was beneath a hatch in the floor of the cowshed. The electric fence, which Yngve tricked me into pissing on for the first and last time. The hay racks, these strange, extended, timid creatures standing outside all farms waiting for alms, unless you saw them from a distance or in the darkness, in which case they looked more like military units lined up ready for battle. The large, round griddle Grandma cooked her cakes on. The black waffle maker. The filters and the flat metal filtering devices used for the milk, and even the milk canisters with their plump bodies and short, headless necks, the way they stopped their flustered mumbling and chattering when filled to the top with milk and how they were then placed on the cart and trundled down to the ramp, side by side, suddenly solemn and dignified, that is, if one of them didn't gaily rock to and fro whenever the wheel hit a pothole in the road. And, oh, Grandad standing by the cowshed and singing the cows inside every afternoon.

"Come by here, my cows!" he sang. "Kum by ya! Kum by ya!"

How could I tell my friends at home about all this when they asked where we had been and what we had done over the holidays? It was impossible, and it was supposed to be impossible, there was a Chinese wall between the two worlds, both in my mind and the world outside.

In the two weeks we were there the unfamiliar became familiar and homely, while home, after a long day of traveling by car, had become unfamiliar, or had been lowered into the pool of unfamiliarity, for as we drove down the hill after Tromøya Bridge and turned into the last stretch up to the house, brown with red frames, surrounded by a lawn parched and scorched, the dark windows staring at us through sorrowful eyes, it was as if I both recognized it yet didn't, because although my gaze was accustomed to all it saw, it put up some resistance, a bit like a pair of new sneakers can, lying there, gleaming in their unused-ness and, as it were, refusing to adapt to their latest surroundings, insisting on their distinctive character, until the resistance has been worn down over a few weeks and they are just one pair among many. Some of this feeling of newness was conferred on the estate when we arrived, it had been stirred up, so to speak, and wasn't to settle for quite a few days.

Dad parked and switched off the engine. A little white kitten lay sleeping on Mom's lap. It had meowed and squealed in the cage all morning, and when it was finally let out it had run around the backseat and on the ledge under the rear window until Mom caught it and at last it fell asleep and was quiet. It had completely red eyes, and although its coat was big and furry, underneath it was tiny. Especially the head, I thought as I was petting it and felt the small cranium in my hand, but also the neck. It was so thin.

"Where's Whitie going to live?" I said.

"Oh, what a name," Dad said, opening the door and getting out.

"We'll have to give it a room in the cellar," Mom said, lifting the kitten to her bosom with one hand and opening the door with the other.

Dad pulled the seat forward and I stepped out onto the gravel, my legs like jelly. Yngve got out on the opposite side, and together we followed Dad to the house. He unlocked the door and went into the laundry room, where he opened the hatch and poked the hose through. He screwed the other end to the tap, and then he walked out with the sprinkler in his hand while Mom, Yngve, and I went into the cellar storeroom, where the kitten, who was still sleeping, was given a basket with a blanket in it, a bowl of water, and a bowl containing some pieces of sausage from the fridge, and then we put a low, plastic tray of sand in the corner.

"Now we'll close all the doors except this one," Mom said. "So he can't run away when he wakes up."

While the thin jets of water from the sprinkler rotated around the lawn and Dad carried in the baggage from the car below us, Yngve, Mom, and I sat having supper in the kitchen. It was Sunday, all the shops were closed, and so Mom had brought a loaf and some butter, meat, and cheese from Sørbøvåg. We drank tea; I had it with milk and three spoonfuls of sugar.

Suddenly we heard the kitten squeaking from the hallway. We got up, all of us, and went out. He was at the top of the stairs. On seeing us, he ran down again. We followed. Mom called him. He shot across the floor, darted past us, bounded up the stairs and into the living room, where he hid. For several minutes we went around searching and calling until Yngve found him. He was in the narrow gap between the bookcase and the wall, impossible to reach unless you moved the whole bookcase.

Mom went downstairs to fetch the bowls of food and water, put them beside the bookcase, and said he would come out when he wanted them. When I went in next morning he still hadn't moved. In the evening he came out and ate something, then he disappeared again. He stayed there for three days. But when he did eventually come out it was for good. He was still a bit jittery at first, but he got more and more used to us and after a week he was running around and playing and jumping onto our laps and purred whenever we stroked him. Every evening he stood in front of the TV smacking whatever appeared on the screen with his paw. He was particularly interested in soccer. He ignored all the players, he only had eyes for the ball, which he watched with the utmost attention. Now and then he padded behind the TV set to look for it.

When school started again, he began to cough. It was comical, it sounded as if there were a person downstairs in the cellar. Slowly and imperceptibly, the mornings became cooler until one day there was a thin, glassy layer of ice on the puddles in the road, which had melted after a few hours, but nevertheless autumn was at the door. The leaves on the trees straddling the hill above our house turned yellow and red and spiraled down from the branches when the wind gusted in. Mom was unwell and in bed when I left for school in the morning and returned some hours later. I went in to talk to her and she could barely raise her head. At the same time Whitie fell ill; he lay in his basket coughing. At school I kept wondering how he was and on my return the first thing I did was to go into the cellar storeroom. If only he would get well soon! But the opposite happened, he got worse and, one day when I ran in to see him, he wasn't in his basket but in the corner, on the concrete floor, writhing to and fro and wheezing. I placed my hand on him, but he kept on writhing.

"Mom! Mom!" I shouted. "He's dying! He's dying!"

I flew up the stairs and wrenched open the door to her room. She turned sleepily to me with a smile.

"You've got to call for a vet!" I shouted. "Right now! It's urgent!" She sat up gingerly.

"What's going on?" she said.

"Whitie's dying! He's writhing around on the floor. He's in so much pain! You've got to call for a vet! At once!"

"But we can't, Karl Ove," Mom said. "I don't think anything will help. And I'm not well . . ."

"You've got to call now!" I shouted. "Mom, Mom, he's dying! Don't you understand?"

"I can't, don't you understand. I'm sorry. It's terrible."

"But Whitie's *dying*!"

She gently shook her head.

"But Mom!"

She sighed.

"He was probably already ill when we took him with us. He's an albino as well. They're often a bit weaker. There's nothing we can do. Nothing."

I looked at her with my eyes full of tears. Then I slammed the door and ran down to the cellar. He was lying on his side, pulling himself along by his claws on the floor and wheezing. Spasms shook through him. I bent down and stroked him. Then I ran out, down into the forest, right down to the water. Up again on the other side. Crying nonstop. When our house came into sight again I ran as fast as I could, I had to try and persuade her again. She wasn't a vet, what did she know about what they could or couldn't do? I opened the door and paused. Inside the house there was silence. Carefully, I crept into the storeroom. He was back in his basket, lying still, with his head rolled back.

"Mom!" I yelled. "Come here!"

I dashed up the stairs and opened the door to her room again.

"He's not moving," I said. "Could you check to see if he's dead? Or if he's recovered."

"Do you think you can wait until your father comes?" she said. "He won't be long."

"No!" I said.

Mom stared at me.

"Okay, I can do it," she said. She lifted the duvet, placed her feet on the ground, and stood up, all at the same slow speed. She was wearing a white nightgown. Her hair was in a mess, her face pale and softer than when she was well. She steadied herself with one hand against the wardrobe. I ran downstairs and waited for her outside the storeroom. I didn't want to be inside on my own.

She leaned forward and felt the kitten.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But I think he's dead."

She looked at me and got up. I put my arms around her.

"He won't be in any more pain," she said.

"No," I said.

I wasn't crying.

"Should we bury him right away?" I said.

"It's best to wait until Dad and Yngve come home, don't you think?"

"Yes," I said.

And so we did. While Mom was in bed Dad carried the kitten to a corner of the garden, followed by Yngve and me, dug a hole in the ground, put the kitten in, and shoveled earth over him. He wouldn't hear of a cross.

◆ ◆ ◆

There are two pictures of the kitten. In one he's standing in front of the television with a raised paw, trying to catch a swimmer. In the other he's lying on the sofa beside Yngve and me. He has a blue bow tie around his neck.

Who put the bow tie on?

It must have been Mom. That was the sort of thing she would do, I know that, but during the months I have been writing this, in the spate of memories about events and people who have been roused to life, she is almost completely absent, it is as if she hadn't been there, indeed as if she were one of the false memories you have, one you have been told, not one you have experienced.

How can that be?

For if there was someone there, at the bottom of the well that is my childhood, it was her, my mother, Mom. She was the one who made all our meals and gathered us around her in the kitchen every evening. She was the one who went shopping, knitted or sewed our clothes; she was the one who repaired them when they fell apart. She was the one who supplied the bandage when we had fallen and grazed our knees; she was the one who drove me to the hospital when I broke my collarbone and to the doctor's when I, somewhat less heroically, had scabies. She was the one who was out of her mind with worry when a young girl died from meningitis and at the same time I got a cold and a bit of a stiff neck. I was bundled straight into the car, off to Kokkeplassen, her foot flat on the accelerator, concern flashing from her eyes. She was the one who read to us, she was the one who washed our hair when we were in the bath, and she was the one who laid out our pajamas afterward. She was the one who drove us to soccer practice in the evening, the one who went to parents' meetings and sat with other parents at our end-of-term parties and took pictures of us. She was the one who stuck the photos in our albums afterward. She was the one who baked cakes for our birthdays and cakes for Christmas and buns for Shrovetide.

All the things mothers do for their sons, she did for us. If I was ill and in bed with a temperature she was the one who came in with a cold compress and placed it on my forehead, she was the one who put the thermometer up my backside to take my temperature, she was the one who came in with water, juice, grapes, cookies, and she was the one who got up in the night and came in wearing her nightgown to see how I was.

She was always there, I know she was, but I just can't remember it.

I have no memories of her reading to me and I can't remember her putting a single bandage on my knees or being present at a single end-of-term event.

How can that be?

She saved me because if she hadn't been there I would have grown up alone with Dad, and sooner or later I would have taken my life, one way or another. But she was there, Dad's darkness had a counterbalance, I am alive and the fact that I do not live my life to the full has nothing to do with the balance of my childhood. I am alive, I have my own children, and with them I have tried to achieve only one aim: that they shouldn't be afraid of their father.

They aren't. I know that.

When I enter a room, they don't cringe, they don't look down at the floor, they don't dart off as soon as they glimpse an opportunity, no, if they look at me, it is not a look of indifference, and if there is anyone I am happy to be ignored by it's them. If there is anyone I am happy to be taken for granted by, it's them. And should they have completely forgotten I was there when they turn forty themselves, I will thank them and take a bow and accept the bouquets.

Dad knew what the situation was. Lack of self-knowledge was not one of his failings. One evening at the beginning of the eighties, he said to Prestbakmo that it was Mom who had saved his children. The question is whether it was enough. The question is whether she was responsible for exposing us to him for so many years, a man we were afraid of, always, at all times. The question is whether it is enough to be a counterbalance to the darkness.

She made a decision: she stayed with him, she must have had her reasons.

The same applies to him. He also made a decision, he also stayed. Throughout the seventies and the beginning of the eighties this is the way they lived, side by side, in the house in Tybakken, with their two children, their two cars, and their two jobs. They had a life outside the house, a life in the house in the way they were to each other, and a life in the house in the way they were to us. We, as children, were like dogs in a crowd of people, only interested in other dogs or doggy things, we were never aware of what else was happening, over our heads. I had a vague sense of who Dad was outside the house, for something seeped down, even to me, but it never made any sense. He was always well turned out, I was aware of that, but not what significance it carried, only when I was older and met some of his former students could I see him in that role. A young, slim, well-dressed teacher stepping out of his Opel Ascona, walking with a determined stride up to the faculty lounge, putting down his briefcase full of papers, pouring a cup of coffee, exchanging a few words with colleagues, going to his class when the bell rang, hanging his brown cord jacket on the chair and scanning the class, who sat quietly looking at him. He had a well-groomed black beard, sparkling blue eyes, and a handsome face. The boys in the class feared him; he was strict and tolerated no nonsense. The girls in the class were in love with him because he was young, had a strong aura, and looked nothing like any of the other teachers. He liked teaching and was good at it, he held his classes in a spell when he spoke about subjects that engaged him. Obstfelder was his favorite. But he also liked Kinck and, of the contemporary writers, Bjørneboe.

He was very correct in his dealings with colleagues, but also kept his distance. The distance lay in his attire; many of the other teachers would wear smocks and jeans or the same suit for months on end. The distance lay in the impartiality he exhibited. The distance lay in his body language, his posture, his aura.

He always knew more about them than they knew about him. It was a rule in his life, which applied to everyone, even his parents and brothers. Or perhaps especially to them.

When he came home from school he went into his study and prepared the evening meetings; he was a Venstre representative on the council, as well as sitting on several committees, and at one point he was a possible Storting candidate for his party, according to him. But what he said wasn't always true, he was notorious for manipulating the truth in the circles in which he moved, although not in his work at school or in politics, where he was proper and seemly. He was also a member of a philately club in Grimstad and showed his collection at a variety of exhibitions. In the summer he devoted himself to the garden, where he was also ambitious and a perfectionist, if such is conceivable in a garden around a house on an estate in the seventies. He had inherited his interest in everything that grew from his mother, and that was perhaps what they spoke about most: various plants, bushes, and trees and the experiences they'd had with them. Sun, soil, moisture, acidity levels. Grafting, pruning, watering. With no friends, his social intercourse took place in the staff room and the family. He visited his parents, brothers, uncles, and aunts frequently and received frequent visits from them. With them he used a tone of voice that was unfamiliar to Yngve and me, and we therefore viewed it with suspicion.

Mom's life differed in many ways from his. She had lots of friends, mostly because of her job, but also in other places, not least among the neighbors. With them she would sit and chat, or "prattle," as Dad would say, and smoke and eat the cakes they had baked – if, that is, they weren't knitting in the thick cloud of tobacco smoke that hung in so many living rooms in the seventies. She had an interest in politics, was in favor of a strong state, a well-developed health system, and equal rights for all, and was probably committed to women's liberation and the peace movement, was against capitalism and the growing materialism, and sympathized with Erik Dammann's *The Future in Our Hands* movement, in short she was on the left. She said she had hibernated during her twenties, everything was about her job, her children, and making ends meet, the budget was tight, you had to fight to keep to it, although in her early thirties she focused on herself and the society she was living in. While Dad rarely read anything other than what he had to, she was genuinely interested in literature. She was an idealist, he was a pragmatist; she was contemplative, he was practical.

They brought us up together even if I never experienced my upbringing as such; I always drew a strict distinction between them and perceived them as two utterly separate beings. But for them it must have been different. In the evenings when we were asleep they sat up talking – about the neighbors, colleagues, us, unless they were discussing politics or literature. Once in a while they went on holiday alone, to London, to the Rhine Valley, or into the mountains, while Yngve and I were with either Mom's or Dad's parents. They were more equal than the parents of my friends as far as chores in the house were concerned: Dad cleaned and cooked, which none of the other fathers did, not to mention all the food gathering they did at that time, all the fish he caught on the far side of the island and the hundreds of kilos of berries we picked on trips to the mainland in late summer and autumn, which afterward they converted into juice and jam and poured into bottles and jars to stand on the shelves in the cellar all winter, glowing dimly in the light from the little window at the top of the wall. Raspberries, blackberries, blueberries, cowberries, and cloudberries, which would excite Dad so much he would shout out if he found any. Sloes for wine. In addition, they would pay to pick fruit from gardens on Tromøya, and it was from there we had apples, pears, and plums. Then there was the cherry tree belonging to Dad's uncle Alf in Kristiansand and, of course, both grandmothers had fruit trees. Our days were structured and clear: on Sundays it was lunch with dessert, on weekdays it was generally a variety of shapes and variants of fish. We always knew when we had school on the following day, how many lessons we had in which subjects, and not even the course of the evening was without a framework, as it was seasonally determined: if there was snow or ice on the ground, then it was skiing and skating. If the water temperature rose above fifteen degrees, well then, swimming was the order of the day, come rain come shine. The sole really unpredictable factor in this life, from autumn to winter, spring to summer, from one school year to the next, was Dad. I was so frightened of him that even with the greatest effort of will I am unable to re-create the fear; the feelings I had for him I have never felt since, nor indeed anything close.

His footsteps on the stairs – was he coming to see me?

The wild glare in his eyes. The tightness around his mouth. The lips that parted involuntarily. And then his voice.

Sitting here now, hearing it in my inner ear, I almost start crying.

His fury struck like a wave, it washed through the rooms, lashed at me, lashed and lashed and lashed at me, and then it retreated. Then it could be quiet for several weeks. However, it wasn't quiet, for it could just as easily come in two minutes as two days. There was no warning. Suddenly, there he was, furious. Whether he hit me or not made no difference, it was equally awful if he twisted my ear or squeezed my arm or dragged me somewhere to see what I had done, it wasn't the pain I was afraid of, it was him, his voice, his face, his body, the fury it emitted, that was what I was afraid of, and the terror never let up, it was there for every single day of my entire childhood.

After the confrontations I wanted to die. Dying was one of the best, most enjoyable fantasies I had. He would have fun then. He would be standing there thinking about what he had done. He would be feeling remorse then. Oh, what remorse he would feel! I visualized him standing there and wringing his hands in despair with his head turned to heaven in front of the tiny coffin where I lay, with my prominent teeth, unable to pronounce my *r*'s.

What sweetness there was in that image! It almost put me in a good mood again. And that was how my childhood was; the distance between good and evil was so much shorter than it is now as an adult. All you had to do was stick your head out of the door and something absolutely fantastic happened. Just walking up to B-Max and waiting for the bus was an event, even though it had been repeated almost every day for many years. Why? I have no idea. But when everything glinted with moisture in the mist and your boots were wet from the slush on the road, and the snow in the forest was white and sunken, and we stood in a gang chatting or playing, or we ran after girls to trip them, grab their stocking caps, or simply throw them into a snowdrift, and I felt one of them against me as I squeezed my arms around her waist as tight as I could, perhaps Marianne, perhaps Siv, perhaps Marian, because they were the girls I prized and thought about most, all my nerves were a-quiver, my chest bubbled with joy – and why? Oh, because of the wet snow. Because of the wet down jackets. Because of the many good-looking girls. Because of the bus rattling along with chains on its tires. Because of the condensation on the windows when we went inside, because of the screaming and shouting, because Anne Lisbet was there, as happy and lovely, as dark-haired and red-mouthed, as she had ever been. Every day was a party, in the sense that everything that happened pulsated with excitement and nothing was predictable. Nor was it over when the bus came, it had only just begun, for the whole school day stretched out before us, with the transformation we went through when our wet clothes were hanging on hooks and we shuffled into the classroom in stockinged feet, with red cheeks and messy hair, wet at the tips because it had been outside the hat. The tingling in your body as the break beckoned, and we ran up the stairs, through the corridors, down the outside steps, across the playground, down the slope, and onto the field. And afterward, going home, playing music, reading, perhaps putting on skis and racing down the steep hill to Ubekilen, where the others always were, and all this at the intensity that only exists in childhood, standing at the bottom, back up herringbone style, racing down, until the darkness was so dense we could hardly see a hand in front of our faces and hung over our ski sticks chatting about everything and nothing.

The glimpse of ice on the bay covered by a shallow layer of water. The lights from the houses on the estate, which formed a kind of cupola over the forest above us. All the sounds the darkness amplified whenever someone shifted weight and the blue mini skis scraped against each other or cut into the soft snow. The car that came down the narrow gravel road, it was a Beetle, belonging to the people who lived there, the light shining a path across the ground, making everything spookily visible for a moment or two and then the darkness closing around us again.

Childhood consisted of an infinity of such moments, all equally compact. Some of them could raise me to dizzying heights, like the evening I got together with Tone and half ran, half slid down the hill, which must have just been cleared by the snowplow, judging by the shiny surface, and when I arrived at the dark patch between the roads outside our house, I lay down in the snow on my back and looked up at the dense, clammy, and lightless night above me and was utterly happy.

Others could open a void beneath me, like the evening Mom told us she was going to start studying the following year. We were at the table eating supper when she told us.

"The school's in Oslo," she said. "It's just for one year. I'll come home every Friday and I'll be here all weekend. Then I'll go back on the Monday. So that's three days here and four there."

"Are we going to be alone here with Dad?" Yngve said.

"Yes. It'll be fine. You'll see a bit more of each other."

"Why are you going to go to school?" I said. "You're an adult."

"There's something called further education," she said. "I'm going to learn more about my profession. It's very exciting, you know."

"I don't want you to go," I said.

"It's just for a year," she said. "And I'll be here for three days a week. And all the holidays. I'm going to have long holidays."

"I still don't want you to go," I said.

"I understand," Mom said. "But it'll be fine. Dad wants to spend time with you. And next year it will be the other way around. Dad will do a further education course and I'll be at home."

I took the last mouthful of tea, closed my mouth, and let it seep through, as I blocked the many wet, black tea leaves at the bottom with my lips.

I half-rose and lifted the heavy teapot over to the cup with both hands, poured, and put it back. The tea was almost black, it had been brewing for so long. I added a generous portion of milk and three large spoonfuls of sugar.

"Sugar in tea," Yngve said.

"And?" I said.

At that moment there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Oh, and I had filled the cup to the brim! I would have to sit there until it was drunk. But Yngve had no such reservations; he stood up and was gone.

Dad walked past with a somber step. He switched on the television and sat down on a chair.

"Would you like some supper?" Mom said.

"No," he said.

I poured in more milk to make the tea colder and drank it up in three long swigs.

"Thank you, Mom!" I said, getting up.

"My pleasure," Mom said.

The news was shocking, but I wasn't shocked as I went to my room afterward, it was April now and the course she was doing didn't start until August. That was four months away and for a child four months is an eternity. Mom's further education course belonged to the future in the same vague way that my next school did or confirmation or my eighteenth birthday. We were in midchildhood and time was suspended there. That is, the moments raced along at breakneck speed while the days that contained them passed almost unnoticed. Even when the last day of school arrived and we were no longer in the third class I didn't think that soon she would be off. Wasn't there the whole of the long summer holiday to go yet? It was only when she was in her bedroom taking out her clothes and a suitcase lay open on the floor that I realized. At the same time there were so many other things going on, the next day school would be starting again, when we, the fourth class, would definitively be among the oldest. We would have a new classroom, and more importantly, a new class teacher. Inside my room there was a new satchel, in the wardrobe there were new clothes. The thought of all this made my stomach tingle, and although I was sad watching her pack I was no sadder than I usually was when she went to work.

She stopped packing and looked at me.

"I'll be back on Thursday," she said. "It's only four days."

"I know," I said. "Have you got everything?"

"You know what, I think I have," she said. "Would you mind helping me with the suitcase? Put your knee there so that I can close it properly?"

I nodded and did as she asked.

Dad came up the stairs.

"Are you ready?" he said with a nod at the suitcase. "I'll take it."

Mom gave me a hug and then she followed him downstairs.

I watched them from the bathroom window. As she got into the green Beetle it was exactly like any afternoon when she had to go to work – apart from the suitcase in the trunk, that is. I waved, she waved back, started the engine, reversed up the incline, put the car in first gear, and it beetled down the hill the way it always did and was gone.

What would happen now?

What would the days be like now?

It was Mom who bound us all together, it was Mom who was at the center of Yngve's and my life, we knew that, Dad knew that, but perhaps she didn't. How else could she leave us like this?

Knives and forks clinking on plates, elbows moving, heads held stiff, straight backs. No one saying a word. That is us three, a father and two sons, sitting and eating. Around us, on all sides, it is the seventies.

The silence grows. And we notice it, all three of us, the silence is not the kind that can ease, it is the kind that lasts a lifetime. Well, of course, you can say something inside it, you can talk, but the silence doesn't stop for that reason.

Dad put the bone on the plate with the potato skin and took another chop. Yngve and I were given only one each.

Yngve had finished.

"Thank you, Dad," he said.

"There's dessert," Dad said.

"Don't want any," Yngve said. "Thanks anyway."

"Why don't you want any?" Dad said. "It's pineapple and cream. You like it."

"It makes my face break out," Yngve said.

"I see," Dad said. "You can leave the table."

He looked at me when Yngve got up, as though he didn't exist.

"But you want some, don't you, Karl Ove?"

"You bet," I said. "It's my favorite."

"Good," he said.

I sat looking out of the window waiting for him to finish. Listening to the music from Yngve's room. A crowd of children had gathered in the road, they put two rocks on the ground as a goal, immediately afterward there was the sound of heavy thuds as boots hit an underinflated ball and of low shouts, which always increase in volume when soccer is played, whatever form it takes.

At last Dad got up, took the plates, and scraped them clean over the trash can. He put a bowl of pineapple and cream in front of me and one in front of himself.

We finished the dessert without saying a word.

"Thanks, Dad," I said, getting up. Dad said nothing, but got up as well, filled the coffeepot with water, and took a packet of coffee from the cupboard.

Then he turned.

"Karl Ove?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"Now don't you tease Yngve about his pimples, do you understand what I'm saying? I don't ever want to hear a word about it again."

"Okay," I said, and stood waiting to see if there was more to come.

Dad turned and cut off the corner of the coffee packet, and I went into Yngve's room, where he was playing his electric guitar, a black Les Paul copy I had been so surprised to hear the first time, as I was convinced not a sound would come from it without an amplifier. But it did, a low plunking sound, he was sitting there and playing with a face full of pimples.

"Want to play something?" I said.

"I already am," he said.

"A game, you chump," I said.

"Fifty-two-card pick-up?" he said.

"Ha ha," I said. "You can only do that once and I've already done it. Can you teach me a chord?"

"Not now. Another time."

"Please."

"Just one then," he said. "Sit here."

I sat down beside him on the bed. He put the guitar in my lap. Placed three fingers on the finger board.

"That's an E," he said, and took his hand away.

I put my fingers where he'd had his.

"Good," he said. "Now strum."

I strummed, but not all the strings made a sound.

"You have to press harder," he said. "And you have to watch your other fingers don't catch the free strings."

"Okay," I said, and tried again.

"That was good," he said. "That's the way. Now you can do E."

I passed him the guitar and got up.

"Do you remember which strings are which?" he said.

"EADGBE," I said.

"That's right," he said. "Now all you need is a band."

"But then I would have to borrow your guitar," I said.

"You can't have it."

I said nothing because things could change so quickly.

"When do you start tomorrow?" I said instead.

"First hour," he said. "And you?"

"No, at eleven, I think."

"Think?"

"Know. Dad?"

"First lesson, dead sure."

That was good news. I would be alone for a few hours.

I turned and went into my room. The new satchel was by the desk leg. The square, blue one I'd had for years had become too small and childish. The one I had now was dark green and made of some synthetic material that smelled wonderful.

I sniffed at it for a while. Then I put on *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and lay back on my bed staring at the ceiling.

Getting so much better all the time!
It's getting better all the time!
Better, better, better!
It's getting better all the time!
Better, better, better!
Getting so much better all the time!

The music lifted me at once, I beat the air with one hand and rocked my head backward and forward, happy to the core. *Bettåh, bettåh, bettåh!* I sang. *Bettåh, bettåh, bettåh!*

There was the school building, black, with all its many windows glinting, as we stormed off the bus. We were among the older pupils now and knew both how to behave and what to expect. While the new kids, hair combed and smartly dressed, stood with their parents listening to the head teacher's welcome talk by the flagpole, we swaggered around and spat or leaned against the wall of the wet-weather shed talking about what we had done that summer. Three cows on a farm was no longer good enough, but even if our only holiday trip had been to Sørbøvåg, where I had stayed with Jon Olav and the others, alone for a week, I definitely had something to offer because there had been a girl there, my second cousin, whose name was Merete, she had blond hair and lived outside Oslo. I went out with her, I said, and although that was not quite as impressive as Liseberg in Gothenburg, northern Europe's biggest amusement park, it was better than nothing.

Some of the girls unfurled their skipping elastic from what were to me hidden places and started jumping.

No, *dancing*.

We managed to persuade them to play the high jump instead, so that we could join in without losing face in front of the other boys. Two of the girls held the elastic between them, and then, one after the other, we ran toward it, launched both legs, and brought our feet down on it to land on the other side.

It was a pleasure to watch the girls as they took off, legs first, in their elegant, controlled fashion.

Whoosh, you heard, and then they were safely on the other side.

Then the height was raised until there was only one person left.

I hoped it would be me because Anne Lisbet had joined us now as well, but it was, as so often before, Marianne.

Tap, *tap*, *tap*, you heard, as she ran forward, *whoosh*, you heard when she jumped, and then she was over.

She smiled shyly, swept her shoulder-length blond hair to one side with a finger, and I wondered if she would be the one I fell in love with this year.

Probably not. She was in my class.

Perhaps it would be someone in the A class?

Or, hey, future of dreams, perhaps someone from another school?

After we had been given the schedule and some new books in the first lesson we had to tell the class what we had done over the summer, one after the other. In the second lesson we had to hold an election for the new student council. I had been the class rep with Siv in the previous year and I thought being reelected would be a formality until Eivind put up his hand and said he would also like to stand as a candidate. There were six names to choose from. Eivind's involvement led to my breaking the unwritten rule that you never, under any circumstances, voted for yourself.

I thought the election might be touch and go, so one vote could be decisive. I considered the chances of anyone finding out that I had voted for myself unlikely in the extreme. After all, it was a secret ballot, and the only person who would see what we wrote and could spot our handwriting, and could therefore expose me, was Frøken, and she wouldn't say anything.

How cruelly mistaken I was.

I wrote KARL OVE in capital letters on the little scrap of paper, folded it, and gave it to Frøken when she came around with a hat. On the board she wrote the names of the six candidates, and then she called on Sølvi, of all people, to read out the ballot slips. Every time Sølvi read out a name she put a cross by the appropriate person on the board.

It was taking time for my votes to start coming in. At first Eivind got most of the boys' votes. Then I realized to my horror that there were no more votes. I hadn't received a single one! How was that possible?

But there. At last.

"Karl Ove," Sølvi said, and Frøken put a cross behind my name.

"Eivind," Sølvi said.

"Eivind."

"Eivind."

"And that must be it, isn't it? Now let's see. The class reps on the council this year are therefore Eivind and Marianne!"

I looked down at the desk in front of me.

One vote.

How was that possible?

And, to cap it off, the one vote was my own.

But I was the best student in the class! At least in Norwegian! And natural and social sciences! And in math I was the second best, or perhaps the third. But, altogether, who could be better than me?

Okay, Eivind won. But one vote? How was that possible?

Hadn't anyone voted for me?

There had to be a mistake somewhere.

No one?

When I opened our front door Dad was standing inside.

I gave a start of surprise.

How had he managed that?

Had he been waiting for me?

"You've got to go to B-Max for me," he said. "Look."

He passed me a shopping list and a hundred-krone note.

"I want all the change back, okay?"

"Yes," I said, put down my satchel, and ran into the road.

If there was one area in this world where I was meticulous it was with Dad's change. When B-Max had just opened Yngve returned home with less change than there should have been. Dad gave him the beating of his life. And that was no small matter because Yngve had been on the receiving end of quite a few beatings. Many more than me. Yes, I got off lightly with everything. Even my bedtimes were lenient compared with his.

I looked at the list.

1 kilo of potatoes
1 packet of rissoles
2 onions
Coffee (for boiling)
1 tin of pineapple slices
¼ kilo of whipping cream
1 kilo of oranges

Pineapple? Were we going to have dessert again? On a Monday?

I put all the items in a basket, stood flicking through some magazines on the shelf by the counter, paid, put the change in my pocket, and ran home with the heavy bag hanging from my hand.

I passed it to Dad upstairs in the kitchen with the change, which he pocketed while I waited for him to say I could go. But he didn't.

"Sit!" he said, pointing to the chair.

I sat.

"Straighten your back, boy!" he said.

I straightened my back.

He took the potatoes, which were covered in soil, from the bag and started peeling them.

What was it he wanted?

"Well?" he said, turning to look at me while his hands worked under the water from the tap.

I looked at him in surprise.

"What did Frøken have to say?" he said.

"Frøken?"

"Yes, *Fwøken*. Didn't she have anything to say to all of you on your first day?"

"Yes, she did, she welcomed us back. Then we were given our schedule and some books."

"What's your schedule like then?" he said, walking over to the cupboard by the stove and taking out a saucepan.

"Shall I go and get it?"

"No, no. You must remember some of it, don't you? Did it look good?"

"Yes," I said. "Great."

"That's good," he said.

That evening I realized what Mom's absence meant.

The rooms were lifeless.

Dad sat downstairs in his study, and the living room and kitchen were "out there," dead. I tiptoed toward them, and the feeling that came over me when I was alone in the forest, when the forest was sufficient unto itself and it didn't want to incorporate me, reemerged here as well.

The rooms were only rooms, a gaping space I entered.

But not my room, thank goodness. It wrapped itself around me, soft and friendly as it had always been.

The next day Sverre and Geir Håkon came over to me in B-Max. Several kids from the class were standing around us.

"Who did you vote for yesterday, Karl Ove?" Geir Håkon said.

"It's a secret," I said.

"You voted for yourself. You got only one vote, and that was the one you gave yourself."

"No, it wasn't," I said.

"Yes, it was," Sverre said. "We've asked everyone in the class. No one voted for you. So you're the only one left. You voted for yourself."

"No," I said. "That's not true. I didn't vote for myself."

"Who did then?"

"I don't know."

"But we've asked everyone. No one voted for you. You voted for yourself. Come on, admit it."

"No," I said. "It's not true."

"But we've asked everyone. There's only you left."

"Then someone's lying."

"Why would anyone lie?"

"How should I know?"

"You're the one who's lying. You voted for yourself."

"No, I didn't."

The rumor spread through the school, but I denied everything. And kept denying it. Everyone knew what had happened, but as long as I didn't admit it, they couldn't be *absolutely* sure. They thought it was typical of me. I thought I *was* someone. But I didn't think that. A person who votes for himself is a nobody. The fact that I never went scavenging, never did any shoplifting, never fired a slingshot at birds or a pea-shooter loaded with cherry pits at cars or passersby, and never joined in when others locked the gym teacher behind the garage door in the equipment room or when others put drawing pins on the supply teachers' chairs or dunked their sponges until they were sopping wet, plus the fact that I told them they shouldn't do these things, told them it was wrong, did not do a great deal for my reputation, either. I knew, however, that I was right and what the others were doing was wrong. Occasionally I would pray to God to forgive them. If they swore, for example. Then a prayer might come into my mind. *Dear God, Forgive Leif Tore for swearing. He didn't mean to.* I said things like: heck, blast, golly, gosh, drats, jeez, my foot, goodness, fudge, holy cow, bother, and yikes. But despite this, despite not swearing, not lying, except in self-defense, not stealing or vandalizing or playing up teachers, despite being interested in clothes and my appearance and always wanting to be right and the best, which meant my general reputation was poor and I was not someone others said they liked, I wasn't shunned or avoided, and if I was, by Leif Tore and Geir Håkon, for instance, there were always boys I could turn to. Such as Dag Lothar. Or Dag Magne. And when all the kids got together in big groups no one was rejected, everyone was accepted, including me.

Of course, it was easier to be at home reading.

Nor did it do much for my reputation that I was a Christian. Actually, that was Mom's fault. One day, the year before, she had banned the reading of comics. I had come home early from school, run up the stairs, happy and excited, since Dad was still at work.

"Are you hungry?" she said, sitting on a chair in the living room with a book in her lap and looking at me.

"Yes," I said.

She got up and went into the kitchen, where she took a loaf from the bread box.

The rain outside was like stripes in the air. Some stragglers were coming down the road from the bus, heads bowed beneath the hoods of their rain jackets.

"I was looking at some of your comics today," Mom said, cutting a slice of bread. "What *do* you read? I'm aghast."

"Aghast?" I said. "What does that mean?"

She put a slice on the plate in front of me, opened the fridge, and took out some mild, white cheese and margarine.

"What you read is absolutely awful! It's just violence! People shooting one another and laughing! You're too young to read stuff like this."

"But everyone does," I said.

"That's no argument," she said. "It doesn't mean *you* have to."

"But I like it!" I said, spreading the margarine with my knife.

"Yes, that's what's so bad about it!" she said, sitting down. "That kind of magazine gives a terrible view of humanity. Especially of women. Do you understand? I don't want your attitudes to be shaped by that."

"By the killing?"

"For example."

"But it's not meant seriously!" I said.

Mom sighed. "You know Ingunn's writing a university thesis about the violence in comics, don't you?"

"No," I said.

"It's not good for you," she said. "Simple as that. At least you understand. That it's not good for you."

"So am I not allowed?"

"No."

"Eh?"

"It's for your own good," she said.

"I'm not allowed? But Mom, Mom . . . Never?"

"You'll have to read Donald Duck."

"DONALD DUCK?" I yelled. "*No one* reads DONALD DUCK!"

I burst into tears and ran to my room.

Mom followed me, sat on the edge of the bed, and stroked my back.

"You can read books," she said. "That's much better. You can go to the library, you and me and Yngve. To Arendal, once a week. Then you can borrow as many books as you like."

"But I don't want to read books," I said. "I want to read comics!"

"Karl Ove," she said, "my mind is made up."

"But *Dad* reads comics!"

"He's an adult," she said. "It's not the same."

"So no more comics *ever* again?"

"I have to work this evening. But tomorrow we can go to the library," she said, and got up. "Shall we leave it at that?"

I didn't answer, and she left.

She must have stumbled on a comic in the *Kamp* series or *Vi Vinner*, which were about war, in which all the Germans, or Fritz or Sauerkraut or whatever they were called, were killed with a smile on their lips, and the pages were littered with *Donnerwetters* and *Dummkopfs* or whatever they shouted to one another in the heat of battle, or she could have found *Agent X9* or *Serie Spesial*, where most of the women wore bikinis and often not even that. It was just great to see Modesty Blaise undressing, though only when I was alone, normally nudity was incredibly embarrassing. Every time *Agaton Sax* was on children's TV I blushed if Mom and Dad were there because in the intro he was ogling a naked woman through binoculars. Sometimes there was actually some sex in the cartoons or films on TV, and if it took place when I was allowed to watch, it all became unbearable. There we were, the whole family, Mom, Dad, and their two sons watching TV, and then a couple screwed – in the middle of our living room, where did you look?

Oh, that was dreadful.

But I kept the comics in my room; Mom had never so much as cast a glance at them.

Now, out of the blue, I wasn't allowed to read them.

How unfair was that?

I cried, I was incensed, I went to see her again and said she had no right to ban them, knowing that the battle was lost, she had made up her mind, and if I didn't stop protesting she would just tell Dad, after which further resistance would be hopeless.

The comics I had borrowed were returned; the others were thrown away. The next day we went to the library, we were each given a membership card, and then it was done, from this moment on books held sway. Every Wednesday I came down the steps outside Arendal Library with a carrier bag full of books in each hand. I went with Mom and Yngve, who had likewise borrowed vast quantities, then it was back to the car, go home, lie down on my bed, read almost every evening, all Saturday and all Sunday, a pattern broken only by shorter or longer excursions outside, all depending on what was going on, and when the week was up it was back to the library with the two bags of finished books and two new bags. I read all the series they had, I liked Pocomoto best, the little boy who grew up in the Wild West, but also Jan, and the Hardy Boys, of course, and the Bobbsey Twins and Nancy Drew, the Girl Detective. I liked the Famous Five series and I plowed through a series of books about real people, reading about Henry Ford and Thomas Alva Edison, Benjamin Franklin and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, David Livingstone, and Louis Armstrong, always with tears in my eyes over the last pages, because, naturally enough, they all died. I finished the *Vi Var Med* series, about all the known and unknown expeditions of discovery in the world, I read books about sailing ships and space travel, Yngve got me into books by von Däniken, who thought that all the great civilizations had come about as a result of encounters with extraterrestrial creatures, and books about the Apollo program, starting with the astronauts' fighter-plane pasts and their attempts to set speed records. I also read all Dad's old Gyldendal books for boys, of which the one that made the greatest impression was probably *Over Kjølen i Kano*, where a father goes on a camping trip with two boys and sees a great auk everyone thought was extinct. I also read a book about a boy who was picked up by a zeppelin in

England during the years between the wars, I read Jules Verne's many books, my favorites being *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* and *Around the World in Eighty Days*, also one called *The Lottery Ticket* about a poor family in Telemark who won a fortune in a lottery. I read *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers*, *Twenty Years After* and *The Black Tulip*. I read *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, I read *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield*, I read *Nobody's Boy* and *Treasure Island* and *The Children of the New Forest*, which I loved and read again and again as I had been given it and didn't borrow it. I read *Mutiny on the Bounty*, Jack London's books, and books about the sons of Bedouins and turtle hunters, stowaways and race car drivers, I read a series about a Swede who was a drummer boy in the American Civil War, I read books about boys who played soccer and I followed them season after season, and I read the more social-issue-style books that Yngve brought home, about girls who got pregnant and were going to have a baby, or who ended up on Skid Row and started taking drugs, it made no difference to me, I read everything, absolutely everything. At the annual flea market in Hove I found a whole series of the Rocambole books, which I bought and devoured. A series about a girl called Ida was another I read even though there must have been all of fourteen titles. I read all Dad's old copies of *Detektivmagasinet*, and bought books about Knut Gribb, the Oslo detective, when I had enough money. I read about Christopher Columbus and Magellan, about Vasco da Gama and about Amundsen and Nansen. I read *A Thousand and One Nights* and Norwegian folk tales, which Yngve and I were given one Christmas by Grandma and Grandad. I read about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. I read about Robin Hood, Little John, and Maid Marian, I read about Peter Pan and about poor boys who swapped their lives for those of rich men's sons. I read about boys who participated in sabotage operations during the German occupation of Denmark, and about boys who rescued someone from an avalanche. I read about a strange little man who lived on a beach and survived on what he could salvage from shipwrecks, and about young English boys who were cadets on naval vessels and Marco Polo's adventures at the court of Genghis Khan. Book after book, bag after bag, week after week, month after month. From everything I read I learned that you had to have courage, that courage was perhaps the supreme attribute, that you have to be honest and sincere in all your dealings and that you must never let others down. In addition, that you must never give in, never give up, because if you have been resolute, upright, brave, and honest, however lonely it has made you and however alone you stand, in the end you are rewarded. I thought a lot about that, it was one of the thoughts I embraced when I was alone, that one day I would be back here and be someone. That I would be someone big whom everyone in Tybakken would be forced, whether they liked it or not, to admire. It wouldn't come any day soon, I knew that, for it wasn't respect I won when Asgeir made a derogatory comment about me and a girl I liked – I went for him and he simply forced me to the ground, straddled me, and started prodding my chest and cheeks, laughing and jeering. I happened to have a yellow Fox in my mouth and I tried to spit it out at him, to no avail, which was underhanded, everyone knew that, but the sticky yellow mess went all over my face. You smell of piss, you shit, I said to him, and it was true, he did. And, if that wasn't enough, he had two sets of teeth, just like a shark, one row inside the other, and I pointed this repugnant sight out to the crowd milling around, not that it helped, I was on my back, vanquished, utterly powerless. You couldn't get further from the ideals I had acquired through reading – which in fact were also valid among children, there were many of the same concepts of honor, although that precise word was not used, but that was what it was about. I was weak, slow, cowardly; not strong, quick, courageous. What good was it that, unlike them, I had been in contact with the ideals, that I knew them inside out, better than any of them ever would, when I couldn't live up to them? When I cried for no reason? It felt unjust that I, of all people, who knew so much about heroic bravery, should be saddled with such frailties. But then there were books about frailties as well, and one of them carried me on a wave that would last several months.

One autumn I fell ill, during the day I lay in bed and was bored and one morning before going to work Dad brought me some books. He'd had them in the cellar, they were from his childhood in the fifties and I was free to borrow them. A handful had been published by a Christian company and for some reason they were the ones that made the strongest impression on me, one of them indelibly. It was about a boy whose father had died and who stayed at home to look after his sick mother; they lived in poverty and were completely dependent on the boy's efforts to make ends meet. He was confronted by a group, or a gang more like, of boys. Not only did they hound and beat up this boy who was so different from them, they swore and stole as well and the inequity of this gang's successes, in the light of the constant setbacks suffered by the honest, loving, and upright protagonist, was almost impossible to bear. I cried at the unfairness of it, I cried at the evil of it, and the dynamics of a situation whereby good was suppressed and the pressures of injustice were approaching bursting point shook me to the core of my soul and made me decide to become a good person. From then on I would perform good deeds, help where I could, and never do anything wrong. I began to call myself a Christian. I was nine years old, there was no one else in my close vicinity who called himself a Christian, neither Mom nor Dad nor the parents of any of the other kids – apart from Øyvind Sundt's parents, who warned him off Coke and candy and watching TV and going to the cinema – and of course no young people, so it was a fairly solitary undertaking I initiated in Tybakken at the end of the seventies. I began to pray to God last thing at night and first thing in the morning. When, in the autumn, the others gathered to go apple scrumping down in Gamle Tybakken I told them not to go, I told them stealing was wrong. I never said this to all of them at once, I didn't dare, I was well aware of the difference between group reactions, when everyone incited each other to do something or other, and individual reactions, when each person was forced to confront an issue head-on with no hiding place in a deindividuated crowd, so that was what I did, I went to those I knew best, my peers, and said to each one that apple scrumping was wrong, think about it, you don't have to do it. But I didn't want to be alone, so I accompanied them, stopped by the gate, and watched them sneak across the age-old fields in the dusk, walked beside them as they scoffed apples on the way back, their winter jackets bulging with fruit, and if anyone offered me anything I always refused, because dealing was no better than stealing.

When one Easter I made a new friend while visiting my grandparents in Sørbøvåg, I implored him again and again to stop swearing. I can remember how afraid I was that he would disobey my instructions when he came in with me and said hello to Grandma and Grandad, and how many times I had told him to promise not to swear. Afterward he avoided me and I coped with this by thinking that I had done the right thing. I offered my seat to elderly people on the bus, asked if I could carry something for them when they came out of supermarkets, never held on to the back of cars, never broke anything, never fired a slingshot at birds, looked where I walked so as not to tread on ants or beetles, and even when I picked flowers in the spring with Geir or anyone else to give to Mom or Dad, my heart sank at the thought of the lives I was taking.

In winter, after snowfalls, I wanted to help old people shovel it away. On one such day – it was a Monday after school and it had snowed heavily all night – I tried to persuade Geir to come with me to clear someone's drive. It was only by hinting that the old man would probably give us a tip for helping him out that I managed to get Geir to join me. Dad had just bought a new snow shovel, the type called the Sørland shovel, red and shiny, and as he had shoveled our drive that morning I assumed he wouldn't need it any more that day, so I went off with it, side by side with Geir, who was pushing his family's green Sørland shovel in front of him. The house I had chosen was on the bend and, when we rang, the face of the old man opening the door lit up when he realized that we weren't there to throw snowballs at his house, which many did, but to help him clear his drive. It was heavy work but fun; we dug a channel along which we could push the snow, over the edge into the ditch, we tipped it here and it rushed down like mini avalanches. The sky was a leaden gray, the snow so wet that water ran from it if you packed it together. From Torungen we heard the blare of the foghorn. Children raced downhill on sleds or skis, cars going up the hill on their way home from work skidded and spun. It took us an hour to finish the drive. We went to the front door and told the old man, he thanked us, and then he closed the door. Geir sent me an accusatory look.

"Weren't we supposed to get money for this?" he said.

"Ye-es. Actually we were. But it's not my fault he didn't give us any . . ."

"Have we done all this for nothing?"

"Looks like it," I said. "Doesn't matter. Come on, let's go."

He followed me, grumbling. As we reached the road in front of our house I saw Dad standing in the doorway. My heart felt as though it had stopped beating. My stomach contracted and I could hardly breathe. His eyes were wild.

"Now you come here this minute!" he shouted when I was in the drive. I fixed my eyes on the ground over the last few steps.

"Look at me!" he said.

I raised my head.

He slapped my face.

I gasped.

Then he grabbed the lapels of my jacket and pressed me against the wall.

"Did you take my Sørland shovel?" he said. "It's brand new! And it's mine! Don't touch my things! Do you understand? You didn't ask me for permission! I thought it had been stolen!"

I was crying and sobbing so much I barely heard what he said. He grabbed my jacket again, pushed me through the door, and sent me flying into the wall on the other side.

"Don't you ever do that again! Never! Go up to your room and stay there until I tell you otherwise! Have you understood?"

"Yes, Dad," I said.

He slammed his study door and I began to remove my outdoor clothes. My hands were shaking. I took off my mittens and hat, I wriggled out of my boots, then the Puffa pants, then the jacket, then the thick sweater. In my room I lay down on my bed. Everything inside me was red raw. I sobbed and tears streamed down over my pillow as a fearful anger took hold of me, tore me this way and that, I didn't know what to do with it. I hated him and I had to get my revenge. I would get my revenge. He'd soon see. I would crush him. Crush him.

Then it struck me: what would a nice boy do? What would a true Christian do?

He would forgive.

Once the thought was there, a warmth spread through me.

I would forgive him.

It was a big thought.

And it made me a big person.

But only when I was alone. When I was in the same room as him it was as though he swallowed up everything inside me, there was only him left, I couldn't think about anything else.

The first day alone with Dad was to form a pattern for all the other days of the year to follow. Breakfast ready on the table, packed lunch in the fridge, off shopping when I came home, sitting and answering questions while he cooked, interspersed with little jibes followed by the constant *Straighten your back, boy* – sometimes I had to stay there until he had finished, sometimes he could suddenly say, *Off you go*, as though he did actually understand what a torment I found these half-hour sessions where I was supposed to keep him company – then we ate and for the rest of the evening I was alone with Yngve upstairs, or outdoors, while he was either at meetings or working in his study. Once a week we went to Stoa after school to do a big shop. In the evenings he would sometimes watch TV with us. We gave him nothing: we sat stiff-backed, without moving and without speaking. If he asked us something we answered in monosyllables.

Gradually he began to turn away from Yngve and spend more and more time with me. I never dared to be as sullen and tight-lipped as my brother.

But it didn't always work.

His footsteps on the stairs, they were an ominous sign. If I was playing music I kept it down low. If I was reading on my bed I sat up so as not to seem too casual.

Was he coming here?

He was.

The door opened, there he stood.

It was eight o'clock; he hadn't been upstairs since the meal at four.

His eyes took in the room. And stopped at the desk.

"What have you got there?" he said. Came in, lifted the pack of cards. "Shall we play?"

"Yes, if you like," I said, putting down my book.

He sat beside me on the bed.

"I'll teach you a new game," he said. Lifted the pack and threw all the cards around the room.

"Fifty-two-card pick-up, it's called," he said. "Away you go. Pick them up!"

I had thought he really wanted to play cards and was so disappointed he was only messing around and I had to go down on my knees and pick up all the cards while he sat on the bed laughing that I muttered an expletive.

I would never have said it if I had been thinking.

But I hadn't been, and it slipped out.

"Bloomin' heck!" I said. "Why did you do that?"

He stiffened. Grabbed my ear and stood up as he twisted.

"Are you swearing at your own father?" he said, and twisted harder and harder until I burst into tears.

"Now you pick the cards up, boy!" he said, keeping hold of my ear while I bent down and started picking up the cards.

Once it was done he let go and left. When it was time for supper he was in his study and when we went into the kitchen he had prepared everything.

The next day he didn't call me in while he was cooking, as he usually did. A call from the kitchen only came when the food was ready. We sat down, helped ourselves without a word, whale steak with gravy and onions and potatoes, we ate in total silence, thanked him, and left the table. Dad washed up, ate an orange in the living room, I could tell by the aroma, and drank a cup of coffee, I could hear from the hiss of the coffeepot, went down to his study, where he played some music before putting on his coat, going to the car, and driving off.

As the drone of the car faded down the hill, I opened the door and went into the living room. Draped myself over the brown leather chair and put my feet on the table. Got up, went into the kitchen, opened the fridge, and looked inside: two plates of sandwiches, ready-made, that was our supper. Opened the cupboard next to it, took out the box of raisins, filled my hand, and tossed them into my mouth with one hand while flattening the level of the raisins in the box with the other. Munching, I walked into the living room and switched on the TV. At half past six there was a repeat of *Blindpassasjer*. It was a series about a spaceship, unbelievably scary, broadcast on Friday night, and we weren't allowed to watch, but neither Mom nor Dad knew anything about the repeats, which, to our great good fortune, were on when they weren't here.

Yngve came in and reclined on the sofa.

"What are you eating?" he said.

"Raisins," I said.

"I want some, too," he said.

"Don't take too many," I said as he got up, "or Dad'll notice."

"All right," Yngve said. He opened the cupboard door.

"Do you want some almonds as well?" he called.

"Yes, please," I said. "But not many."

The streetlamp outside shone orange in the darkness. The pavement beneath glistened the same color. And some of the spruce tree behind it. But the forest behind that was as dark as the grave. From the steepest part of the hill came the whine of a moped.

"There you go," Yngve said, releasing some almonds into my palm. I could clearly recognize his odor. It was acrid yet faint, almost metallic. Not his sweat, that smelled different, but his skin. It smelled of metal. When we wrestled I could smell it, when he tickled me I could smell it, and sometimes when he was lying down and reading, for example, I could put my nose to his arm and breathe in the smell. I loved him, I loved Yngve.

Five minutes before *Blindpassasjer* started, Yngve got up.

"Let's lock the front door," he said. "And then let's switch off all the lights to make it scary."

"No!" I said. "Don't do that!"

Yngve laughed.

"Are you scared already?"

I got up and stood in his way. He fastened his arms around me, lifted me up, and sat me back down and continued toward the stairs.

"Don't!" I said. "Please!"

He laughed again.

"I'm going downstairs now to lock the door," he said from the stairs.

I ran after him.

"I mean it, Yngve," I said.

"I know you do," he said. Locked the door and stood by it. "But I'm in charge when we're on our own."

He switched off the light.

In the murk, illuminated only by the light from the adjacent room, there was something satanic about his smile. I ran upstairs and sat in the chair. Listened to him switching off light after light. The hall, the lamp over the living-room table, the ceiling lamp in the kitchen. Then the four small wall lamps above the sofa and, finally, the lamp on top of the television. Apart from the faint shimmer from the outside lamp and the blue flickering glow from the screen it was completely dark when the episode began. It was scary right from the opening scene, a man was standing and swinging a scythe somewhere, and then he turned, and his face wasn't a face but a mask. I felt a tingle at the very tips of my fingers and toes and my innards were taut with fear. But I watched, I had to watch. When it was over, half an hour later, Yngve got up behind me.

"Don't say anything," I pleaded. "Don't do anything!"

"Do you know what, Karl Ove?" he said.

"Oh, no!" I said.

"I'm not who you think I am," he said, coming toward me.

"Yes, you are!" I said.

"I'm not Yngve," he said. "I am another."

"No, you're not!" I said. "You're Yngve! Tell me you're Yngve."

"I'm a cyborg," he said. "And this . . ." He stretched out his hand and lifted his sweater. "This is not flesh and blood. This is metal and cables. It looks like flesh and blood, but it isn't. I am not a human being."

"Yes, you are!" I said, starting to cry. "You are Yngve! Yngve! Say you're Yngve!"

"Now you will come down to the cellar with me," he said. "Heh heh heh . . ."

"YNGVE!" I screamed.

He smiled at me.

"I'm only joking," he said. "You didn't seriously think I was a cyborg, did you?"

"Don't do that," I said. "Switch the light on right now."

He took a step toward me.

"NO!" I shouted.

"Okay, okay," he laughed. "Let's switch on the light then. Shall we eat now or what? Are you hungry?"

"Switch on the light first," I said.

He switched on the wall lights and the lamp on the TV, where the news had already started. Then we went into the kitchen and had our supper. Yngve made us some tea, which was fine as long as we made sure to clear up after us, it must have been inconceivable for Dad that we could actually use the stove and boil water when he wasn't here. Afterward we unpacked our soccer game on the living-room table, with the door to his room open and my favorite Queen record – *A Night at the Opera* – playing.

When we heard Dad's car outside we hurriedly cleared the table and went into our separate rooms. Sometimes he summoned Yngve if we had been alone and asked what we had been doing and how it had been, but this evening he walked straight into the living room and sat down in front of the television.

It was actually a relief that he kept his distance the way he did, but there was more to it than that, I had a sense he didn't want things to be like this, it was as though the air in the house was weighed down with this feeling, a demand no one could fulfill.

When he came up to us next time it was dreadful. I had been under the weather, I had a cold and a temperature that had risen dramatically in the last hour, and I was sitting in Yngve's bed, leaning against the wall and reading one of his magazines. He was doing his homework at the desk, and the Boomtown Rats were playing on the turntable.

Bang, the door opened, and there was Dad looking at us.

He was in a good mood, his eyes beaming with energy.

"You're playing music," he said. "It sounds good. What's their name?"

"The Boomtown Rats," Yngve said.

Dad translated the name into Norwegian. "Do you remember how you laughed when I said Crystal Palace was Krystallpalasset? You didn't believe me!"

He smiled and came into the room.

"Do you like the music, too, Karl Ove?" he said.

I nodded.

"Come on. Let's dance," he said.

"I'm sick, Dad. I think I've got a temperature. I don't feel like it."

"Course you do," Dad said, grabbing my hands, dragging me to my feet, and swinging me round.

"Stop it, Dad!" I said. "I'm sick! I don't want to dance!"

But he carried on, swung me round, faster and faster, wilder and wilder. It was unbearable and I was on the point of throwing up.

"PACK IT IN, DAD!" I shouted in the end. "PACK IT IN!"

He stopped as quickly as he had started, threw me down on the bed, and left.

Every Friday Mom came home, I would always be close at hand so that I could be with her first because if I was first Dad couldn't send me to my room, which he could do if they were sitting and talking. By the time she left again on Sunday night or Monday morning it was as if Dad had come closer to us, or at least me, for again he called me to the kitchen to tell him what had happened during the day while he cooked. We ate in silence and after doing the dishes he disappeared down to his study without fail. Occasionally he came to watch TV with us, but usually he was downstairs until supper, and so it was as if Yngve and I were on our own at home. Not that I spent my time much differently from how I would have done if he hadn't been there. Mostly I lay on my bed reading. As Mom no longer drove us regularly to the library, and I had read all the books in the school library, I started on Mom and Dad's shelves. I read Agatha Christie and I read Stendhal, *Le Rouge et Le Noir*, I read a book of French short stories, I read a book by Jon Michelet and a biography of Tolstoy. I started writing a book myself, it was going to be about a sailing ship, but after I had written the first ten pages, which consisted largely of listing all the people on board, what kinds of provisions they had, and what cargo they were carrying, Yngve said no one wrote books about sailing ships nowadays, they did when sailing ships existed, now people write about what it's like to be alive today, and so I stopped. I also compiled a newspaper that autumn, in triplicate, which I put in three mailboxes, one for Karlsen, one for Gustavsen, and one for Prestbakmo, but I never heard any more, they just seemed to disappear into a void, as if they had never existed.

I lived one life indoors and another outdoors, as it had always been and as I suppose it was for all children; in front of the TV on Saturday night, surrounded by their parents and brothers and sisters, they were probably very different, much gentler and more accepting than when I saw them down in the forest, where freedom was total and nothing prevented them from following their smallest inclinations. The difference was particularly pronounced in the autumn. In the spring and summer so much of life was lived outdoors, the degree of contact between a child's life and an adult's life was changed, but when autumn came and the nights drew in so early it was as if the ties were cut and we slipped into our own worlds as soon as the front door closed behind us. The brief, dark, cold evenings were laden with all the excitement that exists in the unseen and the hidden. The autumn was darkness, earth, water, and hollow spaces. It was breathing, laughter, torchlight, dens, bonfires, and a flock of children drifting here and there. And not least the bedrooms afterward. Even though I never got permission to have anyone at home and none of the kids on the estate had ever been to my bedroom, I was always allowed to go to theirs. To some occasionally, to others often. That autumn it was the turn of Dag Lothar's bedroom. Red-faced after running through the darkness, we would sit in his room and play Monopoly while listening to one of his two Beatles albums, the red one or the blue one, on the cassette recorder. I liked the red one better, with their first songs, they were simple and happy, we would sing along loudly with the chorus, almost shouting, in English, not bothering too much about the semantics, only the sound, although the blue one was played more and more as we began to enjoy the somber, more unfamiliar tunes on it.

These evenings are among the happiest in my life. It is strange because there was nothing exceptional about them, we did what all young people did, sat playing games, listening to music, chattering away about whatever came into our heads.

But I liked the smell in their house, I liked being there. I liked the darkness we had just come from, which lent everything an unaccustomed quality, especially when it was damp and you could feel it in your whole body, not only see it with your eyes. I liked the light from the streetlamps. I liked the atmosphere that arose when there were lots of us together, the voices in the night, the bodies moving around me. I liked the sound of the foghorn from the open sea. My thinking on these evenings: anything can happen. I liked just dashing around, coming across the unexpected – objects, features, situations. The huts that had been erected in the forest above the pontoons, they were empty in the evening, the windows were lit, and we peered in. Were those porn mags lying there? Yes, they were. No one dared to smash a window and go in and take them, but now all of a sudden it was a possibility, and we knew someone would do it soon, perhaps even we would. This was a time when one morning there could be a centerfold from a porn magazine lying in the road outside the house. This was a time when you could find porn mags in the ditches, in fields, and under bridges. Who had left them there we had no idea, they were scattered as if by God's hand, a part of nature, like wood anemones, catkins, swollen streams, or rain-smooth rocks. And the elements marked them, too: they were either spongy with moisture or bone dry or the paper had cracked after having dried out again, often they were sun-faded, soil-stained, and discolored.

A thrill went through me when I thought about the magazines. It had nothing to do with the way we talked about them, we talked tough, we laughed and ogled them greedily, but the thrill lay somewhere else, so deep that rational thought never reached it.

There were many young guys on the estate you could imagine would have pornographic magazines at home, and they were without exception the same ones you could imagine buying a moped when the time came, starting to smoke and playing hooky from school, in short, the ones who hung out at the Fina station. The bad boys. So within me there were two incompatible entities. The magazines belonged to the bad, but what they filled me with, the intense thrill that forced me to gulp again and again, was also something I desired with a wild urgency. I went weak at the knees when I got to see one of the naked women. It was fantastic, it was terrible, it was the world opening and hell revealing itself, the light shining and the darkness falling, we just wanted to stand there flicking through the pages, we could have stood there for all eternity, beneath the heavy boughs of the spruce trees, with the aroma of damp earth and wet mountain, leering at the pictures. It was as though these women rose from the bog, straight up from the autumn-yellow grass, or at least were closely related to it. Parts of the pictures were often obliterated, but we saw enough of both the soft and the hard to know with certainty that these feelings existed and never left us, and every rumor of the existence of a magazine was always followed up at once.

Geir was one of the keenest in this regard. Already in the second class he had borrowed a copy of his father's *Vi Menn* and we sat down in the forest to study the topless women while, to ward off any suspicions, we talked in high-pitched voices about what Donald and Dolly were doing as though we were reading cartoon strips.

Now there were porn mags in the huts.

We circled them, but the doors were locked and we didn't have the nerve to smash the glass, undo the catch on the windows, and steal the magazines.

But the desire was aroused and it cast around in other directions. The clumps of trees around the car wreck in the forest?

The ditch behind the bus stop by B-Max?

The trees under the bridge?

The garbage dump, but of course! There had to be some there, didn't there? Hundreds? Thousands?

Sunday morning, the end of September, Dad fishing in his boat, Mom in the living room, Yngve on his bike somewhere on the east of the island, and me out of the door and across the wet gravel, wearing my beige jacket and my blue jeans, on my way up to Geir's, butterflies in my stomach, we were finally going to the garbage dump. The sun was shining, but it had rained early in the morning and the pavement was still black and wet in those places the sun didn't reach, such as in the shade under the spruce trees outside our house.

Geir was standing outside, ready, when I arrived, and we sprinted off. Up the hill, over the long plain where there were boats under tarpaulins in front gardens, mostly plastic boats but also some small dinghies, and one cabin cruiser, renowned far and wide. The lawns were brown, the trees behind the houses orange and red, the sky was blue. We had taken off our jackets and knotted them around our waists. Walked up past Ketil's house, onto the gravel road and through the gate that marked the end of the road and the start of the path. On the other side of the field was the new parish hall, where Ten Sing, with all the blond girls, rehearsed and had their meetings.

The stream alongside the path was full, cool green water, flowing lazily down the gentle slope. It got its color from the heather, the grass, and the plants the water flowed and lay across. Only minor ripples on the surface revealed that it was moving. Where the hill became steeper and the stream fell with a roar we began to run. The white stones littering the path were a matte gray in the shadow, a gleaming yellow in the sun. Ahead of us someone was walking uphill and we slowed down. It was an elderly couple. She had gray hair and a cardigan; he had a cord jacket with leather patches on the elbows and a cane in his hand. His mouth was open and his jaw trembled.

We turned and looked after them.

"That was Thommesen, that was," Geir said.

We hadn't seen him since he had us in the second class.

"I thought he'd died ages ago!" I said.

We took the old shortcut through the forest and emerged on the edge above the garbage dump. The mountain of white plastic bags and black garbage bags glinted in the full sun. A dozen or so seagulls were screaming and flapping their wings. We clambered down the slope and wove our way between all the objects, which in some places were stacked high, perhaps four times higher than us, and in others lay strewn about with nothing on top. We were looking for bags and cardboard boxes, and there was no shortage of them, also containing magazines, weeklies that the elderly read: *Hjemmet* and *Allers* and *Norsk Ukeblad*, weeklies for girls: *Starlet* and *Det Nye* and *Romantikk*, piles of newspapers, mostly *Verdens Gang* and *Agderposten*, but also *Vårt Land* and *Aftenposten* and *Dagbladet*; we found *A-Magasinet* and *Kvinner og Klær*, horsey magazines for girls, Donald Duck comics and a fat Fantomet album from the late sixties that I immediately put to one side, a Tempo album as well, some Kaptein Miki comics, and one Agent X9 paperback, which I was pretty pleased with, but it didn't alter the fact that what we were searching for, that is, magazines like *Alle Menn*, *Lek*, *Coctail*, and *Aktuell Report*, and perhaps even a few foreign magazines, because there were quite a few Danish ones in circulation, one called *Weekend Sex*, for example, and some Swedish and English ones, was nowhere to be found. We didn't find a single porn magazine! What was going on? Had someone beaten us to it? They had to be here!

After an hour's searching we gave up and flopped down in the heather to read the normal magazines we had found. Perhaps because I'd had my mind set on something quite different and had felt the expectation all day, I wasn't really happy about just sitting there. Something was missing, and I got up, paced between the trees, looked down at the stream, perhaps a wade in the water was the answer?

"Want to go for a wade?" I called.

"Sure. Just got to read this first," Geir said without looking up from his magazine.

I went over to the two bags of bottles we had found. Most of them were the long, brown ones with the yellow Arendals Bryggeri label, but there was also the odd dumpy, green Heineken bottle. I took one of them out. There was a bit of earth and grass stuck to the outside, and I wondered if it had been lying on the edge of a lawn for a while and had been picked up when the garden was being prepared for winter.

The lust was still there in my stomach.

I rotated the bottle in my hand. The dark-green glass lit up in the sun.

"Do you think it's possible to stick your willy in this?" I said.

Geir rested the magazine on his lap.

"Ye-eah," he said. "If the neck's not too narrow. Are you going to try?"

"Sure," I said. "Are you?"

He got up and came over. Took a bottle.

"Think anyone can see us here?" he said.

"No, are you crazy?" I said. "We're in the middle of the forest. But we could move over there, to be on the safe side."

We walked toward the trunk of a large pine tree. I undid my belt and dropped my trousers to my knees, took out my willy with one hand, and held the bottle in the other. I pressed my willy into the top, the glass neck was cold and hard against my soft, warm skin, and actually too narrow, but with a bit of humping and pumping and wriggling, it slipped inside. A tingle ran down my back as my willy throbbed and the bottle seemed to tighten around it, harder and harder.

"I can't get it in," Geir said. "It won't go."

"I've done it!" I said. "Look!"

I turned to him.

"But I can't budge it," I said. "There's no room. It's stuck!"

To show how stuck it was, I let go of the bottle. It hung between my legs.

"Ha ha ha," Geir laughed.

I was about to pull my willy out when I felt a sharp pain shoot up.

"Ow. Ow, ow, ow, shit!"

"What's the matter?" Geir said.

"Ow! Ow! Oh, FUCK!"

It was a stabbing pain, as if from a knife or a jagged piece of glass. I pulled as hard as I could and got my willy out of the bottle.

On the tip of it there was a black beetle.

"OH! FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!" I howled. I gripped the beetle or whatever it was, it was black with big claws, pulled it off, and hurled it as far as I could, while running back and forth waving my arms.

"What's the matter?" Geir said. "What's the matter? What's the matter, Karl Ove?"

"A beetle. It was biting my willy!"

At first he stared at me, slack-jawed. Then he burst into laughter. It was exactly his kind of humor. He rolled around in the heather laughing.

"Don't tell anyone!" I said, doing up my belt. "Have you got that?"

"Yeah-heh-heh-heh!" Geir said. "Ha ha ha ha!"

Three times I made him promise he wouldn't tell anyone as we walked uphill, each carrying a bag and with the sun beating down on our necks. I also said a short prayer to apologize for my swearing.

"Should we go down and get the deposit on the bottles at Fina now?" Geir said.

"Do they take beer bottles there?" I said.

"Oh, that's right," Geir said. "We'd better hide them then."

We walked back across the field, jumped over the stream, and there, on the other side, in a clump of trees below the chapel, we left the bags of bottles. Pulled up some ferns and tufts of grass and covered them as well as we were able, glanced around to make sure no one was nearby, then calmly moved away, knowing that if you ran you drew attention to yourself, up the road next to the chapel, which we then started to follow.

Outside the cellar door of the house where he lived stood Ketil, his bike turned upside down in front of him. He was revolving the rear wheel with a pedal in one hand while lubricating the chain with a small plastic bottle of oil he was holding in the other. His smooth, black hair hung down in front of his face.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," we said.

"Where've you been?"

"To the dump."

"What were you doing there?"

"Searching for porn mags," Geir said. I sent him a glare. What was he doing? This was a secret!

"Did you find any?" Ketil said, smiling at us.

Geir shook his head.

"I've got a pile of them in my room," he said. "Would you like to borrow them?"

"Oh yes!" Geir said.

"Is that true?" I said.

He nodded.

"Do you want them now?"

"I've got to go home and eat," I said.

"Me, too," Geir said. "But we can take them with us and hide them in the forest."

Ketil shook his head.

"No chance. Then they'd be ruined. You'll have to take them home. But that's okay. I can bring them over this afternoon."

"That's great. But then we'll have to meet you outside. No ringing the bell. Agreed?"

"Oh?" he said, smiling with narrowed eyes. "Are you frightened I'll show the mags to your dad, or what?"

"No, but . . . he asks a lot of questions. And you haven't been there before."

"Fine," he said. "Be outside at five and I'll be there. Okay?"

"That's when the soccer's on," I said.

"Six then. And don't tell me you want to watch children's TV!"

"Okay. Six."

Mom was sitting in the kitchen reading a book with the radio on and rice boiling on the stove. The whole of one side of the pan was white with milk and in the area between the hotplates there was also milk and rice, almost dried up from the heat, so I could see it had boiled over.

"Hi," I said.

She put the book down.

"Hi," she said. "Where have you been?"

"Mm," I said. "Around and about. We found some bottles and we're going to get the money back on Monday."

"Nice," she said.

"Are you going to make pizza this evening?" I said.

She smiled.

"That's what I'd planned."

"Great!" I said.

"Have you started the book you got?"

I nodded.

"I started yesterday. It seems really good. I'm going to go to my room and read some now in fact."

"You do that," she said. "Food'll be ready in a quarter of an hour."

She always brought something when she came on Fridays, and this time it had been a book. *A Wizard of Earthsea*, written by someone called Ursula K. Le Guin, and already after the first few pages I knew that this was an absolutely fantastic book. Yet I didn't settle down with the book without some hesitation, because Mom was at home and I wanted to be with her as much as possible. On the other hand, she was here and almost all the qualities her presence brought to my life were in place, not least the fact that Dad never did anything awful when she was here, never had one of his furious outbursts, always controlled himself, even though I was lying on my bed and she was in the kitchen.

I watched the English Football League match with Yngve and Dad. He had bought toffees as usual, and both Yngve and I had been given a pools coupon with eight rows of twelve matches each. I got five correct results, which the others laughed at because that was less than half and I might just as well have rolled a dice. Dad said it was as hard to get five as it was ten. But whereas those who got ten right were sent money by Norsk Tipping, those who got five had to pay money to them, he said. Yngve got seven right and Dad got ten, but unfortunately this time there was no payout for ten.

By the time all the results were in it was two minutes to six. Outside, Ketil came whizzing down the hill on his bike with a bulging plastic bag strapped to the luggage rack. I jumped up and said I had to go.

"What are you going to do now?" Dad said. "Children's TV is starting."

"I'm not in the mood for it," I said. "And I'm meeting Geir."

"Meeting, eh?" Dad said. "Well, that's fine. Just make sure you're back home by eight."

"Are you going out?" Mom said from the doorway. "And here I was thinking you could help me make the pizza."

"I'd love to, but I've arranged to meet someone," I said.

"Our son has started making arrangements," Dad said. "Are you sure it's Geir? Not a little sweetheart?"

"Yes, I'm absolutely sure about that," I said.

"Be back home by eight then," Mom said.

Dad stood up.

"Soon we'll be all alone in the evenings, Sissel," he said, hauling his trousers up by the belt loops and running a hand through his hair. I was already on my way down the landing and didn't hear what she answered. My throat was thick with excitement, my whole body tingling. In the hallway, I put on my sneakers – if we were lucky the forest would be dry now – the blue sweater, and the blue quilted vest Mom had made for me, opened the door, and rushed out to meet Ketil, who was sitting on his bike with one foot on the pedal and one on the ground, and Geir, who was standing next to him. Both glanced toward me.

"Let's go to the boathouse," I said. "No one will see us there."

"Okay," Ketil said. "I'll cycle round. See you down there."

Geir and I ran down the slope and onto the path, jumped over the stream, and scurried down the hill, which seemed to vibrate beneath our feet, crossed the field, the gravel road, and only slowed down when we reached the grassy incline at the same time as Ketil hove into view at the top of the hill, beside the old, white house.

Ketil was two years older than us and kept himself very much to himself, at least that was how it appeared to us. The high cheekbones, the narrow eyes, and the gleaming, black hair made him look like an Indian and caused a stir among the girls. It wasn't long since that had started. From one day to the next Ketil became the one they talked about and looked at, suddenly you heard his name all over the place, and the strange thing about this was not the way that he suddenly existed now, having existed before in a kind of vale of shadows, but that there was a certain pride in the girls who talked about him and eyed him, as if *they* were the ones who became interesting by making such an unexpected selection, almost more interesting than he was. For he just carried on with his life, cycling round, one day here, one day there, invariably alone, and always friendly to us.

He kicked down the stand on his bike, an orange DBS racer with drop handlebars and the tape hanging off one end, lifted the spring flap on the luggage rack, took the bag, and strolled over to where we were lying in the grass, each with a sprig of grass in our mouths.

"It's porn time!" he said, grabbing the bag from the bottom and spilling the magazines over the grass.

The sun was low in the sky over the ridge behind us, and his shadow stretched a long way across the ground. From the islet in the bay came the sound of screeching gulls. Feeling weak all over, I took a magazine and rolled onto my stomach. Even though I looked at the pictures one at a time, and focused on one part, such as the breasts, which I only needed to catch a glimpse of to feel an electric shock of excitement shoot through me, or such as the legs and the wild thrill aroused by the sight of the slit between them, more or less open, more or less pink and glistening, often accompanied by a finger or two nearby, or near the mouth, which was often open, often contorted into a grimace, or such as the buttocks, sometimes so wonderfully round that I couldn't lie still, this wasn't about the parts in themselves, this was more like bathing in the totality, a kind of sea in which there was no beginning and no end, a sea in which, from the first moment, from the first picture, you always found yourself in the middle.

"Can you see a big mons anywhere, Geir?" I said.

He shook his head. "But there's one here with enormous tits. Do you want to see?"

I nodded, and he held up the magazine for me.

Ketil sat some meters from us, with his legs crossed and a magazine in his hands. But after only a few minutes he threw it down and got to his feet.

"I've looked at them so many times," he said. "I'll have to get some new ones."

"Where did you get them?" I said, gazing up at him and shielding my eyes from the sun.

"I bought them."

"BOUGHT THEM?" I said.

"Yes."

"But they're old, aren't they?"

"They're used, you chump. There's a hairdressing salon in town that also sells old magazines. They've got loads of porn mags."

"Are *you* allowed to buy them?"

"Obviously," he said.

I stared at him for a few seconds. Was he pulling my leg?

Didn't look like it.

I flicked through. There were photos of two girls on a tennis court. They wore short skirts, one light blue, the other white, white shirts, a sweat band over their wrists, white socks, and white sneakers. Each was holding a racket. Surely they weren't going to . . . ?

I flicked on.

One was lying on the grass and had opened her shirt so you could see her breasts. Her head was back. Was she wearing any panties?

Nope.

Soon they were both naked, on their knees by the net, with their bottoms in the air. It was fantastic. Fantastic. Fantastic.

"Look, Geir," I said. "Two playing tennis!"

He glanced at me and nodded, too absorbed in his own pictures to waste any time.

Ketil had walked down to the old, tumbledown pontoon, where he stood skimming stones he must have found on the beach nearby. The water was like a mirror, and every time a stone hit the water, small circular ripples spread outward.

I had flicked through three or four magazines when he reappeared in front of us. I looked up at him.

"It feels good to lie on your stomach and read them," I said.

"Ha ha ha! So you like rubbing yourself?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"I can imagine," he said. "But I've got to be off now. Keep the mags if you like. I'm sick of them."

"Can we *have* them?" Geir said.

"Be my guest."

He kicked the bike stand, raised a hand to say goodbye, and set off up the hill with one hand in the middle of the handlebars. It looked as if he were leading an animal.

It was so obvious to us both that Geir would have to hide the magazines in his room that we didn't even talk about it when we parted outside my house an hour later.

Mom's pizzas had thick bases that rose around the edges, making the filling of minced meat, tomato, onions, mushrooms, peppers, and cheese look like a plain surrounded by long ranges of mountains on all sides. We were sitting at the living-room table, as always on Saturday evenings. We had never eaten in front of the television; that belonged to the realm of the unimaginable. Dad cut a piece for me and put it on my plate, I poured myself a glass of Coke from the liter bottle where the words "Coca-Cola" were printed in white on the greenish glass, not on a red label, which you also saw. Pepsi-Cola wasn't sold in Sørland, I had drunk it only at the Norway Cup, and apart from the Metro and the breakfast where we could help ourselves to as many bowls of cornflakes as we wanted, that had been one of the tournament's biggest attractions.

When the pizza was finished, Dad asked if we felt like playing a new game.

We did.

Mom cleared the table; Dad fetched a pad of paper and four pens from his study.

"Would you like to join in, Sissel?" he shouted to Mom, who had started washing up.

"Love to," Mom said, and joined us. She had soap lather on one arm and her temple. "What are we going to play? Yahtzee?"

"No," Dad said. "We each have a piece of paper and we write down six headings: country, town, river, sea, lake, and mountain. One column for each. Then we choose a letter and the idea of the game is to jot down as many names as we can that begin with the respective letter in three minutes."

We hadn't played this one before. But it seemed like fun.

"Is there a prize?" Yngve said.

Dad smiled.

"Only the honor. Whoever wins becomes the family champion."

"You start," Mom said. "I'll put some tea on for us."

"We can do a trial run," Dad said. "Then we can actually play when you're back."

He looked at us.

"*M*," he said. "So, the letter *M*. Are you with me?"

"Yes," Yngve said, and was already writing, with one arm shielding his work.

"Yes," I said.

Mont Blanc, I wrote under mountain. *Mandal*, *Morristown*, *Mjøndalen*, *Molde*, *Malmö*, *Metropolis*, and *Munich* under town. I couldn't think of any seas, or rivers. Next was countries. Were there any countries beginning with an M? I went through all the countries I could think of. But no. Moelven. Was that a river? Mo in Rana, that was a town anyway. Midwest? Oh, right, Mississippi!

"Time's up," Dad said.

A quick glance at their pieces of paper was enough to confirm that they had beaten me.

"You read yours out, Karl Ove," Dad said.

When I got to Morristown both Dad and Yngve were laughing.

"Don't laugh at me!" I said.

"Morristown only exists in *The Phantom*," Yngve said. "Did you think it really existed?"

"Sure. And why not? Sala works in the UN building in New York, and that exists, doesn't it? Why shouldn't Morristown?"

"Good answer, Karl Ove," Dad said. "You get half a point for that."

I made a face at Yngve, who smirked back.

"Tea's ready," Mom said. We went into the kitchen and took a cup. I added milk and sugar.

"Okay, let's play properly now," Dad said. "We'll do three letters. That's probably as much as we can manage before bedtime."

Mom knew almost as few names as I did, it turned out. Or else she wasn't concentrating as much as Yngve or Dad. However, it was good for me; it was the two of us against them.

After Dad had counted the points from the first round, Mom said she had changed her name.

"I've gone back to my old maiden name. So now I'm Hatløy and not Knausgaard anymore."

My blood ran cold.

"You're not called Knausgaard anymore?" I said, staring at her with my mouth open. "But you're our mother!"

She smiled.

"Yes, of course I am! I always will be!"

"But why? Why aren't you going to have the same name as us?"

"I was born Sissel Hatløy, as you know. That's my name. Knausgaard is Dad's name. And your names!"

"Are you getting divorced?"

Mom and Dad smiled.

"No, we're not getting divorced," Mom said. "We're just going to have different names."

"But a rather stupid consequence of this," Dad said, "is that we can't meet Grandma and Grandad for a while. My parents don't like your mother changing her name, so they don't want to see us anymore."

I gaped at him.

"What about at Christmas?" I said.

Dad shook his head.

I started crying.

"This is nothing to cry about, Karl Ove," Dad said. "It'll pass. They're just angry now. And then it'll pass."

I scraped my chair back, got up, and ran to my room. After closing my door I heard someone follow. I lay down on the bed and bored my head into the pillow while sobbing loudly with tears flowing as they had never flowed before.

"But, Karl Ove," Dad said behind me. He sat on the edge of the bed. "Don't get so upset. Is it that much fun with Grandma and Grandad?"

"Yes!" I shouted into the pillow. My whole body was contorted in convulsive sobs.

"But if they don't want to see your own mother. It's not much fun seeing them then, is it? Surely you understand, don't you? They don't want to see us."

"Why should she change her name?" I shouted.

"It's her real name," Dad said. "It's what she wants. And neither you nor I nor Grandma nor Grandad can deny her that right. Can we?"

He placed his hand on my shoulder for a fleeting moment. Then he stood up and left the room.

When the tears had dried up I picked up the book Mom had bought me and carried on reading. At the back of my mind I was aware that Yngve had gone to bed, that the sliding door was closed, that they were playing music in the living room, but without a scrap of it sticking. From the first sentence I plunged headlong into the story and fell deeper and deeper. The main character was Ged, a boy who lived on an island and had special gifts, and when this was discovered he was sent to a school for wizards. There it came out that his gifts were extra-special, and once when he had to perform for the others, in an act of excessive arrogance, he opened the door to the other world, the underworld, the kingdom of death, and a shadow stole out. Ged was dying, he was weak, with failing powers, for many years afterward, marked for life, and the shadow pursued him. He fled from it, hid in some obscure place somewhere in the world, abandoned all his ambitions knowing that what he had done, the simple wizardry tricks, was just empty gestures and pretense, that there was another, a more profound kind of magic woven into all existence, and it was to maintain the balance here that was a wizard's real responsibility. All objects and all creatures had names corresponding to their essence, and only by knowing the objects' and creatures' real names could they be controlled. Ged could do that, but he didn't reveal that he could, because every spell, every act of wizardry, affected the balance, something else could happen somewhere else, which could not be foreseen. The villagers where he had settled thought therefore that he was a poor wizard; after all he wouldn't perform even the simplest tricks with which every village wizard plied his trade. He was young, serious, there was a large scar across his face, he was sensitive to cold, but when the chips were down, when he really had to use his gifts, he did. Once there was a child dying. He followed it into the kingdom of death and brought it back, even though he shouldn't have, even though it was dangerous, for if there was one balance that should not be upset, it was that between life and death. But he did it and almost died in the process. The villagers saw for the first time who he was. And the shadow that he had released from beyond, who all this time had been flitting around the world after him, saw him, because whenever he used his powers, it noticed and came closer. He had to leave. And he did, in a boat on the sea between islands to the farthest shore. The shadow came closer and closer. After several confrontations, with Ged near to death, came the final showdown. All the while he had been trying to find the name of the shadow. He had scoured reference works about creatures from the oldest times, asked other, more intelligent wizards, but in vain, the creature was unknown, nameless. Then he knew. On the sea, alone in a boat, with the shadow getting closer and closer, he knew. The shadow was called Ged. The shadow had his name. The shadow was himself.

When I turned off the light, after reading the last page, it was nearly twelve o'clock and my eyes were full of tears.

He was the shadow!

At least once, often twice a week during that autumn and winter I was on my own in the house. Dad was at meetings, Yngve was at rehearsals with the school band or training with the volleyball or soccer teams, or at his friends' houses. I liked being at home on my own, it was a wonderful feeling not to have someone telling me what to do, yet I didn't like it that much either because the nights were drawing in and the reflection from the windows, of my figure wandering around, was extremely unpleasant to see, it smacked of death and the dead.

I knew this was not how it was, but what good did this knowledge do?

It was especially spooky when I was engrossed in what I was reading because it was as if I wasn't attached *anywhere* when I lifted my head from my page and got up. All alone, that was the feeling I had, I was absolutely alone, isolated by the darkness that rose like a wall outside.

Oh, I could always run the bath if I had enough time before Dad returned, he didn't like me having a bath at all hours, once a week he felt was enough and he kept a beady eye on this, like everything else I did. But if I took a liberty now and ran the bath, got in, switched on my cassette recorder, and let the hot water wash over my body, I could see myself from the outside, my mouth *agape*, as it were, as though my head were a skull. I sang, the voice rebounded, I submerged my head and was terrified: I couldn't see anything! Someone could sneak up on me! Was anyone there? The two, three, four seconds I had been underwater represented a hole in time, and someone might have snuck in through that hole. Perhaps not into the bathroom, no, there was no one there, but they could have snuck into the house.

The best I could do in this situation was to switch off the kitchen light, or my bedroom light, and look out because outside, when there was no reflection from the windows, there were the other houses, there were the other families, and sometimes the other children, too. Nothing made you feel more secure than that.

On one such evening I was kneeling on a kitchen stool in the darkness and staring out, it was snowing and a gale was blowing. The wind was howling across the landscape, rushing down the chimney, and the roof gutters were rattling. It was pitch black outside, under the yellow glow from the streetlamps, there wasn't a soul, only gusting snow.

A car drove up. It turned into Nordåsen Ringvei, coming toward our house. Was it coming here?

It was. It came into our drive and parked.

Who could it be?

I ran out of the kitchen, down the stairs, and onto the porch.

There I stopped.

Surely no one was coming to visit us?

Who could it be?

I was frightened.

Went to the door and pressed my nose against the wavy glass. I didn't need to open the door; I could stand there and see if I recognized the late-night visitor.

The car door opened and a figure *fell* out!

The figure was moving *on all fours*!

Oh no! Oh no!

Swaying from side to side like a bear, it came toward me. It stopped by the bell and rose onto two legs!

I backed away.

What sort of creature was this?

Ding dong, the bell went.

The figure dropped to all fours again.

The abominable snowman? Lightfoot?

But here? In Tybakken?

The figure raised itself again, rang the bell, and fell back onto all fours.

My heart was pounding.

But then it hit me.

Oh, of course.

It was the local councilman, the one who was paralyzed.

It had to be.

The abominable snowman didn't drive a car.

I opened the door as the figure was starting to crawl away. It turned.

It *was* him.

"Hello," he said. "Is your father at home?"

I shook my head.

"No," I said. "He's at a meeting."

The man, who had a beard and glasses and a bit of saliva at the corners of his mouth, and who often drove around with young people in his custom-designed car, sighed.

"Say hello and tell him I was here," he said.

"Okay," I said.

He dragged himself to the car using his arms, opened the door, and lifted himself up into the seat. I watched him through widened eyes. In the car, his slow, helpless movements were transformed, he revved the engine and reversed up the incline at speed, shot down the road, and was gone.

I closed the door and went to my room. No sooner was I lying on the bed than the door downstairs opened.

From the sounds I worked out that it was Yngve.

"Are you here?" he shouted up the stairs. I got up and went out.

"I'm so hungry," he said. "Want to have supper now?"

"It's only a little after eight," I said.

"The earlier, the better," he said. "And I can make some tea for us. I'm absolutely ravenous."

"Call me when it's ready," I said.

A quarter of an hour later we were at the table eating bread, each with a big mug of tea in front of us.

"Was there a car here this evening?" Yngve said.

I nodded. "The paralyzed guy on the council."

"What did he want?"

"How should I know?"

Yngve looked at me.

"Someone was talking about you today," he said.

My blood ran cold.

"Oh?" I said.

"Yes, Ellen."

"What did she say?"

"She said you had a funny walk."

"She didn't!"

"Yes, she did. But it's true, isn't it. You do have a funny walk. Haven't you ever noticed?"

"I do NOT!" I shouted.

"Oh yes, you do," Yngve said. "Little shrimp can't even walk normally."

He got up and walked across the kitchen floor, falling forward with every step. I watched him with tears in my eyes.

"There's nothing wrong with my walk," I said.

"Ellen said it, not me," he said, sitting down. "They talk about you, you know. You're a little weird."

"I AM NOT!" I shouted, throwing my bread at him as hard as I could. He moved his head to one side, and it hit the stove with a soft splat.

"Is Karlikins upset now?" he said.

I stood up with my mug in my hand. When Yngve saw that he got up, too. I hurled the hot tea at him. It hit him in the stomach.

"You're so sweet when you're angry, Karl Ove," he said. "Poor little shrimp. Want me to teach you how to walk? I'm good at walking, you know."

My eyes were filled with tears, but that wasn't why I couldn't see anything, it was because I was seething with anger inside and the red mist had descended.

I flew at him and punched him with all my strength in the stomach. He grabbed my arms and twisted me round, I tried to wriggle loose, he held me tight, I kicked out, he pulled me harder to him, I tried to bite him on the hand, and he pushed me away.

"Now, now," he said.

I flew at him again, intent only on punching him in the face, smashing his nose, and if there had been a knife there I wouldn't have hesitated to plunge it into his stomach, but he knew all that, it had happened many times before, so he did what he always did, held me tight and squeezed while calling me a little shrimp and saying I was so sweet when I was angry until I tried to bite him and he couldn't keep my head at a distance and he pushed me away. This time I didn't go for him again; instead I ran out of the kitchen. On the living-room table there was a fruit bowl from which I took an orange and I flung it at the floor with all my might. It split open and a thin jet of orange juice spurted up and sprayed the wallpaper.

Yngve stood in the doorway watching.

"What have you done?" he said.

I looked at him. Then I saw the line of juice on the wallpaper.

"You'd better wash it off, you idiot," I said.

"It won't wash off," he said. "The stain will just get bigger. Dad will be livid when he sees that. What's wrong with you?"

"He might not see it," I said.

Yngve just gawped at me.

"Well, we can hope," he said, bending down and taking the orange into the kitchen. From the rustling noises that followed I gathered he was putting it at the very bottom of the garbage can. He came back with a cloth and wiped the floor.

I was trembling so much I could barely stand upright.

The juice ran in a thin line and I couldn't imagine how Dad could avoid seeing it when he came home.

Yngve washed the kettle and the two cups. Threw away the bread, picked up the crumbs. I sat in the chair by the dining table with my head in my hands.

Yngve stopped near me.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to make you cry."

"Yes, you did."

"It's just that you get so angry," he said. "Surely you can see that it's tempting? I *have* said sorry."

"It's not that," I said.

"What is it then?"

"My funny walk."

"Come on," he said. "Everyone walks in a different way. The main thing is to move forward. I was only kidding, really. I wanted to make you angry. And I succeeded. The way you walk is no stranger than anyone else's."

"Sure?"

"Sure as eggs are eggs."

When Dad came home I was in bed. In the darkness I lay listening to his footsteps. They didn't stop on the landing as I had expected but continued into the kitchen. He fiddled around in there for a while before coming out again. And he didn't stop on the landing this time, either.

He hadn't seen anything.

We were saved.

The next evening I went to the swimming class with Geir. We caught the bus from Holtet to the bus station in Arendal and walked up the hills to Stintahallen, each carrying a bag over our shoulders. In my bag I had some dark-blue Arena swim trunks, a white Speedo cap with the Norwegian flag on the side, a pair of Speedo goggles, a bar of soap, and a towel. We had been members of Arendal Swim Club since the previous winter. We could barely swim then, just getting from one end of the pool to the other was an enormous effort, bordering on the impossible, but since it was actually expected of us, as an absolute minimum in a swim club, and the coach, a man with tattoos on his arms who wore clogs, followed us along the side of the pool shouting, it took us a surprisingly short time to get by without any problems. We weren't good, at least not if you compared us to the older boys who sometimes walked around inside, with their slim, long-limbed yet muscular bodies, and who *powered* through the water with open mouths and bug-eye goggles. In comparison to them we were more like tadpoles, I sometimes mused, splashing and straining and just as likely to swim sideways as forward. But even though we gradually improved and could soon swim a thousand meters in the course of a training session it wasn't thanks to my progress that I continued, I knew I would never be a competitive swimmer because when the competitions came and I gave everything it was never enough, I couldn't even overtake Geir – no, it was all the rest I liked, starting the moment we clambered onto the bus and continuing through the evening darkness on the road to Arendal, the deserted town we passed through, the shops we always stopped outside on our way to the class, and inside the hall, this large public building with its strange mixture of inside and outside, which we were funnelled through from standing at the entrance wrapped up in winter clothes to standing almost naked, fifteen minutes later, wearing only a strip of cloth at the edge of the pool, after having passed through the minor ritual of undressing, showering, and dressing, and then throwing ourselves into the wonderfully transparent, cold water that smelled of chlorine. That was what I liked. The sounds echoing around the pool, the night outside the windows, the coral-jewel partition between lanes, the diving boards, the thirty-minute-long hot showers we had afterward. Then the process was reversed and we went from being pale, fragile, semi-naked boys with big heads to once again standing fully clothed in the winter outside, with wet hair under our hats and the smell of chlorine on our skin, our limbs deliciously tired.

I also liked the feeling of being enclosed inside myself when I put on my swimming cap and goggles, not least during competitions, when I had a whole lane of my own waiting for me beneath the starting blocks, but often the thoughts waiting there, in swimming's astronaut-like loneliness, became chaotic and sometimes also panicked. There could be water in the goggles, it slopped against my eyes, making them sting and preventing me from seeing, which of course upset the purity of my thoughts. I could swallow water and I could make a mess of the turn, which left me so breathless that I swallowed more water. And I could see that the swimmers in the adjacent lanes were already way ahead, which I was told by the voice inside me intent on winning, and I started a discussion with it. But even though this inner dialogue, which carried on calmly while I was swimming and fighting for all I was worth, and was therefore lent an almost panic-stricken aura, a bit like a military HQ deep in an underground bunker with officers speaking in controlled tones while the battles raged overhead, had the effect of me increasing the tempo, and for a few seconds I really gave it my all, it didn't help in the slightest, Geir was ahead of me and would remain so, and I couldn't understand that, I was obviously better than him, I knew so much more than him, also about the will to win. Nevertheless, he was the one to touch the pool wall *then*, and I touched it . . . . *then*.

When the coach blew his whistle and the session was over for another week, it was not without some relief that I put my hands on the edge of the pool and heaved myself up, to run with Geir across the tiled floor into the shower, where the pace seemed to be slower, at least our pace was released as we took off our caps and trunks and entered the showers, to feel with closed eyes the heat spreading through our bodies, no longer needing to say or do anything, not even having to bother to laugh as one of the men on his way into the pool, which was now open for all comers, began to sing. There was something dreamlike about the atmosphere inside, the white bodies that appeared in the doorway and stood under the showers with slow, introspective movements, the sound of water beating against the tiles and mingling with the muffled noise from outside, the steam saturating the air, the hollow resonance of voices whenever anyone spoke.

Normally we stood around long after those we had trained with had gone. Geir with his face to the wall, me with my face to the room, to hide my backside. I snatched occasional glances at him when he wasn't paying attention. He had thinner arms than me, yet he was stronger. I was a little taller than him, yet he was faster. That wasn't why he swam faster than me, though. It was because he wanted it more. It was different with his drawings, they were just something he could do, it was in him, it had always been there. Apart from people, he could reproduce everything in precise detail. Houses, cars, boats, trees, tanks, planes, rockets. It was a mystery how he could do it. He never copied, as I did, his mother never let him use either a ruler or an eraser. Now and then his Norwegian could throw up oddities, such as *fantisere* and *firkanti* instead of *fantasere* and *firkantet*, and *en appelsin* instead of *et appelsin*, and even though I corrected him every time, he continued to say them as though these terms were a feature of him that was as permanent as the color of his eyes or the set of his teeth.

Then he noticed my glance and his eyes met mine. With a smile on his lips he stretched up and pressed the palm of his hand against the shower head, stopping the jet, and the water appeared to bulge beneath it. He laughed and turned to me. I held my hands out. My fingertips were red and swollen from the water.

"They look like raisins," I said.

He examined his.

"Mine, too," he said. "Imagine if your whole body had gone like that when we were swimming!"

"My ball bag always goes all wrinkly," I said.

We bent forward and peered down. I ran a finger slowly over the hard yet sensitive folds of skin and a tingle went through me.

"Stroking it feels nice," I said.

Geir looked around. Then he turned off the shower, went to the row of hooks, and began to dry himself. I grabbed a bar of soap and squeezed hard. It skidded along the floor of the room, hit the wall in the corner, and finished up over one of the grids. I turned off the shower and was about to follow Geir when I suddenly couldn't bear the thought of the soap lying there in the middle of the floor. I picked it up and threw it in the bin by the wall. I pressed my face against the dry frotté material of the towel.

"Imagine what it will be like when we've got pubes," Geir said, walking with his legs wide apart.

I laughed.

"Imagine what it will be like if they're really long!" I said.

"Right down to your knees!"

"Then we'd have to comb them!"

"Or make a ponytail!"

"Or go to the hairdresser's! I'd just like a trim round my dick, please!"

"Oh, yes. And how would you like it, sir?"

"Crew cut, please!"

At that moment the door opened and we stopped laughing. A fat, elderly man with sad eyes came in and the vacuum the laughter had left in us was soon filled with giggles as he first nodded to us and then turned away in embarrassment to remove his trunks. As we grabbed our swimming things and were leaving the shower room, Geir said loudly:

"I bet he's got a whopper!"

"Or a teeny-weeny one!" I said, just as loudly, and then we slammed the door behind us and ran into the changing room.

We sat laughing, wondering whether he had heard us or not, until the normally quiet atmosphere also impacted on us and we sluggishly began to pack our gear and get dressed. The only sounds you could hear inside were feet on linoleum, rustling noises as legs were slipped into trousers, arms into jackets, the metallic clink as lockers were opened or closed, someone sighing to himself, perhaps drained by the heat in the sauna.

I took my bag from the locker and put my swimming things inside. First, the goggles, which I held in my hand and examined for a second, because they were new and filled me with such pleasure that they were mine. Next, trunks, cap, and towel and, last of all, the soap case. With its gently rounded lines, greenish color, and faint aroma of perfume, the case belonged to another world from the rest of my swimming equipment, intimately connected with Mom and the items in her wardrobe: earrings, rings, flasks, buckles, brooches, scarves, and veils. She herself was unaware there was such a world, she had to be, otherwise she would never have bought me a woman's bathing cap that time. Because a woman's cap belongs to that world. And if there was one thing everyone knew it was that one world should never be associated with the other.

Beside me Geir was almost ready. I stood up, pulled on my underpants, took my long johns, and put one leg in, followed by the other. Then I pulled them up tight to my waist before turning and starting to search through my clothes for my socks. I found only one and searched through the pile again.

It wasn't there.

I looked in the locker.

Nothing, empty.

Oh no!

No, no, no.

I frantically went through my clothes again, shook item after item in the air, hoping desperately to see it drop out onto the floor in front of me.

But it wasn't there.

"What's up?" Geir said. He was sitting, fully clothed, on the opposite bench watching me.

"I can't find my other sock," I said. "Can you see it?"

He leaned forward and looked under the bench.

"It's not there," he said.

Oh no!

"But it's got to be somewhere," I said. "Can you help me look? Please!"

I could hear my voice quivering. But Geir didn't let on that he'd noticed, if indeed he had heard anything at all. He leaned over and looked under all the benches while I walked toward the showers in case it had got caught up in my towel and dropped out. It wasn't there, either. Perhaps, inadvertently, I had packed it in my bag with the other swimming things?

I hurried back and emptied the contents of my bag on the floor.

But no. No sock.

"It wasn't anywhere there?" I said.

"No," Geir said. "But we have to get going, Karl Ove. The bus is leaving soon."

"I have to find the sock first."

"Well, it's not here. We've looked *everywhere*. Can't you just go without it?"

I didn't answer. Once again I shook all the clothes, crouched down, and scanned the floor under the benches; once again I went into the shower room.

"We've got to go now," Geir said. He held his watch in front of me. "They'll be angry if I miss the bus."

"Can you search while I get dressed?" I said.

He nodded and halfheartedly wandered around examining the floor. I put on my T-shirt and sweater.

On the top shelf perhaps?

I stood on the bench and peered along.

Nothing.

I put on my trousers and quilted vest, zipped up my jacket, and sat down to tie my laces.

"We've *got* to go now," Geir said.

"I'm getting there," I said. "You wait outside."

After he had left I hurried back into the shower room. I looked in the trash can, ran my hand along the windowsills, and even opened the door to the pool.

But no.

Geir was standing by the hill when I went out. He started running down before I had even caught up with him.

"Wait for meee!" I cried. But he showed no signs of stopping, he didn't even turn, and I sprinted off after him. Down into the darkness, past the gray trees, into the light on the road below. For every step I took the bare foot rubbed against the coarse leather of my boot. *I've lost my sock*, a voice inside me said. *I've lost my sock. I've lost my sock.* A ticking started in my head. It happened now and again when I was running, my head ticked, somewhere inside my left temple, *tick tick*, it went, but although it was alarming, sounding as if something had come loose or perhaps it was rubbing against something else, I couldn't tell anyone, they would just say I had a screw loose and laugh.

Tick, tick, tick.

Tick, tick, tick.

I ran behind Geir all the way down to the candy shop where we went; the bag of candy we came out with was always the high point of these trips. Geir was waiting outside, impatiently shifting from one foot to the other. I stopped in front of him. As a result of the snowplows' work we were standing half a meter higher than usual, and the new angle changed our view of the candy shop. It had a cellar-like feel to it, and this feel transformed everything, at a glance I saw the shelves were only "shelves," that the goods were "goods," displayed in a very ordinary room in a house, in short that the shop was a "shop," although I didn't articulate this to myself, it was just an idea that struck me and disappeared as quickly as it had come.

Geir opened the door and went in.

I followed.

"Are we very short of time?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "It goes in eleven minutes."

In the back room the assistant put the newspaper down, came into the shop, and stood behind the counter with a bored, even slightly disdainful expression on her face. She was old and repulsive; there were three long, gray hairs growing out of a mole on her chin.

The whole of one wall was covered with pipes and pipe cleaners, cigarette rolling machines and papers, tobacco pouches and cigarette packets, cigar boxes and snuff tins of various shapes and colors, all with different writing and small, stylized images of dogs, foxes, horses, sailing ships, racing cars, black men smiling, sailors smoking, and women in casual poses. The candy shelf, which we were both looking at now, covered the whole of the second wall. Unlike the tobacco products, the candy had no packaging; chocolates, hard candies, and gumdrops were in transparent plastic jars and represented themselves, with no pictures between them and us: what you saw was what you got. The black ones tasted of salt or licorice, the yellow ones of lemon, the orange ones of orange, the red ones of strawberry, the brown ones of chocolate. The small, square pieces of chocolate with the hard surfaces, called *Rekrutts*, were filled with hard caramel, just as the promised shape; the heart-shaped chocolates, for their part, were filled with a soft, jelly-like mass tasting of apricot, also as expected. The color codes applied to the candies and the gumdrops, with a few exceptions, which on these evenings we tried to narrow down. Some black candies could taste dark green while some dark-green ones tasted green in a throat pastille or eucalyptus kind of way – in other words lighter – and not a sweet-type green, which you would imagine from the color. And then there were the black candies that actually tasted like the King of Denmark aniseed candies, an orangey brown. The strange thing was that it was never the other way around, there were no orangey-brown King of Denmark candies that tasted black, nor had we ever come across any eucalyptus-green candies that tasted like sweet green or black ones.

“What would you like?” the assistant said.

Geir had put the money he would spend on the glass counter and leaned forward to see the range of candies better, the signs of time pressure evident on his face.

“Errr . . .” he said.

“Hurry up!” I said.

Then it all came out in a rush.

“Three of those, three of those, and three of those, and four of those and one of those and one of those,” he said, pointing to the various jars.

“Three of . . . ?” the assistant said, opening an empty paper bag and turning to the stand.

“The green ones. Oh, make that four. And then three of the red-and-white ones. You know, polka d . . . and then *five* babies’ dummies . . .

When we emerged from the shop, each with a small bag in hand, there were just four minutes to go before the bus left. But that was enough time, we told each other, running down the stairs. The steps, covered with hard-trodden snow and ice, were slippery, so we had to hold on to the banisters, which was at odds with the speed we were after. Beneath us lay the town, the white streets appearing almost yellow in the reflection from the lamps, the bus station, where the buses skidded in and out like sleds in the snow, and the tall church with the red tiles and green spire. The black sky arched above everything, strewn with twinkling stars. When there were only ten to fifteen steps left Geir let go of the banister and set off at a sprint. After a couple of strides he lost balance and his only chance to stay upright was to run as fast as he could. He swept down the hill at a blistering pace. Then he changed tactics and decided to slide instead, but his upper body had more momentum, he was pitched forward and plunged headlong into the drift beside the road. It had all happened so fast that I didn’t start laughing until he was lying in the snow.

"Ha ha ha!"

He didn't move.

Was he seriously hurt?

I walked as briskly as I could over the last stretch and stopped beside him. At first he drew breath in short, sob-like bursts. Then came a long, hollow groan.

"*Shit,*" he whispered, holding his chest. "*Shit. Shit. Shit.*"

"I wish you wouldn't swear," I said.

He sent me a brief, withering glare.

"Did you hurt yourself?" I said.

He groaned again.

"Did it knock the breath out of you?"

He nodded and sat up and started breathing normally again. He had tears in his eyes.

"We've missed the bus now anyway," I said.

"It knocked the breath out of me," he said. "I'm not crying."

He held his side as he struggled to his feet with a grimace.

"Can you walk?" I asked.

"Yep," he said.

From the entrance of the Arena Shopping Center we saw our bus depart, turn onto the road, and disappear around the street corner. The next bus would be in half an hour.

We sat down inside the bus station, on a bench beside a photo machine, and ate our candy. There weren't many people around. Two youths buying hamburgers and fries while their car idled outside, a drunk sitting on the floor with his head down, asleep, and a friend of the girl working in the kiosk.

Geir put one of the red-and-white candies in his mouth.

"What color does it taste like?" I said.

He looked at me with raised eyebrows.

"Red and white, of course!" he said. "It was a red-and-white candy."

"It doesn't necessarily follow," I said. "Suppose I ate it and it tasted green."

"What are you talking about now?" he said.

"Suppose it tasted of jam, for example," I said.

"Jam?"

"Don't you understand anything?" I said. "We can't know if a piece of candy tastes the same as the color!"

But he didn't understand. I wasn't absolutely sure I even understood myself. But Dag Lothar and I had once put a piece of candy shaped like a black bolt in our mouths, exchanged glances, and said, both at the same time, it tastes *green*! And later that autumn we'd had visitors, Grandma, Grandad, Gunnar, Dad's uncle Alf, and his wife, Sølvi, had been staying at our house, we ate shrimp, crab, and a lobster, which Dad had caught in the net only a few days before, and while we were eating Sølvi looked at Dad and said:

"Imagine you catching this lobster yourself. It tasted *delicious*."

"It really was delicious," Grandma said.

"Nothing tastes as good as lobster," Dad said. "But we can't know if it tastes the same for all of us."

Sølvi stared at him.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I know how it tastes to *me*," Dad said. "But I have no idea how it tastes to you."

"It tastes of lobster, of course!" Sølvi said.

Everyone laughed.

I didn't understand what they were laughing about. What they said was right. But I laughed, too.

"But how can you know that lobster tastes the same to me as it does to you?" Dad asked. "For all you know, it could taste like jam to me."

Sølvi was about to say something, but held back, looking down at the lobster, then up at Dad. She shook her head.

"I don't understand," she said. "The lobster's there. And it tastes of *lobster*. Not jam!"

The others laughed again. I knew Dad was right, but I didn't know exactly why. For a long time I sat musing. It was as if I was constantly on the point of understanding, but then as I was beginning to comprehend, it slipped from my grasp. The thought was too big for me.

But it had been even bigger for Geir, I remembered, and looked up as the door opened. It was Stig. His face lit up when he saw us and he came over.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," Geir said.

"Hi," I said.

"Missed the bus?" he said, sitting down beside us. Geir nodded.

"Want one?" he said, holding out the bag to him. Stig smiled and chose a baby's dummy. So I had to offer him one afterward, too. Why on earth had Geir done that? We didn't exactly have a lot of candy.

Stig was in the class above ours and did gymnastics training in Arendal three times a week. He competed at the national level, but there wasn't a touch of arrogance about him, as there was with Snorre, who swam for the national squad and wanted nothing to do with us. Stig was nice, one of the nicest boys I knew, in fact. When the bus came he sat in the seat in front of Geir and me. By the end of Langbrygga the conversation had petered out, he turned round and sat like that for the rest of the journey. Geir and I were quiet, too, and the thought of the missing sock returned with renewed vigor.

Oh no, oh no.

What was going to happen?

What was going to happen?

Oh no oh no oh no.

No, no, no!

Perhaps he had noticed that we were late. Perhaps he would be standing there waiting. On the other hand, he might not be, he might be busy with something else, in which case I was safe; if I could get from the hall to the boiler room unnoticed everything would be fine because I had my other socks there and I could change into them.

The bus drove onto Tromøya Bridge and was buffeted by the wind. The windows vibrated. Geir, who always wanted to be the first to pull the bell cord, reached up and rang, even though we were the only passengers to get off here. The bus stop was right at the bottom of the hill, and I always felt guilty when I alighted here because the bus would have to set off again and wouldn't be able to pick up speed until it had passed the brow of the hill a few hundred meters farther on. Sometimes this feeling was so strong in me that I didn't get off until the next stop, up by B-Max, especially when I was on my own. Even now, with thoughts of the sock burning in my consciousness, I felt a little pang as Geir pulled the cord and the bus braked with a sigh of irritation to drop us off.

We stood by the drifts of snow and waited until the bus had pulled out again. Stig raised his hand to say goodbye. Then we crossed the road and walked up the path to the estate.

Usually I would kick my boots against the doorstep a couple of times to shake the snow off and then brush my trousers with the broom leaning against the wall for that very purpose, but this time I skipped the kicks, fearing he might hear, just brushed my trousers and cautiously opened the door, sidled in, and closed it behind me.

But that was enough. From inside, I heard his study door open, and then the door to the porch.

He stood in front of me.

"You're late," he said.

"Yes, I'm sorry," I said. "But Geir fell and hurt himself on the road, so we missed the bus."

I started undoing the boot with a sock in it.

He didn't show any sign of wanting to leave.

I pulled the boot off and placed it by the wall.

Looked up at him.

"What is it?" he said.

"Nothing," I said.

My heart was pounding in my ears. Getting up and walking with one boot on across the floor was obviously not an option. Standing still and waiting for him to leave was not an option, either, because he wasn't going anywhere.

Slowly I began to untie my laces. While doing so I had a brainwave. I unwound my scarf, placed it beside my boot, and, after undoing the laces, I pulled it off, took the scarf, and casually tried to cover my naked foot.

Then, with the scarf half-covering my foot, I stood up.

"Where's your sock?" Dad said.

I looked down at my foot. Glanced at him.

"I couldn't find it," I said, my eyes downcast again.

"Have you *lost* it?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

The next instant he was up close to me, grabbing my arms in an iron grip and pinning me to the wall.

"Have you LOST your sock?"

"Yes!" I shouted.

He shook me. Then let me go.

"How old are you now? And how much money do you think we've got? Do you think we can afford to lose items of clothing?"

"No," I said to the floor, my eyes full of tears. He held my ear and twisted it.

"You little brat!" he said. "Keep an eye on your things!"

"Okay," I said.

"You can't go to the swimming pool anymore. Is that understood?"

"Eh?"

"YOU CAN'T GO TO THE SWIMMING POOL ANYMORE!" he said.

"But . . ." I sobbed.

"NO IFS OR BUTS!"

He let go of my ear and marched to the door. Turned to me.

"You're not old enough. You've shown that tonight. You can't go there again. This was the last time. Have you got that?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good. Go to your room. There'll be no supper for you. You can go straight to bed."

The following week I didn't go swimming, but I missed it so much that the next week I acted as if nothing had happened, packed my things, and caught the bus with Geir and Dag Lothar. My fears trickled through at various points, but something inside me said I would be fine, and I was, on my return everything was as normal and so it stayed, he never said another word about my not being able to continue the class.

At the start of December, three days before my birthday and two days before Mom came home again, I was sitting on the toilet, taking a dump, when the familiar sound of Dad's car turning and parking in the drive was not followed by the equally familiar sound of a door being opened and closed but by the doorbell ringing.

What could this be?

I hurriedly wiped myself, pulled the chain, yanked up my trousers, opened the window above the bathtub, and poked my head out.

Dad was standing beneath me wearing a new anorak. On his legs he wore knee-length breeches and long, blue socks, and on his feet a pair of blue-and-white boots, all equally new.

"Come on!" he said. "We're going skiing!"

I got dressed in a flash and went outside, where he was tying my skis and sticks to the roof rack beside a pair of brand-new, long, wooden Splitkein skis.

"Did you buy some skis?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "Isn't it great? So we can go skiing together."

"Okay," I said. "So where are we going?"

"Let's go to the west of the island," he said. "To Hove."

"Are there slopes there?"

"There? Oh yes!" he said. "They've got the best."

I doubted it, but didn't say anything, got in the car beside him, how unfamiliar he looked in his new clothes, and then we left for Hove. Not a word was said until he parked and we got out.

"Here we are!" he said.

He had driven through Hove Holiday Center, which consisted of a large number of red houses and huts originating from the last war, most probably built by the Germans, like the firing range, which, I had heard rumored, had been an airfield, like the concrete gun placements towering above the sea-smoothed rocks and the pebble beaches close to the edge of the forest, and the fascinating low bunkers among the trees, where we used to play on the roofs and in the rooms when we were here in the afternoon on seventeenth of May celebration days, he had driven past all this, along a narrow road into the forest, which came to an end by a small sand quarry, where he stopped and parked.

After taking the skis off the roof, he came over with a little case full of ski-waxing equipment he had also bought, and we waxed the skis with blue Swix, which, after reading the back of one of the tubes, he said had to be the best. Apparently unfamiliar with bindings, it took him a bit longer to put on his skis than it did me. Then he put his hands through the loops on the poles. But he didn't do it from underneath so that the loop wouldn't slip off even if he lost hold of the pole. No, he put his hands straight through.

That was how little kids who didn't know any better held them.

It hurt me to watch, but I couldn't say anything. Instead I took my hands out and then threaded them through again so that, if he was paying attention, he could see how it was done.

But he wasn't watching me; he was looking up at the little ridge of hills above the sand quarry.

"Let's get going then!" he said.

Although I had never seen him ski before, I could never have dreamed in my wildest imagination that he couldn't ski. But he couldn't. He didn't glide with the skis, he walked as he normally walked, without skis, taking short, plodding steps, which on top of everything else were unsteady, which meant that every so often he had to stop and poke his poles into the snow so as not to topple over.

I thought perhaps this was just the beginning and soon he would find his rhythm and glide as he should glide along the piste. But when we reached the ridge, where the sea was visible between the trees, gray with frothy white-flecked waves, and started to follow the ski tracks he was still walking in the same way.

Occasionally he would turn and smile at me.

I felt so sorry for him I could have shouted out aloud as I skied.

Poor Dad. Poor, poor Dad.

At the same time I was embarrassed, my own father couldn't ski, and I stayed some distance behind him so that potential passersby wouldn't associate me with him. He was just someone out ahead, a tourist, I was on my own, this was where I came from, I knew how to ski.

The piste wound back into the forest, but if the view of the sea was gone its sounds lingered between the trees, rising and falling, and the aroma of salt water and rotten seaweed was everywhere, it blended with the forest's other faintly wintry smells, of which the snow's curious mixture of raw and gentle was perhaps the most obvious.

He stopped and hung on his ski poles. I came alongside him. A ship was moving on the horizon. The sky above us was light gray. A pale, grayish-yellow glow above the two lighthouses on Torungen revealed where the sun was.

He looked at me.

"Skis running well?" he said.

"Pretty well," I said. "How about you?"

"Yes," he said. "Let's go on, shall we? It'll soon be time to head home. We have to make dinner as well. So, away you go!"

"Don't you want to go first?"

"No, you head off. I'll follow."

The new arrangement turned everything in my head upside down. If he was behind me he would see how I, someone who knew how to ski, skied and realize how clumsy his own style was. I saw every single pole plant through his eyes. They cut through my consciousness like knives. After very few meters I slowed down, I began to ski in a slower, more staccato style, not unlike his, just not as clumsy, so that he would understand what I was doing, and that was even worse. Beneath us, the white, frothy breakers washed lazily onto the pebble beach. On the rocks, in some places, the wind whirled snow into the air. A seagull floated past, its wings unmoving. We were approaching the car, and on the last little slope I had an idea, I changed the tempo, and went as fast as I could for a few meters, then pretended to lose balance and threw myself into the snow beside the piste. I got up as quickly as possible and was brushing my trousers down as he whistled past.

"It's all about staying on your feet," he said.

We drove home in silence, and I was relieved when we finally turned into our drive and the skiing trip was definitively over.

Standing in the hall and taking off our skiing gear, we didn't say anything, either. But then, as he opened the door to the staircase, he turned to me.

"Come and keep me company while I'm cooking," he said.

I nodded and followed him up.

In the living room he stopped and looked at the wall.

"What on earth . . ." he said. "Have you noticed this before?"

I had forgotten all about the streak of orange juice. My surprise as I shook my head must have had a dash of authenticity about it because his attention wandered as he bent down and ran his finger over the thin line of orange. Even his imagination would hardly stretch far enough to guess it was caused by my flinging an orange at the floor just there, on the landing outside the kitchen.

He straightened up and walked into the kitchen, I sat down on the stool as usual, he took a packet of pollock from the fridge, placed it on the counter, fetched flour, salt, and pepper from the cupboard, sprinkled them on a plate, and began to turn the soft, slippery fillets in the mixture.

"Tomorrow after school we'll go to Arendal and buy you a birthday present," he said without looking at me.

"Shall I go with you? Isn't it supposed to be a secret?" I said.

"Well, you know what you want, don't you?" he said. "Soccer uniform, right?"

"Yes."

"You can try it on and then we'll know if it fits," he said, pushing a knob of butter from the knife into the frying pan with his finger.

What I wanted was Liverpool colors. But when we went to the Intersport shop they didn't have Liverpool uniforms on the stand.

"Can't we ask one of the people working here? Perhaps they've got some in stock?"

"If it's not hanging up, they haven't got it," Dad said. "Take one of the others."

"But I support Liverpool."

"Take Everton then," he said. "It's the same town."

I looked at the Everton shirt. Blue with white shorts. Umbro.

I looked at Dad. He seemed impatient, his eyes were wandering.

I put on the shirt over my sweater and held the shorts in front of me.

"Well, it looks good," I said.

"Let's take it then," Dad said, grabbing the shirt and shorts and going to pay. They wrapped them up while he counted the notes in his fat wallet, combed his hair back with his hand, and looked into the street outside, which was crowded with shoppers, now, three weeks before Christmas.

On my birthday I woke up very early. The parcel containing the soccer uniform was in my wardrobe. I couldn't wait to try it on. Tore off the paper, took out the outfit, pressed it against my nose, was there any better smell than new clothes? I put on the glistening shorts, then the shirt, which was rougher, a bit uneven against your skin, and the white socks. Then I went into the bathroom to look at myself.

Turned from side to side.

It looked good.

It wasn't Liverpool, but it looked good, and they were from the same city.

Suddenly Dad swung open the bathroom door.

"What are you up to, boy?" he said.

He eyed me.

"Have you opened your present?" he shouted. "On your own?"

He grabbed my arm and hauled me into my bedroom.

"Now you wrap it up again!" he said. "NOW!"

I cried and took off the uniform, tried to fold it as well as I could, placed it in the paper, and stuck it together with a bit of the tape that was still sticky.

Dad oversaw everything. As soon as I had finished, he snatched the parcel out of my hands and left.

"Actually I should have taken it from you," he said. "But now I'll keep it until we give you the rest of your presents. It is your birthday, after all."

As I knew what I was getting and I had even tried the uniform on in the shop, I had been sure it was the *day* that was important and that on the *day* I could wear it. I hadn't seen it as one of the presents I would be given when we ate the birthday cake in the afternoon. It was impossible to make him understand. But I was right, he wasn't. The uniform was mine when all was said and done! On that day it became mine!

I lay in bed crying until the others got up. Mom was in high spirits and wished me a happy birthday when I went into the kitchen, she had baked fresh rolls the evening before, which she was warming up in the oven, and she was boiling some eggs, but I didn't care, my hatred for Dad cast a cloud over everything.

In the afternoon we ate cake and drank pop. I had never been allowed to invite friends on my birthday, and nor was I on this one. I was sullen and surly, I ate the cake without a word, and when Dad put the presents in front of me, with a smile that showed no insight into what had happened that morning, as though it *were* possible to start afresh, I looked down and unwrapped the Everton uniform without showing any sign of pleasure.

"How nice," Mom said. "Are you going to try it on?"

"No," I said. "I tried it on in the shop. Fits perfectly."

"Put it on," Dad said. "So Mom and Yngve can see."

"No," I said.

He eyed me.

I took the uniform to the bathroom, changed, and went back in.

"Excellent," Dad said. "I bet you'll be the coolest on the field this winter."

"Can I take it off now?" I said.

"Wait till we've finished with the presents," Dad said. "Here's one from me."

He passed me a small, square packet that *had* to be a cassette.

I opened it.

It was the new Wings cassette. *Back to the Egg.*

I looked at him. He looked out of the window.

"Do you like it?" he said.

"Oh yes," I said. "It's the new Wings cassette! I'll play it now!"

"Hang on a moment," he said. "You've got a couple of presents left."

"Here's a tiny one from me," Mom said.

It was big but light. What could it be?

"Just something for your room," she said.

I unwrapped it. It was a stool. Four wooden legs and a kind of net seat between them.

"What a great stool," Yngve said.

"Thanks, Mom," I said. "It'll be good for when I read!"

"And here's one from me," Yngve said.

"Really?" I said. "I wonder what you've come up with this time?"

It was a book on how to play the guitar.

I looked at him with moist eyes.

"Thank you very much," I said.

"It's got scales, solos, everything," he said. "Very simple. There's a black dot for where you have to press. Even you can follow that."

For the rest of the day I listened to *Back to the Egg*.

Yngve came in and said that John Bonham, the drummer in Led Zeppelin, was on one of the songs. And he had read in the newspaper that a Norwegian priest spoke at the beginning of one of the songs. It had to be at the start of the LP, we figured out, "Reception," where there was a recording off the radio.

"There!" Yngve said. "Play it again!"

And then I heard it, too.

"*Men la oss nå prøve et øyeblikk å se i dette lys av Det nye testamentet*," a faint, grating old man's voice said.

The thought that neither Paul McCartney, Linda McCartney, Denny Laine, Steve Holly, nor Laurence Juber had a clue what was being said there, but that Yngve and I did, as we were Norwegian, sent my senses into free fall.

As always, Dad was kind all Christmas, even in the morning. As New Year's Eve approached and the shops finally opened for a few hours, Mom drove to Arendal to buy some food and fireworks. She must have intimated that perhaps it wasn't necessary to spend hundreds of kroner on rockets, as Dad always did, at any rate, it was she who had the responsibility for buying fireworks while Dad kept well in the background.

It wasn't a great success.

Dad usually showed us the rockets he had bought and said, well, this year we were going to knock Gustavsen into a cocked hat, for instance, or there were going to be a few really big bangs this year! When New Year's Eve came we would see him standing outside on the shimmering snow astutely and meticulously arranging the launch site. With a strand of hair hanging down over his face, which his beard almost blotted out in the darkness, he would set up the clothesline in the snow and line the biggest rockets up against it, and place the others in a whole battery of bottles and hollow objects. Once the preparations had been made, he would wait until half past eleven. Then he would call us outside and the New Year was brought in with several salvoes. He started small, with a few little firecrackers or sparklers that Yngve and I were allocated, and then he gradually stepped up the power until the biggest rocket was launched at twelve. Afterward he would declare that there had been lots of wonderful rockets this year but we, as usual, had had the best. That, of course, was open to debate because we were not the only ones to invest money in fireworks, Gustavsen and Karlsen did, too.

But this New Year's Eve Dad, the King of Fireworks, had abdicated.

I pondered quite a bit on the cause. Whatever it was, I suspected that the consequences would be of major significance. No, it wasn't a suspicion, I *knew*.

When it was a few minutes after half past eleven and Mom said perhaps it was time to go out and light the rocket, my jaw dropped.

"*The* rocket?" I said. "Do we only have one? One rocket?"

"Yes," Mom said. "Surely that's enough? It's a big one. They said in the shop it was the biggest and best they had."

Dad smirked to himself. He went out after Yngve and me, stood beside us on the terrace at the back of the house where the launch was to take place.

The rocket really was big, she was right about that.

She put it in a bottle, but the bottle was too small, and both the bottle and rocket tipped over. She stood it up and looked around. Her light-colored leather coat was open, the zippers in her high boots were undone, making them seem as if they were unfolding as she moved, like two exotic plants. Around her neck she had wound her thick, rust-brown scarf.

"We could use something bigger to put this rocket in," she said.

Dad said nothing.

"Dad normally uses the clothes horse," Yngve said.

"That's true!" Mom said.

The clothes horse, which was only used in the summer, was made of wood and leaned against the wall. Mom fetched it and set it up in the snow. She crouched down and positioned the rocket against it, but, seeing at once that it wouldn't work, she stood up with the rocket in her hand. Around us fireworks were going off everywhere. The sky was lit with explosions, which we sensed rather than saw because it was overcast and misty, so of the showers of stars and all the colors and patterns not much more than flashes of light were to be seen.

"What about if you lay it on its side," Yngve said. "Dad usually does that."

Mom did as he suggested.

"It's twelve o'clock now," Dad said. "Aren't you going to light our rocket soon?"

"Yes," Mom said. She took a lighter from her pocket, crouched down, shielded the tiny flame with her hand, and averted her whole body, ready to run. The second the fuse was lit she dashed toward us.

"Happy New Year!" she said.

"Happy New Year," Yngve said.

I said nothing because the rocket, which the burning fuse had reached now, sounded as if it was going to fizzle out. Then the flame died and the hiss stopped.

"Oh no," I said. "It didn't work! It was a dud! And we've only got one. Why did you buy only one? How could you do that?"

"That was New Year's Eve then," Dad said. "Perhaps I should be in charge of the fireworks next year?"

I had never felt so sorry for Mom as I did then, when we left the rocket and went into the warm, surrounded by neighbors' exultant shouts and explosions. What hurt most was that she had done the best she could. She couldn't do any better.

One afternoon two weeks later I was down by Lake Tjenna and my legs were absolutely freezing. *Framlaget*, the Socialist Party's children's organization, which I and almost all the other kids on the estate were in, had arranged a ski race. There were numbers on chests and medals for everyone, but above all else it was numbingly cold standing there and waiting your turn. And when my turn did come, my skis were slippery, I could never really get a decent speed going, and I finished way down the results list. As soon as I had passed the line and received my medal I set course for home. The darkness hung between the branches, the cold chafed at my toes, the skis kept slipping and sliding, I couldn't even manage the steepest hill using the herringbone technique and had to ascend sideways. But at last the road was there with its illuminated streetlamps like a luminous ribbon in the dusk, and our house was on the other side. I staggered across and into the drive, undid my skis and leaned them against the house, opened the door, and stopped.

What was that smell?

Grandma?

Was *Grandma* here?

No, out of the question, that was impossible.

Perhaps Dad had been to Kristiansand and had brought the fragrance back with him?

No, for Pete's sake, there was someone talking in the kitchen!

I had my boots off in a flash, registered that my socks were wet, so I couldn't walk in them, they would leave marks, and I jogged through the hall into the boiler room, where there was a fresh pair hanging from a line, put them on, strode up the stairs as fast as I dared, stopped.

The fragrance was stronger here. There was no doubt: Grandma was here.

"Is that you, champ?" Dad said.

"Yes," I said.

"Come in here a moment!" he said.

I went into the kitchen.

There was Grandma!

I ran over and hugged her.

She laughed and ruffled my hair.

"How big you've grown!" she said.

"What are you doing here?" I said. "Where's the car? Where's Grandad?"

"I caught the bus," she said.

"The bus?" I said.

"Yes. My son is alone with his children, I thought, so I can go and give him a bit of a hand. I've already made some dinner for you, as you can see."

"How long are you staying?"

She laughed.

"Well, I'm catching the bus back tomorrow, I think. Someone has to look after Grandad as well. I can't leave him alone for too long."

"No," I said, hugging her again.

"All right," Dad said. "You go to your room for a while and I'll call you when the food's ready."

"But he must have his present first," Grandma said.

"Thank you for my Christmas present, by the way," I said. "It was great."

Grandma leaned forward, lifted her bag, and took out a little packet, which she passed to me.

I tore off the paper.

It was an IK Start mug.

It was white, with the Kristiansand club logo on one side and a soccer player in a yellow shirt and black shorts on the other.

"Wow, a Start mug!" I said, and gave her another hug.

It was strange having Grandma there. I had hardly ever seen her without Grandad, and hardly ever on her own with Dad. They sat chatting in the kitchen; I could hear them through the door, which I had left ajar. There were intermittent pauses when one of them got up to do something. Then they chatted a bit more, Grandma laughed and told a story, and Dad mumbled. He called us, we ate, he was quite different from how he normally was, coming closer to us and distancing himself all the time. Sometimes he was completely in tune with what Grandma was saying, then he would be gone, looking elsewhere or getting up to do something, then he would look at her again and smile and make a comment that would make her laugh, and then he was gone again.

She left the following evening. She gave Yngve and me a hug, then Dad drove her to the bus station in Arendal. I put on *Rubber Soul* and lay down with a biography of Madame Curie. When the second song came, "Norwegian Wood," I took my eyes off the book and gazed at the ceiling as the mood of the music in some incomprehensible way got into me and raised me to where it was. It was a fantastic feeling. Not only because it was beautiful, there was something else present that had nothing to do with the room I lay in or the world I was surrounded by.

I once had a girl, or should I say, she once had me
She showed me her room, isn't it good, Norwegian wood?

Fantastic, fantastic.

Then I went on reading about Madame Curie until ten and I switched off the light. As I drifted into sleep, as whatever existed in my room was somehow diluted with images, where they came from I had no idea, but I accepted them nonetheless, the door was suddenly thrust open and the light switched on.

It was Dad.

"How many apples have you had today?" he said.

"One," I said.

"Are you sure? Grandma said she gave you one."

"Really?"

"But you had one after dinner, too. Do you remember?"

"Oh yes! I'd forgotten that one!" I said.

Dad switched off the light and closed the door without another word.

The next day after dinner he called me. I went into the kitchen.

"Sit down," he said. "Here's an apple."

"Thanks," I said.

He handed me an apple.

"Sit here and eat it," he said.

I glanced up at him. He met my gaze, his eyes were serious, and I looked down, started to eat the apple. Once it was finished, he handed me another.

Where had he got it from? Had he got a bag behind his back or what?

"Have another," he said.

"Thanks," I said. "But I only eat one a day."

"You had two yesterday, didn't you?"

I nodded, took it, and ate it.

He handed me another.

"Here's another," he said. "This is your lucky day."

"I'm full," I said.

"Eat your apple."

I ate it. It took me longer than the first two. The bite-sized chunks seemed to be lying on top of the food from dinner; it was as though I could feel the cold apple flesh down below.

Dad handed me another.

"I don't want it," I said.

"There were no limits yesterday," he said. "Have you forgotten? You must have had two apples because you wanted them. Today you can have as many as you want. Eat."

I shook my head.

He leaned down. His eyes were cold.

"Eat your apple. Now."

I started eating. Whenever I swallowed my stomach contracted and I had to swallow several times not to throw up.

He was standing behind me, there was no way I could trick him. I cried and swallowed, swallowed and cried. In the end, I couldn't go on.

"I'm so full!" I said. "I simply can't eat any more!"

"Eat up," Dad said. "You like apples so much."

I tried a couple more bites, but it was no good.

"I can't," I said.

He looked at me. Then he took the half-eaten apple and threw it in the trash can in the cupboard under the sink.

"You can go to your room," he said. "Now I hope that has taught you a lesson."

Inside my room there was only one thing I longed for, and that was to grow up. To have total control over my own life. I hated Dad, but I was in his hands, I couldn't escape his power. It was impossible to exact my revenge on him. Except in the much-acclaimed mind and imagination, there I was able to crush him. I could grow there, outgrow him, place my hands on his cheeks, and squeeze until his lips formed the stupid pout he made to imitate me, because of my protruding teeth. There, I could punch him in the nose so hard that it broke and blood streamed from it. Or, even better, so that the bone was forced back into his brain and he died. I could hurl him against the wall or throw him down the stairs. I could grab him by the neck and smash his face against the table. That was how I could think, but the instant I was in the same room as he was, everything crumbled, he was my father, a grown man, so much bigger than me that everything had to bend to his will. He bent my will as if it were nothing.

That must have been why, unwittingly of course, I was converting the inside of my room into an enormous outside. When I read, and for a while I did hardly anything else, it was always the world outside I moved in as I lay still on my bed, and not just the world that existed in the here and now, with all its foreign countries and foreigners, but also the one that had been, from Stokke's Bjørneklo, the Stone Age boy, to the one in the future, such as in Jules Verne's books. And then there was the music. It, too, opened my room with its moods and the strong emotions it evoked in me, which had nothing to do with those I normally felt in life. Mostly I listened to the Beatles and Wings, but also to Yngve's music, which for a long time was bands and solo artists like Gary Glitter, Mud, Slade, the Sweet, Rainbow, Status Quo, Rush, Led Zeppelin, and Queen, but who in the course of his secondary school years were changing, as other, quite different, music began to sneak its way between all these old cassettes and records, like the Jam single and a single by the Stranglers, called "No More Heroes," an LP by the Boomtown Rats and one by the Clash, a cassette by Sham 69 and Kraftwerk, as well as the songs he recorded off the only radio music program there was, *Pop Spesial*. He started to have friends who were interested in the same music and also played the guitar. One of them was called Bård Torstensen, and one day at the beginning of May when Dad was out for a few hours and thus the house was left unguarded, he joined Yngve in his room. They sat playing guitar and listening to records. After a while there was a knock at my door, it was Yngve, there was something he wanted to show Bård. I was reclined on the bed reading and got up when they came in.

"Look," Yngve said, going over to the Elvis poster I had on the wall over the desk. "Can you guess what's on the back?"

Bård shook his head.

Yngve loosened the drawing pins, took the poster down, and turned it around.

"Look," he said. "Johnny Rotten! And he hangs it up with Elvis on the front!"

Both of them laughed.

"Can I buy it off you?" Bård said.

I shook my head.

"It's mine."

"But you've got it up the wrong way round!" Bård said, laughing again.

"I haven't," I said. "That is Elvis, you know!"

"Elvis is the past!" Bård said.

"No, he isn't. Not Elvis Costello," Yngve said.

"That's true," Bård said.

After they had gone I looked at the two pictures for a while. The one called Johnny Rotten was ugly. Elvis was good-looking. Why should I swap the ugly one for the good-looking one?

Outdoors, we did what we always do every spring: cut branches off the birch trees, tie bottles onto the remaining stumps, collect them the next day, full of light-colored, viscous sap, and drink it. We cut branches off the willow trees and made flutes from the bark. We picked large bunches of white wood anemones and gave them to our mothers. Well, we were too big for the latter really, but it was a gesture, it was us being good, then one morning, when we had only three hours, I dragged Geir with me into the forest, I knew a place where there were so many anemones that from a distance it looked like snow on the ground. Not without some self-torment, though, for flowers were living beings, picking them was killing them, but the cause was good, with their help I could spread happiness. The light fell in shafts through the branches, the bog was a luminous green, and we each picked an enormous bunch, which we ran home with.

When I arrived Dad was at home. He was in the laundry room at the bottom of the house. He turned to me, anger in every movement.

"I picked you some flowers," I said.

He reached out with his hand, took them, and threw them in the large sink.

"Little girls pick flowers," he said.

He was right. And he was probably ashamed of me. Once some of his colleagues had come home and they had seen me on the stairs, with my blond hair quite long, because it was winter, and I was wearing red long johns.

"What a nice girl you've got," one of them said.

"It's a boy," Dad answered. He had smiled, but I knew him well enough to know the comment had not gladdened his heart.

There was my interest in clothes, my crying if I didn't get the shoes I wanted, my crying if it was too cold when we were in the boat on the sea, indeed my crying if he raised his voice in situations when it would have been absolutely normal to raise your voice. Was it so strange he thought: what kind of son have I got here?

I was a mama's boy, he was constantly telling me. I was, too. I longed for her. And no one was happier than I when she moved back for good at the end of the month.

When summer was over and I was about to start the fifth class it was Dad's turn. He was going all the way to Bergen, to stay at something called the Fantoft Student Town, to major in Nordic literature and become a senior teacher.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to come home every weekend," he said during dinner just before leaving. "Perhaps no more than once a month."

"That's a shame," I said.

I went into the drive to see him off. He put his suitcases in the trunk, and then he got in on the passenger side because Mom was driving him to the airport.

It was one of the strangest sights I had seen.

Dad didn't look right in a VW Beetle, he didn't. And if he was going to sit in one, it definitely shouldn't be as a passenger, it verged on the grotesque, especially when Mom got in beside him and started the engine, turned her head, and reversed.

Dad wasn't a passenger; that much was obvious.

I waved, Dad raised a hand, and they were gone.

What should I do now?

Go into the workshop room, hammer and saw, chop and cut for all I was worth?

Go into the kitchen and make waffles? Fry an egg? Brew up some tea?

Sit with my feet on the table?

No, I knew what.

Go into Yngve's room, take out one of his records, and put it on full volume.

I chose *Play* by Magazine.

Turned up the volume almost full blast, opened the door, and went into the living room.

The bass was making the walls vibrate. Music was *belting* out of the room. I closed my eyes and I swayed back and forth to the rhythm. After doing that for a while I went into the kitchen, took the bar of cooking chocolate, and ate it. The music was booming out around me, but I wasn't inside it, it was more like part of the house, the dining-room table, or the pictures on the wall. Then I started swaying back and forth again and it was as though I were devouring the music and had it inside me. Especially when I closed my eyes.

Someone downstairs was calling me.

I opened my eyes and gasped.

Had they forgotten something and come back?

I dashed into the bedroom and turned the volume right down.

"What *are* you doing?" Yngve called from downstairs.

Oh. What a relief.

"Nothing," I said. "I borrowed one of your records."

He came up the stairs. Followed by another boy. I hadn't seen him before. Perhaps someone from volleyball?

"Have you gone completely nuts?" Yngve said. "You can *burst* the speakers. They're probably ruined now. You damned idiot!"

"I didn't know," I said. "Sorry. Really sorry."

The other boy smiled.

"This is Trond," Yngve said. "And this is my stupid little brother."

"Hi, little brother," Trond said.

"Hi," I said.

Yngve went into his room, turned up the volume, and placed his head against the speakers.

"You haven't burst them, fortunately," he said, straightening up. "You were lucky. You'd have bought me some new ones otherwise. I would have personally made sure you did."

He looked at me.

"Have they been gone long?"

I shrugged.

"Half an hour," I said.

Yngve closed his bedroom door, and I hung around in the living room for a while until I spotted Marianne and Solveig outside. They were pushing a stroller. I went out and ran after them.

"Why don't we walk together?" I said.

"All right," they said. "Where are you going?"

"Up."

"Who are you going to see?"

I shrugged.

"Whose baby is that?"

"The Leonardsens'."

"How much are you getting?"

"Five kroner."

"Are you saving up for something?"

"Nothing special. A jacket maybe."

"I'm going to buy a new jacket, too," I said. "A black Matinique. Have you seen it?"

"No."

"The sleeves are long and they're made of a different material from the rest. Sort of wavy. And it's got a little flap down the middle covering the zipper. What kind of jacket are you going to get?"

Marianne shrugged.

"A coat, I was thinking."

"A coat? A light color?"

"Maybe. Quite short."

"You're the only boy who talks about clothes," Solveig said.

"I know," I said. And it was something I had discovered recently. It was so difficult to talk to girls. Once you had taken their hats or shouted a few bad words after them that was where it usually ended. Well, you could talk to them about homework. But nothing else. Then I suddenly realized. Clothes, that was what they were interested in. All you had to do was chat away.

As we got closer to B-Max, I said bye and ran down the slope to the play area, which was deserted, then up the grass slope to the old car wreck, which was deserted, then over to the soccer field, which was deserted, and over the fence to Prestbakmo's and the front of the house, where I rang the bell. But Geir was having dinner, and afterward he was going up to Vemund's.

Oh, yes.

The road, too, was deserted. It was Sunday, dinnertime, kids were eating or they were out visiting or they were on a trip with their parents.

Then I had a sudden brainwave: Yngve had a friend with him! Perhaps I could join them?

I ran down the hill, but their bikes had gone, they must have already left.

What could I do?

It was cloudy and not very warm. There probably wasn't anyone at the Rock.

Slowly I started walking down to the pontoons. Probably no one there, either, but if nothing else I could look at the various boats and breathe in the distinctive smell of fiberglass and wood, gasoline and salt water.

No, a whole crowd was there.

I mingled with them unobtrusively. Some of them had boats, they were sitting on board and spitting into the water while listening to those on the pontoon who didn't have a boat but had come to be close to those who did. I stood with them although I had no dreams of ever owning a boat, it was so unrealistic that I might just as well have dreamed about waking up in the Viking Age the next morning, as a boy had done in one of the books I was reading. No, if I dreamed about anything, it was a pair of new, white sneakers with the light-blue Nike logo, like the ones Yngve had, or new light-blue Levi's jeans, or a light-blue Catalina jacket. Or a new pair of Puma soccer cleats, an Admiral tracksuit, or a pair of Umbro shorts. Or Speedo trunks. I thought a lot about the black-and-white Adidas Olympia sneakers. Then there was a pair of shin pads with instep protection I wanted, and a Puma bag, and for winter Atomic slalom skis and Dynastar slalom poles. I wanted slalom pants and a genuine down jacket. Splitkein fiberglass skis, new Rottefella bindings. And light-colored, Sami reindeer-hide boots, the ones with the little curled-up toe. I wanted a new, white shirt and a red college sweater. I had mentally chosen white rubber boots instead of the dark-blue ones I had now. I would also have liked a pink coral necklace I had seen, white in a pinch.

Boats, mopeds, and cars interested me less. But as I couldn't say this to anyone I had a few favorite brands among them, too. Boat: a ten-footer With Dromedille with a five-horsepower Yamaha engine. Moped: Suzuki. Car: BMW. These choices had a lot to do with the unusual letters. *Y, Z, W.* For the same reason I was drawn to Wolverhampton Wanderers, it was the first soccer team I supported, and even after Liverpool took over that role, my heart still beat for the Wolves, who else when their ground was called Molineux and their logo was a wolf's head on an orange background?

Trousers, jackets, sweaters, shoes, and sports gear were on my mind a lot because I wanted to look good and I wanted to win. When John McEnroe, whom I rated as perhaps the all-time greatest, got that dangerous glint in his eye after a line judge's decision, when he glared up at the umpire while bouncing the ball on the court before serving, I thought desperately, No, don't do it, don't do it, it won't help, you can't afford to lose the point, don't do it! – and could barely watch when he did it anyway and started to swear at the line judge, perhaps even sling his racket to the ground so hard it bounced up several meters. I identified with him to such a degree that I cried every time he lost, and couldn't bear to be indoors, but had to go out onto the road, where I sat on the concrete barriers mourning the defeat, my cheeks wet with tears. The same applied to Liverpool. A defeat in the FA Cup Final drove me outside onto the road with my face streaming. On that team I liked Emlyn Hughes best, he was the one I rooted for, but I liked the others, too, of course, especially Ray Clemence and Kevin Keegan, before he went to Hamburg and Newcastle. In one of Yngve's soccer magazines I had read a comparison of Kevin Keegan and his replacement, Kenny Dalglish. They were compared point by point, and even though they had their own strengths and weaknesses, they came out of it fairly even. But one thing that had been written left a searing mark on me. The article said that Kevin Keegan was an extrovert while Kenny Dalglish was an introvert.

Just seeing the word "introvert" threw me into despair.

Was I an introvert?

Wasn't I?

Didn't I cry more than I laughed? Didn't I spend all my time reading in my room?

That was introverted behavior, wasn't it?

Introvert, introvert, I didn't want to be an introvert.

That was the last thing I wanted to be, there could be nothing worse.

But I was an introvert, and the insight grew like a kind of mental cancer within me.

Kenny Dalglish kept himself to himself.

Oh, so did I! But I didn't want that. I wanted to be an extrovert! An extrovert!

An hour later, after I had taken the road through the forest and climbed a tree to find out how far I could see, I ran onto the road the moment Mom's Beetle came up the hill. I waved, but she didn't see me and I ran as fast as I could after the car, up the hill, across the short, flat stretch, and into the drive, where she got out of the car, hitched her bag over her shoulder, and shut the door.

"Hi," she said. "Would you like to help me bake some bread?"

That might have been the year Dad lost his grip on us.

Many years later he was to say Bergen was where he started drinking.

It came up casually, I was visiting him one summer at the beginning of the nineties, he was drunk, and I said I was going to move to Iceland that winter, and he said, Iceland, I've been there, to Reykjavik.

"Have you really?" I said. "When would that have been?'

"It was when I was living in Bergen, you remember," he said. "I had a girlfriend there, she was Icelandic, and we went to Reykjavik together."

"While you were with Mom?"

"Yes. I was thirty-five and living in student housing."

"You don't have to make an excuse. You can do what you like."

"Yes, I can. Thank you, son."

None of this came to our ears at the time, of course, and we didn't have the experience to imagine it, either. All that counted for me was that he wasn't at home. But even though the house opened up, and for the first time in my life I could do what I wanted, in a strange way he was still there, the thought of him went through me like a lightning strike if I brought dirt in with me to the hall or if I dropped crumbs on the table while eating or even if juice ran down my chin while eating a pear. Can't you even eat a pear without making a mess, boy, I could hear him saying. And if I did well in a test it was to him I wanted to bring the news, not Mom, that wasn't the same. However, what was happening outside was slowly changing character, it was becoming both better and worse, it was as though the gentle world of the child, where the blows that fell were muted and somehow untargeted, in the sense that they were intended for everything and nothing, became sharper and clearer, any doubt was removed, it is *you* and what *you* say that we dislike, and this was a red line, while something else opened and this something else had nothing to do with me personally, although perhaps it affected me to an even greater degree, because I was a part of it, and that part had *nothing* to do with my family, it belonged to *us*, to those of us who were out there. I was tremendously attracted to almost all the girls that autumn as I started the fifth class, but I didn't perceive them as radically different, I had something inside me that enabled me to approach them. I had no idea this was a huge blunder, actually, the biggest blunder a boy can commit.

We had an older woman teacher that year, her name was Fru Høst, she taught us a range of subjects and she liked to set up role plays. Often she chose little events for dramatization, and I always volunteered, it was my favorite activity, everyone looked at me and I could be someone else. I had a special talent for acting girls' parts. I was good at it. I flicked my hair behind my ears, pouted a little, swung my hips as I walked, and spoke in a slightly more affected voice than normal. Fru Høst sometimes laughed so much tears were rolling down her cheeks.

One evening I was hanging out with Sverre, who also liked role plays and was also a good student and bore a strong enough resemblance to me for two substitue teachers to think, independently of each other, that we were twins, and I suggested going to visit Fru Høst. She lived three kilometers or so east of the estate.

"Good idea," Sverre said. "But my bike's got a flat. And it's a bit of a hike on foot."

"Let's hitch," I said.

"Okay."

We walked down to the crossroads and stood by the curb. I had hitchhiked quite a lot the previous year, mostly with Dag Magne, to Hove or up to Roligheden or some of the other places we found appealing, and we had never stood there for more than an hour without getting a lift.

This evening the first car stopped.

There were two guys inside.

We got in. They were playing loud music; the windows were vibrating from the bass. The driver turned to us.

"And where are you going?"

We told him, he put the car in gear, and drove off so fast we were pinned back against the seat.

"Who lives out there?"

"Fru Høst," Sverre said. "She's our teacher at school."

"Aha!" the one in the passenger seat said. "You're going there to cause some mischief. We did that, too, when we were younger. Went to the teachers' places and tormented the hell out of them."

"Well, we're not going to do that exactly," I said. "We're just going to visit her."

He turned and looked at me.

"Visit her? Why? Something to do with homework or what?"

"No-o," I said. "We just felt like it."

He turned back. They were silent for the rest of the journey. Braked sharply at the crossroads.

"Looks like the end of the road," the driver said.

I had a bit of a bad conscience, knowing we had disappointed them, but lying wasn't an option. So I thanked them as warmly as I could.

They raced off into the darkness with the bass pounding.

Sverre and I trudged up the gravel driveway. Large leafy trees with outstretched branches on both sides. We had never been to her house, but we knew where it was.

There were two cars outside and all the windows were lit.

I rang the bell.

"My goodness," Fru Høst said in surprise, opening the door.

"We thought we would visit you," I said.

"Can we come in?" Sverre said.

She hesitated.

"I'm afraid I have visitors here. It's not such a convenient time. But did you come all this way just to visit me?"

"Yes."

"Come on in then! You can stay for half an hour if you like. In fact, I have some cookies. And some juice!"

We went in.

The living room was full of adults. Fru Høst introduced us, we sat down at the table, on stools, and she gave us a plate with three cookies on it and a glass of juice.

She said we were her favorite students and we were such good actors.

"Could they perform something for us now?" someone asked.

Fru Høst glanced at us.

"Could do," I said. "Okay with you?"

"Of course," Sverre said.

I tucked my hair behind my ears, pouted, and we were off, improvising, and it made everyone there laugh. After the performance we bowed, slightly flushed but happy to hear the applause.

I repeated the success at the fancy dress party just before Christmas when both Dag Magne and I dressed up as women, complete with makeup, dress, and handbag, and my impersonation was so good that no one recognized me, not even Dag Lothar, who I was standing next to for at least five minutes before he suddenly realized who the stranger really was.

Although I wasn't ashamed about dressing up as a girl, nor about discussing girlish things with them, I also actually went out with some of them. The best was Mariann, it lasted two weeks, we went skating together, she sat on my lap and kissed me, I went to her birthday party, the only boy, and she sat on my lap and I held her while she chatted to her friends, we made out there, too, but after a while I grew tired of it – she was without doubt one of the best-looking girls at school, although not at the absolute top – and perhaps I also felt a little sorry for her because she lived alone with her mother and sister and they were quite poor, for example, she almost never had any new clothes, her mother did the best she could with old ones and hand-me-downs, so I felt an emptiness when I was in her room and claustrophobia when we kissed, I just wanted to leave as soon as possible, and finally I persuaded Dag Magne to tell her it was over. That same day I made a terrible mistake, she was running behind me in the wet weather shelter, and as a purely reflex action I stuck my foot out, she tripped, and hit her face on the pavement, there was blood and she cried, but that wasn't the worst, the worst was the ensuing fury she poured over me, which the other girls united behind as they gathered round to help her. It would be wrong to say that I was popular for the next few weeks. That I hadn't meant anything by it, that I had only done it for fun, didn't get much of a sympathetic response. At times it was as though the girls really hated me, considered me some sort of scum; at others it was the opposite, not only did they want to talk to me but at the class parties we had begun to arrange, in one another's houses and at school, they also wanted to dance with me. My attitude to them was also ambivalent, at least as far as the girls in my class were concerned. On the one hand, I knew them so well that after close to five years at school I was completely indifferent toward them; on the other hand, they had started changing, the bulges under their sweaters were growing, their hips were widening, and they were behaving differently, they had risen above us, suddenly when they looked at boys, they were from two or three classes up. With our high-pitched voices, more or less furtive glances, as we admired all the attributes they now possessed, we were no more than air to them. But even though they were so important, they knew nothing about the world they were moving toward. What did they know about men and women and desire? Had they read Wilbur Smith, where women were taken by force under stormy skies? Had they read Ken Follett, where a man shaves a woman's pussy while she lies in a foam-filled bathtub with her eyes closed? Had they read *Insect Summer* by Knut Faldbakken, the passage that I knew by heart, when he takes her panties off in the hay? Had they ever gotten their hands on a porn magazine? And what did they know about music? They liked what everyone liked, the Kids and all the other crap on the hit lists, it meant nothing to them, not really, they had no idea what music was or what it could be. They could barely dress, they turned up at school wearing the strangest combinations of clothes and didn't realize. And they were looking down on me? I had read Wilbur Smith and Ken Follett and Knut Faldbakken, I had been flicking through porn mags for years, I listened to bands who really counted, and I knew how to dress. And was I supposed to be inferior to them?

To demonstrate the true state of affairs, I pulled off a little coup in the music lesson. Every Friday we had something we called "Class Top of the Pops." Six of us would bring along a song that everyone voted on afterward. Mine always came last, whatever I played. Led Zeppelin, Queen, Wings, the Beatles, the Police, the Jam, Skids – the result was the same, one or two votes, last. I knew they were voting against me and not the music. They weren't really listening to the music. This irritated me beyond endurance. I complained to Yngve and he not only understood how irritating it was, because he disliked hit list music, too, but he also came up with a way to trick them. The Kids' second record hadn't been released yet. One Friday I took with me the Aller Værste!'s first LP, *Materialtretthet*, which Yngve had bought a few days before, and said that I had an advance copy of the Kids' new record. The music teacher was in on my ruse and played the first song off the LP, which was still in a white inside sleeve because, as I told them, the record was so new that the cover hadn't been designed yet. For them the Aller Værste! was the worst of the lot, the last time I had played a song by them, the single "Rene Hender," they had shouted, *Rene Hender! Rene Hender!* after me for several days, but when the first notes of the band's first song sounded in the classroom it was to mumbles of appreciation and mounting enthusiasm, which culminated when the vote was taken and it transpired that the Aller Værste!, under the pseudonym of the Kids, had won hands down. How the triumph shone in my eyes as I was able to stand up and say that they had *not* voted for the Kids but for the Aller Værste! I said this proved that they weren't interested in the music, there were other issues determining their votes. How angry they were! But there was nothing they could say. I had fooled them too well for that.

Of course, I never heard the last of it. I was conceited, I thought I was quite something, I always had to like weird things, not what everyone else liked. That wasn't true, though, in fact I liked good music and not bad music, surely that wasn't my fault? – and I learned more and more about it, thanks to Yngve and his music magazines, which I plowed through, and to the records he played me. Bands like Magazine, the Cure, the Stranglers, Simple Minds, Elvis Costello, Skids, Stiff Little Fingers, XTC, the Norwegian groups Kjøtt, Blaupunkt, the Aller Værste!, the Cut, Stavangerensemblet, DePress, Betong Hysteria, Hærværk. He also taught me more and more chords on the guitar, and when he wasn't at home, I would play by myself with the black Gibson plectrum in my hand and the black Fender strap over my shoulder. To be on the safe side, I also bought a teach-yourself drums book, carved two sticks, placed some books around me in a circle on the floor, the one on the left was the hi-hat, the one next to it the snare drum, and the three books above them the tomtoms. The only person on my wavelength was Dag Magne, with whom I was spending more and more time. We were mostly up at his house, playing records and trying to copy the songs on his twelve-string guitar, but he also came down to ours, where we read magazines because Mom's ban was no longer absolute, while listening to my cassettes and talking about girls or the band we were going to start, especially what we were going to call it. He wanted it to be Dag Magne's Anonymous Disciples; I wanted it to be Blood Clot. Both were equally good, we agreed, and we didn't need to make a decision until the time was ripe and we were performing on a stage.

In this way winter passed, with the first class parties, where we played spin the bottle and danced slow ones, round and round on the floor holding some of the girls we had been in the same class with for five years and knew better than our sisters, and my head almost exploded when I held Anne Lisbet's body so close to mine. The fragrance of her hair, the sparkling eyes that were bursting with life. And, oh, the little breasts under the thin, white blouse.

Wasn't that a *fantastic* feeling?

It was completely new, unknown for all these years, but now I knew it, now I wanted to go there again.

Winter passed, spring came, with its light, which every day held the passage to night open for a little longer, and with its cold rain, causing the snow to slump and dwindle. One of these March mornings, oppressed by the darkness and the rain, I went into the kitchen to have breakfast as usual. Mom had already left, she was on the early shift. She had forgotten to switch off the radio. Even in my room I had gathered that something had happened in the night because the voices on the radio – I could hear the resonance but not the words – sounded unusually dramatic. I buttered a piece of bread, added a slice of salami, and poured milk into a glass. There had been an accident in the North Sea, an oil platform had capsized. Raindrops slid slowly down the outside of the windows. The faint thrum of the rain on the roof surrounded the house like a membrane. The gutters were running. Up at Gustavsen's a car was started, the headlights were switched on. It was a catastrophe, a number of people were missing, no one knew how many. When I arrived at B-Max half an hour later, my trousers tucked into my boots and my waterproof hood tied tightly around my face, no one spoke of anything else. Everyone knew someone who knew someone who had a father or a brother working on that particular platform. Alexander Kielland, it was called, and apparently one leg had given way. Was it a hundred-year wave that had caused it? A bomb? A construction fault?

In the first lesson the teacher talked about the accident, even though it was a math class. I wondered what Grandad would be saying now. He always told us we should find a job in oil. Oil was the future. But other signals were coming in from elsewhere: an item on the news had opened with a forecast that the oil reserves would soon be running out, it was happening faster than anyone would have believed, within a mere twenty-five years it would all be gone. I was fascinated by the year that was quoted, 2004, because it was so far into the future, and actually unreal, but treated here as a sober reality, different in kind from the one you met in science fiction books and magazines and hence shocking: would 2004 ever *really* arrive? In *our* lifetimes? At the same time I was also unnerved by the doom and gloom in these men's voices warning of terrible things to come and despondent that something was going to come to an end. I didn't like that; I wanted everything to last and go on forever. All ends were frightening. Therefore I hoped that Jimmy Carter would get a second term and that Odvar Nordli and the Socialist Party would win the next election. I liked Jimmy Carter. I liked Odvar Nordli even though he was always so drained and exhausted. I didn't like Mogens Glistrup or Olof Palme, there was something smarmy about them, about their lips and eyes. Einar Førde and Reuilf Steen also had it, though not so much. But I liked Hanna Kvanmo. Not Golda Meir and not Menachem Begin, despite the Camp David Agreement. It was hard to judge Anwar Sadat. The same applied to Brezhnev, on quite a different scale, though. When I saw him standing there in his fur coat and hat, with the bushy eyebrows above the narrow Mongolian eyes in his expressionless face, mechanically waving to the parade below, as one artillery rocket after the other rolled past, surrounded by thousands of identical goose-stepping soldiers, I didn't see him as human, he was something else, impossible to relate to.

Did I like Per Kleppe?

Yes, in a way, I certainly hoped with a passion that Kleppe's anti-inflation packages would work.

I liked Hans Hammond Rossbach, but I considered Trygve Bratteli a bit odd with that low, whispering voice of his and his strange *r*'s, the narrow shoulders and the big, skull-like head with the thick, black eyebrows.

The accident in the North Sea was the main topic of conversation for a quarter of an hour, then the lesson proceeded as usual, that is, we worked on sums in our books while the teacher walked between the rows of desks helping whoever needed it as the hand of darkness outside released its grip on the morning and it slowly became lighter. In the break someone said there might be air pockets inside the platform where you could survive for several days. Others said no parents from our school had been on board, but the father of a pupil at Roligheden was missing. It was hard to know where all the rumors were coming from, or how true they were. In the next lesson we had Norwegian. When Frøken sat down at her desk I put up my hand.

"Yes, Karl Ove?"

"Have you corrected our essays?"

"You'll have to wait and see," she said.

But she must have because the next thing she did was to go through some words and rules on the blackboard, which presumably were examples of the mistakes we had made in the essays we had handed in the Thursday before.

Yes indeed. The big pile of exercise books was taken from her bag and put on the desk.

"There were lots of excellent essays this time," she said. "I could have read out all of them, but there wasn't enough time, so I chose four. This doesn't necessarily mean they are the best, as you know. Everyone in the class writes good essays."

I stared at the pile to see if I could recognize mine. It wasn't the one on top, that was for sure.

Anne Lisbet put up her hand.

She was wearing a white sweater. It suited her so well. Her black hair and black eyes went well with white, and her red lips and the redness in her cheeks, which always flushed when she came into the warm, did too.

"Yes?" Frøken said.

"Can we knit while you read?" Anne Lisbet said.

"Yes, I don't have a problem with that," Frøken said.

Four of the girls leaned forward and took out some knitting from their satchels.

"Can we do our homework as well?" Geir Håkon said.

Someone giggled.

"Put your hand up like everyone else, Geir Håkon," Frøken said. "But the answer is, of course, no."

Geir Håkon smiled, blushing, not because he had been put in his place but because he had ventured to speak. He was always pink-faced when he spoke in class.

Frøken began to read. The first was not mine. But there were three left, I thought, stretching my legs out under the desk. I liked the first lessons, when it was dark outside and it was like we were sitting in a bright capsule, all of us with slightly messy hair and sleepy eyes and these soft-focus movements that the day seemed to sharpen until everyone was running around shouting over one another with wide-open eyes and flapping limbs.

The second essay wasn't mine, either. Nor the third.

I peered up uneasily as she lifted the fourth book. That wasn't mine, was it?

Oh. She wasn't going to read it.

Something inside me slumped with disappointment. While something else soared. My essay was the best, I knew that, and she knew that. Yet she hadn't read it the previous time, nor this. What was the point of writing well if that was what happened? The next time I would write as badly as I could.

Finally she put the wretched essay down.

I put up my hand.

"Why didn't you read mine?" I said. "Wasn't it any good?"

Her eyes narrowed for a second, then opened, and she smiled.

"I have received twenty-five essays. I can't read all of them out. Surely you can understand that? Your essays are in fact among those I read out most often. This time it was someone else's turn."

She clapped her hands.

"And they were really fantastic this time. What imagination you have! I really enjoyed all of them."

She nodded to Geir B, who jumped to his feet and went to the desk. He was the class monitor and had to hand out the essays. I scanned mine. About a mistake a page. At the end she had written: *Imaginative and elegant, Karl Ove, but perhaps the story finished a little abruptly? Very few mistakes, but you have to work on your writing more!*

We had to write about something in the future. I had written about a journey in space. That is, I had spent so much time describing the various training programs the astronauts went through that ten pages were already covered before the day of the launch, so after some deliberation I decided the trip would be cancelled at the last moment because of a fault and the astronauts would go home with their work left undone.

Somewhere in the essay I had written *Hotel*, and she had added an extra *l* in her red looped script. I put up my hand and she came over.

"'Hotell' is spelled with one *l*. I know that. I saw it in a book, so I'm absolutely sure."

She leaned over. Soap fragrance rose from her hands, and from her neck a faint scent of a summery perfume.

"Ah, well, in one way you're right. 'Hotel' with one *l* is English. There are two *l*'s in Norwegian."

"Hotel Phønix has one *l*," I said. "And that's in Norway. And on top of that, it's in Arendal!"

"You're right."

"So it's not a mistake after all?"

"No. Let's say that. And it was a good essay, Karl Ove."

She straightened up and went back to her desk. Her words were warming, even though they were only meant for my ears.

Outside, the rain and the wind continued. The trees beyond the school grounds swayed and creaked, and when we went into the gym at the end of the break, the wind was gusting against the external walls with such force that it sounded like waves hitting them. The ventilation grilles howled and wheezed as though the building were alive, a huge beast full of rooms, corridors, and shafts that had settled here beside the school, and in its despondency sang lonely laments. Or perhaps it was the sounds that were alive, I wondered, sitting on the bench in the changing room and undressing. They rose and fell, whirled around for a while, drifting here, drifting there, as if in the middle of a game. I stood up, naked, took my towel, and went into the shower, which was already hot with the steam. I found a place among the throng of pale, almost marble-white boys' bodies, and was engulfed by the hot water that first hit the top of my head and then ran in steady streams down my face and chest, neck and back. My hair stuck to my forehead and I closed my eyes. That was when someone shouted.

"Tor's got a hard-on! Tor's got a hard-on!"

I opened my eyes and looked over at Sverre, the boy who had shouted. He was pointing across the narrow room to where Tor was standing, with his arms down by his sides, his dick in the air, and a smile on his face.

Tor had the biggest dick in the class, well, perhaps, in the whole school. It dangled between his legs like a classic pork sausage and it was no secret because he always wore tight trousers and he placed it at an angle, pointing upward, so that everyone could see. Yes, it was big. But now, in its erect state, it was enormous.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat," Geir Håkon shouted.

Everyone looked at him, there was a sudden excitement in the atmosphere, and it was obvious something had to be done. Such an extraordinary circumstance could not be allowed to go to waste.

"Let's take him to Fru Hensel!" Sverre shouted. "Come on, quick, before it's too late!"

Fru Hensel was our gym teacher. She came from Germany, spoke broken Norwegian, was strict, neat, and prim, which was emphasized by her narrow glasses and her tightly pinned-up hair. She was meticulous yet distant, in sum what we called snooty. As a teacher she was a nightmare because she had a predilection for gym apparatus and hardly ever let us play soccer. When Sverre suggested taking Tor to her – she was tidying up in the gymnasium, still with her whistle around her neck, wearing her blue tunic and white tights – we all knew it was perfect.

"No," Tor said. "Don't do that!"

Sverre and Geir went over and grabbed him by the arms.

"Come on!" Sverre shouted. "We need a couple more of you!"

Dag Magne went over, and with Geir B, they grabbed Tor's legs and lifted him. Tor protested and writhed as they carried him out of the shower, but rather halfheartedly. The rest of us followed. And it was quite a sight. Tor, stark naked with an enormous bone, carried by four boys, also naked, followed by a procession of more naked boys, through the changing room and into the large, cold gymnasium where Fru Hensel, who was around thirty years old, turned to us from the stage at the far end.

"What do you want?" she said.

Those carrying Tor *ran* over with him. Once in front of Fru Hensel, they straightened him up as though he were a statue to be examined, left him like that for five seconds or so, then laid him down, and charged back to the changing room.

Fru Hensel said nothing, other than *No, no, boys, this really is not a good idea* and she did nothing. There were no screams, no howls, no bulging eyes, and no gaping mouth, as perhaps we had hoped. Nevertheless, it had been a success. We had shown her Tor's massive hard-on.

In the changing room afterward we discussed what would happen now. Few believed there would be any consequences, for the simple reason that it would be embarrassing for her to take the matter any further. We were wrong. It turned into a big affair, the headmaster came to the class, the four boys who had carried Tor were given detentions, and the rest of us a lecture we would never forget. The only person to come out of this with his honor intact was Tor, who now emerged as a victim – the headmaster, the class teacher, and Fru Hensel regarded the incident as a case of bullying – and a winner, for now everyone knew, also the girls, this sensational detail of his physique without his having to lift a finger.

That night I posed naked in front of the mirror for a long time.

It was easier said than done. The only full-length mirror we had was in the hall by the stairs. I couldn't exactly stand there naked, even if there was no one in the house because someone could come at any moment and even if I reacted quickly they would still see my butt beating a swift retreat up the stairs.

No, it had to be the bathroom mirror.

But it was designed solely for faces. If you got up close and had your legs as far back as possible you could catch a glimpse of your body but from such a bizarre angle that it told you nothing.

So I waited until Mom had finished washing up after dinner and taken a seat in the living room with the newspaper and a cup of coffee. Then I went into the kitchen and fetched a chair. If she asked what I was doing with it, I could say I was going to put the cassette recorder on it while I was in the bath. If she asked why it couldn't be on the floor as usual, I could say I had heard water and electricity were dangerous if they came into contact, and water often slopped on the floor when I had a bath.

But she didn't ask.

I locked the door, undressed, placed the chair by the wall, and clambered up.

First I looked at the front of my body.

My dick wasn't like Tor's, not at all. More like a little cork. Or a kind of spring because it quivered when you flicked it lightly.

I put it in my hand. How big was it?

Then I turned and looked at it from the side. In fact, it seemed a bit bigger then.

Anyway, it looked like all the dicks in our class, apart from Tor's, didn't it?

I fared worse with my arms. They were so thin. And my chest was thin. I had a sudden image of it from a Norway Cup photo and the way it tapered the closer it came to my head. And that was definitely not how it was meant to be. I was supposed to do push-ups in training, but I always cheated because in reality, and only I knew this, I couldn't do a *single* one.

I climbed down from the chair, ran the water into the bath, and while it splashed out from the tiny mouth under the miniature iron girder construction that the two eyes, one red and one blue, rested on, I hurried into my bedroom, grabbed the cassette recorder, inserted *Outlandos d'Amour*, which for me was bath music, put it on the chair, pressed PLAY, and carefully stepped into the bathtub. The hot water stung my skin so much it was impossible to sit. But I managed. I sat, got up, sat, got up, sat, got up until my skin was used to the temperature and I could lie there letting the heat wash over me while the music poured from the little recorder and I sang "So Lonely" by the Police at the top of my voice, dreaming about becoming famous and what all the girls I knew would say then.

I caught every little nuance in Sting's voice, even the whimper at the end. Now and then I banged my fists on the edge of the bath in my enthusiasm. When the song had finished I dried my hands on a towel, turned the cassette over, and wound forward to "Masoko Tanga," another favorite of mine.

Oh, "Masoko Tanga"!

Afterward I stood in front of the wardrobe in my bedroom looking for clothes to wear. There were still some hours of the evening left.

It had to be the light-blue shirt with the white buttons and the dark-blue Levi's.

"When are we going to buy clothes for the seventeenth of May?" I said to Mom, stopping in front of her in the living room.

"It's only the end of March now," she said. "We've got plenty of time."

"Perhaps it would be cheaper now?" I said.

"We'll have to see," she said. "We haven't got much money now, either, you know, as Dad is studying."

"But we've got a little?" I said.

She smiled.

"Of course you'll have new clothes for the seventeenth."

"And shoes."

"And shoes."

The seventeenth of May was still the high point of spring for us, as Christmas was of the winter. At school we sang "Vi Ere En Nasjon Vi Med," "Norge I Rødt," "Hvitt og Blått," and "Ja, Vi Elsker," we learned about Henrik Wergeland and what happened at Eidsvoll in 1814. At home, ribbons and flags were taken out and all the flutes and horns we could find. On the day itself flags were hoisted on all the masts, and from very early morning families came out of their houses wearing traditional costume, dresses or suits, covered with capes or coats if it was cold or raining, children with flags in their hands, now and then an instrument case, for quite a few of my neighbors played in marching bands and wore uniforms instead of their finery, which they changed into later. The uniform of the Tromøya school band consisted of a mustard-yellow jacket and black trousers with a white stripe down the sides and a black Foreign Legion–style kepi on top. Their chests were festooned with medals acquired at the innumerable gatherings they had attended. Then car after car left front drives, onto the road and into Arendal, where you had to park well outside the center because people were trickling in from every direction and the streets were packed with crowds lining the long road along which the procession would pass. And the procession, that was us. We assembled in Tyholmen, beneath the standard of Sandnes School, which we were proud to walk behind in an almost endlessly long line consisting not only of all Arendal's schools but all the schools in the district. Then we walked in two lines up and down the streets, in a sea of people, which you had to keep a constant eye on, because your parents, whom you had to wave to and who had to take a photo of you, could be anywhere.

That day, the seventeenth of May, 1980, was different from all the other Constitution Days I had experienced. It was raining when we got up, and I was upset about that because I had to wear a waterproof anorak and trousers over my new clothes. I had been given light-blue Levi's, a pair of white Tretorn tennis shoes, and a grayish-white, waist-length jacket. I was especially pleased with the jeans. Outside the houses up the hill there were sporadic protracted laments from the instruments the kids were carrying. Car doors slammed, shouts carried across garden paths, the atmosphere was feverish but expectant. As we approached the assembly area in Tyholmen, with the skies opening in unfailingly regular bursts of drizzle, it became clear that we would be walking side by side with a class from Roligheden School. I played soccer with some of them, but I had never seen many of the faces.

A girl turned.

She had wavy blond hair, large blue eyes, and she smiled at me.

I didn't smile back, but I held her gaze and then she turned forward.

The procession began to move. Somewhere far ahead a band was playing. One of our teachers began to sing and we joined in. After marching for perhaps twenty minutes many began to find their patience waning, especially the boys, we started laughing and fooling around, and when some boys used the flag to lift girls' skirts, and the idea caught on, I made my way toward the blond girl, along with Dag Magne, fortunately, so that I was part of something and not just on my own. I put the flag under the pleat of her skirt and lifted, she spun on her heel, held it down with one hand, and shouted, *Don't you dare, don't you dare*. But the eyes that looked at me were smiling.

I did it to some other girls as well, until it would no longer be suspicious if I approached her again.

"Don't do that!" she said this time, and ran ahead, away from me. "Don't be so childish!"

Was she really angry?

Seconds passed. Then she turned and smiled. Briefly, but it was enough, she wasn't angry, she didn't think I was childish.

But wasn't that an Østland accent?

Was she not from here? Was she only visiting?

Then I would never see her again.

No, no, no. Relax. Visitors wouldn't be allowed in the school procession!

I suddenly noticed the flag I was holding and raised it. Last seventeenth of May Dad was annoyed I had let the flag droop as I passed them.

Dag Magne beamed his broadest smile. A camera flashed. His parents were in the front row. They were unlike their normal selves, their Sunday best looked strange on them.

I observed the girl again.

She wasn't very tall and she was wearing a pink jacket, a light-blue skirt, and thin, white stockings. Her nose was small, her mouth large, and she had a little cleft in her chin.

I felt pains in my stomach.

When she spun round to stop her skirt being lifted I had seen that she had big breasts, her jacket had been open and the white sweater beneath insubstantial.

Oh, dear God, please let me go out with her.

"Hi, Karl Ove!" Mom shouted from somewhere. I scanned the rows of people. There they were, on the other side of the street from Hotel Phønix. Mom waved and lifted her camera to her eye, Dad sent me a nod.

On our way back to the center she turned and looked at me again. Straight afterward the procession broke up and she was lost in the crowd.

I didn't even know her name.

After the school procession in Arendal everyone drove back home to the estate, where clothes were changed, food was eaten, and perhaps also TV broadcasts of the children's processions around the country were watched before everyone piled into their cars, rather more informally dressed, and headed for Hove, where the climax of the celebrations would take place. Here there were stalls selling hot dogs, ice cream, and pop, stalls where you could buy a lottery ticket and play tombola, organized games, and a huge crowd of children with ten-krone notes burning a hole in their pockets, running here to buy a hot dog, running there to jump in a sack race, with ketchup on their sleeves and ice cream smeared around their mouths and a bottle of Coke with a straw in their hands. We hadn't quite outgrown that, but the speed with which we did everything had perhaps dropped, compared with the previous year. For my part, I searched for the girl in the procession all afternoon, if I caught sight of a pink jacket or a blue skirt my heart almost stopped beating, but it was never her, she wasn't there. Even if I knew which class she was in and even if I played soccer with two boys who were in the same class as her, I couldn't ask them, they would realize straightaway what was going through my mind and wouldn't hesitate for a moment, they would spread it far and wide. However, sooner or later I would see her again, that much I did know, Tromøya was not that big.

Dad moved home two weeks later, proud to have finished his studies in a matter of months. He had sold his stamp collection, he had given up his political commitments, the garden was immaculate, he was so on top of his teaching it was boring. What he was doing was applying for new jobs. And if he got one, we would move. He hoped the coming year as a bog-standard *ungdomskole* teacher would be his last.

He bought himself a boat at the beginning of the summer, a Rana Fisk 17 with a twenty-five-horsepower outboard motor. Mom, Yngve, and I were standing on the pontoons when he came back from Arendal for the first time. He was standing behind the wheel as the boat skimmed across the water and although he didn't smile or wave to us I could see he felt proud.

He eased back on the throttle and the prow of the boat sank, but not enough for him to be able to turn into our berth as he had planned, the boat overshot and bumped into the pontoon. He reversed, put the engine into gear, and glided in. Threw the mooring rope to Mom, who didn't quite know what to do with it.

"Does it go well?" I said.

"Yes, it certainly does," he said. "You saw, didn't you?"

He jumped ashore with a red gasoline canister in his hand. Secured the tarpaulin, stood for a moment inspecting the boat, then we got into the car and drove up toward home, with Dad at the wheel even though it was Mom's car.

When the school year began I had to join him casting nets in the afternoons and pulling them up at the crack of dawn. We gulped down a couple of pieces of bread, our faces drawn with tiredness, and then we went into the darkness. He started the car and drove down to the pontoons, which lay quiet and deserted, undid the green tarpaulin on the boat, put the red canister of gasoline in its place, loosened the mooring ropes, got the engine going, and carefully reversed out. I sat at the front, behind the windshield, shoulders hunched, arms close to my body, and hands in my pockets because it was cold, and even though the boat was faster than the old double-ender, the trip to the far side of the island still took over half an hour. Dad stood at the wheel concentrating on steering through the narrow passage between the shore and the island of Gjerstadholmen, where there was some sunken rock he had run onto earlier that summer. As we emerged into Tromøya Sound he sat down and we plowed across, with the waves thumping against the underside of the plastic propeller and spray hurtling through the air. He usually set the nets quite close to the shore and it was my job to sit in the bow and grab the floats to which they were attached. It was difficult, they were slippery, and if I didn't succeed the first time Dad told me to get my act together, all I had to do was pick them up. My hands were already freezing, the water was obviously ice cold, and out here, in open sea, there was always a wind blowing early in the morning. Dad's hair was in wild disarray, his eyes flashed with annoyance as he reversed and steered into the wind again, and if I didn't grab the float this time, he would shout at me and I would start to cry, and then he would become even more angry and perhaps stomp forward to grab it himself, while telling me to take the wheel, steer into the fricking wind, he would say, *into the wind*, I told you, you idiot! Can't you do anything! Steering's not so easy, I said, and he replied, it's not *steewing*, it's *steering*! RRR. STEERING! I was crying and frozen and Dad leaned over the railing and pulled the float on board. Then, as we rocked on the waves, with the dawn light a stripe on the horizon, and he pulled up the net, the glow of fury in his eyes gradually abated and he would try to mitigate the effect of his outburst, but it was too late, the cold was as deep in my soul as it was in my hands, I hated him as you can only hate your father, and on the way back, with the fish still squirming in the white tub, not a word passed between us. While he gutted the fish in the utility room I packed my satchel and left for the day, which for my classmates had only just begun, but which for me had already lasted several hours.

That same autumn our band finally became a reality. The name I chose won the day, it was to be Blood Clot we wrote on our jackets and satchels, and we practiced in the basement of the new chapel. Dag Magne had arranged it, his mother did the cleaning for a doctor who was also on the church committee. He was also the only one of us who could play or evince anything that was redolent of musical talent. He played the guitar and sang, I played the guitar, Kent Arne played the bass his mother had bought for him, Dag Lothar played the drums. At the end-of-term Christmas party we were lined up to play in the gymnasium. Yngve had taught me the chords for "Forelska I Lærer'n," the Kids' big hit, "In Love with the Teacher," and even though playing that song of all songs was like sucking up, at least for me, it was the easiest song Yngve knew, and probably the only song in existence that was simple enough for us to play. Although the band came apart at the seams in the process, everyone played at their own tempo, and Kent Arne started tuning the bass in the middle, and although most of the audience was critical, even the fourth-years ventured a few remarks, and rightly so, we couldn't play, the feeling among us afterward, standing in the school playground, dressed in ripped jeans and denim jackets, and with scarves around our necks, could not be surpassed. We were in the sixth class, would soon be in the *ungdomskole*, and we were in a *band*. The fact that the band split up straight afterward, as neither Dag Lothar nor Kent Arne wanted to continue, was a setback, but Dag Magne and I carried on as a duo, for as long as it lasted, recording songs in his house, listening to music, dreaming of a breakthrough, for example at the locally famous Saga Nights, which would be in Arendal during the summer and at which new bands were allowed to play. I went up to see Håvard, who played in the town's only punk band, was five years older than us, and lived by Tromøya Bridge, and asked him if he could help us to get in. He couldn't promise anything, but he would put in a good word and we would have to wait and see.

That spring, at a school parents' evening, we performed two songs, Dag Magne on guitar and me on snare drums, first of all one I had written myself, "Tramp på en Soss," Stamp on a Snob, and then Åge Aleksandersen's "Ramp," Riff-Raff. Before we played, I gave a little introductory talk about punk to the parents.

"In recent years a completely new form of music has sprung up in the English working classes," I explained. "Some of you may have heard about it. It's called punk. Those who play punk are not great musicians but rebels who want to rebel against society. They wear leather jackets and studded belts and they've got safety pins everywhere. You could say the safety pin is their symbol."

I gazed enthusiastically across the assembly of hairdressers, secretaries, nurses, house helpers, and housewives. I was twelve years old and before every Christmas and summer for the last five years they had seen me standing on the stage, either as Joseph in the Nativity play or the mayor in *Borgmester I Byen*, and now here I was again, this time as a spokesman for punk and a member of Blood Clot.

"We're going to give you a sampler of this type of music. We'll begin with a song we wrote ourselves. It's entitled 'Tramp på en Soss.'"

Then Dag Magne, who had been standing beside me with his twelve-string guitar over his shoulder, started to play while I hit the snare drum when the whim took me.

Our next performance was in a lesson. We played the same two songs. After we had finished, most of the class whistled and the teacher, the red-bearded Finsådal, went over to Dag Magne and said his guitar playing was beginning to take off.

That hurt.

In response, in the deepest secrecy, I sent a letter to NRK, who broadcast a program where children could perform with their idols, and I wrote that I would like to play "Ramp" with Åge Aleksandersen.

For a long time I lived in hope, but no answer ever came, and slowly the dream of overnight fame as a pop star faded while another appeared: our coach, Øyvind, gathered us together at the end of a training session and said that we might be playing the pre-match game before IK Start versus Mjøndalen. For me, who, the year before, had been at the League Cup Final in Kristiansand Stadium and had seen Start win the match in the dying seconds, who had charged onto the field with several hundred others, stood under the building where the changing rooms were, singing and cheering and paying tribute to the players and even getting my hands on Svein Mathiesen's shirt, only to have it ripped from my grasp by a grown man with piggy eyes a second later, for me, who every alternate Sunday over many years had been to all the home games and whose uncle Gunnar actually knew Svein Mathiesen a little, enough to get an autograph for Yngve, for me, playing at Kristiansand Stadium, with the opportunity to be seen not only by the whole of the immense crowd but also by the players themselves, this was charged with enormous significance. The team I played for was one of the region's best, we won most matches by several goals, and had won the league every single year I had been involved, and I always thought my being one of the worst players on the team, slow and without much skill, was a temporary state of affairs, *actually* I was good, *actually* I could do everything as well as the others, it was just a question of time before it would become evident. I felt like this because *in my mind* I could knock in goals from every conceivable and inconceivable angle, like John, and steam past whoever was on the wing, like Hans Christian. All I needed to do was align my actions with my thoughts, making them one and the same, and then it was done. Why couldn't that happen during a pre-match game at Kristiansand Stadium just as easily as at a training session in Hove? Was it not the case that I always got *better* over the weeks in the autumn? In fact, from out of nowhere could I not actually ghost past one player after the other?

Yes, that was how it was. It was all in my head. And despite the fact that I still hadn't shown any of what I hoped for, strangely enough, I still had a regular spot in the midfield. Early that spring we had played our first practice match on the shale field outside the new Tromøya Sports Hall above Roligheden School, and when I was brought off at some point during the second half, my eyes were full of tears as I left the field. Even though I was looking down, the trainer realized and ran after me as I headed for the changing room. I should have stayed to see the rest of the match, but partly I was so disappointed to have been taken off that I couldn't be bothered, and partly I didn't want anyone else to see me crying.

"What's up, Karl Ove?" he said.

"Nothing," I said.

"Is it because you were taken off? Everyone has to have a go, you know. It doesn't mean you've been dropped from the team. It doesn't. It was just for today. It's a practice match."

I smiled through my tears.

"It's nothing," I said. "It's okay."

"Sure?"

"Yes," I said, feeling fresh tears building up.

"Good," he said.

After that I wondered perhaps if I would be allowed to play because he felt sorry for me, or if he didn't want to repeat the experience. It wasn't a pleasant thought, but actually being on the team meant a great deal to me, my shortcomings notwithstanding.

We trained and played home games at Kjenna, a ground immediately below the big estate in Brattekleiv and most of the boys I played with came from there.

That was when I saw her again.

The beginning of June, blue sky, not a cloud in sight. We played between cones placed in the middle of one half of the field because around the goals and in the center circle the grass was already cut up and the soil eroded, and even though the sun was low and the shadows from the trees stretched across the field it was so hot that sweat ran down my face and neck as we ran around after the ball. Birds sang in the trees on both sides of the field, gulls screamed, the occasional car roared past, somewhere in the distance the drone of a lawnmower rose and fell, and down by the makeshift changing rooms came squeals and laughter, a group of children in the hot, brown water of the Tjenna, all while we panted and puffed and kicked and the ball thudded between us. I was on the best team this season, playing with boys a year older than me whereas, because of how my birthday fell, I would be doing the same next year as last year, playing with boys a year younger. We were on top of the league by some distance, and in a month's time we would be going to the Norway Cup again, not without some hope of going all the way and playing the final in Ullevål Stadium. I had white Umbro shorts and a pair of Le Coq Sportif boots, which I polished after every session and could still turn round in my hand and admire with immense pleasure and satisfaction.

This evening four girls jumped off their bikes at the end of the field, pressed down the kickstands, and strolled laughing and chatting over to the side by the rocks, where they sat down to watch us. Girls did sometimes come and watch us like this, but I had never seen her there before. For it was her, there was no doubt. This time she was wearing blue jeans and a white T-shirt.

For the rest of the session my awareness of her never left me for a moment. Everything I did, I did for her. When we had finished playing, done our stretching exercises, and the XL1 bottles had been passed around I sat down on the grass below them with Lars and Hans Christian. They shouted some insults up to the girls and received laughter and more insults in return.

"Do you know them?" I said as warily as I could.

"Yes," said Lars, bored.

"Are they in your class?"

"Yes. Kajsa and Sunnva. The others are in HC's class."

So she was called either Kajsa or Sunnva.

I leaned back with my hands behind my head on the grass and my eyes squinting into the rays of the orange sun. One of the others ducked the whole of his head into a bucket of water by the touchline. He straightened up and tossed his head. The drops of water formed a glittering arc in the air for a brief instant before dissipating. With prong-like fingers he plowed both hands through his wet hair.

"I've seen one of them before," I said. "The one on the far right. What's her name?"

"Kajsa?"

"Oh, really?"

Lars glanced at me. He had curly hair, freckles, and a slightly cheeky expression, but his eyes were warm and always had a glint.

"We're neighbors," he said. "I've known her since I learned to walk. Are you interested?"

"No-oo," I said.

Lars bored a rigid finger in my chest a few times.

"Ye-es," he grinned. "Shall I introduce you?"

"Introduce?" I said, my mouth suddenly dry.

"Isn't that what it's called, you who knows everything?"

"Yes, I suppose it is. No. Not now. That is, not at all. I'm not interested. I was just wondering. I thought I had seen her before."

"Kajsa's nice, she is," Lars said. Then he whispered: "And she's got big breasts."

"Yes," I said. I turned without thinking and looked at her. Lars laughed and got up. She looked at me.

She looked at me!

I got up, too, and followed Lars down to the changing rooms.

"Can I have some?" I said.

He threw me the XL1 bottle, I leaned back and squirted the greenish liquid through the long, narrow plastic pipe and down my throat.

"Are you going for a shower?" he said.

"No, I've got to go home," I said.

"Perhaps Kajsa will be in the showers, too," he said.

"You think?" I said. He eyed me. I shook my head. He smiled. Behind us the others straggled in. In the changing room I just put on my T-shirt, tracksuit top, and shoes, then I placed my bag on the rack of my bike and cycled home along the old gravel road through the forest where the air soon cooled in places the sun hadn't been shining for a while, and I had to close my mouth because these cool, gray pockets buzzed with large swarms of insects. The sun shone on the ridge close by, still bare after a fire the previous year, before it disappeared where the hills began and tall, dense spruce trees lined both sides of the road like a wall. My bike was the same one I'd had since I was small, a DBS kombi, with the seat and the handlebars raised as far as they would go, which made it look like a kind of mutant, a bike's first, clumsy transition from a bike. I sang at the top of my voice as I raced between all the bumps and potholes and sometimes skidded sideways with a static rear wheel.

Shoot, Shoot!
Dodiddilidodo
Shoot, Shoot!
Dodiddilidodo
Shoot, Shoot!
Dodiddilidodo

You come all flattarp he come
Groovin' out slowly he got
Ju ju eyeball he won
Holy roller he got
Here down to his knees
Got to be a joker, he just do what he pleases

Shoot, Shoot!
Dodiddilidodo
Shoot, Shoot!
Dodiddilidodo
Shoot, Shoot!
Dodiddilidodo

That was the opening track on the *Abbey Road* LP, "Come Together," or at least how it sounded to my ears. Well, I knew it wasn't exactly what they sang, but what did it matter as I whizzed down the hill in the forest, absolutely throbbing with happiness? Down at the crossroads I braked in front of a car, then picked up speed and pedaled as hard as I could up the gravel on the other side. I swallowed a midge or two and tried in vain to cough them up, crossed the main road at the top of Speedmannsbakken, and followed the cycle path down to the Fina station, where a gang of kids was sitting at the tables outside and not, as in winter, in the café. Their bikes and mopeds were parked a little way from them. I wasn't frightened of going in there anymore, the worst that could happen was that someone might make a comment, but I still didn't like it, so when I passed them it was on the other side of the road. There were three from my class with them this evening, John, and I also saw Tor and Unni, and then Mariann from the parallel class. I had been out with her. No one took any notice of me, if indeed they saw me at all.

The quickest way to cycle home was along the main road, but I jumped off on the way up to the path and began to push my bike uphill. As soon as the trees closed off the view of the main road behind me the scenery became rural and I liked the change enough to relish the extra minutes it took.

Then it was all forest, not a house or a road to be seen, there were trees everywhere, tall, broad-crowned deciduous trees, crammed with green leaves, full of chattering birds. The path, which was no more than beaten earth and bare rock face, was crossed in several places by huge roots resembling prehistoric animals. The grass growing alongside the bed of a stream was thick and lush, in the wilderness at the bottom there were fallen trees with smooth trunks, and many plants covered the bed between the dry, lifeless branches, which had been there for as long as I could remember, and behind them there was a ridge of stumps between the long grass and the new trees that had shot up. Walking down the first hundred meters of the path, you could imagine the forest was deep, indeed, endlessly deep, and full of mystery. It wasn't hard to dismiss the thought that between the branches in autumn and winter you could glimpse the long, rocky slope down from the road that went around the estate or glimpse the orange roof of one of the houses. The problem is not so much that the world limits your imagination as your imagination limits the world. But this time I was not outside to play but to surround myself with nature and to cultivate the feeling of liberation Kajsa's gaze had given me.

Kajsa, her name was Kajsa!

With my bike bumping along beside me, I trudged up the hills, across the gentle slope, then jumped on my bike again when I emerged on the road, just below the parish hall. Outside Ketil's house the road teemed with kids playing soccer. His father sat in a camping chair on the terrace wearing shorts, with his belly bulging out of an open, short-sleeved shirt. Smoke wafted over from a barbecue not far away from him.

Oh, the smell!

On the other side, Tom was washing his car. He was wearing large aviator glasses and denim shorts with long, frayed threads hanging down his thighs, otherwise nothing. I recognized the music blaring out through the open doors, which made the car look like a small, plump airplane, it was Dr. Hook. Then I reached the hill and saw the distant blue of Tromøya Sound behind the green trees, and the white gas holders on the other side. The wind forced tears from my eyes as I hurtled downhill. Another crowd of kids was playing on the road outside our house. Marianne's little brother, Geir Håkon's little brother, Bente's little brother, and Jan Atle's little brother. They said hello, I didn't say hello back, I jumped off my bike, and trundled it down the drive, where there were two cars. There was Anne Mai's big Citroën and Dagny's 2cv. I had completely forgotten they were coming, and a little shiver of pleasure went through me when I saw them.

They were sitting in the living room with Mom. She had baked a cake, perhaps there was a third left, and she had made coffee. Now they were chatting, wreathed in clouds of smoke. I said hello, they asked how I was, I said fine, I had been at soccer practice, had the school holiday started, they asked, I answered yes, and it was wonderful. Anne Mai took out a packet of Freia Ms.

"I suppose you're too old for these now?"

"Not for Ms," I said. "You're never too old for them, are you?"

I took the bag and turned to go into the kitchen when Anne Mai said: "What on earth's that on your back? Trauma?"

She laughed.

"His soccer team's called Trauma," Mom said.

"Trauma!" Dagny said. Now all three of them were laughing.

"What's wrong with it?" I said.

"That's what we work with, you know. It's when something terrible happens. You can have trauma. It was quite funny to see it on your back."

"Oh," I said. "But that's not what it means. It comes from Thruma, the old name for Tromøya. From Viking times."

They were still laughing when I went to my room. I put the Specials on the cassette recorder and lay down to read while the last rays of sun were shining on the wall beyond the bed, and the estate outside was slowly draining of noise.

Kajsa was constantly on my mind over the following weeks. I had two recurrent images of her. In one she was turning to me, with her blond hair and blue eyes, wearing the pink and light-blue clothes of the seventeenth of May. In the second she was lying naked in front of me in a field. The latter I saw every night before I went to sleep. The thought of her big, white breasts with the pink nipples made my body ache. I lay writhing while imagining various indistinct but intense things I did with her. The second image aroused something else in me, and at other moments: jumping from a cliff on the island, floating in the air with the sun on my face, I caught a glimpse of her and a wild cheer broke free from my innards, more or less at the same instant as my feet hit the surface and my body plunged into the bluish-green seawater, breaking my fall of several meters, and, surrounded by a rush of bubbles and with the taste of salt on my lips, I headed for the surface again with slow arm movements and a quiver of happiness in my chest. Or at the dinner table, while I was peeling the skin off a piece of cod, for example, or chewing a mouthful of hashed lung, which had such an unpleasant consistency, it swelled and filled my mouth at first, but when I chewed, my teeth went right through the mass, which only resisted at the last, when it stuck to my gums, then the image of her could suddenly appear and she was so radiant that everything else was pushed into the shadows. But I didn't see her at all in reality. The distance as the crow flew between our two estates could have been only a few kilometers, but the social distance was greater and could not be covered by either bike or bus. Kajsa was a dream, an image in my head, a star in the firmament.

Then something happened.

We were playing a match on the Kjenna field, the spring season was actually over, but a game had been cancelled and moved forward, so there we were, running around the grass in the heat with the usual ten to fifteen spectators when from the corner of my eye I espied three figures walking along the touchline, and I knew at once it was her. For the rest of the match I watched the spectators standing on the slope as much as the ball.

After the match a girl came over to me.

"Can I have a word with you?" she said.

"Yes, of course," I said.

A hope so wild it made me smile was lit inside me.

"Do you know who Kajsa is?" she said.

I reddened and looked down.

"Yes," I said.

"She wants me to ask you a question," she said.

"Pardon," I said.

A wave of heat surged up inside me, as though my chest were filling with blood.

"Kajsa was wondering if you would like to go out with her," she said. "Would you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Great," she said. "I'll tell her."

She made a move to leave.

"Where is she?" I said.

She turned.

"She's waiting over by the changing room," she said. "Will we see you there afterward?"

"Yes," I said. "That's fine."

As she went away I looked down at the ground for a second.

Thank God, I said to myself. Because now it had happened. Now I was going out with Kajsa!

Was it true?

Was I really going out with Kajsa?

With *Kajsa*.

Dazed, I began to walk along the touchline. Suddenly it struck me that I had a big problem. She was there and waiting for me. I would have to speak to her. We would have to do something together. What would it be?

On my way into the changing room I could either pretend I didn't see her or just flash a fleeting smile because I had to go in and change. But when I had to go out again . . .

It was a mild evening, the air smelled of grass and was filled with birdsong, we had won, and the voices rising from the changing room were animated. Kajsa was standing in the road nearby with two other girls. She was holding her bike and glanced at me when I looked over. She smiled. I smiled back.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said.

"I'll just get changed," I said. "Be out afterward."

She nodded.

In the shedlike changing room I undressed as slowly as possible while feverishly trying to find a way to extricate myself with honor. To go off with her, unprepared, was inconceivable, it would never work. So I had to find a convincing excuse.

Homework? I wondered, loosening a shin pad, slippery with sweat on the inside. No, that would give a bad impression of me.

I put one shin pad in the bag and took off the other, staring at the lake through the small window. Unwound the bandage from my foot and rolled it up. The first boys had already gone out. "Jesus Christ, are you crazy or what?" John said to Jostein, who was smacking John's face with a goalie's glove. "Give it up, you bastard," John shouted. I'm going out with Kajsa, I felt like saying, but I didn't, of course. Got up and put on my light-blue jeans instead.

"What posh pants," Jostein said.

"You're the one with posh pants," I said.

"These?" he said, motioning toward his red-and-black-striped trousers.

"Yes," I said.

"They're punk trousers, you jerk," he said.

"They're not," I said. "They're from Intermezzo, and that is definitely a posh shop."

"Is the belt posh, too?" he said.

"No," I said. "It's a punk belt."

"Good," he said. "But your pants are definitely pretty posh."

"I am not posh," I said.

"But you are a bit of a jessie," John piped up.

A jessie? What did that mean?

"Ha ha ha!" Jostein laughed. "Come on, Jessie!"

"What did you say, you daddy's boy?" I said.

"Is it my fault my father has a lot of money?" he said.

"No," I said, zipping up the blue-and-white Puma top.

"Bye," I said.

"Bye," they said, and I went out to Kajsa, without having prepared anything.

"Hi," I said, stopping in front of them, with my hands around the handlebars.

"You were so good, all of you," Kajsa said.

She was wearing a white T-shirt. Her breasts bulged beneath it. Levi's 501 with a red plastic belt. White socks. White Nike sneakers with a light-blue logo.

I swallowed.

"Do you think so?" I said.

She nodded.

"Are you coming back with us?"

"In fact, I don't have a lot of time this evening."

"No?"

"No. I really should be going now."

"Oh, that's a shame," she said, meeting my eyes. "What have you got to do?"

"I promised I would help my father with something. A wall he was building. But can't we meet tomorrow?"

"Of course."

"Where then?"

"I can go to your place after school."

"Do you know where I live?"

"Tybakken, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

I swung a leg over my bike.

"Bye!" I said.

"Bye!" she said. "See you tomorrow!"

I cycled off, casually to the observer, until I was out of sight, then I stood on the pedals, leaned forward, and began to pump like a wild man. It was absolutely fantastic and absolutely awful. Go to your place, she had said. She had known where I lived. And she wanted to be with me. Not only that. We were *going out.* I was going out with Kajsa! Oh, everything I wanted was now within reach! Though not yet. What would I talk to her about? What would we do?

When I turned into our drive half an hour later, Mom was sitting on the terrace behind the house reading the newspaper with a cup of coffee on the camping table in front of her. I went over and sat down.

"Where's Dad?" I said.

"He's gone fishing," she said. "How was the match?"

"Good," I said. "We won."

Brief silence.

"Has something happened?" Mom said, looking at me.

"No," I said.

"Something on your mind?"

"No, not really," I said.

She sent me a smile and went on reading the newspaper. The sound of a radio wafted over from Prestbakmo's. I looked up. Martha was sitting, like Mom, in a camping chair with a newspaper spread out in front of her. Nearby, next to the stone wall facing the forest, Prestbakmo himself was bent over a bed in the vegetable garden with a trowel in his hand. Then a movement on the path made me turn my head. It was Freddie, I saw at once, he was an albino and his white hair was unmistakable. He was in the fourth class and had an archery bow on his back.

I looked at Mom again.

"Do you know what a 'jessie' is, Mom?" I said.

She lowered the newspaper.

"A jessie?" she said.

"Yes."

"No, not really. But it is a girl's name."

"So, like a girl?"

"I suppose so. Why do you ask? Have you been called a 'jessie'?"

"No, not at all. I just heard it after the match today. Someone else was called it. I just hadn't heard it before."

She glanced at me, I could see she was on the point of saying something, and I got up.

"Oh well," I said. "Better bring my soccer gear in."

After supper I went into Yngve's room and told him what had happened.

"I got together with Kajsa this evening," I said.

He looked up from the school books spread over his desk and smiled.

"Kajsa? I haven't heard her name before. Who's she?"

"She's at Roligheden. In the sixth class. She looks really good."

"I don't doubt that," Yngve said. "Congratulations."

"Thanks," I said. "But there's just one thing . . . I need some advice . . ."

"Yeah?"

"I don't know . . . Well, I don't know her at all. I don't know . . . what should we do? She's coming over tomorrow, and I don't even know what to say!"

"It'll be fine," Yngve said. "Just don't think about and it'll be fine. You can always make out instead of talking!"

"Ha ha."

"It'll be fine, Karl Ove. Relax."

"Do you think so?"

"Goes without saying."

"Okay," I said. "What are you doing?"

"Homework. Chemistry. And then geography."

"I'm looking forward to starting at *gymnas*," I said.

"Lots of reading to do," Yngve said.

"Yes," I said. "All the same."

Yngve turned back to his book and I went to my room. Yngve had just finished the first year at *gymnas* and I understood he wanted to do social studies while Dad wanted him to do natural sciences, so that was what he had to do. It was a bit odd because Dad's subjects were Norwegian and English.

I put on *McCartney II* and lay down on the bed wondering what I could say and do the next day. Every so often I had an attack of the shivers. Imagine me actually going out with her! Perhaps she was lying in bed, in her room, in her house, thinking about me this very minute? Perhaps she had gone to bed, perhaps she was wearing only panties in bed? I rolled over onto my stomach and rubbed my groin against the mattress while singing "Temporary Secretary" and thinking about all that lay in store for me.

She arrived an hour after we'd had dinner. I had been pacing by the windows facing the road and was as prepared as I could be. Nevertheless, it was a shock to see her cycling up the hill. For a few seconds I was unable to breathe normally. Kent Arne, Geir Håkon, Leif Tore, and Øyvind were outside, hanging over the handlebars of their bikes, and when they all turned to look at her a rush of pride surged through me. No one had ever seen a more attractive girl in Tybakken. And it was me she had come to see.

I put on my shoes and jacket and went out.

She had stopped by them and was chatting.

I grabbed my bike and pushed it over.

"She was asking where you lived, Karl Ove!" Geir Håkon said.

"Oh yes?" I said to him. Meeting Kajsa's gaze. "Hi," I said. "You found your way here?"

"Yes, it was no problem," she said. "I didn't know exactly which house it was, but . . ."

"Shall we go?" I said.

"All right," she said.

I mounted my bike. She mounted hers.

"See you!" I said to the four boys. I turned to her. "We can go up there."

"Fine," she said.

I knew they were watching us and that they were more than ordinarily envious of me. How on earth had he done it? they were thinking. Where had he met her? And how in the name of all things living and moving had he managed to land her?

After we had cycled part of the way up, Kajsa got off her bike. I did the same. A wind rose through the forest, rustling the leaves beside us, and then it dropped. The sound of tires on pavement. Trouser legs rubbing against each other. The cork heels of her sandals on the road.

I waited for her to come alongside.

"That's a nice jacket," I said. "Where did you get it?"

"Thank you," she said. "At Bajazzo's in Kristiansand."

"Oh," I said.

We reached the crossroads with Elgstien. Her breasts were swaying; my eyes were permanently drawn to them. Did she notice?

"We can go over to the shop and see if anyone's there," I said.

"Sure," she said.

Was she regretting this already?

Should I kiss her now? Would that be right?

We were at the top of the hill and I swung a leg over the bike saddle. Waited until her feet were on the pedals, then I set off. Another gust of wind blew past us. I cycled with one hand and half-turned to her.

"Do you know Lars?" I said.

"Lars, yes," she said. "We're neighbors. And we're in the same class. Do you know him? Of course you do. You're on the same team."

"Yes," I said. "Did you watch the whole match last night?"

"Oh yes. You're a very good team!"

I didn't answer. I put my other hand on the handlebars and freewheeled down the little hill to B-Max. It was closed and there was no one around.

"Doesn't seem to be anyone here," I said. "Want to go to your house?"

"All right," she said.

I decided I would kiss her if a glimmer of a chance arose. And definitely hold her hand. Something had to happen. After all we were girlfriend and boyfriend now.

Kajsa was my girlfriend!

But no chance arose. We cycled along the old gravel road up to Kjenna, which was deserted, up the hills to her house, and stopped outside. We hadn't exchanged many words on the way, but enough to know it hadn't been a disaster.

"Mom and Dad are home," she said. "So you can't come in."

Did that mean I could when they weren't?

"Okay," I said. "But it's late. Maybe I should be getting back."

"Yes, it's pretty far!" she said.

"Shall we meet again tomorrow?" I said.

"I can't," she said. "We're going out in the boat."

"On Thursday then?"

"Yes. Will you come up here?"

"Yes, of course."

The bikes were between us the whole time. It wasn't possible to lean over and kiss her. And perhaps she wouldn't have wanted it either, right in front of her house.

I got back on my bike.

"I'll be off then," I said. "See you!"

"Bye," she said.

And I cycled off as fast as I could.

Well, it could have been worse. I hadn't gotten very far, but nothing had been ruined forever. It couldn't continue like this, I realized, we couldn't just talk, if we did, everything would wither and die. I had to kiss her; we had to do what real boyfriends and girlfriends did. But how to make the move? I had fooled around with Mariann, but I hadn't been that excited about her, it hadn't been a problem, I had just put my arms around her, pulled her to me, and kissed her. I had just taken her hand when we walked side by side. I couldn't do that with Kajsa, though, couldn't just put my arms around her, out of the blue. Imagine she didn't want it! Imagine if I couldn't pull the move off! It had to happen, and it would have to happen next time, that much was certain. And in a suitable place where no one could see us.

Thank God for the boat trip. It gave me two whole days to plan.

As I was about to fall asleep I remembered we had soccer practice on Thursday. That meant I would have to call and tell her. For all of the next day I dreaded it. Our telephone at home was in the hall, everyone could hear what was said, unless I closed the sliding door, but that was bound to arouse their curiosity, so the best would be to call from a telephone booth. There was one by the bus stop opposite the Fina station and I cycled down as late as I could, to be precise, a little after eight. If there was nothing special going on, I had to be home by half past eight, because I had to be in bed by nine-thirty on weekdays, the rule was still inflexible, even though everyone I knew stayed up later.

Having parked my bike outside, I searched for their home number in the telephone directory. What I was going to say had been reverberating around my head.

I dialed the whole number, apart from the last digit, very quickly. Then I waited a few seconds to get my breathing under control and dialed the last digit.

"Pedersen," a woman's voice said.

"May I speak to Kajsa please?" I said hurriedly.

"Who's calling?"

"Karl Ove," I said.

"Just a moment."

There was a pause. I heard footsteps fading into the distance, voices. A bus came down the hill and slowly pulled into the bus stop. I pressed the receiver tighter against my ear.

"Hello?" said Kajsa.

"Is that Kajsa?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

"This is Karl Ove," I said.

"I could hear that!" she said.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said.

"I have to go to soccer tomorrow," I said. "So I can't make it to your house as we agreed."

"Then I'll see you down there. You'll be at Kjenna, won't you?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"Was it nice?" I said.

"Was what nice?"

"The boat trip? Was it nice?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"See you tomorrow then!" I said.

"Yes. Bye," she said.

"Bye."

I put down the receiver and my eyes were met by those of an old teacher in his forties who worked with Dad; he was on the bus and looked away when I saw him. I opened the dusty door and went out. The air was warm and full of the fumes from the idling bus engine. A family with two children was sitting outside the Fina station eating ice cream. As I cycled by, John came out the door. He was holding a helmet in one hand. Bare chest, clogs on his feet.

"Hi, Karl Ove!" he called.

"Hi," I shouted back.

He put on his helmet, it was black with a black visor, and he got on the back of a motorbike. The driver started it up with two hefty kicks. Afterward they roared up the hill behind me. John waved an arm in the air as they raced past. My forehead was soaked with sweat. I ran my hand through my hair. My hand was sweaty, too. But my hair was fine; I had washed it the night before so that it would be perfect for the following day and the date with Kajsa. At the bus stop, on the crest of the hill, outside B-Max, I stopped. Rested my foot against the curbstone.

Suddenly I knew how I would do it.

Only a few weeks ago I had been here, surrounded by a whole crowd of people, with Tor as the center of attention. He had built his own bicycle, mounted a motorbike saddle and an enormous, new cogwheel at the front. He was doing wheelies, back and forth, spitting great gobbets of saliva across the pavement. Merethe, his girlfriend, was also there. I had just been hanging out, with Dag Magne, and we had bumped into them and stayed there. Tor cycled over to Merethe and kissed her. Then he took a watch from his inside pocket, it was on a chain, glanced at it, and said, "Want to see how long we can make out?" Merethe nodded, and then they leaned toward each other and kissed. You could see their tongues working in each other's mouths. She had her eyes closed and her arms around him; he stood with his hands in his pockets and his eyes open. Everyone was watching them. After ten minutes he held up his watch and straightened his back. Wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Ten minutes," he said.

That was how to do it. I would take off my watch and ask if we could see how long we could kiss. And then all we had to do was kiss.

I pushed off with my foot and cycled down to Holtet. It was important to find a suitable place. In the forest, of course, but where? Up at her place? No, I didn't know my way around there. It should be somewhere nearby here.

Perhaps not too close to either of us.

We were meeting at her house.

But of course. Oh, yes. In the forest, by the path up from Fina. Under the trees there. That was perfect. No one would see us. The ground was soft. And the light was so wonderful as it fell between the treetops.

So as not to be the very first to arrive at soccer practice the next afternoon, I pushed my bike up all the hills, not that it made much difference, because when I saw the field in front of me it was deserted, covered with clicking, murmuring jets spraying water around, each at its own rhythm. Christian and Hans Christian were sitting on the gate by the entrance squinting at me in the sunshine.

"Anyone have a ball?" I said.

They shook their heads.

"Is it true you're going out with Kajsa?" Christian said.

"Yes," I said, biting my lip to stop myself smiling.

"She's pretty," he said.

Christian had never gone out with any girls, he wasn't the type. But at the Norway Cup the previous summer he had bought a porn magazine from the kiosk outside the school the evening we arrived. Unfortunately for him his father, who coached the juniors, found him lying in his sleeping bag ogling the hypnotic pictures. With everyone on the team watching, he had to go and throw the magazine in the trash and apologize to his father.

"Ye-es," I said.

Soon after, Øyvind came with the balls and keys, and we ran out between the sprinklers to the goal farthest away and we began to take shots while Øyvind switched off the water and moved the sprinklers off the field. When everyone was there we ran around the field a couple of times, did some stretching exercises, and practiced some set pieces before playing seven against seven on half of the field. Kajsa didn't come until close to the end, with the three girls she had been with before. She waved to me; I waved back.

"Concentrate, Karl Ove!" Øyvind shouted. "Training first, girls later!"

After the session I dipped my head in the bucket of water on the touchline and tried to act as normal. But it wasn't easy; the knowledge that she was up there, and not just her, but also her friends, looking at me, was burned into my consciousness.

Then she came down.

"Are you going to get changed?" she said.

I nodded.

"I'll come with you. I've got something to tell you afterward."

Tell me? Was she going to finish it?

I started walking. She stretched out her hand. It brushed against mine. Had it been by chance? Or could I hold it?

I looked at her.

She smiled at me.

I grabbed her hand in one swift movement.

Someone was whispering behind us. I turned. It was Lars and John. They were rolling their eyes. I smiled. She gently squeezed my hand.

The walk across the field had never been as long as it was this evening. Holding her hand was almost more than I could bear; all the time I felt an urge to withdraw my hand to bring this unbearable happiness to an end.

"Hurry up," she said when we were there.

"Okay," I said.

On the bench I leaned back against the wall. My heart was pounding and pounding. Then I pulled myself together, threw on my clothes, and left. Kajsa's friends were standing on the road beneath the field with their bikes. I went over and stood beside Kajsa. She looked happy. She stroked a strand of hair from her face with her small hand. Her nails were painted in a semi-transparent pink varnish. Her friends got on their bikes as if at a signal and cycled off.

"This Saturday I'll be at home without my parents," she said. "I've told Mom that Sunnva's coming. So she's going to make a pizza and buy Coke for us. But Sunnva isn't coming. Would you like to come?"

I swallowed.

"Sure," I said.

Some of the other boys on the team cheered us from the shed. Kajsa stood with one hand on the handlebars and the other down by her side.

"Shall we go?" I said.

"Let's," she said.

"Down?" I said.

She nodded and we got on our bikes. We pedaled along the shaded gravel road, me in front, Kajsa right behind. At the crest of the long hill I braked so that we could race down side by side. The sun lit up the ridge on the other side. The insects swarming in the air were like glitter someone had scattered. Halfway down, there was an old forest track to the right and it suddenly struck me that it might lead to a suitable place, so with the wind streaming through our hair I shouted to Kajsa that we would go up there, she nodded, we turned off and must have gone ten meters before our bikes slowed down and we dismounted. She said nothing, I said nothing, we walked up the grassy track strewn with bark and bits of tree. Reaching the top and looking into the forest I could see it wasn't suitable. The ground was covered with tree stumps and where they stopped, the spruces were so close together it was like a wall.

"No," I said. "That's no good. Let's go on."

Kajsa still said nothing, just got on her bike as well and coasted down, standing on the pedals and braking harder than me.

No, the path above the Fina station was the place to be.

The thought sent a wave of terror through me. It was like having climbed up a rock too high and looking down at the water, knowing you either had to conquer your fear and dive or chicken out.

Did she know what was going to happen?

I sneaked a glance at her.

Oh, the ripple of her breasts.

Oh, oh, oh.

But her face was serious. What did that mean?

We jumped off our bikes and walked up the hill to the main road, beneath the deep shadows from the trees whose tops stretched far above us. We hadn't said a word since we were in Kjenna. If I said something now it had to be important, it couldn't be some triviality.

Her trousers were cotton, a pastel green color and secured around the waist by a rope belt. They hung loose over her thighs but were tighter around the groin and across the bottom. On her chest, she was wearing a T-shirt with a thin cardigan over it, which was white with a hint of yellow. Her sandaled feet were bare. Her toenails were painted with the same polish as her fingers. She had a chain around one ankle.

She looked fantastic.

When we came to the main road and only a long hill down and a long hill up separated us from what was to happen, what I most wanted to do was cycle off and leave her. Just step on the pedals and cycle out of her life. And then why stop at that? I could cycle from our house. Tybakken, Tromøya, Aust-Agder, Norway, Europe, I could leave everything behind me. I would be called the Cycling Dutchman. Damned forever to cycle around the world, with a ghostly light from the lamp on the handlebars illuminating the country roads.

"Where are we going actually?" she said as we sped down the hill.

"I know somewhere nice," I said. "It's not far."

She didn't say anything. We cycled past the Fina station, I pointed up the hill between the trees, again she jumped off as soon as the road became steeper. A thin layer of sweat glistened on her forehead. We walked past the old, white house and the old, red barn. The sky was clear and blue. The sun hung over the ridges to the west, a silent blaze. Its light gave the leaves on the trees in front of us an intense glow. The air was filled with birdsong. I was close to throwing up. We entered the path. Light filtered down between the treetops, as I had imagined it. It was refracted in a similar way to the way it was refracted under water. Pillars of light sloped into the ground.

I stopped.

"We can put our bikes here," I said.

We did. Both of us kicked out the stands and stood our bikes upright. I started walking. She followed. I looked for a suitable place to lie down. Grass or moss. Our footsteps sounded unnaturally loud. I didn't dare look at her. But she was right behind me. There. There was a good spot.

"We can lie down here," I said. Without looking at her I sat down. After some hesitation she sat down next to me. I put my hand in my pocket and located my watch. I took it out and held it in my open palm in front of her.

"Shall we time how long we can kiss?" I said.

"What!" she said.

"I've got a watch," I said. "Tor managed ten minutes. We can beat that."

I put the watch down on the ground, it was eighteen minutes to eight, I noted, placed my hands on her shoulders, and gently leaned her back while pressing my lips against hers. When we were both lying down I inserted my tongue in her mouth, it met hers, pointed and soft like a little animal, and I began to move my tongue round and round inside. I had my hands alongside my body, I wasn't touching her with anything except my lips and my tongue. Our bodies lay like two small boats laid up on land beneath the treetops. I concentrated on getting my tongue to go round as smoothly as possible while the thought of her breasts, which were so close to me, and her thighs, which were so close to me, and what was between her thighs, under her trousers, under her panties, was seared into my consciousness. But I didn't dare touch her. She lay with her eyes closed rotating her tongue around mine, I had my eyes open, groped for the watch, found it, and held it within reach. Three minutes so far. Some saliva ran down from the corner of her mouth. She wriggled. I pressed my groin against the ground letting my tongue go round and round, round and round. This wasn't as good as I had imagined, in fact, it was quite strenuous. Some dry leaves crunched beneath her head as she shifted position. Our mouths were full of thick saliva. Seven minutes now. Four left. Mmm, she said, but this was not a sound of pleasure, there was something wrong, she stirred, but I didn't let go, she moved her head while I continued to rotate my tongue. She opened her eyes, but didn't look at me, they were staring up at the sky above us. Nine minutes. The root of my tongue ached. More saliva from the corners of our mouths. My braces occasionally knocked against her teeth. Actually we didn't need to continue for more than ten minutes and one second to beat Tor's record. And that was now. We had beaten him now. But we could beat him by a large margin. Fifteen minutes, that ought to be possible. Five left then. But my tongue ached, it seemed to be swelling, and the saliva, which you didn't notice much when it was hot, left you with a slight feeling of revulsion when it ran down your chin, not quite so hot. Twelve minutes. Isn't that enough? Enough now? No, a bit more. A bit more, a bit more.

At exactly three minutes to eight I took my head away. She got up and wiped her mouth with her hand without looking at me.

"We did fifteen minutes!" I said, getting up. "We beat him by five minutes!"

Our bikes gleamed at the far end of the path. We walked toward them. She brushed leaves and twigs off her trousers and cardigan.

"Hang on," I said. "There's something on your back as well."

She stopped and I picked off bits and pieces that had got caught in her cardigan.

"There you go," I said.

"I'd better go home now," she said as we reached the bikes.

"Me, too," I said, pointing upward. "There's a shortcut through the forest."

"Bye," she said, getting on her bike and coasting down the bumpy path.

"Bye," I said, grabbing the handlebars and walking up.

That night I lay fantasizing about her breasts, milky-white and large, and all the things we could have done on the forest floor, until I fell asleep. I had to ring her because we hadn't arranged when I should go to her house on Saturday, but I put off doing it all the next day and also part of the Saturday until there was no avoiding it and at two o'clock I jumped on my bike and pedaled down to the telephone booth again. There was another problem as well, which was that I had to be home by half past eight, which was not at all in tune with the life I was leading now. I couldn't leave her place at eight because I had to go home to bed, what would she think of me? I hinted to Mom that I had something important to do that evening; couldn't I come home at nine-thirty, or even ten? She wanted to know what and I said I couldn't tell her. If you can't tell me, you can't have permission, she said. We have to know where you are and what you are doing. Then perhaps you can have permission. You do understand, don't you? Yes, I did understand and I was prepared to toe the line and tell her about Kajsa. But first I had to get in touch with her.

The sky was overcast and the gray, matte cloud cover seemed to suck the colors out of the countryside. The road was gray, the rocks in the ditch were gray, even the leaves on the trees had a weft of matte gray in their greenness. Also the heat from the previous days had gone. It wasn't cold, it was maybe sixty degrees, but enough for me to button up to the neck as I cycled down. My jacket ballooned out in the air. Two vehicles were at the bus stop, which in fact was a mini bus station, with buses often parked there all night. Now they were standing there, engines idling, ready to proceed on their way, one to the other side of the island, the other to Arendal, and the two drivers had parked so that they could chat to each other through the open windows.

I stood my bike behind the green, hat-shaped fiberglass shelter. A stream flowed nearby, through branches and bushes and litter, mostly candy wrappers, probably from the Fina station; I could see Caramello, Hobby, Nero, Bravo, and a blue Hubba Bubba wrapper, but there were also some shiny bottles without labels, some newspapers, and there was a cardboard phone booth full of assorted junk. I took the money from my pocket, went into the phone booth and placed it on top of the machine, ready. Dialed the number in the directory as various jokes went through my head. Why are there so many Hansens in the phone book? They've all got phones. Followed by: Why don't the Chinese have a phone book? Too many Wings and Wongs, and you might wing a wong number. Operator, operator, call me an ambulance. Okay, you're an ambulance. With my finger under the number and the receiver in my hand I stood for a long time staring through the dusty glass without quite registering what I saw until I plucked up the courage, put the phone to my ear, and dialed.

"Hello?" a voice said.

It was Kajsa's!

"Hi," I said. "This is Karl Ove. Is that Kajsa?"

"Yes," she said. "Hi."

"We forgot to talk about when I should come," I said. "Is there any particular time that would be good? It makes no difference to me."

"Errrm," she said. "Well, in fact, it's all off."

"Off," I said. "Can't you make it? Aren't your parents going out after all?"

"What I mean to say is," she started. "Erm . . . erm . . . I can't . . . well, go out with you any longer."

What?

Was she ending it? But . . . we'd only been going out for five days!

"Hello?" she said.

"Is it over?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "It's over."

I said nothing. I could hear her breathing at the other end. Tears were running down my cheeks. A long time passed.

"Well goodbye," she said suddenly.

"Bye," I said, and put down the phone and went to the bus stop. My eyes were blinded by tears. I wiped them with the back of my hand, sniffed, got on my bike, and began to pedal homeward. I barely saw the road in front of me. Why had she done that? Why? Now that things had started to click? On the day we were going to be alone in her house? She liked me a few days ago, so why didn't she like me now? Was it because we hadn't talked much?

And she was so good-looking. She was so unbelievably good-looking.

Jesus Christ.

JesusfuckingChrist.

JesusfuckingshittingChrist.

When I got to B-Max I dried my tears on the sleeves of my jacket, it was Saturday just before closing time, the parking lot was full of cars and people with shopping bags and kids, loads of kids. But if they saw my tears, could they have been caused by the wind? I was cycling after all.

I plodded up the little hill before the flat stretch. Completely empty, neutral spaces were developing inside me, ten seconds could pass without my thinking a single thought, without knowing that I even existed, and then the image of Kajsa was suddenly there, it was over, and a sob shook through me, impossible to stop.

I locked my bike and put it in its place outside the house, stood still inside the house listening to hear where the others were, now was not the time to bump into anyone, and when it sounded as if the coast was clear I went upstairs and into the bathroom, where I washed my face carefully before going into my room and sitting down on the bed.

After a while I got up and went to Yngve's room. He was on the bed playing the guitar and glanced up when I entered.

"What's up? Have you been crying?" he said. "Is it Kajsa? Did she end it?"

I nodded and started crying again.

"It's all right, Karl Ove," he said. "It'll soon pass. There are so many girls out there waiting. The world is full of girls! Forget her. It's no big deal."

"Yes, it is," I said. "We only went out for five days. And she's so good-looking. She's the only one I want to be with. No one else. And today of all days. When we were going to be alone at her place."

"Hang around," he said, getting up. "I'll play a song for you. It might help."

"What kind of song?" I said, sitting down on the chair.

"Hang on," he said, flicking through a pile of singles on the shelf. "This one," he said, holding up one of the Aller Værste!'s. "'No Way Back.'"

"Oh, that one."

"Listen to the lyrics," he said, removing the single from the sleeve, placing the plastic core in the middle of the turntable, then the forty-five, lifting up the stylus, and putting it down on the first groove, which was already whizzing around. After a second's scratching the energetic drums pumped into life, then came the bass, the guitar, and the Farfisa organ with the rest, followed by the jangling, unbelievably exciting guitar riff and then the voice of the singer with the Stavanger accent:

I'm not lying when I say I knew
That me and you were already through
I saw you were trying to hide it
Until the sensi thin condom split
Long-term plans and our shared visions
Blown to bits in one minute flat
You gave me a hug; I wanted to give you more
But you certainly put paid to that

"Listen now!" Yngve said.

All things pass – all things must decay
You go to sleep; you wake up to a new day
No way back now, nuthin' to thank you for
Nuthin' to say, there's your coat, there's the door

"Yes," I said.

We were on the point of going banal
I heard myself speaking and got irritated
We had one too many and went sentimental
But the words were still infected
You broke my heart and gave me the clap
I still haven't finished the penicillin rap
Why must we bang our heads against the same old wall
When we know deep down we hate it all

All things pass – all things must decay
You go to sleep; you wake up to a new day
No way back now, nuthin' to thank you for
Nuthin' to say, there's your coat, there's the door

"'All things pass,'" Yngve said when the song was over and the stylus had returned to its little rest. "'All things must decay. You go to sleep; you wake up to a new day.'"

"I understand what you're saying," I said.

"Did it help?"

"Yes, a bit. Could you play it again?"

Fortunately Mom and Dad didn't notice that I had been crying when we were having dinner. Afterward, too restless to stay inside, I went out and as the road was empty and the children I knew best were on vacation I ambled down to the pontoons. There was a whole crowd standing around Jørn's boat, which was brand new. Lots of people had a new boat that spring, both Geir Håkon and Kent Arne had one, a GH 10 and a With Dromedille respectively, a ten-footer as well, both with a five-horsepower Yamaha outboard motor.

I walked over to them.

"Here's our jessie," Jørn said as I stopped.

That word again.

They laughed, from which I concluded it wasn't well meant.

"Hi," I said.

Jørn started the engine after a few tugs on the cord.

"Come here, Karl Ove," he said.

"No," I said. "Not likely."

"I want to show you something," he said, looking at his little brother. "You reverse when I tell you, right."

His little brother nodded.

"Come on," he said, moving to the bow.

I took a few hesitant steps forward. When I was on the edge of the pontoon he threw himself around my legs.

"Reverse!" he shouted to his brother.

The boat reversed, I went into a crouch, my legs were pulled away from beneath me, I fell and was dragged over the edge because Jørn didn't let go and the boat continued to reverse. I made a grab for the edge and clung on by my fingers. Jørn's brother accelerated, the engine revved, and I hung there with my legs on board the boat, my body over the water, and my hands on the pontoon. I shouted to them to stop. I started to cry. The bystanders smiled and looked on calmly at what was happening.

"That's enough!" Jørn shouted.

The whole incident had lasted maybe a minute. Jørn's brother revved forward, Jørn let go of my legs, and I climbed up and walked off as quickly as I could, crying. The tears didn't stop until I was up by the rock face, where I sat down in the hot, perfectly still air, saturated with aromas of the sun-warmed rocks, dry grass, and wildflowers.

I mulled over whether I should call Kajsa and ask her why she had broken up with me, so that I could learn from it for the next time, but it was too complicated, I could hear it all now, her hesitation and my groping for words, for what? It was over, she didn't want to be with me, simple as that.

Still weak at the knees and shaking, I got up and walked home. Washed my face slowly in cold water in the bathroom, drew the curtains, didn't want anything from outside to slip in, put on Motörhead, *Ace of Spades*, but it felt wrong, so I took it off and put on the new solo record by Paul McCartney instead and started a Desmond Bagley book I had bought with my own money called *The Vivero Letter*. I had read it before, but it was about the pyramids in South America, the enormous underwater grottos, where the protagonists dived in search of a hoard of gold others were also after . . .

When I sat down to have supper Mom looked at me and smiled.

"It might be time for you to start wearing a deodorant, Karl Ove?" she said. "I can buy you one tomorrow."

"Deodorant?" I repeated stupidly.

"Yes, don't you think so? You'll be starting at the new school soon."

"You do stink, in fact," Yngve said. "No girls like that, you know."

Was that *why*?

But when I asked Yngve about it afterward, he smiled and said he doubted it was that simple.

The next morning Dad came in and told me I couldn't spend the whole summer in bed reading, I had to get out, what about a swim? he said.

I closed my book without a word and walked past him without a second glance.

I sat on the concrete barriers for a few minutes throwing pebbles into the road. But I couldn't stay there, everyone would see that I had nothing to do or anyone to be with, so I trudged down toward the big cherry tree at the edge of the forest by the road, where Kristen's field started, to see if the cherries were ripe enough to eat yet. Who owned this tree was unclear, some said it was a wild cherry, others said it belonged to Kristen, but we had still stripped it every summer since we were old enough to climb, and no one had complained so far. Knowing every branch, I climbed almost to the top and along a branch until it began to bend. The berries weren't quite ripe yet, the skin was hard and green on one side, but the other exhibited a faint redness and that was enough for me to bite into their skins, chew and swallow, and spit the pits as far as I could afterward.

Sitting there, I saw Jørn come cycling toward me. He was holding a canister of gasoline on the luggage rack with one hand and steering with the other. When he spotted me he braked gently and stopped.

"Karl Ove!" he shouted.

I climbed down as fast as I could. It took roughly the same time to clamber down as it took him to get off his bike and come to the tree because by the time I was on the ground he was only a few meters from me. Our eyes met, then I hared off, up toward the forest.

"I only wanted to say I was sorry!" he said. "About yesterday! I heard you crying."

I didn't turn.

"I didn't mean it!" he said. "Come back down, so that we can shake hands on it!"

Ha ha, I thought, and stumbled on up between thickets and bushes until I was at the top and could watch him amble back to his bike, get on, and continue on his wobbly way down to the boats. Then I went back down. But the hard, bitter cherries had lost their fascination, so I gave up on the tree, and instead wandered off in the hope that someone would appear on the road after a while. Sometimes people came out if they saw you from a window, so I went for a walk up the hill, staring into the gardens on both sides as I went. Not a soul anywhere. People were in their boats or they had driven to swimming holes on the far side of the island or they were at work. Tove Karlsen's husband was lying on a sunbed in the middle of their yellowing lawn with a radio beside him. Fru Jacobsen, the mother of Geir, Trond, and Wenche, was sitting under a parasol on the veranda smoking. On her head she was wearing a white bucket hat. She had covered the rest of her body in light, white clothes. Their two-year-old brother was sitting on the floor beside her; I glimpsed him between the bars of his playpen. Behind me, someone called my name. I turned. It was Geir; he sprinted up with his palms facing inward.

He stopped in front of me.

"Where's Vemund?" I said.

"On vacation," Geir said. "They left today. Are you coming in the boat?"

"All right," I said. "Where do you want to go?"

Geir shrugged.

"Gjerstadsholmen. Or one of the small islands beside it?"

"Okay."

Geir only had a row boat, so the radius of his activities was much more limited than that of the other boat owners. Nevertheless, it took us out to the islets and on occasion we had rowed several kilometers along the coast of the island. He wasn't allowed to row in Tromøya Sound.

We scrambled on board, I pushed off, he positioned the oars in the rowlocks, applied force with his feet, and rowed so hard, with his oars so deep, that a grimace distorted his entire face.

"Ugh," he groaned at every pull. "Ugh. Ugh."

We glided along the light-blue surface of the sea, which was sporadically ruffled by gusting shoreward winds. The waves farther out in the sound had white tips.

Geir turned and located the little island, adjusted his course with one oar, and then resumed his grunts while I hung my hand in the water and rested my eyes on the little there was of a wake.

As we approached, I stood up, leaped ashore, and pulled the boat into a tiny inlet. I didn't know how to tie any knots, so it was Geir who tethered the rope to one of the metal rods that appeared to be fixed to every single little crag in the archipelago.

"Feel like a swim?" he said.

"Fine by me," I said.

On the side facing Tromøya Sound, a rock rose from the sea into a two-meter-high pinnacle from which we jumped and dived. It was cold in the wind but warm in the water, so we swam for almost an hour before getting out and lying on the cliff to dry.

When we had dressed, Geir took a lighter from his pocket and showed it to me.

"Where did you get hold of that?" I said.

"It was in the cabin," he said.

"Want to set fire to something?"

"Yes, well, that was the idea."

Grass grew in all the cracks on the rock face, and in the middle of the islet there was a grass plain.

Geir crouched down, cupped his hand around the lighter, and set fire to a little tuft. It caught at once with a clear, transparent flame.

"Can I try?" I said.

Geir stood up, swept his stiff bangs to one side, and passed me the lighter.

"Hey!" I said. "Watch out! It's spreading!"

Geir laughed and stamped on the fire. It was as good as out when flames suddenly flared up farther away, where he had already put it out.

"Did you see that?" he said. "It started all on its own!"

He stamped it out, and I walked over to the plain and lit the grass there. At that moment a strong wind gusted in. The fire was raised like a little carpet.

"Give me a hand," I said. "There's so much to put out."

We jumped and stamped for all we were worth, and the fire was suffocated.

"Give me the lighter," Geir said.

I passed it to him.

"Let's light the grass in lots of places at once," he said.

"Okay," I said.

He lit it where he was, passed me the lighter, I ran to the other side and lit it there, ran over to him, to where he had moved, and he lit it there.

"Can you hear it crackling!" he said.

It was indeed. The fire crackled and spat as it slowly ate its way across. Where I had lit the grass the fire resembled a snake.

Another rush of wind blew in off the sea.

"Ooooh yikes!" Geir said as the flames rose and took a substantial chomp out of the middle.

He started stamping like a wild man. But suddenly it didn't help.

"Give me a hand," he said.

I heard a growing panic in his voice.

I started stamping as well. Another blast of wind, and now some of the flames were up to our knees.

"Oh, no!" I shouted. "It's burning like hell over there, too!"

"Take your sweater off! We'll put it out with those. I saw them do it in a film once!"

We took off our sweaters and began to beat the ground with them. The wind continued to whip up the flames, which spread even farther with every gust.

Now the grass was well alight.

We stamped and beat at the flames like crazy men, but it was no use.

"It's no good," Geir shouted. "We won't be able to put this out."

"No," I said. "It's just getting worse and worse!"

"What shall we do?"

"I don't know. Can we use the bailer, do you think?" I said.

"The bailer? Are you completely stupid or what?"

"No, I am not stupid," I said. "It was just a suggestion."

Oh, no. The fire was burning out of control. I could feel the heat from several meters away.

"Let's get out of here," Geir said. "Come on!"

And so, as the flames danced and crackled across the grass, with ever greater ferocity, we shoved out the boat. Geir got behind the oars and began to row, even harder than before.

"God Almighty," he kept saying. "What a fire! What a fire!"

"Yes," I said. "Who would have thought it?"

"Not me anyhow."

"Me neither. Hope no one sees it."

"Makes no difference," Geir said. "The important thing is that no one saw *us*."

On reaching land we dragged the boat deep into the forest to hide any possible traces. There was soot on our T-shirts; we dipped and wrung them in the water, and for safety's sake we removed our shorts and rinsed them as well. If anyone asked we would say we had been swimming in our shorts and our T-shirts had fallen in the sea. Then we dived in to get rid of the smell of fire and walked home.

From a distance I could see there was no one in the front garden. I stopped in the hall: not a sound. Slipped into the boiler room, hung up the T-shirt, and went up to my room bare-chested, took another T-shirt from the wardrobe, and changed my shorts.

From the window in Yngve's room I saw Dad lying on the sunbed on the lawn. He could lie in the sun for hours without moving, like a lizard. And the tan he had bore witness to it. The sound of a radio drifted over from somewhere; Mom must have been sitting on the terrace under the living-room window.

An hour later she came into my room with some deodorant for me. MUM for Men, it was called. It was a glass bottle, blue, and smelled sweet and good. I thought: for men. I was a man. Or a young man at least. I would be starting a new school in a few weeks and would use the deodorant.

She explained I should rub it in under my arms after washing, but always after washing, never without, otherwise the smell would be worse.

After she had gone I did as she said, inhaled the new aroma for a while, then resumed the book I was reading, it was *Dracula*, my all-time favorite, I was reading it for the second time, but it was just as exciting now.

"Supper's up!" Mom called from the kitchen, I put it down and went in.

Dad was sitting in his place, dark-skinned and dark-eyed. Mom poured boiling water in the teapot and put it down on the table between us.

"Martha has invited us to their cabin today," she said.

"Out of the question," Dad said. "Did she say anything else?"

Mom shook her head.

"Nothing special."

I looked down at the table and ate as fast as I could without giving the appearance of haste.

An engine was started up nearby, it coughed a couple of times, then died. Dad got up to look out the window.

"Isn't Gustavsen away?" he said.

No one answered; he looked at me.

"Yes," I said. "But not Rolf or Leif Tore. They're the only ones at home.

The car was started again. This time the engine was revved hard. Then it was put into first gear, and the drone rose and sank and stuttered.

"Someone's driving their car anyway," Dad said.

I stood up to see.

"Sit down!" said Dad.

I sat down.

"What's going on?" Mom said.

"The brats are taking their parents' car without asking."

He turned and looked at Mom.

"Isn't that incredible?" he said.

Jerking and stuttering, the drone went up the hill.

"Have they *no* control over their kids?" he said. "Leif Tore is in *Karl Ove's* class. And he goes and steals his parents' *car*?"

I gulped down the last bit of bread, poured a drop of milk in my tea to cool it enough to drink. Got up.

"Thanks, Mom," I said.

"Pleasure," Mom said. "Are you going to bed?"

"Think so," I said.

"Good night then."

"Good night."

He came in before I switched off the light.

"Sit up," he said.

I sat up.

He fixed me with a long stare.

"I hear you've been smoking, Karl Ove," he said.

"What?" I said. "I have not! I promise you. I'm telling the truth."

"That's not what I've heard. I've heard you've been smoking."

I glanced up and met his eye.

"Have you?" he said.

I looked down.

"No," I said.

There it was, his hand around my ear.

"You have," he said, twisting it. "Haven't you."

"Noooo!" I yelled.

He let go.

"Rolf told me you had," he said. "Are you telling me Rolf was lying?"

"Yes, he *must* have been," I said. "Because I have never smoked."

"Why would Rolf lie?"

"I don't know," I said.

"And why are you crying? If you have a clear conscience? I know you, Karl Ove. I know you've been smoking. But you won't do it again. So that'll have to do this time around."

He turned and left, as darkly as when he came.

I dried my eyes with the duvet cover and lay staring at the ceiling, suddenly wide awake. I had never smoked.

But he had known I had done something.

How did he know?

How *could* he have known?

The next day we were unable to keep away and rowed past the islet.

"It's all black!" Geir said, resting on the oars.

We laughed so much we almost fell in the water.

Even if, on the outside, this summer was like all previous summers – we went to Sørbøvåg, we went to Grandma and Grandad's cabin, and for the rest of the time I hung around the estate and headed off with anyone who was around, if I wasn't on my own reading – on the inside, it was quite different, for what awaited me, when it was over, was not only a new school year like all the other new school years, no, at the end-of-term party in June the head teacher had given a speech, and he had done this because we were leaving Sandnes *Barne*skole, our time there was past, after the summer vacation we would be starting the seventh year at Roligheden *Ungdoms*skole. We were no longer children, but youths.

I worked in a market garden all July, standing in the fields from dawn under the burning-hot sun picking or packing strawberries, thinning carrots, sitting on a knoll eating my packed lunch as fast as I could in the middle of the day so that I could cycle to Lake Gjerstad and have a swim before work resumed. Everything I earned I would use for pocket money during the

Norway Cup. For the week the tournament lasted Mom and Dad went walking in the mountains. There was a heat wave that summer, we played one of the matches on shale, it was so hot I collapsed and was taken to a kind of field hospital on the plain, where I came round that night; someone was playing Roxy Music's "More Than This" in the distance, I looked up at the tent ceiling and was as happy as I had ever been for some reason I did not comprehend but acknowledged.

Could it have been because I'd hung around with Kjell during those days, sung Police songs on the Metro so loud the walls reverberated, hit on girls, and bought lots of band badges from a street-seller, including ones of the Specials and the Clash, as well as a pair of black sunglasses I wore every waking hour?

Yes, it certainly could. Kjell was one year older and the most popular boy with the girls in the school. His mother was Brazilian, but he was not only brown-eyed, black-haired, and attractive, he was also tough and someone everyone respected. So it was an enormous boost that he didn't seem to mind me, it elevated me at once to somewhere higher than Tybakken and the kids there. They didn't want to have anything to do with me, but Kjell did, so what did it matter? I also went to Oslo with Lars, which was more than I could actually have hoped for.

This was possibly why I was so incredibly happy where I was. But it may have been the song by Roxy Music, "More Than This." The song was so captivating and so beautiful, and around me in that pale, bluish summer night lay a whole capital, not only crowded with people, of whom I knew nothing, but also record shops with hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of good bands on their shelves. Concert venues where the bands I had only read about actually played. The traffic hummed in the distance, everywhere there was the sound of voices and laughter, and Bryan Ferry singing *More than this – there is nothing. More than this – there is nothing.*

Late one evening in mid-August, we all went to the island of Torungen, south of Hisøy, to go crabbing. Dad had bought a powerful underwater flashlight and he had brought along a rake, as well as a diving mask, flippers, and an empty white tub. A whole colony of gulls took off when we went ashore, flew above our heads screaming, some diving so close they almost brushed us, it was intense and frightening, but it eased as we moved to the far side of the island and the night-black sea lay still before us. Mom lit a fire, Dad undressed, put on the flippers, and glided into the water with a flashlight in his hand, slipped on the mask, and swam under the surface. The water cascaded off the snorkel as he reemerged.

"None there," he said. "Let's try a bit farther up."

Yngve and I walked slowly along the smooth rocks. The gulls were still screaming behind us. Mom was preparing food for us.

There he was, coming up again, this time with a big crab with splayed claws in one hand.

"Bring the tub!" he said, Yngve went down to the water's edge, Dad put the crab in, and swam off again.

I was a bit embarrassed, that wasn't how you should catch crabs, you did it with a rake on land and a flashlight. On the other hand, there was no one else on the island but us.

Afterward, with the tub brimful of crawling crustaceans, Dad sat down and warmed himself by the fire while we grilled sausages and drank pop. On the way down to the boat, after he had extinguished the fire with a bucket of seawater, and a hiss, I discovered a dead gull lying in a hollow in the rock face. I felt it. It was warm. A quiver went through its leg and I was startled. Wasn't it dead? I leaned forward and poked a finger in its white breast. No reaction. I stood up. Its lying there was spooky. Not so much because it was dead but because its colors and lines seemed almost obscenely precise to me. The orange beak, the black and yellow eyes, the large wings. And its feet, scaly and reptilian.

"What have you found?" Dad said from behind me.

I turned and he shone the flashlight on my face. I raised a hand in defense.

"A dead seagull," I said.

He lowered the flashlight.

"Let me see," he said. "Where is it?"

"There," I said, pointing.

The next instant it was the focus of the light, as if it were on an operating table. Its eyes flashed in the reflection.

"There may be some chicks in distress somewhere," Dad said.

"Do you think so?" I said.

"Yes, they still have chicks in the nests. That was why they were so angry at us. Come on."

Back toward the glittering lights of Arendal, through Tromøya Sound to the quay, with the constant clicking of the crabs and the ghostly rattle from the two full tubs. Dad boiled them as soon as he got home, and there was a sense of liberation at witnessing the pitilessness of the operation: they were taken from the tubs alive, they were dropped into the boiling water alive, and, dead, they floated around slowly on their backs in their bone-white and leaf-brown shells.

Two days after our nocturnal trip Dad was transferred to Kristiansand. He had been offered a job at a *gymnas* in Vennesla, it was too far to commute, so he had rented a flat in a block in Slettheia. He took all the things he needed in three loads of a hired trailer, and from then on he turned up at home every weekend, and after a while barely that. The idea was that he would look for a house in the Kristiansand area and we would move there the following summer.

It was a great relief when he left. And an incredible stroke of luck that he would change his job the precise autumn I started at the school where he had been employed for thirteen years. If he had been working there I would have felt his eyes on me the whole time and hardly dared to lift a finger without first considering the consequences. That was how it had been for Yngve. But that was not how it would be for me.

The first days at my new school reminded me of those we had experienced when we started the first class six years earlier. All the teachers were new and unfamiliar, all the buildings were new and unfamiliar, and apart from those in our class, all the other students were new and unfamiliar. Here, other rules and codes held sway; here, other rumors and stories circulated; here, the atmosphere was quite different. No one played at this school. No one did French skipping, no one did any skipping, no one played ball, no one played tag or any of the games we played on the playground. The sole exception was soccer. No, what kids did during the break here, in the new school, was lounge about. The smokers hung around in a corner on their own by the wet weather shelter, chatting and laughing and flicking their lighters and smoking their cigarettes, some of them in leather jackets, some in denim jackets, almost all with a moped of some description because a vehicle was part of the life they led. Rumors circulated about some of them, that they had been involved in burglaries, for example, that they had turned up at school drunk, or even that they had tried drugs, which of course they didn't deny, but nor did they confirm it, they were somehow surrounded by an air of mystery and danger, and who else but John should stand side by side with them on the very first normal school day, laughing his gruff laugh? All of those standing there despised bookish learning, hated school, most were good with their hands, and already wanted to be out in the world of work in the eighth year, and they were given permission, all lost causes were given permission, the school was only too happy to get rid of them. But, the cigarette hanging from the corner of the mouth aside, in practice they behaved no differently from any of the other students because they hung around in gangs as well and chatted and laughed. The girls stood in groups, the boys in other groups. Sometimes the boys baited the girls and there could be a bit of running back and forth and jeering, and on rare occasions fights broke out between two boys, which attracted everyone on the playground to the two of them, like swimmers on a tidal wave, it was impossible to resist.

It took us several weeks to adjust to our new school life. Everything had to be tested. We had to explore the teachers' limits and preferences. We had to explore the boundaries. Of what went on inside the classroom walls and what went on outside.

In natural sciences we had Larsen, the teacher who had come to school drunk, he always looked as if he had spent the night on the sofa in his clothes and had just been awoken, whatever time of day we had him, he was always a bit torpid and unfocused, but he loved experiments, smoke, and bangs, so we liked his lessons. In music we had Konrad, he was in charge of the youth club, he wore blouse-like shirts under a black vest, had glasses, a round face, moustache, and a little bald patch, was jovial and youthful, so he was on first-name terms with all of us; for math we had Yngve's previous form teacher, Vestad, a ruddy-faced, bald man with glasses and gimlet eyes; in domestic science, we had Hansen, a bespectacled, gray-haired, strict, missionary-type Frøken who seemed to be genuinely interested in teaching us to fry fishcakes and boil potatoes; in English, Norwegian, history, and social sciences we had our form teacher, Kolloen, a tall, thin man in his late twenties with pointed features and very little patience, who generally kept a distance from us but who could show flashes of empathy and sympathy.

These teachers not only gave general comments and evaluations, as the teachers at our first school had done, no, here they gave us grades for everything we did. This created a very new tension in the class for now we were all given our ideas of one another's strengths and weaknesses in black and white. It was impossible to keep your grades secret, or it *was* possible, but it was regarded as bad form. I averaged around a B or B+ and on rare occasions achieved an A, and dropped to a C, but if I didn't keep the grades quiet inside the classroom, I began to tone them down outside as in recent months I had begun to detect signs that it was not cool to be good at school, that an A, despite what one might assume, was indicative of a character flaw, a deficiency, and not the opposite, which originally it had been meant to express. My status had long been on the wane, now I tried to reverse the process and reestablish a good reputation without of course thinking of anything specific or tangible, it was all based on hunches and intuition according to the social codes people confronted everywhere. In this task I had a huge advantage, namely soccer, where I had met many of the boys in the eighth and ninth classes, among whom there were four or five who were really respected by both boys and girls. I was the only person in my class who could go over to the gang Ronny was in, for example, or Geir Helge, or Kjell, or all of them at once, without them staring at me with eyebrows raised or starting to harass me. They didn't think that much of me either, I didn't get a lot from them, but that wasn't the main point, the main point was that I could actually stand there and be seen standing there. Geir and Geir Håkon and Leif Tore had gone overnight from being little nabobs to becoming little idiots, here they were nobody, here they had to build themselves up anew, and God knows whether they would manage that in the course of the three years they had. I didn't look their way any longer, except in class, which no longer counted.

During the first weeks of school Lars became my new best friend. He was in the parallel class and so represented something new: he lived in Brattekleiv, where we from Tybakken seldom went, and he played soccer. He was sociable, knew a lot of people, and got along well with everyone. He had curly, auburn hair, was permanently in a good mood, had a loud, ringing, confident laugh, and teased everyone, rarely in a malicious way. His father was a former European skating champion, had participated in various world championships and Olympic tournaments, among them Squaw Valley, their basement was full of cups, medals, diplomas, and a large, dried-up and faded laurel wreath. He was a friendly and considerate though firm man, married to a Dane who couldn't do enough for those around her.

With Lars as a friend everything that Tybakken could throw at me bounced off. At the same time I had changed, it happened almost from one day to the next, I was no longer interested in good deeds, quite the contrary, I started swearing, I went apple scrumping, I threw stones at streetlamps and shed windows, I was prone to talking back in class and I stopped praying to God. The freedom there was in that! I loved apple scrumping, and the greater the risk the better. Stopping my bike by the curb in the morning on the way to school, sprinting into a garden and helping myself to five or ten apples in broad daylight and then just straddling my bike and continuing on my way as though nothing had happened gave me a good feeling I hadn't known before and hadn't even known existed. One of the gardens I passed was newly established, and in the middle there was a little apple tree, with a single apple on it, and it didn't require much imagination to see that the apple had special significance for the father who had planted the tree that spring and for his two children who were looking forward to the day the apple, which for them must have been *the* apple, became ripe. It was their apple that I saw dangling there every morning on the way to school and that in the end I grabbed.

Not in the evening when it was dark and the odds of doing it unseen were good, no, I did it in the morning on the way to school, just dropped the bike, climbed over the fence, walked across the lawn, snatched the apple, and sank my teeth into it as I was walking back. A world had opened. I wasn't stealing from shops yet, but it was on my mind, I was considering the possibility. At home, however, the only way I had changed was that I behaved more freely, was happier, chatted more, which Mom didn't appear to find unusual since a lack of liberty was strongly attached to Dad's presence and his anger only found its most extreme expression when we were alone with him. With Mom and Yngve I had always been like that. With Mom I had always talked about everything, that is, seldom about things directly concerning the world outside, I spoke more about things that I was thinking at any given point, all kinds of ideas and notions, but these days I was beginning to become aware of what I said and what I didn't say to her, for I understood that it was important that one world had to be light and clean and exclude any of the other world's many, long shadows.

This autumn both these worlds opened, but it was no mechanical garage door being raised, this was a living, organic process governed by a muscle: every Friday when Dad came home the world closed around me again, the old patterns were resumed, and I stayed there as little as possible. But whereas the world at home was familiar and always the same, the world outside was completely unpredictable, or, to be precise, what happened, happened clearly and unequivocally and without any ambivalence; it was the causes of these events that were so murkily unclear.

Every Friday there was a youth club meeting in the school's old gymnasium. It was open to all the students in the school. For a couple of years it had been a mythological place for me, as fascinating as it was unattainable. I had seen Yngve dress with meticulous care before going there, even with a scarf once, I knew they had dancing there, table tennis, and billiards, sold Coke and hot dogs, sometimes showed films, held concerts, and put on special events. There was quite a lot of talk about us being allowed to enter this miraculous place one day, mostly by the girls, for in some strange way they were the ones who identified with it most closely, as though it were primarily for them, but only now and then for us boys.

The first time I cycled there it felt as though I was about to go through a rite of passage. The evening air was cool, up the hill toward the school I passed some year-seven girls, all of them had made a special effort with their appearances, none looked as they did every day. I parked the bike outside, ambled past the crowd of kids smoking, bought an admission ticket, and entered the dark converted gymnasium with kaleidoscopic spotlights, flashing disco balls, and music pounding out from two enormous loudspeakers. I looked around. There were lots of year-eight and year-nine girls there, none of whom dignified me with a glance, of course, but most people were year-sevens like me. We were the only ones for whom the club had novelty value.

The dance floor was empty. Most of the girls were sitting at tables by the wall; most of the boys were hanging out in other rooms, where the table tennis and pool tables were, or outside the exit where kids always gathered with mopeds during the evening. Many belonged to boys who had left school, but not so long ago that they had stopped keeping an eye on the girls.

But I wasn't there to play table tennis or hang around the parking lot with a Coke in my hand. I liked music, I liked girls, and I liked dancing.

I didn't dare dance on my own on an empty floor. But when a couple of girls I was friends with tentatively began to dance and two more joined them, I also ventured out.

Captivated by the rhythm and the pleasurable awareness that I was so visible, I danced away. One song, two songs, and then I went to find someone I knew. Bought a Coke and sat down with Lars and Erik.

My whole being, with my liking for clothes, my long eyelashes, and soft cheeks, my know-all attitude, and poorly concealed academic prowess, was fertile and ready ground for a pre-puberty catastrophe. My behavior on these evenings didn't exactly improve matters. But of that I knew nothing. I saw nothing from the outside, I experienced everything from the inside, where all that counted was the seductive, pumping rhythm of "Funkytown," the Bee Gees' strange falsetto singing, Springsteen's catchy "Hungry Heart," the glittering darkness, all the girls moving around inside it, with their breasts and thighs, mouths and eyes, the exciting aromas of perfume and sweat, that was what this was about. I could return home after these Friday evenings with my head totally in a spin, where normality had been cast under some mysterious spell and suddenly appeared in a murky light, unclear in a shadowy way, but endlessly rich and alluring, full of hope and possibilities. Because, hey, this was the gym we were talking about! This was Sølvi, Hege, Unni, and Marianne! Geir Håkon, Leif Tore, Trond, and Sverre! This was hot dogs and ketchup and mustard! The tables and chairs were the same ones that were in our classrooms. The bars on the walls, the ones we had in gym class. But they were of no significance when the darkness came and the flashing lights filled it, when everything was sucked into the dark circle of magic, so full of promise, when everything was dusky eyes and lovely, soft bodies, pounding hearts, and jangling nerves. I left the youth club after the first Friday in a daze, I arrived there on the next, tense and full of expectancy.

What was brilliant about the place was that it made it easier for you to approach girls. Usually they were out of your reach, in recent months the majority had a blasé, world-weary air about them, they sat there in the sun chatting or knitting during the breaks with their cassette recorders on, most of what we did was childish, they were impossible to reach. Even though I tried, because I still spoke their language, it never led to anything. As soon as the bell rang we went our separate ways.

But at the youth club it was different, there you could go straight up to a girl and ask her to dance. So long as you didn't set your sights too high and approach the most attractive year-nine with boys buzzing round her, it always went well, they said yes and all you had to do was step onto the floor, press yourself against her warm, soft body, and sway from side to side until the song had finished. The hope was that it would develop into something more, perhaps being followed by stolen glances and tiny mischievous smiles, but even if it didn't, these moments had value in themselves, not least because of all the promises they bore of a future paradise in complete nakedness. All the girls I had gone out with so far, Anne Lisbet, Tone, Mariann, and Kajsa, went to school and were at the youth club, but even though I could still feel a stab in the heart when I saw them with boys, they were dead to me, history, from them I wanted nothing except that they shouldn't say anything to others about the person I had been. Especially in Kajsa's case. I had realized that what happened in the forest was ridiculous, I had behaved like a complete clod, I was deeply ashamed, and had decided long ago that I would never tell *anyone*, not even Lars. Especially not Lars. But she had no reason to feel ashamed, and I kept a bit of an eye on her when she was in the vicinity, to see whether she would lean forward and whisper, and everyone would look at me. It didn't happen. Instead the body blows came from other, unexpected sources. Right from the fourth class I'd had my eye on Lise in the parallel class, she was good-looking and I liked watching her, the way she smiled, what she wore, the sharpness in her character, she was one of those who would say if she didn't agree, she was fearless, but her facial expressions were gentle, and when we started the seventh class, her figure was beautifully rounded. More and more my eyes were drawn to her. She was Mariann's best friend, and after the arguments since I had ended it with her had subsided Mariann and I would often sit together and chat or walk together back from school, and it was on one of those occasions she repeated something Lise had said about me that day.

I had gone into the old gymnasium, which during the day was used as a dining hall where we could tuck into our lunch boxes in the breaks. I had gone in, and when Lise, who was sitting at a very full table, saw me coming she had said, "Yuck, he's so revolting! I get the heebie-jeebies whenever I see him!"

"Well, I don't agree," Mariann added after she had told me. "I don't think you're a jessie, either."

"Jessie?" I said.

"Yes, that's what everyone says."

"What?"

"Didn't you know?"

"No."

And as if there had been some secret pact not to call me a jessie to my face, before I had been properly but discreetly informed, after the conversation with Mariann it began to be used against me, spreading with the speed of sound. Suddenly I was the jessie. Everyone called me that. The girls in the class, the girls from other classes, some of the boys in the class, boys from other classes, in fact, even on the soccer team they would call me that. One day John turned to me in training and said, "What a damned jessie you are." Even younger kids, fourth-years on the estate, had picked it up and would shout it after me. "Jessie, jessie, jessie," I heard all around me. A sentence had been passed, and it could not have been worse. If I was arguing with someone, for example Kristin Tamara, she swept away all the arguments and crushed me totally by just saying: "You're such a jessie. You jessie. Hey, Jessie! Come here, Jessie." This got me down, I thought of almost nothing else, it was like a black wall in my consciousness and impossible to escape. It was the worst; there was nothing I could do.

It wasn't as if I could behave in a less effeminate way for a couple of days and then everyone would say, "Oh, you aren't a jessie after all!" No, this went deeper, and it would be there forever. They had something on me and they used it for all it was worth. Apart from Lars, he just said I shouldn't take any notice, and for that I was grateful, one of my first thoughts when this all started was that Lars would no longer want to be seen with me, suddenly he had a lot to lose. But it didn't bother him. Neither Geir nor Dag Magne nor Dag Lothar said it. And of course none of the teachers or parents. But everyone else did. The term undermined any other qualities I had, it made no difference what I could or couldn't do, I was a jessie.

In a biology lesson, as we were about to focus on human reproduction, as Fru Sørsdal called it, Jostein from the parallel class, our goalkeeper, came into the class and sat down at a free table. At first he wasn't noticed, the lesson began, Fru Sørsdal talked about homosexuality, and Jostein said, Karl Ove knows all about that! He's one himself! You should ask *him* to tell *you*. The laughter that followed was desultory, he had gone too far and was at once ejected, but a seed was sown. Was I perhaps homosexual as well? Was that what was wrong with me? I began to ponder on that. I was a jessie, perhaps even a homo, and, if so, all hope was lost. Then there would be nothing to live for. Dark times, they had never been as dark as now.

I said nothing to Mom, of course, but after a few weeks I plucked up courage and told Yngve. He was on his way up the hill to the shop when I caught him.

"Are you in a hurry or what?" I said.

"Pretty much," he said. "What's the matter?"

"I've got a problem," I said.

"Oh, yes?" he said.

"They're calling me names," I said.

He glanced at me as though he didn't really want to know.

"What names?"

"Yeah . . ." I said. "Well, it's . . ."

He stopped.

"*What* are they calling you? Tell me!"

"Well, they call me a jessie," I said. "I'm the jessie."

Yngve laughed.

How could he *laugh*?

"That's no big deal, Karl Ove," he said.

"Jesus Christ," I said. "Of course it is! Don't you understand?"

"Think about David Bowie," he said. "He's androgynous. It's a good thing in rock, you see. David Sylvian as well."

"Androgynous?" I said, so disappointed that he hadn't understood a thing.

"Yes, ambiguous sexual identity. A bit woman, a bit man."

He looked at me.

"It'll pass, Karl Ove."

"Doesn't seem like it," I said, turning and walking back home while Yngve continued up the hill.

I was right, it never stopped, but somehow I became accustomed to it, that was how it was, I was the jessie, and even if thoughts about it tormented me in a way I had not experienced before, and the shadows it cast were long, there was enough happening around me, most of such an intensity it nullified everything else while this carried on.

We drifted around, that was what we did. Actually I always had but whereas the point for Geir and me during all these years had been to seek out secret places, places for ourselves, the opposite was now the case, with Lars we sought places where something might happen. We hitchhiked everywhere, to Hove if there was something going on there, over to Skilsø, to the east of the island, hanging around outside B-Max in the hope that something might happen, someone might come, hanging out around the Fina station, drifting around town, cycling up to the new sports hall even though we weren't going to do any training, up to the parish hall where Ten Sing had their rehearsals, because at the sports hall there were girls, at Ten Sing there were girls, and that was all we talked and thought about. Girls, girls, girls. Who had big breasts and who had small ones. Who might become attractive and who was attractive. Who had the nicest butt. Who had the best legs. Who had the nicest eyes. Who we might have a chance with. Who was unattainable.

One dark winter evening we caught the bus to Hastensund, where there was a girl who went to Ten Sing, she had blond hair, was a bit on the chubby side, but was stunningly beautiful, we were interested in her even if she was a year older, we knocked at the door, and then we sat there in her room, chatting shyly about this and that, burning with lust, and on the bus home we were so full of emotion we could barely utter a word.

One weekend Mom visited Dad in Kristiansand and Lars stayed over with me, we ate potato chips, drank Coke, ate ice cream, and watched TV, it was in the spring, the night before the first of May, the TV was showing a rock concert that night to keep Oslo kids indoors who might otherwise be wandering the streets and throwing stones. We didn't have any porn magazines, I didn't dare keep any in the house despite the fact that we were on our own, so we had to make do with *Insect Summer* by Knut Faldbakken, the passage I had read so many times the book automatically opened at the right page. We decided we couldn't be alone, we had to invite some girls, and Lars suggested Bente.

"Bente?" I said. "Which Bente?"

"The one who lives up here," Lars said. "She's lovely."

"*Bente?*" I almost shrieked. "But she's *younger* than us!"

I had seen her all my life, she had always been smaller, never a girl I had considered. But now she had developed, Lars declared, he had seen, she had breasts and everything. And she was a beauty. A real beauty!

I hadn't noticed, but now that he said it . . .

We threw on our jackets and ran up the hill and rang her doorbell. She was surprised to see us, but down to our house, no, she couldn't do that, not tonight.

Okay, we said, another time then!

Yes, another time.

So back we went and sat down in front of the TV to watch one band after the other while discussing what we saw and all the girls we would have liked to watch it with. Siv from our class, whom I hadn't considered either, suddenly became the focus of our interest, we rang her doorbell, too. What would happen afterward we had no idea.

And so we went on, drifting around, restless, full of ungovernable desire. We read porn magazines, it physically hurt to look at the pictures, they were so close and yet so far, so endlessly far away, not that that prevented them from arousing all these tremendously powerful feelings in us. I felt like shouting as loudly as I could every time I saw a girl, knocking her over, and tearing off all her clothes. The thought made my throat constrict and my heart pulsate. It was incredible, the thought that they were naked under the clothes they were wearing beside us, all of them, and they could, theoretically, remove them themselves. It was an impossible thought.

How could everyone walk around knowing that, without ultimately running completely amok?

Did they repress it? Were they acting cool?

I couldn't do that. I thought of nothing else, it was all I had in my head from the moment I woke up in the morning to the moment I went to bed at night.

Yes, we looked at porn magazines. We also played cards, we pulled out the pack everywhere and in all situations, we went to friends' homes, we went to the youth club, listened to music, played soccer, went swimming for as long as it was possible, went apple scrumping, drifted around, hung out here, hung out there, and chatted nonstop.

Kjersti?

Marianne?

Tove?

Bente-Lill?

Kristin?

Lise?

Anne Lisbet?

Kajsa?

Marian?

Lene?

Lene's sister?

Lene's *mother*?

Never, later in life, have I had my finger on the pulse the way I had then with the girls living around us in those years. Later I may have doubted whether Svein Jarvoll's *Journey to Australia* was a good or a bad novel, or whether Hermann Broch was a better writer than Robert Musil, but I was never ever in any doubt that Lene was a good-looking girl and that she was in quite a different league from, for example, Siv.

Lars had a lot going on around him as well, he sailed quite a bit, with his mother and father, and alone in the Europe dinghy. He was good at skiing, light years better than me, sometimes he went with his father to Åmli or Hovden and he had his old pals out there, too, Erik and Sveinung. When he was busy I stayed in my room, played music, read books, talked to Yngve or Mom. I never went into the forest, up into the hills, down to the pontoons, or into Gamle Tybakken anymore.

One Sunday at the end of the winter I cycled out to see Lars. He was going to Åmli with his father and Sveinung to ski down the slalom slope there. I couldn't join them as it had already been planned for a long time. I was so disappointed and it came so unexpectedly that my eyes filled with tears. Lars saw, and I turned away and cycled off. Tears, that was no good, that was the worst.

He called when I got home. There was room for me, too. They could drop by and pick me up. I should have said no, to show that I wasn't upset and should have explained to him that the tears – I had seen from his expression that he didn't like them – were not tears, I had something in my eye, the wind had upset my cornea. But I couldn't, Åmli was a big slalom slope with a lift and everything, I had never been there, so I swallowed my pride and joined them.

His father skied with a fifties elegance I had never seen before.

But the tears had disappointed Lars, and they had disappointed me. Why couldn't they stay away now that I was thirteen years old? Now that they could not be excused?

One woodworking lesson John started to tease me, I cried, and was so angry I hit him over the head with a wooden bowl as hard as I could, it must have hurt and I was thrown out of the classroom, into the corridor, but he just laughed and came over to me afterward and apologized, I didn't realize it would make you cry, he said. I didn't mean it. Everyone had seen how feeble and pathetic I was, and suddenly all the efforts I had made to appear tough, to be one of the tough boys, had gone down the drain. John, who had shown his butt to the teacher on the first day at the new school and who had come in one morning with his eyebrows shaved off and who had started ditching classes. Everyone was expecting him to be one of those looking for a job while still in the eighth class. He had to be rescued. I tried to rescue myself. Lars had weights in his father's garage, but he pumped iron, too, and one afternoon I asked if I could have a try.

"Be my guest," he said.

"How much do you lift?" I said.

He told me.

"Can you put the weights on for me?" I said.

"Can't you do that yourself?"

"I don't know how to."

"Okay. Come with me."

I went downstairs with him. He added the weights and put the bar in position. Looked at me.

"I have to do this on my own," I said.

"Are you kidding?" he said.

"No. Go ahead, I'll be up soon."

"Okay."

When he had gone I lay down on the bench. I couldn't budge the bar. I couldn't lift it a centimeter. I removed half of the weights. But I still couldn't lift it. A fraction, though, perhaps two or three centimeters.

I knew you had to lower the bar onto your chest and raise it with your arms fully stretched.

I removed two more.

But I still couldn't do it.

In the end, I had removed all of the weights and lay there lifting the bar, and nothing but the bar, up and down a few times.

"How was it?" Lars said as I emerged. "How much did you manage?"

"Not as much as you," I said. "I had to take off two of the weights."

"Hey, that's not bad!" Lars said.

"Isn't it?" I said.

Through all these years, right from the time when I was with Anne Lisbet in the first class, I thought I had learned something each time. That it would get better and better with every new girl I was with. After Kajsa there would be no more setbacks. After her, yes, it would all be fine, now I knew what it was about and could avoid any more mistakes.

But that was not how it turned out.

I fell in love with Lene. She was in the parallel class. She was the best-looking girl in the school. No contest, she won hands down. She was more beautiful than anyone else, but also shy, and I had never experienced that before. There was a fragility about her it was hard not to be attracted by and dream about.

She had a sister who was in the ninth class called Tove and she was the complete antithesis, although also beautiful, but in a boisterous, provocative, mischievous way. Both were very popular with the boys.

Lene only indirectly, though, she was the kind you looked at and pined for in secret. At least I did. Her eyes were narrow, her cheekbones high, cheeks soft and pale, often with a slight flush, she was tall and slim, she held her head at an angle, and often interlaced her fingers as she walked. But she also had something of her sister in her, you could occasionally see it when she laughed, the glint that appeared in her turquoise eyes, and in the obstinacy and unshakable certainty that sometimes shone through, so difficult to reconcile with the otherwise predominant impression of dreamy fragility. Lene was a rose. I looked at her and started to tilt my head the same way she did. That's how I made contact with her, that's how we had something in common. I couldn't hope for more really, because I had set her on too high a pedestal to dare make any kind of approach. The thought of asking her to dance, for example, was absurd. Talking to her was unthinkable. I contented myself with looking and dreaming.

Instead I went out with Hilde. She asked me, I said yes, she was in the same class as Lene, she had a broad, powerful body, almost masculine, was half a head taller than me, with delicate features and a lovely, friendly personality, and she ended it with me two days later because, as she put it, you're not in the slightest bit in love with me. With you, there is only Lene. No, I said, you're wrong, but of course she was right. Everyone knew, I thought of nothing else, and when we were in the playground during the break I always knew where she was and who she was with, and that attentiveness couldn't go unnoticed.

One day Lars said he had heard someone say they had heard her say she wasn't at all ill-disposed toward me. Despite the fact that I was a jessie. Despite the fact that I had cried in the woodworking class. Despite the fact that I was slow on the soccer field and could barely manage a bench lift.

I looked at her on the playground, she met my eyes and smiled and turned away with pink cheeks.

I decided that I should strike while the iron was hot. I decided that it was now or never. I decided that I had nothing to lose. If she said no, well, nothing had changed.

If she said yes, on the other hand . . .

One Friday, therefore, I sent Lars over to her with a question. They had been in the same class for six years, he knew her well. And he returned with a smile playing around his lips.

"She said yes," he said.

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Now you're going out with Lene."

Then it started again.

Could I go over to her now?

I looked in her direction. She smiled at me.

What should I say when I was there?

"Off you go now," Lars said. "Give her a kiss from me."

He didn't push me across the playground, but it wasn't far from it.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said.

She looked down; one foot squirmed around on the pavement.

God, how beautiful she was.

Ay yay yay yay.

"Thank you for saying yes," my mouth said.

She laughed.

"My pleasure," she said. "What class do you have now?"

"Class?"

"Yes."

"Err . . . is it Norwegian?"

"Don't ask me," she said.

The bell rang.

"Will we see each other afterward?" I said. "After school, I mean?"

"All right," she said. "I've got training in the sports hall. We can see each other afterward."

The question was not how this would go, the question was how many days it would last before it stuttered and she brought it to an end. I knew that, but I tried anyway, I had to put up a fight, you could never be sure, and she was present inside me for every single waking minute, partly as a kind of unconstrained, excited feeling, a constant sensation, partly as a more nebulous perception of her essence and character. Yes, I would have to fight, even though I didn't really have anything to fight with. I didn't even know what the fight was about. To keep her, yes, but how? By being myself? Don't make me laugh. No, I would have to draw on others, I realized that, and during these days I sought out the company of others with her so that all the conversation didn't rest on my shoulders. Up to the sports hall with Lene, over to Kjenna's with Lene, over to the Skilsø ferry with Lene. We had all been given a Bible at school, the preparations for our confirmation would start next autumn, and it struck me that I could ask her what she had done with her Bible and then I could say I had ditched mine, and I would have a theme going, so that I could ask people I met what they had done with their Bible. Lene listened, Lene followed me, Lene started to get bored. She was a rose, we kissed at a crossroads, and we walked hand in hand on the playground, but I was only a little boy and even though I had perfectly even, white teeth after my braces had been taken off, that wasn't enough, Lene was bored with me, and one evening when she came to soccer practice with me I saw her leave the spectators' stand and disappear, she was gone for the whole of the last hour, I went in and changed with the others, suspecting that something was wrong, stopped in the entrance hall where the reception desk and the Coke machine were, and looked outside: there was Lene Rasmussen, there was Vidar Eiker, they were chatting and laughing, and I could see from the way she was laughing it was over. Vidar Eiker had left school the year before, he was one of the group who hung around at the Fina station, and he had a moped, which he was leaning on at this minute.

I went up into the stand and sat down.

After half an hour or so Hilde came over. She sat down beside me.

"I've got bad news, Karl Ove," she said. "Lene's ended it."

"Yes," I said, averting my head so that she couldn't see the tears streaming down my cheeks. But she saw them because she stood up as if she had been burned.

"Are you crying?" she said.

"No," I said.

"You really do love her, don't you?" she said with surprise in her voice.

I didn't answer.

"But Karl Ove," she said.

I wiped my tears away with one hand, sniffled, and drew a slow, quivering breath.

"Is she out there now?"

She nodded.

"Shall I walk out with you?"

"No, no. You just go, Hilde."

As soon as she had gone through the door at the end of the stand I got up, swung my bag onto my back, and left. Wiped my tears again, hurried along the corridor, emerged in the entrance hall, and opened the door to where they had been standing before.

I bowed my head and walked past.

"Karl Ove!" she said.

I didn't answer, and as soon as they were out of sight I burst into a run.

Lene went out with Vidar, I was crushed for several months, but then spring came and with its immense power it washed everything aside. The year-eights and the year-nines were at school camp for a week, there were only the year-sevens left at school, and a kind of mania spread through the ranks of the boys in those days, we began to attack the girls, one stole up on them from behind and lifted their sweaters while another came at them from the front and groped their naked breasts as they screamed and struggled to get away, but never so loudly that any of the teachers heard. We did this in the corridors between the classrooms, we did it in the playground, and we did it on the unpopulated parts of the road to school. There were rumors that Mini, Øystein, and others in the Fina crowd had frigged Kjersti, held her down, pulled down her trousers, and stuck a finger inside her, so one evening Lars and I went up to her house, thinking perhaps that we could experience some of the same, but when we rang the bell it was her father who answered, and when Kjersti came down and we asked if we could come in, her lips formed a clear no, we would certainly not be allowed *in*, what were we thinking about?

But the glint in her eyes was even more brazen than that in our own; she understood exactly what we were after. A few weeks later we met at the Boat Fair in Hove where Lars and I had been at the Trauma stall selling lottery tickets, among them a winning ticket that we put aside and took with us when our stint finished, and we walked around looking at boats and people so as not to arouse suspicion, because we had a little scam in mind, then casually stopped by the stall, bought a ticket each, and opened them, and while I leaned forward with mine to ask if I had won a prize, Lars swapped his for the winning ticket. Christian and John were manning the stall now and they refused to believe Lars when he passed them the winning ticket. They said it was an old one. We denied this with such vehemence that in the end they agreed to give us half the winnings. We said fine and walked off with the enormous box of chocolates under one arm, bubbling with laughter and tremulous with fear at what we had done. Nearby, we bumped into Kjersti.

"Feel like a walk?" Lars said.

"Okay," Kjersti said, and my body felt so strange when she said that.

We walked through the forest and down to the pebble beach where we lay down and started on the chocolates.

She was wearing red trousers and a blue padded jacket and she said nothing as I gently stroked the outside of her thigh with my hand. Nor when I stroked the inside. Lars was doing the same on the other side.

"I know what you want," she said. "But you're not going to get it."

"We don't want anything," I said, swallowing, my throat thick with desire.

"Nothing," Lars said.

I stroked her crotch, placed my whole hand against it, and could have screamed out with happiness and frustration. Lars snuck a hand up to her jacket zipper and pulled it down, then put his hand up her sweater. I did the same. Her skin was hot and white, and I felt her breasts in my hand. The nipples were stiff, her breasts firm. I stroked her thigh again, put my hand on her crotch again, but then, gulping repeatedly, I made the mistake of pulling down the zipper of her trousers.

"No," she said. "What are you thinking of?"

"Nothing," I said.

She straightened up and pulled down her sweater.

"Any more chocolate?" she said.

"Yes, help yourself," Lars said, and we sat there eating chocolate and staring across the sea as if nothing had happened. The breakers resembled white snowdrifts the second they crashed against the smooth, low rocks. Some seagulls swept past with their wings flapping. When the box was empty we got up and walked back through the forest to the fair. Kjersti said goodbye, see you later perhaps, and we decided to go home. But to do that we had to drop by the lottery stall to collect our bikes. Øyvind, our coach, was there, and he didn't look happy when he caught sight of us. We denied everything. He said he couldn't prove anything, but he knew what we had done. Why else would we have been content with half the prize? We denied it point-blank. He said he was disappointed, he didn't want to have to look at us any more that day, and we cycled home.

On Monday, before school began, Lars lifted up Siv's sweater and I pressed both my hands against her breasts. She screamed and said we were childish and calmly walked off.

In the first lesson, which was Norwegian, we had to borrow a book from the library, read it during the week, and then write about it in an essay. I said I had read all the books in the library. Kolloen didn't believe me. But it was true. I could tell him about every book he pulled out. In the end he allowed me to write about another book. Which meant I had nothing to do that lesson. I took out a history book and sat at the desk under the window. Outside, it was misty but warm. The playground was deserted. I flicked through the book and looked at the pictures.

Suddenly I saw one of a naked woman. She was so thin her hips protruded like bowls. All her ribs were visible. Between her legs there was a small, black tuft. Behind her there were rows of bunk beds in which I glimpsed other female figures.

My insides shook.

Not because she was so thin but because there was nothing attractive about her, although she was naked, and because on the next page there was a picture of an enormous pile of corpses in front of a deep grave where many bodies lay strewn. What I saw was this: the legs were only legs, the hands were only hands, the noses were only noses, the mouths were only mouths. Something that had been shaped and formed elsewhere was now here, scattered across the ground. When I stood up I felt nauseous and confused. As I had nothing to do I went out and sat against the wall. The sun warmed, despite being covered by mist. The grass growing in the cracks and hollows of the boulder in the middle of the playground, surrounded by walls and pavement, was long and swayed to and fro in the gentle breeze. The nausea didn't pass, it became associated with what I saw, it became a part of them. The green grass, the yellow dandelions, Siv's bare breasts, Kjersti's fat thighs, the skeletal woman in the book.

I got up and went back in, called Geir, and he came over with a quizzical look.

"I've found a picture of a naked woman," I said. "Do you want to see it?"

"Of course," he said, and I opened the book in front of him and pointed to the skeletal woman.

"That's her," I said.

"Oh, my God," Geir said. "Ugh."

"What's the matter?" I said. "She's naked, isn't she?"

"Oh, yuck," Geir said. "She looks as if she's dead."

That was exactly how she looked. Like the living dead. Or death in living form.

The next weekend Mom and I went to visit Dad. It was odd to see him in his flat. It was on a higher floor in a tower block, it was all white, the sun shone in through the windows, filling it completely, and there was so little furniture it almost seemed as if no one were living there.

What did he do here?

He drove us to Grandma and Grandad's, where we ate, and then he drove us home. No one quite seemed to know when we were going to move, it was dependent on so many factors, the house had to be sold, a new one had to be bought, Mom had to find a job, we had to change schools, so I didn't think too much about it. But I had no objection to leaving the estate or the school. It felt as if all my cards had been played. I made mistake after mistake. One day after gym, for example, when I was standing in the corridor outside the classroom, Kjersti came over to me.

"Do you know what, Karl Ove?" she said.

"No," I said, fearing the worst, for her expression was sardonic.

"We've just been talking about you," she said. "And we discovered that not one of the girls in the class likes you."

I said nothing, I glared at her, filled with a sudden, enormous fury.

"Did you hear me?" she continued. "Not one of the girls in the class likes you!"

I smacked her cheek as hard as I could. The flash of my arm and the following slap, which turned her cheek crimson, caused people to turn their heads.

"You bastard," she shouted, and punched me in the mouth. I grabbed her hair and pulled. She hit me in the stomach, kicked me in the calf, and grabbed my hair, too, we were a whirl of blows and kicks and hair-pulling, and I, poor, pathetic, miserable little shit, I burst into tears, it all became too much for me, a pathetic sob escaped my mouth; all those who had gathered around us within the space of seconds shouted, he's crying, I heard them, but I couldn't stop myself, and then I felt a heavy hand on my collar, it was Kolloen, he was holding Kjersti in the same way and asked what on earth was going on, are you *fighting*? I said it was nothing, Kjersti said it was nothing, and then we were frog-marched into the classroom, each with a teacher's hand in the middle of our backs, me a laughingstock, for I had not only broken the rule about never crying but also the one about never fighting with a girl, Kjersti now had the status of a hero, for she had been hit and hit back, and she didn't cry.

How low can you sink?

Kolloen said we had to shake hands. We did, Kjersti apologized, and smiled at me. The smile was not sardonic, it was heartfelt, in a way, as though we were complicit in something.

What did it mean?

In the last week of May the heat came, the whole class set off for Bukkevika to go swimming, the sand was white, the sea blue, and the sun burned in the sky above us.

Anne Lisbet emerged from the sea.

She was wearing a bikini bottom and a white T-shirt. It was wet, and her round breasts were visible. Her wet, black hair shone in the sun. She beamed her broadest smile. I watched her, I couldn't keep my eyes off her, but then I noticed something beside me, and turned my head, and there was Kolloen, he was watching her, too.

There was no difference in our gazes, I realized that at once, he saw what I saw and he was thinking what I was thinking.

About *Anne Lisbet*.

She was thirteen years old.

The moment didn't even last for a second, he looked down as soon as I noticed him, but it was enough, and I'd had an insight into something that a moment before I didn't even know existed.

Three days later Dad picked me up from school early, we were going off to look at a house, it was twenty kilometers from Kristiansand, by a river, we were considering buying it, now I had to say what I thought, and I had to be honest. From the way Dad was talking – it had a barn, the house was old, from the 1800s, it was on a big piece of land, you could have a normal garden and a vegetable garden, too, there were big, old fruit trees growing there, and perhaps we could keep hens, as well as grow our own potatoes, carrots, and herbs – I had already decided, I would tell him I liked it, whether I did or not.

When we arrived, with the sky blue, the grass green, and the river glinting down below I ran from window to window and peered in so that he could see how enthusiastic I was, which was not entirely insincere, just somewhat exaggerated, and the matter was decided. If it was available we would buy it. Mom applied for a job at the nursing college, Dad would continue at the *gymnas*, and I would start at a new school here. What Yngve would do was less clear. He refused to move. For the first time in his life he stood up to Dad. They argued, and that had never happened before. We had never argued with Dad. He was the one who told us off, and we were on the receiving end.

But there was Yngve saying no.

Dad was furious.

But Yngve continued to say no.

"I don't want to spend my last year in Kristiansand," he said. "Why should I? All my friends are here. I've only got one year of school left. It would be ridiculous to start afresh somewhere new."

They stood face-to-face in the living room. Yngve was as tall as Dad.

I hadn't noticed before.

"You might think you're grown-up, but you're not," Dad said. "You have to stay with your family."

"No, I do not," Yngve said.

"All right," Dad said. "Can you tell me how you're going to manage? You won't be getting one øre from me, you know."

"I'll take out a loan," Yngve said.

"Who do you think will give you a loan?" Dad said.

"I can apply for a study loan," Yngve said. "I've checked."

"Are you going to take a study loan before you begin to study?" Dad said. "That's very clever."

"If I must, I must," Yngve said.

"Where are you going to live?" Dad said. "The house will be sold, you know."

"I'll rent a bedsit," Yngve said.

"You do that then," Dad said. "But you won't get any help from us. Not so much as a krone. Do you understand? If you want to live here, you can, but don't you come running to us for any help. You'll have to manage on your own."

"Okay," Yngve said. "I'll be fine."

And that was what happened.

When the last day of the seventh class came, it had been announced that I was moving and my classmates of seven years had bought farewell presents. First of all, I was given a cabbage head as my name, Karl, as some called me, sounded in the broad dialect we spoke like "Kål," cabbage, which became a nickname. Then I was given a cloth monkey because I looked like a monkey.

That was it.

Then we went through the doors, and I never saw my classmates again.

But it wasn't quite over. That evening there was to be a class party at Unni's. Some of the girls met early that afternoon to get everything ready, and at around six the rest of us cycled over. The party was held in the garden and in the cellar, and as the summer night fell over the hills we could see across and all the red roofs of the houses on the estate glinted in the light of the setting sun, and the party slowly began to degenerate, even though no one was drinking. A year's secret thoughts and desires began to stir. It was simply in the air. Hands wandered under sweaters, not as part of an assault or any brutality, it went on close by, among the lilac bushes in the garden, amid hot panting, mouths met, mouths kissed, and then some of the girls took off their tops, they walked around with their breasts bobbing, it was a kind of early puberty orgy that had been slowly building up steam and the very same girls who only one month earlier had said they didn't like me offered themselves to me, one after the other, they sat on my lap, they kissed me, they rubbed their breasts against my face. The hierarchy the girls had been placed in, with some slowly climbing during autumn and others falling, had no significance here, it didn't make any difference who it was, I pressed my face against their soft, white breasts, kissed their dark, erect nipples, ran my hands over their thighs and between their legs, and they didn't say no, there wasn't a no in their mouths on this night, instead they leaned forward and kissed me, their eyes were warm and dark, but also surprised, as mine must have been, is it really us doing this?

I haven't seen any of them since that summer, and if I search for them on the Net to see what they look like or how life has treated them, there are no hits. They don't belong to that class there, they belong to the class of blue- or white-collar parents who grew up outside the center and who have presumably remained outside the center of everything but their own lives. Who I am to them I have no idea, probably a vague memory of someone they once knew in their childhood years, for they have done so much to one another in their lives since then, so much has happened and with such impact that the small incidents that took place in their childhoods have no more gravity than the dust stirred up by a passing car, or the seeds of a withering dandelion dispersed by the breath from a small mouth. And, oh, wasn't the latter a fine image, of how event after event is dispersed in the air above the little meadow of one's own history, only to fall between the blades of grass and vanish?

After the moving van had left and we got into the car, Mom, Dad, and I, and we drove down the hill and over the bridge, it struck me with a huge sense of relief that I would never be returning, that everything I saw I was seeing for the final time. That the houses and the places that disappeared behind me were also disappearing out of my life, for good. Little did I know then that every detail of this landscape, and every single person living in it, would forever be lodged in my memory with a ring as true as perfect pitch.

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A reading group guide for *My Struggle* is available at www.ReadingGroupGold.com.

Cover design by Charlotte Strick
Cover photograph © Alex Telfer / Gallery Stock

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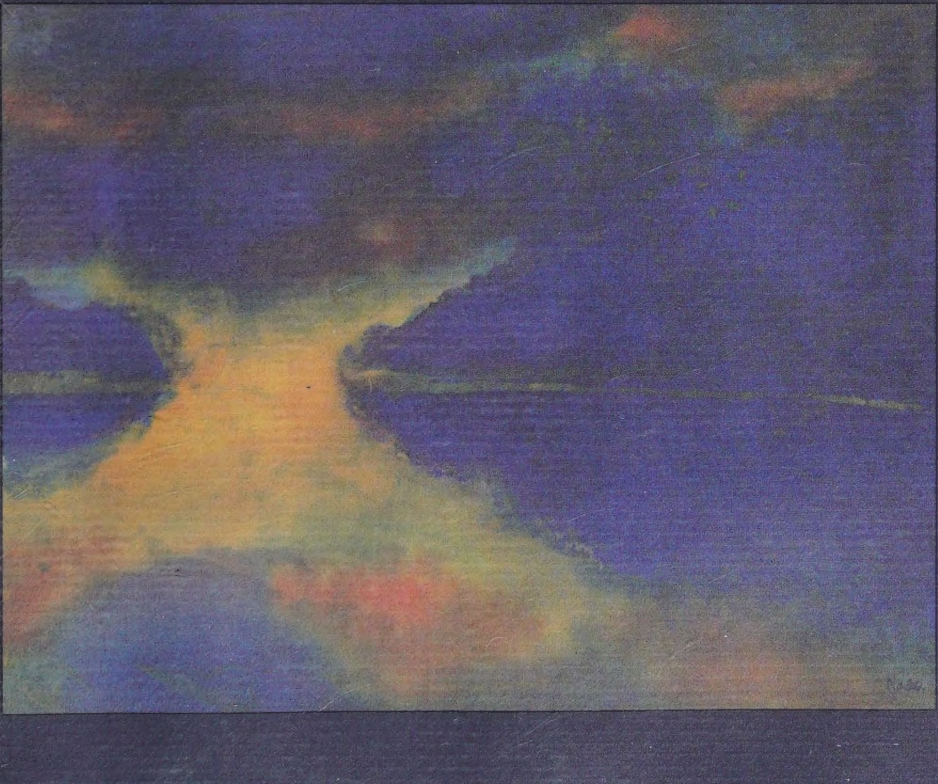
Karl Ove Knausgaard

BOOK FOUR

My Struggle



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Karl Ove Knausgaard

My Struggle

BOOK FOUR

Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett

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First Archipelago Books Edition, 2015

First published in English by Harvill Secker,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

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First published as *Min kamp 4* by Forlaget Oktober in 2010.

Archipelago Books
232 3rd Street #A111
Brooklyn, NY 11215
www.archipelagobooks.org

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Knausgård, Karl Ove, 1968-
[Min kamp. 4. English]
My struggle : Book 4 / Karl Ove Knausgaard ; translated from the
Norwegian by Don Bartlett. – First Archipelago Books edition.
pages cm
ISBN 978-0-914671-17-6 (alk. paper)
I. Bartlett, Don, translator. II. Title.
PT8951.21.N38M5613 2015b
839.823'74 – dc23 2014049820

Distributed by Penguin Random House
www.randomhouse.com

Cover art: Emil Nolde

The publication of *My Struggle Book Four* was made possible with support from
Lannan Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency,
the Black Mountain Institute, and NORLA (Norwegian Literature Abroad).

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

My Struggle

Slowly my two suitcases glided around on the carousel in the arrivals hall. They were old, from the end of the 1960s, I had found them among Mom's things in the barn when we were about to move, the day before the removal van came, and I immediately commandeered them, they suited me and my style, the not-quite-contemporary, the not-quite-streamlined, which was what I favored.

I stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray stand by the wall, lifted the cases off the carousel, and carried them outside.

It was five minutes to seven.

I lit another cigarette. There was no hurry, there was nothing I had to do, no one I had to meet.

The sky was overcast, but the air was still sharp and clear. There was something alpine about the landscape even though the airport I was standing outside was only a few meters above sea level. The few trees I could see were stunted and misshapen. The mountain peaks on the horizon were white with snow.

Just in front of me an airport bus was quickly filling up with people.

Should I catch it?

The money Dad had so reluctantly lent me for the journey would tide me over until I got my first paycheck in a month. On the other hand, I didn't know where the youth hostel was, and wandering blindly around an unfamiliar town with two suitcases and a backpack would not be a good start to my new life.

No, better take a taxi.

Apart from a short walk to a nearby snack bar stand, where I consumed two sausages with mashed potatoes in a cardboard tray, I stayed in the youth hostel room all evening, lying with the duvet over my back and listening to music on my Walkman while writing letters to Hilde, Eirik, and Lars. I started one to Line as well, the girl I had spent all summer with, but set it aside after one page, undressed, and switched off the light, for all the difference that made, it was a light summer night, the orange curtain glowed in the room like an eye.

Usually I would fall asleep at once wherever I was, but that night I lay awake. In just four days I would be starting my first job. In just four days I would be entering a classroom in a small village on the coast of Northern Norway, a place I had never been and knew nothing about, I hadn't even seen any pictures.

Me!

An eighteen-year-old Kristiansander, who had just finished *gymnas*, who had just moved away from home, with no experience of working other than a few evenings and weekends at a parquet flooring factory, a bit of journalism on a local paper, and a month at a psychiatric hospital this summer, I was about to become a teacher at Håfjord School.

No, I couldn't sleep.

What would the pupils think of me?

When I went into the classroom for the first lesson and they were sitting there in their chairs in front of me, what would I say to them?

And the other teachers, what on earth would they make of me?

A door was opened in the corridor, releasing the sound of music and voices. Someone walked along quietly singing. There was a shout: "Hey, shut the door." Afterward all the noise was enclosed again. I rolled over onto my other side. The strangeness of lying in bed under a light sky must have played a part in my not being able to fall asleep. And once the thought was established that it was difficult to sleep, it became impossible.

I got up, pulled on my clothes, sat in the chair by the window, and began to read. *Dead Heat* by Erling Gjelsvik.

All the books I liked were basically about the same topic. *White Niggers* by Ingvar Ambjørnsen, *Beatles* and *Lead* by Lars Saabye Christensen, *Jack* by Alf Lundell, *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac, *Last Exit to Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby, Jr., *Novel with Cocaine* by M. Ageyev, *Colossus* by Finn Alnæs, *Lasso Round the Moon* by Agnar Mykle, *The History of Bestiality* trilogy by Jens Bjørneboe, *Gentlemen* by Klas Östergren, *Icarus* by Axel Jensen, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, *Humlehjertene* by Ola Bauer, and *Post Office* by Charles Bukowski. Books about young men who struggled to fit in to society, who wanted more from life than routines, more from life than a family, basically, young men who hated middle-class values and sought freedom. They traveled, they got drunk, they read, and they dreamed about their life's great passion or writing the great novel.

Everything they wanted I wanted too.

The great longing, which was ever present in my breast, was dispelled when I read these books, only to return with renewed vigor the moment I put them down. It had been like that all the way through my latter years at school. I hated all authority, was an opponent of the whole limited society I had grown up in, with its bourgeois values and materialistic view of humanity. I despised what I had learned at gymnas, even about literature; all I needed to know, all true knowledge, the only really essential knowledge, was to be found in the books I read and the music I listened to. I wasn't interested in money or status symbols; I knew that the essential value in life lay elsewhere. I didn't want to study, had no wish to receive an education at a conventional institution like a university, I wanted to travel down through Europe, sleep on beaches, in cheap hotels, or with friends I made on the way. Take odd jobs to survive, wash dishes at hotels, load or unload boats, pick oranges . . . That spring I had bought a book containing lists of every conceivable, and inconceivable, kind of job you could get in various European countries. But all of this was to culminate in a novel. I would spend some time writing in a Spanish village, go to Pamplona and run the bulls, continue on down to Greece and write on one of the islands, and then, after a year or two, return to Norway with a novel in my backpack.

That was the plan. That was why I didn't do my military service when gymnas was over, like so many of my friends had done, nor did I enroll at university, as the rest had done, instead I went to the employment office in Kristiansand and asked for a list of all the teaching opportunities in Northern Norway.

"Hear you're going to be a *teacher*, Karl Ove," people I saw at the end of the summer said.

"No," I answered. "I'm going to be a writer. But I have to have something to live off in the meantime. I'll work up there for a year, put some money aside, and then travel down through Europe."

This was no longer an idea in my head but the reality I was in: tomorrow I would go to the harbor in Tromsø, catch the express boat to Finnsnes and then the bus south to the tiny village of Håfjord, where the school caretaker would be waiting to welcome me.

No, I couldn't sleep.

I took the half bottle of whiskey from my suitcase, got a glass from the bathroom, poured, drew the curtain aside, and took a first shivering sip as I gazed at the strangely light housing estate outside.

When I woke around ten the following morning my nerves were gone. I packed my things, called for a taxi from the pay phone in the reception, stood outside with my suitcases at my feet, and smoked as I waited. This was the first time in my life I had traveled anywhere without having to return. There was no "home" to return to. Mom had sold our house and moved to Førde. Dad lived with his new wife farther north, in Northern Norway. Yngve lived in Bergen. And, as for me, I was on my way to a first flat of my own. There I would have my own job and earn my own money. For the very first time I had control of all the elements in my life.

Oh, how incredibly good it felt!

The taxi came up the hill, I threw the cigarette butt to the ground, crushed it, and put the suitcases in the trunk, which the driver – a plump elderly man with gray hair and a gold necklace – had opened for me.

"The harbor, please," I said, climbing into the back.

"The harbor's a big place," he said, turning to me.

"I'm going to Finnsnes. On the express boat."

"That can be done, no problem."

He set off downhill.

"Are you going to the gymnas there?" he asked.

"No," I said. "I'm going on to Håfjord."

"Oh? Fishing? You don't look much like a fisherman!"

"Actually, I'm going there to teach."

"That's right. A lot of southerners do that. But aren't you pretty young to have a job like that? Don't you have to be eighteen?"

He laughed and looked at me in the mirror.

I gave a short laugh too.

"I left school in the summer. I figure that's better than nothing."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right," he said. "But think of the kids growing up there. Teachers right out of gymnas. New ones every year. No wonder they give up on school after ninth grade and go fishing!"

"Yes, I guess it isn't that surprising," I said. "But it's not my fault."

"No, not at all. And fault? Who's talking about blame! Fishing's a much better life than studying, you know! Much better than hanging around studying until you're thirty."

"You're right. I'm not going to study."

"But you're going to be a teacher!"

He looked at me in the mirror again.

"Yes," I said.

There was silence for a few minutes. Then he took his hand off the gearshift and pointed.

"Down there, there's your express boat."

He stopped outside the terminal, set my suitcases on the ground, and closed the trunk again. I gave him the money, not knowing what to do about a tip, I had been dreading this the whole journey and solved the problem by saying that he could keep the change.

"Thank you!" he said. "And good luck!"

Bye-bye, fifty kroner.

As he rejoined the road, I stood counting the money I had left. I didn't have much, but I could probably get an advance, surely they would understand that I wouldn't have any money before the job started?

With its one main street, numerous plain concrete buildings, probably hastily erected, and its barren environs girdled by mountain ranges in the distance, Finnsnes, it struck me a few hours later, sitting in a patisserie with a cup of coffee in front of me and waiting for the bus to leave, looked more like a tiny village in Alaska or Canada than Norway. There wasn't much of a center, the town was so small that everything had to be considered the center. The atmosphere was quite different here from in the towns I was used to, because Finnsnes was so much smaller, of course, but also because no effort had been made anywhere to make the place look inviting or homey. Most towns had a front and a back, but here everything looked pretty much the same.

I leafed through the two books I'd bought in the nearby shop. One was called *The New Water* by a writer unfamiliar to me, Roy Jacobsen; the other was *The Mustard Legion* by Morten Jørgensen, who had played in a couple of the bands I had followed a few years ago. Perhaps it hadn't been such a good idea to spend my money on them, but after all I was going to be a writer, I had to read, if only to see how high the bar was set. Could I write like that? This was the question that kept running through my brain as I sat there flipping through the pages.

Then I ambled over to the bus, had a last smoke outside, put my suitcases in the luggage compartment, paid the driver, and asked him to tell me when we were in Håfjord, walked down the aisle and sat on the penultimate seat on the left, which had been my favorite for as long as I could remember.

Across from me sat a lovely fair-haired girl, perhaps one or two years younger than me, she had her satchel on the seat, and I imagined she went to the gymnas in Finnsnes and was on her way home. She had looked at me when I got onto the bus, and now, as the driver shifted into first gear and pulled away from the stop with a jerk, she turned to look at me again. Not lingeringly, no more than a glance, and barely a fleeting one at that, but still it was enough to give me a boner.

I put on my headset and inserted a cassette into the Walkman. The Smiths, *The Queen Is Dead*. So as not to appear intrusive, I concentrated on staring out the window on my side for the first few kilometers and resisted all impulses to look in her direction.

After passing through a built-up area, which began as soon as we left the center and extended for quite a distance, where around half the passengers got off, we came to a long, deserted, straight stretch. Whereas the sky above Finnsnes had been pale, covering the town beneath with its vapid light, here the shade of blue was stronger and deeper, and the sun hanging over the mountains to the southwest – whose low but steep sides obscured a view of the sea that had to be there – caused the red-flecked, in places almost purple, heather, which grew densely on either side of the road, to glow. The trees here were for the most part deformed pines and dwarf birches. On my side the green-clad mountains the valley rose up to meet were gentle, hills almost, while those on the other were steep and wild and alpine, although of no great height.

Not a person, not a house, was to be seen.

But I hadn't come here to meet new people; I had come to find the peace I needed to write.

The thought sent a flash of pleasure through me.

I was on my way, I was on my way.

A couple of hours later, still engrossed in music, I saw a signpost up ahead. From the length of the name I concluded it had to be Håfjord. The road it pointed to led straight into the mountainside. It was not so much a tunnel, more a hole, the walls seemed to have been blasted out, and there was no light in there, either. Water streamed down from the roof of the tunnel in such quantities that the driver had to turn on the windshield wipers. When we emerged on the other side, I gasped. Between two long rugged chains of mountains, perilously steep and treeless, lay a narrow fjord, and beyond it, like a vast blue plain, the sea.

Ohhh.

The road the bus followed hugged the mountainside. To see as much of the landscape as I could I stood up and crossed to the other row of seats. From the corner of my eye I noticed the fair-haired girl turn toward me and smile when she saw me standing there with my face pressed against the window. Below the mountains opposite there was a small island, densely packed with houses on its inner landward side, completely deserted on the outer side, at least that was how it looked from this distance. There were some fishing boats moored inside a harbor with a mole around it. The mountains continued for perhaps a kilometer. Closest to us, the slopes were clad in green, but farther away they were completely bare and gray and fell away with a sheer drop into the sea.

The bus passed through another grotto-like tunnel. At the other end, on a relatively gentle mountain slope, in a shallow bowl, lay the village where I would be spending the next year.

Oh my God.

This was spectacular!

Most of the houses huddled around a road that wound its way through the village like a U. Beneath the road at the bottom was what looked like a factory building in front of a quay, it must have been the fish-processing plant, beyond it there were lots of boats. At the end of the U stood a chapel. Above the road at the top was a line of houses, behind them were dwarf birches, heather, and scrub up to the point where the valley stopped and a large mountain rose on either side.

That was it.

Well, almost: above the point where the top road met the lower one, right by the tunnel, there were two large buildings, which had to be the school.

"Håfjord!" said the bus driver. I stuffed my headset into my pocket and walked up the aisle, he followed me down the steps and opened the door to the luggage compartment, I thanked him, he said no problem without a smile and climbed back up, whereupon the bus turned in the square and reentered the tunnel.

With a suitcase in each hand and a seaman's kitbag on my back, I first looked up, then down the road for the caretaker while drawing the fresh, salty air deep into my lungs.

A door in the house right opposite the bus stop opened. Out came a small man dressed in only a T-shirt and jogging pants. From the direction he was heading, I could see this was my man.

Apart from a little wreath of hair around his ears, he was completely bald. His face was gentle, his features were pronounced, as happens when you are in your fifties, but the eyes behind the glasses were small and piercing, and it struck me as he approached that in a way they didn't quite match the rest.

"Knausgaard?" he said, proffering his hand but without looking me in the eye.

"Yes," I said, and took it. Small and dry and pawlike. "And you must be Korneliussen?"

"That's right," he said with a smile, his arms down by his sides, taking in the view. "What do you think?"

"About Håfjord?" I asked.

"Nice, isn't it?" he said.

"Fantastic," I said.

He turned, looked up and pointed.

"You'll be living there," he said. "So we'll be neighbors. I live just there, you see. Shall we go up and have a look?"

"Yes," I said. "Do you know if my things have arrived?"

He shook his head.

"Not as far as I know," he said.

"They'll be here on Monday then," I said, and set off up the road beside him.

"You'll have my youngest son at school, from what I've heard," he said. "Stig. He's in the fourth grade."

"Do you have many children?" I said.

"Four," he said. "Two live at home. Johannes and Stig. Tone, my daughter, and Ruben live in Tromsø."

I scanned the village as we walked. Some people were standing outside what must have been a shop, where a couple of cars were also parked. And outside a snack bar stand on the top road there were a few people with bikes.

Far out in the fjord a boat was coming in.

Seagulls were screeching down by the harbor.

Otherwise all was still.

"How many people live here actually?" I said.

"Two hundred and fifty or so," he said. "It depends on whether you include the kids going to school."

We stopped in front of a black, 1970s timber house, by the porch.

"Here it is," he said. "Go ahead and step in. The door should be open. But you might as well have the key right away."

I opened the door and went into the front hall, put down my suitcases, and took the key he handed me. It smelled as houses do when they haven't been inhabited for a while. A faint, vaguely outdoor, whiff of damp and mold.

I pushed a half-open door and went into the sitting room. The floor was fitted with an orange wall-to-wall carpet. A dark brown desk, a dark brown coffee table, and a suite upholstered in brown and orange, also dark wood. Two large panoramic windows facing north.

"This is great," I said.

"The kitchen's in there," he said, pointing to a door at the end of the tiny room. He turned. "And the bedroom's in there."

The wallpaper in the kitchen was a familiar '70s pattern: gold, brown, and white. There was a little table under the window. A fridge with a small freezer compartment at the top. A sink set in a short laminate counter. The floor, gray linoleum.

"And, last of all, the bedroom," he said, standing in the doorway while I went in. The carpet on the floor was darker than the one in the sitting room, the wallpaper light, and the room empty except for an enormously wide low bed made of the same wood as the other furniture. Teak or imitation teak.

"Perfect!" I said.

"Do you have any bed linen with you?"

I shook my head. "It's being sent."

"You can borrow some of ours if you like."

"That would be great," I said.

"I'll drop some off then," he said. "And if you have any questions, anything at all, come down and see us. Visitors are welcome here!"

"OK," I said. "Thank you."

From the sitting-room window I watched him walking down toward his house, which was maybe twenty meters down the road from mine.

Mine!

Unbelievable, I had my own place.

I walked around inside, opened a few drawers, and glanced into some cupboards until the caretaker returned carrying a pile of sheets in his arms. After he'd left I started unpacking the little I had brought with me: my clothes, a towel, the typewriter, a few books, and some typing paper. I placed the desk beneath the sitting-room window, put the typewriter on top, moved the standard lamp, arranged the books on the windowsill, as well as a literary magazine, *Vinduet*, which I had bought in Oslo and decided I would subscribe to. Next to them I stacked the fifteen, maybe twenty, cassettes I had brought along, and beside the pile of paper on the table I laid the Walkman and the spare batteries for it.

When my writing alcove was finished I put my clothes in the bedroom wardrobes, shoved the empty cases onto the top shelf, and stood in the center of the room for a while, not sure what to do next.

I felt an urge to call someone and tell them what it was like here, but there was no telephone. Should I go out perhaps and look for a phone booth?

I was hungry too.

What about the snack bar stand? Should I go over there?

There was nothing to do here anyway.

In front of the mirror in the little bathroom that led off the hall I put on my black beret. On the doorstep I stood for a few seconds looking down. In one sweeping gaze you could scan the whole village and everyone who lived in it. There was nowhere to hide. Walking down the road, the surface of which was gravel underneath asphalt, I felt utterly transparent.

Some teenage boys were hanging around outside the snack bar. Their conversation froze as I approached. I walked past without looking at them, went up the steps to the veranda and over to the serving hatch, which shone bright yellow in the wan late-summer evening light that seemed to hang over the landscape. The window was smeared with grease. A boy around the same age as the ones behind me appeared at the hatch. A couple of long black hairs grew from his cheek. His eyes were brown, his hair was black.

"Hamburger with everything, fries, and a Coke," I said. Listened intently to hear if any of the mumbling behind was about me. But it wasn't. I lit a cigarette and paced up and down the veranda while I waited. The boy lowered a landing-net-style receptacle full of thin potato sticks into the boiling fat. Slapped a hamburger down on the hotplate. Apart from the low sizzle of the meat and the by-now excited voices behind me, there was no sound. The houses on the island across the fjord were illuminated. The sky, which hung low there, higher by contrast above the mouth of the fjord, was a bluish gray and rather heavy, though far from dark.

The silence was not oppressive, it was open.

But not to us, I thought for some reason. The silence had always been like this here, long before people existed, and would remain so long after they had disappeared. Lying here in this mountain bowl, with the sea spread out before it.

Where did it end actually? America? Canada?

Yes, that had to be it. Newfoundland.

"Here's your burger," the kid said, placing a Styrofoam tray containing a hamburger, a few strips of lettuce, a quarter of a tomato, and a pile of fries on the shelf outside the serving hatch. I paid, grabbed the tray, and turned to go.

"Are you the new teacher?" asked one of the boys hanging over the handlebars of his bike.

"Yes," I said.

"You're going to have us," he said, spat, and pushed his cap farther up his forehead. "We're in ninth grade. And him, he's in eighth."

"Oh yeah?" I said.

"Yeah," he said. "You're from the south?"

"Yes, from Sørland," I said.

"OK," he said, nodding, as though indicating the audience was over now, and I was free to go.

"What are your names?" I said.

"You'll find out soon enough," he said.

They laughed at that. I gave an unabashed smile but felt stupid as I walked past them. He had outmaneuvered me.

"And what's your name?" he called out after me.

"Mickey," I said. "Mickey Mouse."

"He's a comedian as well!" he shouted.

After I had eaten the hamburger, I got undressed and went to bed. It was still only around nine o'clock, the room was as light as if it were the middle of a gray day, and the silence that was everywhere magnified the sounds of every movement I made, so even though I was tired, it took me a few hours to fall asleep.

I woke in the middle of the night to a door banging somewhere. Immediately afterward I heard footsteps on the floor above. Half awake, I imagined I was sleeping in Dad's office in Tybakken and it was him walking above me. How on earth had I ended up here, I found myself thinking, before I sank back into the darkness. The next time I woke I was in a state of panic.

Where was I?

In the house in Tybakken? The house in Tveit? Yngve's studio? The youth hostel in Tromsø?

I sat up in bed.

The glances I cast around the room didn't find anything to hold them; nothing I saw gave any meaning. It was as though my whole person were sliding down a slippery wall.

Then I remembered.

Håfjord. I was in Håfjord.

In my own flat in Håfjord.

I lay back in bed and mentally retraced my journey here. Then I imagined the village as it was outside the windows, all the people in all the houses whom I didn't know and who didn't know me. Something that could have been expectation, but could also have been fear or insecurity, erupted inside me. I got up and went into the tiny bathroom, showered, and put on a green silky shirt, baggy black cotton trousers, stood in front of the window for a while looking down toward the shop, I would have to go there to buy something for breakfast, but not right now.

There were several vehicles in the parking lot. A little cluster of people was gathered between them. Now and then someone came out the door carrying shopping bags.

Well, might as well dive right in.

I went into the hall and put on my coat, beret, and white basketball shoes, glanced at myself in the mirror, straightened my beret, lit a cigarette, and went out.

The sky was as serene and gray as yesterday. The mountains plunged into the water on the other side of the fjord. There was something brutal about them, I saw that in a flash, they didn't care, anything could happen around them, it meant nothing, it was as though they were somewhere else at the same time as being here.

There were five people gathered outside the shop now. Two were old, at least fifty, the other three looked a few years older than me.

They had seen me from way off, I knew, it was inevitable, it wasn't every day a stranger in a long black coat came down the hill, I imagined.

I raised the cigarette to my mouth and inhaled so deeply that the filter became hot.

Either side of the door hung a white plastic flag advertising the newspaper *Verdens Gang*. The window was full of green and orange paper plates emblazoned with a variety of special offers, written by hand.

I was fifteen meters away from them now.

Should I say hello? A chirpy, easygoing "hi"?

Stop and talk to them?

Say I was the new teacher? Make a little joke about it?

One of them looked at me. I gave a slight nod.

He didn't nod back.

Hadn't he seen it? Had my nod been so slight that it had been perceived as an adjustment of the way I held my head, or a twitch?

Their presence felt like knives in me. A meter away from the door I threw the cigarette to the ground, stopped, and stepped on it.

Could I leave it there? Litter the sidewalk? Or should I pick it up?

No, that would look just a bit *too* pedantic, wouldn't it?

To hell with it, I'll leave it, they're fishermen, I'm sure they toss their cigarette butts away when they've finished with them!

I placed my hand on the door and pushed, took one of the red shopping baskets, and began to move down the aisle between the various shelves. A rotund lady in her midthirties was holding a packet of sausages in her hand and saying something to a girl who must have been her daughter. Thin and gangly, she stood there with a sullen, obstinate expression on her face. On the other side of the woman there was a boy of around ten leaning over a rack, rummaging. I put a whole-wheat loaf in the basket, a packet of Ali coffee, and a box of Earl Grey tea bags. The woman glanced at me, put the sausages in her basket, and continued to the other end of the shop with the boy and girl in tow. I took my time, wandered around looking at all the food items, added a brown goat's cheese from a cabinet, a tin of liver paste, and a tube of mayonnaise. Then I picked up a carton of milk and a packet of margarine and went over to the counter, where the woman was now packing her items into a bag while her daughter stood reading a notice board by the door.

The assistant nodded to me.

"Hello," I said, and started to empty the basket in front of him.

He was short and stocky, his face was broad, his nose curved, and his powerful chin covered with a patch of grizzled bristles.

"Are you the new teacher?" he said as he was entering the prices on the till beside him. Over by the notice board, the girl had turned to look at me.

"Yes," I said. "Arrived yesterday."

The boy was tugging at her arm, she yanked it free and went out the door. The boy followed her, and a moment later so did the mother.

I needed oranges. And apples.

I hurried over to the modest fruit counter, filled a bag with some oranges, grabbed a couple of apples, and went back to the till, where the assistant was ringing up the last item.

"And a pouch of Eventyr tobacco and rolling papers. And *Dagbladet*."

"You're from the south?" he said.

I nodded. "Kristiansand."

An elderly man wearing a cloth cap entered the shop.

"Good morning, Bertil!" he shouted.

"Oh, so it's you!" the assistant said, giving me a wink. I squeezed a smile, paid, put my purchases in a bag, and left. One of the people standing outside nodded, I nodded back, and then I was out of their range.

Up the hill, I gazed at the mountain rising from the end of the village. It was completely green, all the way to the top, and that was perhaps the most surprising feature of the countryside here, I had expected something bleaker, with less color, not this green which seemed to resonate everywhere, drowned out only by the grays and blues of the vast sea.

It was a good feeling going back into my flat. It was the first place I'd ever been able to call mine, and I enjoyed even the most trivial activities, like hanging up my jacket or putting the milk in the fridge. Admittedly, I had lived for a month in a small flat next to Eg Psychiatric Hospital earlier in the summer, that was where Mom had driven me when I moved from the house we had occupied for the past five years, but it wasn't an actual flat, only a room off a corridor with other rooms where in the old days the unmarried nurses had lived, hence its name the Henhouse, in the same way that the job I had there wasn't an actual job either, just a short summer temp job without any real responsibility. Also it was in Kristiansand. For me it was impossible to feel free in Kristiansand, there were too many ties with too many people, real and imagined, for me ever to do what I wanted in that town.

But here! I thought, lifting a slice of bread to my mouth while looking out the window. The reflection of the mountains across the fjord was broken kaleidoscopically by the ripples in the water below. Here no one knew who I was, here there were no ties, no fixed patterns, here I could do as I liked. Hide away for a year and write, create something in secret. Or I could just take it easy and save up some money. It didn't really matter. What mattered was that I was here.

I poured some milk into a glass and drank it in long swigs, placed the glass next to the plate and the knife on the counter, returned the food to the fridge, and went into the sitting room, plugged the typewriter in, put on my headset, turned the volume up full, inserted a sheet of paper into the typewriter, centered it, and typed a 1 at the top. Looked down at the caretaker's house. A pair of green rubber boots stood on the doorstep. A broom with red bristles leaned against the wall. There were some toy cars lying in the mixture of gravel and sand covering the area in front of the door. Between the two houses grew moss, lichen, some grass, and a few slender trees. I tapped my forefinger against the table edge to the rhythm of the music. I wrote one sentence: "Gabriel stood at the top of the hill looking over the construction site with an expression of disapproval on his face."

I smoked a cigarette, brewed a pot of coffee, and looked out across the village and fjord and up at the mountains beyond. I wrote another sentence: "Gordon appeared behind him." Sang along to the chorus. Wrote. "He grinned like a wolf." Pushed back my chair, put my feet on the table, and lit another cigarette.

That was pretty good, wasn't it?

I picked up *The Garden of Eden* by Hemingway and browsed through it to get a feel for the language. I had been given it by Hilde as a graduation present two days before, at the Kristiansand railway station when I was about to leave for Oslo to catch a plane to Tromsø. Lars was there too, and Eirik, who went out with Hilde. Not forgetting Line. She was going to travel with me to Oslo and say good-bye there.

It was only now that I saw there was a dedication on the copyright page. She had written that I meant something special to her.

I lit a cigarette and sat looking out the window while I chewed that over.

What could I mean to her?

She saw something in me, I felt that, but I didn't know what she saw. To be friends with her was to be taken care of. But the care that resides in understanding always makes the recipient smaller too. It wasn't a problem, but I was aware of it.

I wasn't worth it. I pretended I was, and the strange thing was that she rose to it, because there was nothing wrong with her intelligence in such matters. Hilde was the only person I knew who read decent books, and the only person I knew who herself wrote. We had been in the same class for two years and at once she caught my attention, she had an ironic, sometimes also rebellious, attitude to what was said in the classroom, which I had never seen in a girl before. She despised the other girls' mania for makeup, the way they always did their best to be proper, their often affected childishness, but not in any aggressive or bitter manner, she wasn't like that, she was kind and caring, she had a fundamentally gentle nature, but there was a sharpness to it too, an unusual stubbornness, which made me look in her direction more and more often. She was pale, she had pale freckles on her cheeks, her hair was a reddish-blond color, she was thin and there was something physically fragile about her, fragile in the sense of the opposite of robust, which in another, less sharp, less independent soul would perhaps evoke a need in those she met to take her under their wing, but there was definitely no need for this, quite the contrary, it was Hilde who took whoever crossed her path under her wing. She often went around in a green military jacket and plain blue jeans, which signaled politically that she was on the left, but culturally she was on the right because what she was against was materialism while what she was for was the mind. In other words, the internal rather than the external. That was why she scorned writers like Solstad and Faldbakken, or Phallusbakken as she called him, and liked Bjørneboe and Kaj Skagen and even André Bjerke.

Hilde had become my closest confidante. Actually she was my best friend. I was in and out of the house where she lived, I got to know her parents, sometimes I stayed the night and had dinner with them. What Hilde and I did, occasionally with Eirik, occasionally on our own, was talk. Sitting cross-legged on the floor of her cellar flat, with a bottle of wine between us, the night pressing against the windows, we talked about books we had read, about political issues that interested us, about what awaited us in life, what we wanted to do and what we could do. She was very serious about life, she was the only acquaintance of my age who was, and she probably saw the same in me, while at the same time she laughed a lot and irony was never far away. There was little I liked better than being there, in their house, with her and Eirik and sometimes Lars; however, there were other things happening in my life which were irreconcilable, and this caused me to have a permanent guilty conscience: if I was out drinking at discos and trying to pick up girls, I felt bad about Hilde and what I stood for when I was with her; if I was at Hilde's place and talked about freedom or beauty or the meaning of everything, I could feel pangs of guilt toward those I went out with, or toward the person I was when I was with them, because the duplicity and hypocrisy that Hilde, Eirik, and I talked so much about was also present in my own heart. Politically, I was way out on the left, bordering on anarchy, I hated conformity and conventionality, and like all the other alternative young people growing up in Kristiansand, including her, I despised Christianity and all the idiots who believed in it and went to meetings with their stupid charismatic priests.

But I didn't despise the Christian girls. No, for some strange reason it was precisely them I fell for. How could I explain that to Hilde? And although I, like her, always tried to see beneath the surface, on the basis of a fundamental yet unstated tenet that what lay beneath was the truth or the reality, and, like her, always sought meaning, even if it were only to be found in an acknowledgment of meaninglessness, it was actually on the glittering and alluring surface that I wanted to live, and the chalice of meaninglessness I wanted to drain – in short I was attracted by all the town's discos and nightspots, where I wanted nothing more than to drink myself senseless and stagger around chasing girls I could fuck, or at least make out with. How could I explain that to Hilde?

I couldn't, and I didn't. Instead I opened a new subdivision in my life. "Booze and hopes of fornication" it was called, and it was right next to "insight and sincerity," separated only by a minor garden-fence-like change of personality.

Line was a Christian. Not ostentatiously so, but she was, and her presence at the railway station, close to me, somehow made me feel ill at ease.

She had curly black hair, pronounced eyebrows, and clear blue eyes. She moved with grace and was independent in that rare way that does not impinge on others. She liked drawing and did it a lot, perhaps she had some talent; after she'd said good-bye to me she was going to study creative arts at a folk high school. I wasn't in love with her, but she was good-looking, I was incredibly fond of her, and occasionally, after we'd shared some white wine, passionate feelings for her could rise inside me anyway. The problem was that she had clear boundaries as to how far she would go. During the weeks we had been together I had asked her twice, begged her, to let me as we lay there, seminaked, kissing in bed at her house or in my room at the Henhouse. But no, it wasn't me she was saving herself for.

"Couldn't I do it from behind then!" I once burst out in my desperation, without really knowing what that involved. Line snuggled up to me with her supple body and smothered me in kisses. Not many seconds later I felt the hated spasm from down below as my underpants filled with semen and I discreetly moved away from her; fired still by a driving passion, she didn't realize that my mood had changed completely from one moment to the next.

On the station platform she stood beside me, hands in her rear pockets and a little backpack on her back. There were six minutes to go before the train was due to leave. People were still getting on board.

"I'm just going to run over to the kiosk," she said, eyeing me. "Need anything?"

I shook my head.

"Oh, maybe a Coke."

She dashed over to the Narvesen kiosk. Hilde looked at me and smiled. Lars's eyes were wandering. Eirik was gazing in the direction of the harbor.

"Now that you're venturing out into the big wide world, I'll give you a piece of advice," he said, turning to me.

"Oh yeah?" I said.

"Think before you act. Make sure you're never caught with your pants down. And you'll survive. If, for example, you want some of your pupils to suck you off, for God's sake do it *behind* the teacher's desk. Not in front. OK?"

"Isn't that a double standard?" I said.

He laughed.

"And if, while you're up north, you've got to slap a girlfriend around, do it so the bruises don't show," Hilde said. "Never the face, however much you might feel like it."

"Do you think I should have two, then? One down here and one up there?"

"Why not?" she said.

"One you hit and one you don't," Eirik said. "Can't get a better balance than that."

"Any more advice?" I said.

"I saw an interview with an old actor on TV once," Lars said. "He was asked whether there was anything he'd learned over the course of a long life that he'd like to pass on to the viewers. He said yes, there was. The shower curtain. Make sure it was inside the bath, not outside. Otherwise when you turned the water on it would go all over the floor."

We laughed. Lars, pleased with himself, looked around.

Behind him, Line came back empty-handed.

"The line was too long," she said. "But I guess they'll have a bar on board."

"They do," I said.

"Shall we go?"

"OK," I said. "Thet was thet, as Fleksnes used to say. No more Kristiansand!"

They hugged me one after another. That was something I had started doing in my junior year: whenever we met we hugged.

Then I slung my kitbag over my shoulder, grabbed my case, and followed Line onto the train. They waved a few times, the train set off, and they strolled down to the parking lot.

It was unbelievable that was only two days ago.

I put down the book and, while rolling another cigarette and taking a swig of lukewarm coffee, read the three sentences I had written.

Down the hill the shop was less busy. I went for an apple from the kitchen and sat down at the typewriter again. In the course of the next hour I wrote three pages. About two boys on a construction site, and it was good as far as

I could judge. Perhaps three more pages and it would be finished. And that wasn't bad, finishing a short story on the first whole day up here. At that rate I could have a collection ready by Christmas!

As I was rinsing the dregs from the coffeepot, I saw a car coming up the road from the shop. It stopped outside the caretaker's house and two men, who looked to be in their midtwenties, got out. Both were well built, one was tall, the other shorter and rounder. I held the pot under the tap until it was full and put it on the burner. The two men were walking up the hill. I stepped to the side so they couldn't see me through the window.

Their footsteps stopped outside the porch.

Were they coming to see me?

One of them said something to the other. The ring of the doorbell pierced the silence of the flat.

I wiped my hands on my thighs, went into the hall, and opened the door.

The shorter of the two stretched out a hand. His face was square, his chin curved and jutting, his mouth small, his eyes alert. He had a black moustache and stubble on his jaw. A heavy gold chain around his neck.

"I'm Remi," he said.

Embarrassed, I shook his hand.

"Karl Ove Knausgaard," I said.

"Frank," the tall one said, reaching out a hand, which was enormous. His face was as round as the other man's was square. Round and fleshy. His lips were thick, the skin was delicate, pink almost. Hair blond and thinning. He looked like an overgrown child. His eyes were kind, also like a child's.

"Can we come in?" the one called Remi said. "We heard you were on your own up here and thought you might like some company. I suppose you don't know anyone in the village yet."

"Oh," I said. "That was kind of you. Do come in!"

I took a step back. *Kind! Do come in!* Where the hell did that come from? Was I fifty?

They stopped in the sitting room and looked around. Remi nodded a few times.

"Harrison lived here last year," he said.

I looked at him.

"The last temporary teacher," he said. "We were here a lot. He was a great guy."

"A good guy," Frank said.

"*No* wasn't in his vocabulary," Remi said.

"He's already deeply missed," Frank said. "Can we sit down?"

"Yes, of course," I said. "Would you like a cup of coffee? I just made some."

"Coffee? Yes, please."

They took off their jackets, laid them across the arm of the sofa, and sat down. Their bodies were like barrels. The upper arms of the one called Frank were as wide as my thighs. Even with my back to them, in front of the counter, I could feel their presence, it filled the whole flat and made me feel weak and girly.

That was kind of you. Would you like a cup of coffee?

For Christ's sake, I didn't have any cups! Only the one I'd brought with me.

I opened the cupboards above the counter. Empty, of course. Then I opened the lower ones. And there, next to the downpipe from the sink, was a glass. I rinsed it, sprinkled some coffee in the pot, banged it on the tabletop a few times, carried it into the sitting room, and looked around for something to put it on.

It had to be *The Garden of Eden*.

"Well?" Remi said. "What do you think, Karl Ove?"

I was uncomfortable at hearing my name used so familiarly by a man I had never seen before and felt my cheeks flush.

"I don't really know," I said.

"We're going to a party tonight," Frank said. "Over'n Gryllefjord. How'd you like to come along?"

"There's a place free in the car, and we know you won't've had time to go to the liquor store, so we've got some booze for you too. What do you say?"

"Not sure," I said.

"What? Would you rather mope around here in this empty room?"

"Let the man make his own mind up!" Frank said.

"Yeah, OK."

"I'd planned to do some work," I said.

"Work? On what" Remi said. But his eyes were already fixed on the typewriter. "Do you write?"

I flushed again.

"A little," I said with a shrug.

"Ah, a writer!" Remi said. "Not bad."

He laughed.

"I've never read a book in my life. Not even when I went to school. I always got out of it. Have you?" he said, looking at Frank.

"Sure, lots. *Cocktail*."

They both burst into laughter.

"Does that count?" Remi said, looking at me. "You're a writer. Does porn count as literature?"

I gave a strained smile.

"Fiction is fiction, I guess," I said.

There was a silence.

"You're from Kristiansand, I hear," Frank said.

I nodded.

"You have a girl down there?"

I mulled that one over.

"Yes and no," I said.

"Yes and no? That sounds interesting!" Remi said.

"Sounds like something for you," Frank said with a glance at Remi.

"For me? No. I'm more the either-or type."

There was another silence as they took a mouthful of coffee.

"Any children?" Remi said.

"Children?" I said. "Jesus. I'm only eighteen!"

At last, a comment from the heart.

"It's happened before in the history of the world," Remi said.

"And do you two have children?" I said.

"Frank doesn't. But I do. My son's nine. He lives with his mother."

"He's from the 'or' time," Frank said.

They laughed. Then they both looked at me.

"Well, we shouldn't bother him any more on his first day here," Remi said, and got up. Frank got up too. They took their jackets and went into the hall.

"Think about the party tonight," Remi said. "We'll be at Hege's if you change your mind."

"He doesn't know where Hege lives," Frank said.

"You walk up the top road. Then it's the fourth house on the left. You can't miss it. There'll be cars outside."

He held out a hand.

"Hope you'll come. Thanks for the coffee!"

After I'd closed the door behind them, I went into the bedroom and lay down. Stretched out my arms and legs and closed my eyes.

A car came up the hill and stopped outside.

I opened my eyes. More visitors?

No. A door banged somewhere else in the house. It was my neighbors, whoever they were, coming home. After shopping in Finnsnes maybe.

Oh, I was dying to call someone I knew!

I couldn't sleep, which I was also eager to do, to get away from all of this. Instead I went to the bathroom, undressed, and had another shower. It was a way of tricking myself into believing something new was beginning. Not as good as sleeping, it was true, but better than nothing. Then, with wet hair and my shirt sticking to my back, I sat down and went back to writing. I had the two ten-year-olds walking around in the forest. They were scared of meeting foxes and had cap guns in their hands to frighten them away if they showed up. Suddenly they heard a shot. They ran over to where the sound had come from and saw a garbage dump in the middle of the forest. There were two men lying on the ground shooting at rats. That's when something seemed to flash through me, an arc of happiness and energy; now I couldn't write fast enough, the text lagged slightly behind the narrative, it was a wonderful feeling, shiny and glittering.

The men shooting at the rats went on their way, the two boys pulled up two chairs and a table in the forest and sat there reading porn magazines. One of them, the one called Gabriel, stuck his dick in a glass bottle and suddenly felt a terrible stinging pain, he pulled it out and there was a beetle on the end of it. Gordon laughed so much he fell back into the heather. They forgot all about time, then Gabriel realized, but it was too late, his father was furious with him when he got home, punched him in the mouth, which began to bleed, and locked him in the tiny room with the hot-water tank, where he had to stay all night.

When I had finished, it was almost eight, and seven closely written pages lay in a pile beside the typewriter.

So great was my sense of triumph that something inside me screamed out to tell someone. Anyone! Anyone!

But I was all alone.

I turned off the typewriter and buttered some slices of bread, which I ate standing in front of the kitchen window. A figure hurried past on the road under the graying though still blue sky. Two cars emerged from the tunnel, one right after the other. I had to go out. I couldn't stay inside any longer.

Then there was a knock at the door.

I answered it. A woman of around thirty, in a T-shirt and slacks, stood outside. Her face had gentle features, her nose was big though not obtrusively so, her eyes were warm and brown. Her hair was dark blond and tied in a knot at the back.

"Hi!" she said. "I just had to say hello. We're neighbors. I live upstairs. And we're also colleagues. I'm a teacher too. I'm Torill."

She held out her hand. Her fingers were thin, but her grasp was firm.

"Karl Ove," I said.

"Welcome to Håfjord," she said with a smile.

"Thank you."

"You arrived yesterday, I hear?"

"Yes, by bus."

"Yes, well, we'll have to talk another time. I just wanted to say that if there's anything you need just ring the bell. I mean, sugar or coffee or bed linen or whatever it is you're short of. A radio, for example. Do you have one? We've got at least one we don't use."

I nodded.

"I have a Walkman," I said. "But thanks anyway. It was very kind of you to come down!"

Very kind.

She smiled.

"I'll see you later," she said.

"Yes, see you," I said.

I stood in the hall long after she had gone. What was happening actually?

Every meeting here was like a dagger to the soul.

No, I had to get out and walk.

I put on a coat, spent a few seconds in front of the mirror in the bathroom straightening my beret, locked the door behind me, and started walking down the hill. Some way down you could the see past the edge of the mountain and out to sea, the razor-sharp horizon against the sky. Two large very white clouds hung motionless, hovering on high. On the other side of the fjord a little fishing boat was chugging back toward the harbor. The fjord was called Fugleøyfjord. Bird Island Fjord. OK, they, the first people who arrived here, must have thought: What shall we call this fjord? Fishfjord? No, that's what we called the last one, didn't we. What about Birdfjord then? Yes! Good idea!

I continued along the road past the fish-processing plant, which was deserted apart from the seagulls huddled on the roof, and on toward the bend that led to the higher part of the village. Beyond the last house the mountain soared straight up. There was no intermediate stage, which I was used to where I had grown up, those diffuse, hard-to-define places, which were neither private property nor open nature. This was real nature, and not the low, gentle Sørland type of nature but wild, harsh, windswept Arctic nature, which confronted you as soon as you opened the door.

Were there a hundred houses here in all?

Way up here, beneath the mountains, by the sea.

I had the feeling I was walking on the edge of the world. That it wasn't possible to go any farther. One more step and I was gone.

But, my God, how fantastic it was to be able to live here.

Now and then I saw movements behind the windows in the houses I passed. The flickering lights of TV sets. All somehow submerged beneath the crash of the waves as they washed up on the shore below, or woven into it, for so even and regular was this roar that it seemed more like a quality of the air, as though the air could not only be colder or warmer but also louder or softer.

In front of me appeared the house where I assumed the woman they had called Hege lived, at any rate there were lots of cars in the drive, music was coming from an open veranda door, and behind the large 1970s-style windows I glimpsed a group of people sitting around a table. It was tempting to go over and knock on the door, they could hardly expect anything of me, after all I didn't know anyone, a certain shyness would only be natural, so it would be OK just to sit there drinking without uttering a word until the alcohol kicked in and loosened everything in me, including my heart, which was now so small and constricted.

While I was thinking this I didn't stop walking, I didn't even slow down because if they saw me standing there wavering and then I set off for home again they would think they knew something about me.

Maybe I was longing for something to make my heart swell, but this wasn't vital, and I was supposed to be doing my writing, I thought as I walked on, and then I was past the house and it was too late.

When I came to a halt by my front door I looked at my watch.

It had taken me fifteen minutes to walk around the whole village.

So it was within these fifteen minutes I was to live my whole life this coming year.

A shudder went through me. I walked into the hall and took off my coat. Even though I knew nothing was going to happen, I locked the door and kept it locked all night.

The next day I didn't go out, I sat writing and staring at the people who appeared and disappeared again on their way downhill. I paced back and forth in the flat pondering more and more what I was going to do when classes started on Tuesday, formulating one introductory sentence after another in my head while also trying to decide what strategy to adopt for dealing with the pupils. The first priority was to establish what their level was. Perhaps test them in all the subjects right from the beginning? And then plan everything after that? Tests? No, that was a bit harsh, a bit too authoritarian, a bit too schoolmarmy.

Some exercises, then, that they could do at home?

No. There was so much time to fill in every lesson that it would be best to give them the exercises at school. I could work on them tomorrow.

I went into the bedroom and lay down on the bed, finished the two books I had bought, and once that was done started on the articles in the literary magazine I had picked up in Oslo, although I didn't understand much. I was familiar with most of the words, but what they described seemed to be constantly beyond my reach, as though they were about an unknown world which the language of the old world was not equipped to approach. But one thing did emerge from these pages with greater force than anything else, and that was the description of a book, *Ulysses*, which in its singularity sounded absolutely fantastic. Before me I saw an enormous tower, glinting with moisture as it were, surrounded by mist and a pallid light from the overcast sun. It was regarded as the major work of modernism, by which I imagined low-slung racing cars, pilots with leather helmets and jackets, zeppelins floating above skyscrapers in glittering but dark metropolises, computers, electronic music. Names such as Hermann Broch, Robert Musil, Arnold Schönberg.

Elements of earlier, long-gone cultures were assimilated into this world, in my mind's eye, such as Broch's *Virgil* and Joyce's *Ulysses*.

At the shop the day before I had forgotten today was Sunday, so I was eating bread with liver paste and mayonnaise when there was another ring at the door. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and hurried into the hall.

There were two girls standing outside. I recognized one of them at once. She was the girl sitting across the aisle from me on the bus coming here.

She smiled.

"Hi!" she said. "Do you recognize me?"

"Of course," I said. "You're the girl on the bus."

She laughed.

"And you're the new teacher at Håfjord! I thought you were when I saw you, but I wasn't sure. Then someone at the party last night told me you were."

She stuck out a hand.

"My name's Irene," she said.

"Karl Ove," I said with a smile.

"This is Hilde," she said, nodding in the direction of the other girl, whose hand I then shook."We're cousins," Irene said. "I dropped in on her today. But actually that was just an excuse to come and say hello to you." She let out a laugh. "No, I was just joking."

"Would you like to come in?" I said.

They looked at each other.

"Love to," Irene said.

She was wearing jeans, a blue denim jacket, and, beneath it, a white lace blouse. She was chubby, her breasts under the blouse were full and her hips broad. Her hair was blond, shoulder-length, her skin pale with some freckles around her nose. Eyes large, blue, and teasing. Standing next to her in the hall, smelling the fragrance of her perfume, which was also full, as she passed me her jacket – there were no hooks in the hall – with a slightly searching look, I got another boner.

"I can take yours too while I'm at it," I said to Hilde, who had nowhere near the same presence as her cousin, and who passed me her jacket with a shy, bashful smile. I hung them over the back of the desk chair and slid a hand into my trouser pocket so that the bulge was not visible. The two girls went somewhat hesitantly into the sitting room.

"My things haven't arrived yet," I said. "They'll be here soon."

"Yes, it is a bit drab in here," Irene said, smiling.

They sat down on the sofa, both with their knees tightly together. I sat on the chair opposite them, with my legs crossed to hide the bulge, which had not become any smaller. She was sitting only a meter away from me.

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Eighteen," I said. "And you?"

"Sixteen," Irene said.

"Seventeen," Hilde said.

"So you just finished gymnas?" Irene said.

I nodded.

"I'm in my junior year," Irene said. "At the gymnas in Finnsnes. It's a boarding school. So I've got a room there. You can come and visit me if you like. No doubt you'll soon be coming to Finnsnes quite a bit."

"Yes, I'd like that," I said.

Our eyes met.

She smiled. I smiled back.

"But I'm really from Hellevika. That's the next village. Across the mountain. It's just a few kilometers away. Do you have a driver's license?"

"No," I said.

"Shame," she said.

There were a few moments of silence. I got up, went for an ashtray and my pouch of tobacco, and rolled a cigarette.

"Can I have one?" she said. "Mine are in my jacket."

I threw the pouch over to her.

"I had to laugh when we were on the bus yesterday," she said as she was making her rollie. "You looked as if you were trying to climb out the window."

They grinned. She licked the gum, folded the paper over with her forefingers against her thumbs, put it in her mouth, and lit up.

"It was so incredibly beautiful," I said. "I had no idea what it would be like up here. Håfjord was just a name to me. In fact, not even that."

"Why did you apply to come up here then?"

I shrugged.

"I was given a list of names by the employment office, and so I chose this one."

Someone crossed the floor above.

We all looked up at the ceiling.

"Have you met Torill yet?" Irene said.

"Yes, briefly," I said. "Do you know her?"

"Of course we do. Everyone knows everyone here. Well, in Hellevika and Håfjord."

"And on Fugleøya," Hilde said.

Silence.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" I asked them, half getting up from the chair.

Irene shook her head. "No, I think we should be going. What do you think, Hilde?"

"Yes, I think so too," her cousin said.

We got up, I took the jackets from the chair, went closer to Irene than strictly speaking I had to as I handed her the jacket. I was filled with a sense of her hips, covered by her tight jeans, and of her thighs and legs and surprisingly small feet, of her neck and her full breasts, her short nose and blue eyes, at once innocent and sassy, I closed the door behind the girls. The whole visit had lasted ten, maybe fifteen minutes.

I was on my way to the kitchen to put on some coffee when there was another knock at the door.

It was her, alone this time.

"There's a party in Hellevika next weekend," she said. "In fact, that was why I came by, to tell you. Would you feel like coming? It's a good way to meet people from around here."

"Of course," I said. "If I can make it I will."

"If?" she said. "You just have to get in a car. Everyone's going. See you there!"

She winked. Then she turned and walked down the hill to where Hilde was chipping away at the edge of the asphalt with the tip of her shoe.

A little after eight the following morning, I left the flat for the first time in more than a day. The sun that hung above the mountains to the east shone directly on the door, and the air that met my face when I closed it behind me was mild and summery. But only a few meters away, where the countryside lay in shadow behind the mountains, it was colder, and the impression I had of small pools existing in the air, like currents and eddies, rapids and waterfalls, seemed strangely uplifting. Ahead of me, atop a small plateau, was the school, and if I wasn't absolutely dreading going in, I was certainly nervous enough for tiny flashes of apprehension to shoot through me as I approached.

It looked like any other school, a long single-story edifice on one side, connected to a tunnel-like corridor with a larger, newer, and taller block housing a woodwork room, gymnasium, and small swimming pool. Between the two buildings was the playground, which extended behind them to a full-sized soccer field. On a mound above it, standing proudly, was what I guessed was the community center.

Two cars were parked in front of the entrance. A big white jeep and a low black Citroën. The sun gleamed on the row of windows. The door was open. I went into the hall, the yellow linoleum floor was almost white in the sunshine, which fell in long stripes through the glass door panels. I rounded one corner, there were three doors on the right, two on the left, and at the end the hall opened into a large space. A man stopped and looked at me. He had a full beard and a bald patch. Probably in his early thirties.

"Hello!" he said.

"Hello," I said.

"And you are . . . Karl Ove?"

"That's me," I said, stopping in front of him.

"Sture," he said.

We shook hands.

"Karl Ove was a pure guess," he said with a smile. "But you didn't look like a Nils Erik."

"Nils Erik?" I said.

"Yes, we have two teachers from the south this year. You and Nils Erik. The rest of the untrained staff are local people, so I know them."

"Are you local?"

"I certainly am!"

He looked me straight in the eye for a few seconds. I found it unpleasant, what was this, some kind of test, but I didn't want to be the first to look away so I held his gaze.

"You're very young," he said eventually, and looked away toward the door we were standing next to. "But we knew that of course. It'll all be fine! Come on, you have to meet the others."

He stretched out an arm toward the door. I opened it and entered. It was the staff room. A kitchenette, armchairs, and a sofa, a small room full of papers and a photocopier, an adjacent rectangular room with workstations on both sides.

"Hi!" I said.

Six people were sitting around the table. All eyes turned to me.

They nodded and mumbled "hi" in return. From the kitchenette appeared a small but powerful and energetic man with a red beard.

"Karl Ove?" He beamed. After I had nodded and he'd shaken my hand, he addressed the others.

"This is Karl Ove Knausgaard, the young man who has come all the way from Kristiansand to work with us!" And then he said the names of all those seated, which I had forgotten an instant later. They all had a cup of coffee in their hands or on the table in front of them, and everyone, apart from one elderly woman, was young. In their early twenties or so it seemed.

"Take a seat, Karl Ove. Coffee?"

"Please," I said, and squeezed down at the end of the sofa.

For the next few hours the head teacher, who was called Richard and must have been in his late thirties, told us, the two temporary teachers, about the school. We were shown around the rooms, given keys, allocated workstations, and then we went through the timetables and various routines. It was a small school with so few pupils that classes were grouped together for many of the lessons. Torill would be the homeroom teacher for the first and second graders, Hege for the third and fourth, me for the fifth, sixth, and seventh, Sture for the eighth and ninth. Why precisely I had been made a homeroom teacher I had no idea, and it felt a little uncomfortable, not least because the other temp from Sørland, Nils Erik, was considerably older than me, twenty-four, and planning to embark on teacher training after this year. He was serious about it, this was his future, while I had no such plans: becoming a teacher was the last thing I wanted to do in this life. The other temps came from the area, knew the ins and outs, and ought to have been better suited than me to taking responsibility for a class. Presumably the head teacher had based his decision on my application, and that made me uneasy because I had laid it on thick.

The head teacher showed us where the syllabuses were and demonstrated the range of teaching aids we had at our disposal. At one o'clock we were finished, and I walked down to the post office, which was at the other end of the village, arranged a PO box number, sent a few letters, did some food shopping, made dinner at home, lay on my bed listening to music for an hour or so, jotted down some key words regarding the ideas I'd had for my classes, but they looked stupid, too obvious, so I crumpled up the paper and threw it away.

I had everything under control, everything.

Early that evening I went back up to the school. It was a strange feeling to unlock the door of the main building and walk along the corridors. Everything was empty and still, filled with the gray light that seeped in through the windows. All the shelves and cupboards were empty, the classrooms somehow untouched.

In the staff room there was a telephone in a small cubicle, I went in and called Mom, she'd also had her first day at a new school today. She was busy unpacking in the new place she was renting, a terraced house some way outside Førde town center. I told her a bit about what it was like here and how nervous I was about teaching the next day. She said she knew I would manage just fine, and even though her character reference didn't count for a lot – after all she was my mother – it did help.

When I had finished the call, I went into the photocopier room and made ten copies of the short story I had written. The idea was to send it to people I knew the following day. Then I wandered around all the rooms in the school. In the gym I swung open the panel door to the little equipment room, threw a ball out, had a few kicks at the handball goal at the far end. Switched off the light, went into the swimming pool area. The water lay dark and still in the pool. I went up to the woodwork room and on to the natural science room. From the windows you could see across the village lying beneath the mountains, lots of small houses in a variety of colors which appeared to vibrate, and beyond, across the sea, the endless sea, and the sky that rose from it, in the far distance, full of elongated, smoke-like clouds.

Early tomorrow morning the pupils would come, then it was down to business.

I switched the lights off after me, locked the door, and walked down the hill with the large key ring jangling in my hand.

Upon waking the next morning I was so nervous I was on the point of throwing up. A cup of coffee was all I could get down me. I walked up to the school half an hour before the first lesson was due to begin, sat in my place flipping through the books we were going to use. The mood among the other teachers buzzing around between the photocopier, classrooms, kitchenette, and sofa suite was lighthearted and cheery. Outside the window the students were beginning to appear in dribs and drabs, coming up the hill. My chest was frozen with terror. My heart was beating as if it were being strangled. I saw the letters on the page I had opened but couldn't make any sense of them. After a while I stood up and went into the kitchenette to get myself a cup of coffee. When I turned I met the eyes of Nils Erik. He looked relaxed, leaning back against the sofa, his legs wide apart.

"You're free in the first lesson, aren't you?" I said.

He nodded. His cheeks were slightly flushed. His hair was black and he had the same unruly tufts of hair that my old best friend Geir had. His eyes were light blue.

"I'm so damned nervous," I said, sitting down in the chair opposite.

"What are you nervous about?" he said. "You know there are only five or six pupils in each class, don't you?"

"I do," I said. "Nevertheless."

He smiled.

"Shall we trade places? They don't know who's who anyway. I'll be Karl Ove and you're Nils Erik."

"Why not," I said. "But what do we do when we have to swap back?"

"Swap back? Why would we have to?"

"No, you've got a point there," I said, glancing out the window. The pupils were standing around in groups. Some were running around. Scattered between them were also some mothers. The children were smartly dressed.

Of course they were. Some were here for the first time. It was their very first school day.

"So where am I from?" I said.

"Hokksund," he said. "And me?"

"Kristiansand."

"Great!" he said.

I shook my head.

"No, you're wrong there," I said.

He looked at me with a twinkle in his eye.

"You might think so *now*," he said. "But just wait a few years."

"What's happening in a few years?" I said.

Just then the bell rang.

"In a few years you'll think of your hometown as paradise on earth," he said.

What the hell do you know about that? I thought, but said nothing, just got up, took my coffee cup in one hand, the pile of books in the other, and headed for the door.

"Good luck!" he said from behind me.

There were five pupils in the seventh grade. Four girls, one boy. In addition to them, I was also responsible for the three in the fifth and sixth grades. So, in all, eight pupils.

When I stopped in front of the teacher's desk and put my things down, all of them were staring at me. My palms were damp, my heart was thumping, and as I drew breath it was with a tremble.

"Hi," I said. "My name's Karl Ove Knausgaard. I come from Kristiansand and I'm going to be your homeroom teacher this year. I thought we might begin with a little roll call? I've got your names here, but I don't know who's who yet."

While I was talking they exchanged glances; two of the girls giggled. The attention they were paying me was not hostile, I sensed that at once, it was childlike. They were children.

I took out the list of names. Studied it, studied them.

I recognized the girl from the shop. But the one who made the strongest impression on me was a girl with reddish hair and black-rimmed glasses. She was skeptical, I could tell. There was no sharpness from any of the others.

"Andrea?" I said.

"Here," said the girl from the shop. She said it with downcast eyes, but as her voice trailed off she looked up at me.

I smiled to reassure her.

"Vivian?"

The girl beside her giggled. "That's me!" she said.

"Hildegunn?"

"Yes," said the girl with the glasses.

"Kai Roald?"

He was the only boy in the seventh grade. Wearing jeans and a denim jacket, he sat fiddling with a pen.

"Here," he said.

"Live?" I said.

A girl with long hair, a round face, and glasses smiled. "Yup, that's me."

Then there was the boy and the girl from the sixth grade, and the girl from the fifth.

I put down the list and sat on the desk.

"You'll be with me for Norwegian, math, religion, and science. You're all very good, though, aren't you?"

"Not that good," said the redhead with the glasses. "We've always had unqualified teachers from the south who only stay for a year."

I smiled. She didn't.

"What subjects do you like?"

They looked at one another. No one seemed to want to answer.

"How about you, Kai Roald?"

He squirmed. A pink flush spread across his cheeks. "I don't know," he said. "Woodwork maybe. Or gym. Not Norwegian anyway!"

"And you?" I said, motioning to the girl from the shop as I looked down at my list. "Andrea?"

She had crossed her legs under the desk and was leaning forward, drawing something on a sheet of paper.

"I don't have any favorite subjects," she said.

"Do you like them all or dislike them all?" I said.

She peered up at me. A glint appeared in her eyes. “Dislike!” she said.

“Is that the same for all of you?” I said.

“Yes!” they said.

“OK,” I said. “But the thing is that we have to be here for all these lessons whether you like them or not. So we may as well make the best of it. Don’t you agree?”

No one answered.

“Since I know *nothing* about you, I’m going to spend the first few lessons getting to know you better and find out what we have to work on.”

I got up, took a swig of coffee, and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. In the corner on the other side someone started singing. A clear, high-pitched voice, that had to be Hege, and then some very young children’s voices joined in.

They were the first graders!

“So I thought I would simply start by giving you an exercise,” I continued. “You have to write a page about yourselves. A presentation.”

“Oh no. Do we have to write?” Kai Roald said.

“What’s a presentation?” Vivian asked.

I looked at her. There was so little angularity about her chin that her whole face seemed almost square, though not harsh. She had something soft and puppylike about her. Her blue eyes almost disappeared entirely when she smiled, and she smiled a lot, I could already see that.

“It’s writing about who you are,” I said. “Imagine you have to say who you are to someone who doesn’t know you. What’s the first thing you would write?”

She shifted her position on the chair and pressed her calflike knees together.

“Maybe that I’m thirteen years old. And in the seventh grade at Håfjord School?”

“Yes, that’s good,” I said. “And maybe that you’re a girl?”

She laughed. “Yes, he’d have to know that,” she said.

“OK,” I said. “So write a page about yourselves. Or more if you like.”

“Are you going to read it out loud?” Hildegunn said.

"No," I said.

"What are we supposed to write on?" Kai Roald said.

I smacked my forehead. "You're right! I haven't given you any books!"

They cracked up, they were children, they thought things like this were funny. I dashed to the staff room, grabbed a pile of exercise books, handed them out, and soon they were all writing while I stood by the window gazing at the mountain peaks across the fjord where they seemed to *writhe* their way upward, so cold and black against the airy light.

When the bell rang at the end of the lesson, I gathered my papers with an exuberant, almost jubilant, feeling in my body. It had gone well, there was nothing to be afraid of. And after twelve years of continuous education, the next moment – opening the door and going into the staff room – was a particular pleasure: I had crossed the line, I was on the other side, an adult and responsible for a class of my own.

I put down my books and papers in front of my spot at the table, poured coffee into a cup, sat down on the sofa, and observed the other teachers. I was backstage, I mused, but what at first was a wonderful thought was immediately replaced by its antithesis, for this was not what I wanted, for Christ's sake, I was a *teacher*, was there anything sadder than that? Backstage, that was bands, women, drinking, tours, fame.

But that was not what I wanted either. This was just a step on the way.

I took a mouthful of coffee and glanced at the door as it opened. It was Nils Erik.

"How did it go?" he said.

"It went well," I said. "Certainly nothing to be afraid of."

Behind him appeared the woman called Hege.

"They're so *lovely*," she said. "Little sweeties!"

"Karl Ove?" came a voice from the kitchenette. I looked across; Sture was standing with a cup in his hand, looking at me.

"You play soccer, don't you?"

"I do," I said. "But I'm not much good. I played in the fifth division two seasons ago."

"We've got a team here," he said. "I'm the coach. We're in the seventh division, so you shouldn't have any difficulty hanging in there, I bet. How about a game?"

"Sure," I said.

"Tor Einar's always up for it. Isn't that right, Tor Einar?" he said, sticking his head into the room with the workstations.

"Are you talking nonsense about me again?" we heard from inside. A second later a man poked his head around the corner.

"Tor Einar used to play in the fourth division as a junior," Sture said. "Sadly though he has no other talents."

"At least I haven't lost my hair," Tor Einar said, coming closer. "So I don't need to grow a beard to retain my masculine dignity, like some people I know."

Tor Einar came from Finnsnes, had pale skin and freckles, bristly reddish hair, and a constant grin playing on his lips. His movements were slow and laborious, in an almost demonstrative way, as if with them he were trying to say here comes someone who does everything at his own pace and is not concerned about anyone else.

"Where do you play then?" he said.

"Midfield," I said. "And you?"

"Midfielder/ball winner," he said with a wink.

"Ah, a terrier," I said. "I was called the elk myself when I used to play. That tells you everything . . ."

He laughed.

"Why the elk?" Hege said.

"My loping gait," I said. "Long, unsteady stride and no change of pace."

"Are there any other animal metaphors on the soccer field?" she said.

"There are, aren't there?" I said, looking at Tor Einar.

"Yes, you've got the striker who's as strong as an ox and rams the ball into the net."

"And then you've got the cat," I said. "Lots of goalkeepers called the cat. And incidentally there's a midfield general too."

"What's that?"

"Someone who always knows where the others are and can deliver pinpoint passes at precisely the right moment."

"How unbelievably childish!" Hege said.

"And a sweeper," Tor Einar said.

"And there's often a dynamic duo up front. And then there's the lone wolf, of course."

"You've forgotten the referee," Nils Erik said. "The ref's an asshole."

"And you do this of your own free will," Hege said.

"Not me," Nils Erik said.

"But the two of you do," she said, looking at me.

The bell rang. I got up to collect my books for the next lesson. Sture placed a hand on my shoulder.

"You have my class now, don't you?" he said.

I nodded.

"For English."

"Watch out for a kid called Stian. He might try to nettle you. But don't rise to it and you'll be fine. OK?"

I shrugged.

"Hope so," I said.

"Make sure you always leave him a way out and he's no problem."

"OK," I said.

English was my worst subject, and I was only two years older than the oldest pupils, so while I was walking over to the other building, where the eighth and ninth grades had their classroom, my stomach was churning again.

I put my pile of books down on the raised table. The pupils were scattered across their desks as if they had just been hurled out of a spin dryer. No one paid any attention to me.

"Hello, class!" I said. "My name is Karl Ove Knausgaard, and I'm going to be your English teacher this year. *How do you do?*"

No one said anything. The class consisted of four boys and five girls. A couple of them watched me, the others sat scribbling something, one was knitting. I recognized the boy from the snack bar stand: he was wearing a baseball cap and rocking back and forth on his chair while eyeing me with a smirk on his face. He had to be Stian.

"Well," I said. "Now I would like you to introduce yourselves in English."

"*Snakk norsk!*" Stian said. The boy behind him, a conspicuously tall, thin figure, taller than me, and I was six foot four, guffawed. Some of the girls tittered.

"If you are going to learn a language, then you have to speak it," I said.

One of the girls, dark-haired and white-skinned, with regular, slightly chubby facial features and blue eyes, put up her hand.

"Yes?" I said.

"Isn't your English a bit too bad? I mean, for teaching?"

I could feel my cheeks burning, I stepped forward with a smile to hide my embarrassment.

"Well," I said. "I have to admit that my English isn't exactly perfect. But that isn't the most important thing. The most important is to be understood. And you do understand me?"

"Sort of," she said.

"So," I said. "And what's your name?"

She rolled her eyes. "Camilla."

"Full sentences, please."

"Oh, my name is Camilla. Happy?"

"*Ja*," I said.

"Do you mean yes?" she said.

"Yes," I said, blushing again.

"So, what's your name?" I asked the girl sitting behind Camilla. She raised her head and looked at me.

Ay-yay-yay.

What a beauty!

Gentle blue eyes that narrowed when she smiled. Large mouth. High cheekbones.

"My name is Liv," she said with a chuckle.

"Camilla, Liv. And you?" I said, motioning with my head to Stian.

"*Æ heitte Stian*," he said.

"Well," I said. "What would that be in English?"

"Stian!" he said.

Everyone laughed.

When the bell rang and I left the room, I was absolutely exhausted. So much had to be parried, so much had to be tolerated, so much had to be ignored, so much had to be repressed. The girl called Camilla had yawned and stretched her arms above her head while staring straight at me. She was wearing only a T-shirt, and her breasts, which were large and round, were delineated in unmistakable clarity against the white material. I had an erection, it was impossible to avoid, no matter how hard I tried to concentrate on other matters. How glad I was that I was sitting behind the teacher's desk! And as if that weren't enough, the girl called Liv was as charming as she was beautiful, somehow shy and outgoing at the same time, apart from the vague wildness there was about her – which above all was embodied in her big dark-blond hair and wide selection of jangling bracelets, but also in the contrast between her reserved body language and the sparkle in her eyes – which made it impossible for me not to think about her when she was in the room. Then there was Stian, who kept fidgeting with a penknife while taking every opportunity to taunt me and refused to do anything I told the class to do, and his friend Ivar, who laughed at everything Stian said, a hollow, slightly inane laugh that was always followed by sweeping glances around the room. But his gaze was ingenuous, sometimes even toward me, I could win him over, he had even grinned once or twice at something I had said.

In the staff room I slumped down onto the sofa. The teacher called Vibeke stopped and smiled at me. She was nineteen, had a full body and a round soft face, happy blue eyes, curly, permed blond hair.

"How's it going?" she said.

"It's going fine," I said. "How about you?"

"Fine too," she said. "There's not as much that's new here for me as there is for you, I imagine. I attended this school when I was growing up."

I couldn't think of a response, and she smiled again before going into the workroom. Beside me sat Jane, she was also from the village, in her early twenties, also large: her upper arms were perhaps twice the size of mine. She had a long, straight, almost Roman nose, flat cheeks, thin lips that often sagged at the corners as though she wouldn't touch what she saw before her with a bargepole. Her eyes were grumpy, indeed her whole bearing was grumpy. But a couple of times I had seen her laugh, and then all of her brightened up, the transformation was total, she could hardly stop laughing once she had started, and it was a pleasure to see her struggling to regain her composure.

In addition to all the young temporary teachers, there was an older woman on the staff, Eva, she was in her late forties, but looked older, she taught needlework and home economics, was small, lean, with a pointed face, thin fair hair, and a piercing voice, and at this moment she was sitting in the chair on the other side of the table, knitting. She was skeptical about me, I could see that from the way she looked at and didn't look at me. And with absolute justification, for what was I doing here actually? What did I want from this job?

When I came in after the English lesson, she glanced up at me, and I think she knew what feelings were coursing through me.

Of course that was impossible, but it was what I thought anyway.

During the lunch break I went down to the post office at the other end of the village. The mountainsides were bright green in the sunshine. The sea was deep blue. Something about the light or perhaps the cool draft I felt in the air, somehow *beneath* what the sun heated up, so typical of August, evoked the atmospheres I recognized from when I started school after the holidays: the excitement, the anticipation, the perhaps-something-fantastic-is-going-to-happen-this-year?

On the slope behind the last row of houses there was already a hint of yellow in the green. Of course autumn came earlier here. I nodded to a car driving past. The driver, who looked like a mother, nodded back, and I walked down the graveled incline to the post office, which was housed in the basement of a block of flats. In the hall were the PO boxes, inside was the office with counters, posters on the walls, stands of postcards and envelopes.

The woman behind the counter was probably about fifty. Permed thinning reddish hair, glasses, a delicate gold necklace. A man with a walker stood by the small table under the window scraping a scratch card with a coin.

"Hello," I said to the assistant, and placed the envelopes on the counter. "I just wanted to mail these."

"Yes, of course," she said. "By the way, there's some mail for you already."

"Is there?" I said. "Not bad!"

While she weighed the letters and selected the appropriate stamps, I unlocked my box. It was a letter from Line.

I went in and paid, opened the letter, and started to read while walking up the gravel road.

She wrote that she was in her room and thinking about me. She liked me a lot, she said, we'd had so much fun together, but she had never actually been in love with me, so now, with us living in two different places, she thought the best and most honest thing to do would be to end it. She hoped everything would go well for me in my life, urged me to take writing seriously, as she would with her drawing, and also hoped that I would not be angry with her, for our new lives were starting now, we were far apart, tomorrow she would be traveling to the folk high school, and by now I had probably arrived in the village where I was going to work, and as long as this felt the way it did and she didn't love me, anything else but breaking off the relationship would be a betrayal of herself. But I was a wonderful person, I should know that, that was not the reason, you can't control feelings, they are how they are.

I stuffed the letter in my coat pocket.

I hadn't been in love with Line either, everything she said about me I could have said about her, yet still I felt sad and also a bit angry with her when I read what she had written. I wanted *her* to love *me*! And even though I didn't want to be with her, and was glad it was over, it should have been me who ended it. Now it was her who had the high ground, who said no to me and who would also probably go through life convinced that I had loved her and had been crushed by her letter.

Oh well.

There was great activity down at the fish-processing plant. Several boats had docked, forklift trucks were plying back and forth across the concrete and into what looked like a dark hall. Men in high rubber boots bustled here and there, a group of women wearing open white coats and white caps stood smoking outside the end of the hall, and the air above them was full of flapping, screaming seagulls. I went into the shop and bought some rolls, some mild cheese, a packet of margarine, and a liter of milk, said hello to the assistant, who asked whether I had settled in all right, fine, I said, everything was great.

I didn't have a class in the next slot, so after eating two rolls and putting the rest in the tiny staff room fridge, I sat down at my workstation to plan the next few days' teaching. The temporary teachers had been allocated a mentor, who would come to see us once a week so that we could discuss any problems or difficulties we had in our classes. We were also going on a course next week, in Finnsnes, with all the other temporary teachers in the district. There were a lot of them; the locals who trained as teachers seldom moved back when the training was over. All sorts of measures had been implemented to remedy this, it was a big problem, of course. Where Dad lived now there were huge tax incentives, and that was one of the reasons that he and Unni had moved north. They both worked at a gymnas but actually, for now, only Dad was working because Unni was expecting a child. The last time I saw them, a few weeks ago in the terraced house they had bought in Sørland, which would be waiting for them after they had completed their contract in the north, her belly had been enormous.

That was where I'd gotten the idea to come up here. We had been sitting on the veranda, Dad bare chested, as brown as a nut, with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, me with a crucifix dangling from one ear and wearing sunglasses, when he had asked me what I was going to do in the autumn. His gaze was anywhere else but on me, also when he asked, his voice was tired and apathetic, a touch slurred from all the beers he had drunk since I arrived, and so I answered in a sort of lackadaisical way, although it hurt me. I shrugged and said I definitely wasn't going to study or do military service. Work somewhere, I said. In a hospital or something.

He straightened up and stubbed out his cigarette in the large ashtray on the table between us. The air was heavy with pollen, everywhere there was the buzz of bees and wasps in the air. Why don't you do some teaching, then? he said, and slumped back in the chair, perhaps twenty kilos heavier now than the last time I had seen him. You can get a job in Northern Norway any day of the week, you know. As long as you've been to gymnas they'll welcome you with open arms. Maybe, I said. I'll think about it. You should, he said. If you want another beer, you know where the crate is. OK, why not, I said, and went into the living room, which was pitch black after the bright light outside, and into the kitchen, where Unni was reading the paper. She smiled at me. She was wearing khaki shorts and a baggy gray top. I'm going to have another beer, I said. Why not, she said. It's your summer holiday after all. True, I said. Is there an opener anywhere? Yes, there's one on the table over there, she said. Are you hungry? Not particularly, I said. It's so hot, isn't it. But you're going to stay the night, aren't you? she asked. Yes, I said. So we can eat later, she said. I leaned back and took a long swig. I should be doing some work in the garden, she said. But it's simply too hot. Yes, I said. And my stomach's beginning to get in the way. Yes, I said. I can see. Don't you want to go for a swim in the lake? Sounds like there are lots of people down there today. I shook my head. She smiled, I smiled, and then I went back out to Dad. You got yourself one, I see, he said. Yes, I said, and sat down again. In the old days he would have been working in the garden now. And if not he would have been observing everything going on around him, even if it was only a car stopping and a young man leaning over to a window that was being wound down. But all that had gone. In his eyes was only indifference, apathy.

However, the situation was not so black and white because when I observed him, and his eye caught mine, I could sense *he* was still there, the hardness, the coldness I had grown up with and still feared.

He swayed forward and put the empty bottle on the floor, took another and flipped the top off with the opener on his key ring. He always fetched three or four bottles at once so that he wouldn't have to keep running into the kitchen, as he put it. Lifted it to his lips, glugged down a few mouthfuls. Mm, he said. Sun's nice. Yes, I said. I've got a tan anyway! he said. Yes, I said. Me too. Know what? he said, blowing out his cheeks. We've bought ourselves a solarium up north, you know. Have to in all that darkness. Yes, I said. I saw it when I was up there. Yes, you may have, he said. Took another long swig, put the empty bottle down by the previous one, rolled a cigarette, lit it, opened another bottle. When do you want dinner? he asked. Makes no difference, I said. You two decide. Yeah, I don't get hungry in this weather, he said, snatching the section of the newspaper that lay on the table. I rested my arm on the balustrade and looked down. The grass beneath the veranda was scorched, more yellow and brown than green. The gray road was deserted. This side of it was a dusty gravel area, beyond it some trees, behind them the walls and roofs of houses. They knew no one here, neither in the immediate vicinity nor in town. A small propeller plane flew past high in the blue sky. From the living room I heard Unni's heavy footsteps on the floor. Another head-on collision on the E18, Dad said. A car and an eighteen-wheeler. Oh? I said. Almost all these accidents are disguised suicides, he said. They drive straight into a truck or into a mountainside. No one can possibly know whether it was intentional or not. So they're spared the shame. Do you really believe that? I said. Indeed I do, he said. And it's effective too. A little swing to the side and seconds later they're dead. He lifted the paper to show me. Not much chance of surviving that, is there, he said. The photo showed a car that had been completely crushed. No, I said, and got up, went downstairs and into the toilet. Sat down on the seat. I was slightly drunk. Got up again and splashed some cold water over my face. Flushed the toilet in case anyone noticed such details. When I reappeared on the veranda he had discarded the newspaper and was sitting with his elbow over the balustrade, and I remembered he used to sit like that when he was driving the car in the summer, with his elbow sticking out of the open window. How old was he actually? I wondered and counted. Forty-three this May. Then I thought about his birthdays, how we had always bought him the same green Mennen aftershave and how I had always wondered what he did with it as he had a beard. I smiled. He rose to his feet unsteadily, paused for a second to find his balance. Then he walked into the living room, taking his usual long strides and hitching his shorts up from behind.

The idea he had sown, to work as a teacher in Northern Norway, had grown and grown afterward. In fact, there were only advantages: 1) I would be far away, far from everyone and everything I knew, and totally free. 2) I would be earning my own money doing a respectable job. 3) I would be able to write.

And now here I was, I thought, looking down at the book in front of me again. At the end of the little vestibule just outside the staff room, where our two toilets were, Torill breezed into sight. She smiled but said nothing, bent forward and took out a thin file from her shelf.

"Great being a teacher!" I said.

"Give it time . . . !" she said, flashing me a smile, and was off again. Outside, Nils Erik was crossing the playground with my pupils around him.

Five years ago I had been the same age as them. And in five years I would be the same age as him.

Oh, by then I would have made my debut. By then I would be living in a city somewhere, writing and drinking and living the life. I would have a beautiful lissom girlfriend with dark eyes and big breasts.

I got up and went into the staff room, picked up the coffee Thermos, and shook it. It was empty, I filled the pot with water, poured it into the machine, popped a filter paper into the funnel, measured five spoonfuls, and started the whole shebang, lots of spluttering and gurgling, the slow rise of black liquid in the pot, and the bright red eye.

"All going well so far?" a voice worryingly close to me said. I turned. It was Richard, he was staring at me with those intense eyes of his and a broad smile. What was this? Could he move through the school without making a sound?

"Yes, I believe so," I said. "It's exciting."

"It is," he said. "Being a teacher is a very special, a fine profession. And, not least, a responsible one."

Why did he say that? Did he feel I needed to hear it, that it was a great responsibility, and if so, why? Did I give off an aura of irresponsibility perhaps?

"Mm," I said. "My father's a teacher actually. A bit farther north."

"You don't say!" Richard said. "Is he from Nordland?"

"No. It was the tax incentives that brought him up here."

Richard laughed.

"Would you like a cup?" I said. "It'll be ready any second."

"Pour it in the Thermos, will you, and I'll have some later."

He stole away as soundlessly as he had come. I didn't know which was worse, *pour it in the Thermos* or *will you*. It was patronizing whichever way you looked at it. Because I was only eighteen didn't mean he could treat me like a schoolboy! I was an employee here, no different from him.

Just afterward the bell rang and the teachers came in one by one, some silent, others with chirpy one-liners for everyone. I had put the Thermos on the table and was standing by the window with a full cup in my hand. The pupils were already running around outside. I tried to put names to the faces, but the only one I could remember was Kai Roald, the boy in the seventh grade, perhaps because I had sympathized with him, the reluctance I had sensed in his body occasionally countermanded by an interested, perhaps even an enthusiastic, glint in his eyes. And then Liv, the stunner in the ninth grade, of course. She was standing up against the wall, her hands in her back pockets, wearing a beige anorak, blue jeans, and worn gray sneakers, chewing gum and stroking away some strands of hair that the wind had blown into her face. And Stian, over there, standing legs apart, hands in his pockets, chatting to his beanpole of a friend.

I turned back to the room. Nils Erik smiled at me.

"Where do you live?" he said.

"Down the hill from here," I said. "A basement flat."

"Under me," Torill said.

"Where did you end up?" I said.

"At the top of the village. Also a basement flat."

"Yes, under me!" Sture said.

"So that's how they've organized it," I said. "The trained teachers get the flats with the view and everything while the temps get the cellars?"

"You may as well learn that right from the start," Sture said. "All privileges have to be earned. I slaved away for three years at a teacher-training college. There has to be some sort of payback."

He laughed.

"Shall we carry your bags for you too, then?" I said.

"No, that's too much responsibility for the likes of you. But every Saturday morning you're expected to come and clean for us," he said with a wink.

"I've heard there's a party in Hellevika this weekend," I said. "Anyone here going?"

"You've settled in fast, it looks like," Nils Erik said.

"Who told you about it?" Hege said.

"Heard it through the grapevine," I said. "I was wondering whether to go or not. But it's not much fun going alone."

"You're never alone at a party up here," Sture said. "This is Northern Norway."

"Are you going?" I said.

He shook his head.

"I've got a family to take care of," he said. "But I'll give you some tips. If you want." He laughed.

"I was thinking of going," Jane said.

"Me too," Vibeke said.

"What about you?" I said, looking at Nils Erik.

He shrugged. "Maybe. Is it on Friday or Saturday?"

"Friday, I think," I said.

"Maybe not such a bad idea," he said.

The bell rang.

"We can talk about it later," he said, and got up.

"OK," I said, put my cup down on the counter, grabbed my books from my workstation, went to the classroom, sat on the teacher's desk, and waited for the pupils to arrive.

When I walked down to my flat after school, my boxes were waiting on the porch. They contained everything I owned, which wasn't much: a box of records, another with an old stereo in it, one full of kitchen utensils, and one with the odds and ends that had accumulated in my old room, plus some of Mom's books. It still felt as though I had been given a huge present as I carried them into the sitting room. I assembled the stereo, stacked the records against the wall, flicked through them, selected *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* by Brian Eno and David Byrne, one of my all-time favorites, and with it resounding through the room I started to organize the other items. Everything I had brought with me from home when we moved – pans, plates, cups, and glasses – I'd had around me ever since I was little and we lived in Tybakken. Brown plates, green glasses, a large pot with only one handle, blackened underneath and some way up the sides. I'd had the photo of John Lennon in my room all the time I was at gymnas and proceeded to hang it on the wall behind the typewriter. I'd had the enormous poster of Liverpool FC, the 1979/80 season, since I was eleven, and it was now given a position on the wall behind the sofa. It was perhaps their best team ever: Kenny Dalglish, Ray Clemence, Alan Hansen, Emlyn Hughes, Graeme Souness, and John Toshack. I'd grown tired of the Paul McCartney poster, so I put it in the bedroom cupboard, rolled up. When everything was in shape, I flicked through the records again imagining I was someone else, someone who had never seen them before, and wondered what they would have made of the collection, or rather of the person who owned this collection, in other words me. There were more than 150 LPs, most from the past two years, when I had been reviewing records for the local paper and spent almost all the money I had on new ones, often the complete back catalog of bands I liked. Every single one of these records embraced an entire little world of its own. All of them expressed quite definite attitudes, sentiments, and moods. But none of the records was an island, there were connections between them which spread outward: Brian Eno, for example, started in Roxy Music, released solo records, produced U2, and worked with Jon Hassell, David Byrne, David Bowie, and Robert Fripp; Robert Fripp played on Bowie's *Scary Monsters*; Bowie produced Lou Reed, who came from Velvet Underground, and Iggy Pop, who came from the Stooges, while David Byrne was in Talking Heads, who on their best record, *Remain in Light*, used the guitarist Adrian Belew, who in turn played on several of Bowie's records and was his favorite live guitarist for years. But the ramifications and connections didn't only exist between the records, they extended right into my own life. The music was linked with almost everything I had done, none of the records came without a memory. Everything that had happened in the past five years rose like steam from a cup when I played a record, not in the form of thoughts or reasoning, but as moods, openings, space. Some general, others specific. If my memories were stacked in a heap on the back of my life's trailer, music was the rope that held them together and kept it, my life, in position.

But this wasn't its most important aspect, which was the music itself. When, for example, I played *Remain in Light*, which I had done regularly since the eighth class and never tired of, and the third track started, "The Great Curve," with its fantastic rolling, multilayered accompaniment, brimful of energy, and the horns joined in, and afterward the voices, it was impossible not to move, impossible, it ignited every part of my body, me, the world's least rhythmic eighteen-year-old, sitting there squirming like a snake, to and fro, and I had to have it louder, I turned it up full blast, and then, already up on my feet, yes, then I had to dance, at that moment, even if I was alone. And, toward the end, on top of all this, like a bloody fighter plane above a tiny dancing village, comes Adrian Belew's overriding guitar, and oh, oh God, I am dancing and happiness fills me to my fingertips and I only wish it could last, that the solo would go on and on, the plane would never land, the sun would never go down, life would never end.

Or *Heaven Up Here* with Echo and the Bunnymen, the diametric opposite of Talking Heads, because here the essence is not rhythm or drive but sounds and moods, this tremendous wailing that springs from them, all longing and beauty and gloom, which swells and subsides in the music, no, which *is* the music. And even though I understand a lot of what he is singing about, even though I have read tons of interviews with him, as is the case with most of the bands whose records I own, this knowledge is obliterated by the music; the music doesn't want to know about it, because in music there is no meaning, there is no explanation, there are no people, only voices, each with its own special distinctive quality, as though this is its essential quality, its essence, unadulterated, no body, no personality, yes, a kind of personality without a person, and on every record there is an infinity of such characteristics, from another world, which you meet whenever you play the music. I never worked out what it was that possessed me when music possessed me, other than that I always wanted it.

Furthermore, it made me someone, of course. Thanks to music I became someone who was at the forefront, someone you had to admire, not as much as you had to admire those who made the music, admittedly, but as a listener I was in the vanguard. Up here in the north probably no one would see that, as hardly anyone in Kristiansand had been aware of it, but there were circles where it was seen and appreciated. And that was where I was heading.

I spent some time arranging my records in such a way that the impression made by each one would be enhanced and perhaps lead to surprising new associations for whoever thumbed through them, then I walked down to the shop and bought some beer and a ready-made frozen meal, pasta carbonara. In addition, I bought a rutabaga, a cauliflower, some apples, some plums, and a bunch of grapes, which I intended to use in the science class with the third and fourth years the following day in a grand illustration of the cosmos, an idea that had occurred to me while skimming through their syllabus the day before.

When I arrived home I put the meal in the microwave and ate it straight from the tray on the kitchen table while drinking a beer and reading *Dagbladet*. Well sated, I lay on my bed for an hour's rest. Images of teachers and pupils and the school interior flickered through my consciousness for a long time before at last I was gone. An hour and a half later I was roused by someone ringing the doorbell. I no longer knew what to expect, all sorts of people rang, so it was with a mixture of sleepiness and nervousness that I hurried to the door.

Three of the girls in my class stood outside. One, Andrea, smiled brazenly and asked if they could come in; the second, Vivian, giggled and blushed; the third, Live, stared shamelessly at me from behind her large, thick glasses.

"Of course," I said. "Come in, all of you!"

They did what other visitors had done, looked around as they stepped into the sitting room. Huddling close to each other, they pushed and shoved and giggled and blushed.

"Come on, take a seat!" I said, nodding in the direction of the sofa.

They did as bidden.

"Well?" I said. "What brings you here?"

"We wanted to see how you were. We were bored," Andrea said.

Was she some kind of leader? She hadn't exactly given that impression at school.

"There's nothing to do here," Vivian said.

"Nothing," Live said.

"No, doesn't seem like there's much," I said. "But I'm afraid there's not a lot going on here either."

"No, it's a hole," Andrea said.

"My flat is a hole?" I said.

She flushed to the roots.

"No, silly. The village!" she said.

"I'm going to move away the second I finish the ninth grade," Vivian said.

"Me too," Live said.

"You always copy what I do," Vivian said.

"Yeah? So?"

"Yeah? So?" Vivian said in a perfect imitation. It even included Live's little tic: two wrinkles of the nose under her glasses, in rapid succession.

"Ooohh!" Live said.

"You can't have a monopoly on leaving the village when you're sixteen," I said, looking at Vivian, who smiled and lowered her eyes.

"You speak so *weirdly*, Karl Ove," Andrea said. "What does *monopoly* mean?"

The use of my name caught me off guard, so much so that, while looking at Andrea, since she was the one who was talking, I reddened and bowed my head.

"Someone who is the only person to do something," I said, looking up.

"Oh, yeees," she said, pretending to keel over with boredom. The other two girls laughed. I smiled.

"I can see that you kids have a lot to learn," I said. "You're lucky that I came up here."

"Not me," Andrea said. "I know all I need to know."

"Except for how to drive a car," Vivian said.

"I can drive a car!" Andrea said.

"Yeah, but you're not *allowed* to drive. That's what I meant."

There was a pause. I smiled at them, obviously failing to conceal a patronizing air because Andrea narrowed her eyes and said:"We're thirteen years old, by the way. We're not little kids, if that was what you were thinking."

I laughed.

"Why should I think that? You're all in the seventh grade, I know that. I can even remember how it felt."

"How what felt?"

"Starting at a new school. It's your first day at the *ungdomsskole* today."

"And don't we know it," Vivian said. "It was even more boring than the sixth grade, I think."

The doorbell rang. The three girls exchanged glances. I got up to open the door.

It was Nils Erik.

"Hello there," he said. "Are you going to offer an old colleague a cup of coffee?"

"Wouldn't you rather have a beer?"

He raised his eyebrows and put on a thoughtful, or perhaps it was a skeptical, look.

"No thanks. I'm going for a drive afterward. Better safe than sorry."

"Anyway, come in," I said.

The three girls stared at him as he stopped in the middle of the sitting room.

"So this is where you hang out in the evenings," he said.

"Haven't they been to your place yet?" I said.

He shook his head. "But some fourth graders came over this afternoon. While I was frying fish cakes."

"We're just so bored," Live said.

The two others sent her an angry glare. Then they got up.

"Well," said Andrea. "We'd better be going."

"Bye," I said. "And feel free to come by another day!"

"Bye!" Vivian said from the hall, before the door was slammed shut.

Nils Erik smiled. Shortly afterward we saw them trudging down the hill toward the shop.

"Poor kids," I said. "They must be pretty desperate if all they have to do in their free time is visit teachers."

"Perhaps to them you're exciting?" Nils Erik said.

"And you're not, I guess?" I said.

"No, I'm not," he snorted. "I was thinking of going for a drive, Karl Ove. Feel like coming?"

"Where to?"

He shrugged.

"Other side of the fjord maybe? Or Hellevika?"

"I wouldn't mind going to Hellevika," I said. "After all, we can see the other side of the fjord from here."

It transpired that Nils Erik was the outdoor type. He had applied for a job up here because of the natural beauty, he said, he had brought a tent and a sleeping bag with him intending to go on hikes every weekend. Did I want to join him?

"Not every weekend," he added with a smile as we drove at a snail's pace alongside the fjord in his yellow car.

"It's not really my thing," I said. "Think I'll give that a miss."

He nodded.

"Thought so," he said. "But what makes a sophisticated city slicker like you move up here?"

"I want to write," I said.

"Write?" he said. "What? Fill out forms? Job applications? Quick reminders to yourself? Letters? Limericks for radio shows? Letters to the editor?"

"I'm working on a collection of short stories," I said.

"Short stories!" he said. "The Formula One of literature!"

"Is that what they call them?" I said.

"No," he said with a laugh. "Not really. I think that's what they call *poems*. The Stunt Poets, you know. One of them said something like that."

I didn't know but said nothing.

"But you can still come with me on walks, can't you? A couple of weekends anyway. There's a fantastic nature reserve only an hour away from here."

"I don't think so. If anything's going to come of my writing I have to work."

"But the nature, man! God's wondrous creation! All the colors! All the plants! That's what you have to write about!"

I laughed in derision.

"I don't believe in nature," I said. "It's a cliché."

"What do you write about then?"

I shrugged. "I've just started. But you can read it if you want."

"Love to!"

"I'll bring it in with me tomorrow."

We returned to the village around eight in the evening. It was as light as day. The sky above the sea was so magnificent that I stood by the porch staring for several minutes before going in. It was empty, there was nothing there, yet it seemed gentle and friendly, as if it wished those who lived beneath it well. Perhaps because the mountains for their part were so hard and barren?

I had some supper, lit a cigarette, and drank tea as I went through the exercise my pupils had done.

> *My name's Vivian n I'm thirteen years old. I live in a village called Håfjord. I'm happy here. I have a sis called Liv. Dad's a fisherman n mam's a housewife. My best freind is Andrea. We do a lotta things together. School is boring. Sometimes we work at the fish factory. We cut the tungs off cod. With the money I'm gonna buy a stereo.*

So Vivian and Liv were sisters!

For some reason this gave me a lift. There was also something about the awkwardness she showed that touched me. Or perhaps it was her openness?

I decided not to correct the words. That would be far too demoralizing, so instead I wrote a little comment in red underneath: "*Well done, Vivian! But remember it's 'and' not 'n,' 'a lot of' not 'lotta,' and 'going to' not 'gonna.'*"

Then I leafed through the next exercise book.

> *My name is Andrea. I'm a thirteen-year-old girl and I live on the far side of an island in northern norway. I have a brother who is ten and a sister who is five. Dad goes fishing and Mom is at home with Camilla. I like listening to music*

> *and watching movies. My favorite is* Champ. *And I like hanging around the village with my friends Vivian and Hildegunn and Live. It's a little boring here, but it will be better when we're old enough to go to partys!*

I had thought of Andrea and Vivian as two of a kind – I had barely been able to tell them apart on the two occasions I had seen them – but from their answers I could see there was quite a difference, or was it just that one of them was more used to expressing herself in writing?

I wrote a similar comment in Andrea's book, read the three last ones, which all fell somewhere between the first two, made a comment in each, slipped the pile into my bag, put on "My Bag" by Lloyd Cole, and gazed across the village as the music made the hairs on my arms stand on end. Slowly I began to move to the beat, a shoulder here, a foot there at first, then, after switching off the light so that no one below could see me, I danced away with my eyes closed, and sang from the bottom of my heart.

That night I came in my sleep. A wave of pleasure washed through me, carried me up toward the surface, where I had no desire to go, and I didn't, because just before I reached consciousness and the vague notion of who I was, how happy I was, became a reality, I sank back down into dark, heavy slumber, where I stayed until the alarm clock rang and I opened my eyes to a room full of light and to underpants that were sticky with semen.

At first I had feelings of guilt. God knows what I had been dreaming about. Then, when I remembered where I was and what I was doing, the pressure in the pit of my stomach returned. I got up and went into the bathroom, telling myself there was nothing to be nervous about, the class was small, the pupils children, but it didn't help, it felt as if I had to walk out onto a stage without any lines to deliver. I tried to recapture the wonderful mood I had been in previously, when I had been enjoying marking the presentations and the new sensation the role of teacher gave me, seeing pupils, planning what could be done to help them, but as I stood there, surrounded by steam, drying myself, all of that was gone, for I was not a teacher, I wasn't even an adult, I was just a ridiculous teenager who knew nothing about anything.

"Oh, *hell*!" I shouted. Wiped the condensation from the mirror with the towel and studied my face in the few seconds it took before the glass was covered with moisture again.

I looked damned good, actually.

That was something after all.

I'd had the long hair at the back of my neck cut just before I left. Now my hair stood in a thick, maybe three-centimeter-high carpet across my skull, layered down to my temples and neck. From my left ear hung a cross.

I smiled.

My teeth were white and even. There was a glint in my eyes that I liked to see, until the incredible indignity of the situation, a person smiling and what was tantamount to winking at himself in the mirror made my stomach constrict again.

For Christ's sake.

I put on my *Dream of the Blue Turtles* T-shirt, my black Levi's, a pair of white tube socks, stood in front of the mirror putting on alternately the thin green military jacket and the blue denim jacket, finally choosing the former, tried on the beret, it didn't go, and two minutes later walked bareheaded up to the school with a white Ali coffee bag full of books and materials hanging from my hand.

The third and fourth graders, who had been put together in one class for all their lessons, numbered twelve pupils: five girls and seven boys. It seemed like more, they were always roaming around, running and shouting, and would never sit still. Once they had finally sat down on their chairs, there were legs twisting and turning here, arms twisting and turning there, their minds, like agitated dogs, were forever on the move.

They hadn't had me before, they had only heard about me and seen me from a distance, so when I loomed up in their part of the school all eyes were fixed on me.

I smiled and put my bag down on the teacher's desk.

"What have you got in there?" one of them said. "What's in your bag?"

I looked at him. White puppy-dog skin, brown eyes, extremely short hair.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Reidar," he said.

"Mine's Karl Ove," I said. "And there's one thing you may as well learn right from the start. You have to put up your hand before you say anything."

Reidar put up his hand.

A smart-ass.

"Yes?" I said.

"What have you got in your bag, Karl Ove?"

"It's a secret," I said. "But you'll soon find out. First of all, though, I have to know what your names are."

The boy behind Reidar, a little squirt with fair hair and hard – for his age – pale-blue eyes put up his hand.

"What's your name?" I said.

"Stig," he said. "Are you strict?"

"Strict? No!" I said.

"My mom says you're too young to be a teacher!" he said, looking around for a reaction.

They laughed, all of them.

"I'm older than you anyway!" I said. "So I think everything will be fine."

"Why do you have a cross in your ear?" Reidar said. "Are you a Christian?"

"What did I just say about raising your hand?"

"Whoops!" He laughed and raised his hand.

"No, I'm not a Christian," I said. "I'm an atheist."

"What's that?" Reidar said.

"Your hand? Where is it?"

"Oh."

"An atheist is someone who doesn't believe in God," I said. "But now you have to tell me your names. Let's start at the end there."

One after one they called out their names.

Vibeke
Kenneth
Susanne
Stig
Reidar
Lovisa
Melanie
Steve
Endre
Stein-Inge
Helene
Jo

I connected with some of them at once and would remember them easily from now on – the girl who was so unbelievably pretty and doll-like in everything from her facial features to her body and her dress, the boy with the pudgy face, the little squirt who seemed angry, the boy with the big head and the warm eyes, the loudmouth, the blond-haired girl with pigtails who gave the impression of being so rational and sensible – others were more nebulous and revealed too little for me to get a handle on them.

"So you're the third and fourth graders!" I said. "What's the name of the place where you live?"

"Håfjord, isn't it!" Reidar said.

I said nothing, just looked at them. Then two or three of them realized what I was getting at and raised their hands. I nominated the little doll-like creature.

"Lovisa?" I said.

"Håfjord," she said.

"What's the name of the county Håfjord is in?"

"Troms."

"And the country?"

Now everyone had a hand in the air. I chose the fatty.

"Norway," he said.

"And the continent?"

"Europe," he said.

"Good!" I said, and he smiled.

"But what's the name of the planet we're on? Does anyone know? Yes, Reidar?"

"The world?"

"Yes, it is. But is there another name?"

I turned and wrote the whole address on the board: HÅFJORD, TROMS, NORWAY, EUROPE, EARTH. Turned back to them.

"And where is the earth?"

"In the cosmos," said Stein-Inge.

"Yes," I said. "It's in the solar system, in a galaxy called . . . ?"

On the board I wrote, THE MILKY WAY.

"Have you heard about that?"

"Yes!" several of them shouted.

"For us this galaxy is enormous. But in comparison with the rest of the cosmos it's teeny-weeny."

I observed them.

"What do you think is outside the cosmos then?"

They stared at me with mouths agape.

"Have you ever thought about that? Endre?"

Endre shook his head.

"Is there anything outside?"

"Well, no one knows," I said. "But there can't just be nothing. There has to be something, don't you think?"

"What does it say in the textbooks?" Reidar asked.

"It doesn't say anything," I answered. "As I said, no one knows."

"No one?"

"No."

"Why should we learn that then?" he said.

I smiled.

"You need to learn about where we live. And that is of course the universe.

Well, if we take a broader view of it, the cosmos. What you see above us every night. Or what you don't see because you're little kids and have gone to bed."

"He-ey, we're not little kids!"

"Just joking," I said. "But the stars you can see when it's dark. And the moon and the planets. You have to learn about them."

I turned and wrote THE UNIVERSE on the board.

"OK," I said. "Can anyone in the class name any of the planets in our solar system?"

"The earth!" Reidar said.

Scattered laughter.

"Any more?"

"Pluto!"

"Mars!"

"Good!" I said. When no more suggestions were forthcoming, I drew the whole solar system on the board.

SUN
MERCURY
VENUS
EARTH
MARS
JUPITER
SATURN
URANUS
NEPTUNE
PLUTO

"Here on the board it looks as if they're right next to each other. But there's an incredible distance between the planets. It would take many, many years to travel to Jupiter, for example. I'd like to give you an idea of the distances. So put on your coats and we'll go out onto the soccer field."

"Are we going out? During the lesson?"

"Yes, get moving. Put your coats on and we'll be going."

They jumped up from their seats and converged on the line of coat hooks. I stood waiting by the door with the bag hanging from my hand.

They flocked closely around me as we walked across the field. I felt a bit like a shepherd, so different from these small, eager creatures.

"Good, we'll stop here!" I said, and took a ball from the bag. Placed it on the ground. "This is the sun, OK?"

They looked at me somewhat skeptically.

"Come on. Now let's walk a bit farther!"

We walked for another twenty meters or so before I stopped and placed a plum on the ground.

"This is Mercury, the planet that is closest to the sun. Can you see the sun over there?"

Everyone stared over at the ball, which cast a light shadow over the shale, and nodded.

Next I placed two apples, two oranges, the rutabaga, the cauliflower, and, last of all, right up by the door of the community center, the grape, which was supposed to represent Pluto.

"Do you all understand now how far it is between the planets?" I said. "The tiny sun so far away, and Mercury, which is like a plum, we can't even see it from here. And all this," I said, looking at them as they stared blankly across the soccer field, "is just a teeny, weeny, weeny, weeny bit of the cosmos! Teeny tiny! Isn't it funny that the earth we live on is millions of miles away from the other planets?"

Some of them were thinking so hard you could see the smoke. Others were gazing across the village and the fjord.

"Let's go back in now," I said. "Come on. Run, run, run!"

In the staff room I took out a copy of my short story, stapled the pages together, and passed it to Nils Erik, who was sitting on the sofa reading *Troms Folkeblad*.

"Here's the short story I was telling you about," I said.

"Interesting!" he said.

"When do you think you'll have read it? By tonight?"

"Urgent, is it?" He looked at me and smiled. "I was planning to go to Finnsnes this afternoon actually. Would you like to come, by the way?"

"I'd love to. Good idea."

"Then I can read your short story by tomorrow, and we can have a little seminar afterward?"

Seminar, which to me meant universities and academia, studies, girls, and parties.

"Great," I said, and went to get a cup of coffee.

"What actually were you doing outside with them?" Nils Erik said to my back.

"Nothing special," I said, "I was just trying to help them visualize the cosmos."

When I entered the classroom for the next lesson, three of the girls were standing in a huddle by the window whispering excitedly. My entrance hadn't made the slightest impression on them.

"You can't stand there all day chitchatting!" I said. "The lesson has started! Have you forgotten? You're pupils. You have to obey the rules and do what the teachers tell you!"

They spun round. When they saw that I was smiling, they just continued.

"Hello there!" I said. "Come and sit down!"

Then, with a dilatoriness I would later that day consider exquisite because their movements became so strikingly sophisticated and their ungainliness suddenly transformed into feminine poise, they went to their seats.

"I've read your presentations now," I said, handing out their books. "They were very good. But there are a couple of things we can clear up right away since they apply to all of you."

They opened their books to see what I had written.

"Don't we get grades?" Hildegunn said.

"Not for such a small exercise," I said. "I gave you the assignment mostly so that I could get an impression of you."

Andrea and Vivian compared their comments.

"You've written almost the same thing for both of us!" Vivian said. "Are you that lazy?"

"Lazy?" I said with a smile. "You'll get grades which will show you all where you stand soon enough. I'm not sure that's much to look forward to."

Behind me, the door opened. I turned. It was Richard. He went over and sat down at a table by the wall while motioning me to carry on.

What was this? Was he going to *observe* me?

"The first thing we have to get to talk about is your dialect," I said. "You can't write like you speak. That's *no* good at all. You have to write *jeg*, not *æ*. *Er*, not *e*. *Hvordan* rather than *koss*."

"But that's what we *say*!" Vivian said, and twisted around in her chair to glance at Richard, who sat with his arms crossed and face impassive. "Why do we have to write *jeg* when we say *æ*, huh?"

"And Harrison said we could write like that last year," Hildegunn said.

"He said it was better to write *something* than to write correctly," Live said.

"Last year you were at a school for children," I said. "This year you're in a higher school. Where your language has to be standardized, as it's known. This is how it is up and down the country. We can talk as we like, but when we write, it has to be standard Norwegian. There is nothing to discuss. Unless you want your essays covered in red ink and low grades, you *have* to do this."

"Oh!" Andrea said, looking first at me, then Richard. The others giggled.

I asked them to get out their books and then, when they had all turned to the same page, I asked Hildegunn to start reading. Richard got up, nodded briefly to me, and left the room.

During the break I went to his office and knocked on the door.

He looked up from his desk as I walked in.

"Hi, Karl Ove," he said.

"Hi," I said. "I was just wondering why you came into my lesson."

The gaze he sent me was partly probing, partly curious. Then he smiled and chewed his lower lip, this was a quirk of his, I had realized, his bearded chin jutted forward and made him resemble a goat.

"I just wanted to see how things were going in the class," he said. "I will be doing that now and then. There are quite a few of you who have no training. I need to get an idea of how you are managing. Teaching is not easy, you know."

"I promise to tell you if I have any problems," I said. "You can trust me."

He laughed.

"I know that. That's not the issue. Go and have yourself a break now!"

He looked down at the papers in front of him. That was a rank-pulling number, and for a few seconds I refused to yield to it; however, there was nothing else I could do, I had nothing else to say, and there was nothing unreasonable about what he'd said, so finally I turned and went into the staff room.

There were three letters in my PO box when I went to the post office after school. One from Bassen, who had started university in Stavanger, one from Lars, who had moved in with his girlfriend in Kristiansand, and one from Eirik, who was now studying at the Institute of Technology in Trondheim.

Bassen told me about an incident that had taken place just before he moved. He had gone home with a girl, or rather a woman, because she was twenty-five, and while they were on the job, as he put it, she had suddenly had some kind of fit. He had been scared out of his wits. It was as though she was being convulsed by electric shocks, he wrote, her body was quivering and shaking, he thought it was epilepsy, he withdrew, and stood up.

> *I was terrified, Karl Ove! I didn't know whether to call for an ambulance or what. What if she died! In fact that's what I thought she was going to do. But*

> *then she opened her eyes and pulled me back down and asked me what I was doing. Keep going! she shouted. Can you imagine? She'd just been having an orgasm! That's mature women for you!*

Walking along, I laughed as I read his letter, but I also felt a stab of something else, because I had never slept with a girl, I'd never had sex, in other words I was a virgin, and was not only ashamed that for two years I had been lying about the amount of sexual experience I'd had, which Bassen and several others were presumably taken in by, but I was also desperate for it, to sleep with a girl, any girl actually, and to experience what Bassen and my other friends experienced on such a regular basis. Whenever I heard about their adventures, it was as though equal portions of enervation and desire spread through me, equal portions of powerlessness and power, for the longer I went without sleeping with a girl, the more afraid of it I became. I could talk to others about almost any other problem I had, to ease my mind, but I couldn't reveal this, not to anyone, not ever, not under any circumstances, and whenever I thought about it, which was not seldom, it must have been several times an hour, I was overcome by a kind of black gloom, a gloom of hopelessness, sometimes only fleetingly, like a cloud drifting past the sun, sometimes for longer periods, and whatever form the hopelessness took I couldn't surmount it, there was so much doubt and torment associated with it. Could I? *Could I?* If, against all the odds, I succeeded in maneuvering myself into a suitable situation and was in a room alone with a naked girl, would I be able to make love to her? Would I be able to go through with it?

All the secrecy and pretense surrounding this didn't make it any easier for me.

"Do you know what it says on the teat of condoms?" Trond once said, in a break that spring, as he fixed me with his eye. We were standing in a group on the grass outside the school and jabbering away.

It was me he singled out.

Why? Did he suspect that I was lying about the girls, about the sex I'd had?

I blushed.

What should I say? No, and give myself away? Or yes, and then invite the natural follow-up question, what then?

"No, what does it say?" I said.

"Have you got *such* a little prick?" he said.

They laughed.

I laughed too, relieved.

But Espen was staring at me, wasn't he? Kind of knowingly, and semi-reveling in it as a result?

Two days later he drove me home at night. We had been at Gisle's together.

"How many have you actually done it with, Karl Ove?" he said as we drove up the gentle slope by Krageboen, flanked on both sides of the road by crumbling old houses.

"Why?" I said.

"I was just wondering," he said, sending me a glance before returning his eyes to the road ahead. The smile playing on his lips was furtive.

I frowned and pretended to concentrate.

"Um," I said. "Six. No, hang on, *five*."

"Who were they?"

"Is this the Inquisition or what?"

"Noo. But surely you can tell me that much."

"Cecilie, you know, the girl I went out with from Arendal," I said.

Outside, the shop where I had stolen so many pieces of candy drifted past. It had closed down a long time ago. Espen signaled.

"And?" he said.

"And Marianne," I said.

"Did you *fuck* Marianne?" he said. "I didn't know that. Why didn't you say?"

I shrugged. "You've got to keep some things private."

"You devil! Of all the people I know, you're the one I know least about. But that's just two."

The big man with the enormous gut and the ever-open mouth stood by the fence watching us as we went past.

"Quite a family, they are," I said.

"Now, don't you wriggle out of it," Espen said. "There are three left. I'll list mine afterward, if you're interested."

"OK. There was an Icelandic girl working at an ice-cream stall next to mine in the summer. When I was selling cassettes on the street in Arendal. I went back to her place one night."

"Icelandic!" Espen said. "Sounds great."

"Yes, it was as well," I said. "And then there were two one-night stands in town. I don't even know their names."

We drove down the last hill. The deciduous trees were as compact as a wall along the river. At the bottom the countryside opened out and I looked across the field to the small soccer field, where three tiny figures were shooting at a fourth in goal.

"And yours?" I said.

"There's no time for that now. We're here."

"Come on," I said.

He laughed and stopped the car.

"See you tomorrow!" he said.

"You bastard," I said, opened the door, and walked up to the house. As I listened to the sound of his car hammering down the hill and soon disappearing, I reflected that I had given him too much information, it would have been better if I had just said it was none of his business. That is what he would have said.

How come he could do it and I couldn't?

He didn't admire girls as much as I did, that was one thing. Not that he liked them any less than me, far from it, but perhaps he didn't consider them *better* than him, put them on such a high pedestal that you couldn't chat with them or do normal things with them; for him they were on the same level or perhaps he was even higher than them, for if there was one thing he had, it was self-confidence. That meant he didn't care, and when they saw that, he was someone they wanted to conquer. I looked upon them as completely unapproachable creatures, indeed, as angels of a sort, I loved everything about them, from the veins in the skin over their wrists to the curves of their ears, and if I saw a breast under a T-shirt or a naked thigh under a summer dress, it was as though everything in my insides was let loose, as though everything began to swirl around and the immense desire that then arose was as light as light itself, as light as air, and in it there was a notion that everything was possible, not only here but everywhere and not only now but forever. At the same time as all this arose inside me, a consciousness shot up from below, like a waterspout, it was heavy and dark, there was abandon, resignation, impotence, the world closing in on me. There was the awkwardness, the silence, the scared eyes. There were the flushed cheeks and the great unease.

But there were other reasons too. There was something I couldn't do and something I didn't understand. There were secrets and there was darkness, there were shady dealings and there was laughter that jeered at everything. Oh, I sensed it, but I knew nothing about it. Nothing.

I stuffed Bassen's letter in my pocket and hurried up the hill. Nils Erik was supposed to be picking me up in half an hour and before that I had to have something to eat.

A couple of hours later we were driving along the main street of Finnsnes. Coming here from Oslo and Tromsø, I had regarded Finnsnes as a crummy little hole, but now, only five days later, coming from Håfjord it seemed like a large, complex, almost sophisticated place, rich with possibilities.

Nils Erik parked in the supermarket parking lot and then we walked off to find a liquor shop. I bought a bottle of Koskenkorva vodka for the party, four bottles of white wine, and half a bottle of whiskey to take home with me; Nils Erik bought three bottles of red wine, which came as no surprise, he was the red-wine type, not the beer and spirits type. After we had stowed the bottles in the trunk, I took him along to an electrical goods shop that also sold stereos. Mine wasn't good enough, I had thought that for quite a while, and now that I had a steady job I decided to do something about it.

In the shop they had only racks, they weren't the best, but I could buy a decent stereo later, I figured, and looked around for an assistant.

A man was standing behind the counter with his back to us, opening a large cardboard box with a small paper knife. I walked over.

"I need some help," I said.

He turned to face me.

"Just a moment," he said.

I went back to the wall of stereo racks. Waved to Nils Erik, who was flicking through a crate full of records.

"Which one would you buy?" I said.

"None of them," he said. "Racks are shit."

"Agreed," I said. "But this is probably all they've got. And I only want it for while I'm up here."

He looked at me.

"Are you shitting money? Or is Knausgaard a family of shipowners? You never told me!"

"You can get one on an installment plan. Look, three thousand four ninety-nine kroner for that one. That's only a few hundred a month."

The assistant straightened up and looked around for me. A thin man with a bit of a gut, metal-rimmed glasses, and a comb-over.

I pointed to the Hitachi rack.

"I'd like that one," I said. "I can buy it in installments, can't I?"

"As long as you've got a job," he said.

"I'm working as a teacher in Håfjord," I said.

"Sure," he said. "Then you'll have to fill in a few forms, so if you come over to the counter with me . . ."

While I stood writing he went to the storeroom to get the stereo system.

"Is this such a good idea?" Nils Erik said. "In installments you pay almost double in the end. And the monthly payments are painful. Our salary isn't *that* good, either."

I glared at him. “Are you my mom or what?”

“OK, OK, it’s your business,” he said, and went back to the records.

“Yes, it is.”

At that moment the assistant returned from the storeroom with a large cardboard box in his arms. He handed it to me, I held it while he checked the papers and my ID, and when he was satisfied, I carried it to the car and placed it in the back seat.

The last item on the agenda was the supermarket. Each pushing a shopping cart in front of us, we walked around plucking things that weren’t available in the village shop from the shelves. My first target was two packs of cigarettes. At the back of the shop, next to the fruit counter, while Nils Erik was over by the pasta, I put the packets in my jacket, one in each pocket, then went on filling the cart with food as normal. I always stole cigarettes when I shopped in supermarkets, and it was completely foolproof, I had never been caught. Stealing was closely related to freedom for me, about not giving a shit, doing what you wanted, not what you were supposed to do. It was a rebellious, nonconformist act while, in a sense, pushing my personality toward one of the places where I wanted it to be. I stole, I was someone who stole.

It always went well, nevertheless I was nervous as I pushed my trolley toward the little island where the cashier sat. But there was nothing unusual about her expression and there were no men discreetly approaching from any direction, so I placed the items on the conveyor belt one by one with my sweaty hands, paid, packed them into a bag, and walked, quickly but not conspicuously so, out of the shop, then I stopped, lit up, and waited for Nils Erik, who arrived at my side a minute later carrying two bulging plastic bags.

The first kilometers were driven in silence. I was still annoyed with him for his moralizing tone in the shop where I had bought the stereo. I hated it when people interfered with what I was doing, regardless of whether it was my mother, my brother, my teacher, or my best friend: I didn’t want to hear it. No one had any business telling me what to do.

He cast intermittent glances at me as he drove. The countryside around us had leveled out. Low trees, heather, moss, brooks, shallow, completely black tracts of water, and in the distance, chains of tall, rugged peaks. He had filled the tank just outside Finnsnes, there was still a smell of gasoline in the car, it made me feel slightly nauseous.

He glanced at me again.

"Could you put some music on? There are some cassettes in the glove compartment."

I opened it and transferred the pile of cassettes to my lap.

Sam Cooke. Otis Redding. James Brown. Prince. Marvin Gaye. UB40. Smokey Robinson. Stevie Wonder. Terence Trent D'Arby.

"So you're a soul man," I said.

"Soul and funk."

I inserted the only cassette I'd heard before: Prince, *Parade*. Leaned back in the seat and gazed up at the mountains, which, at the bottom, were covered with a green tangled carpet of bushes and small trees, farther up with moss and heather, also green.

"By the way, why did you steal the cigarettes?" Nils Erik said. "It's got nothing to do with me. You can do what you like as far as I'm concerned. I'm just curious, that's all."

"You saw?" I said.

He nodded.

"You *do* have the money, after all," he said. "It wasn't as if you took them out of sheer deprivation, was it?"

"No," I said.

"What if you'd been caught? How would that have looked? As a teacher, I mean."

"Was I caught?"

"No."

"No? So then it's purely hypothetical," I said.

"We don't have to talk about it," he said.

"I don't mind talking about it," I said. "Talk away."

He gave a short laugh.

The ensuing silence was long but not unpleasant, the road was straight, the mountains were beautiful, the music was good, Nils Erik an outdoor type I didn't much care for.

But then my attitude changed. It was as though I had gone so far in one direction and now I was beginning to return because there was something unresolved here. Nils Erik, he hadn't done anything to me, didn't wish me any harm, he was curious, that was all, and maybe a bit pushy, and out here, where I didn't know anyone, perhaps that wasn't such a bad thing.

I hummed along to "Sometimes It Snows in April."

"Have you heard Prince's latest?" I said. "*Lovesexy*."

He shook his head. "But if he comes to Norway or Sweden in the summer, I'll go and see him. His concerts are fantastic these days. I talked to someone who had seen him on the *Sign o' the Times* tour. They said it was the best concert they'd ever seen."

"I'd be up for it too," I said. "But it's good, the new one, that is. Not as good as *Sign o' the Times* but . . . As a matter of fact I reviewed it when it came out for *Fædrelandsvennen* and almost made a huge blunder."

I looked at him.

"I'd read in some English music mag that he was illiterate, and I was going to write that, you know. I was on the point of pitching the whole article that way, that Prince couldn't read, but luckily it struck me as a bit odd and I dropped the idea. Afterward I realized it was probably music that he couldn't read. But I don't know. And it's not good, all the vague information you accumulate, the stuff you carry around with you that's not remotely true. If you say anything, it's a little embarrassing, but if you actually write it and it's in the newspaper the day after, that's worse."

"I thought that was what newspapers were all about," Nils Erik said, smiling, his eyes on the road.

"You can say that again," I said.

Farther ahead lay the road to Håfjord, a thin gray line leading to a small black gap in the mountain.

"By the way, I got a long letter from my girlfriend on Tuesday," I said.

"Oh really?" he said.

"Yes. Well, girlfriend may be stretching it. We were together during the summer. Her name was Line . . ."

"*Was?* Did she die this week?"

"For me, yes. That was the point. She broke up with me. Wrote that I was a nice person blah blah blah, but she'd never been in love with me and it was a good time to end it now because I was moving up here."

"So you're free as a bird," Nils Erik said.

"Exactly," I said. "That's what I was about to say."

A car emerged from the tunnel, it was small and black like a dung beetle, but soon it grew in size, it was going at a considerable speed.

The driver raised a hand as he passed, Nils Erik responded, slowed down, and turned into the last short stretch before the village.

"It's strange, isn't it," I said. "Everyone knows who we are while we don't know anyone."

"It's true," he said. "We've ended up in an incredibly intimidating place."

He twisted one of the levers by the steering wheel for full beam and flicked the other up to activate the windshield wipers. Drops of water splashed on the hood, windshield, and roof. The drone of the engine rebounded off the rock face, it surrounded us like a kind of shell, which vanished the moment we exited the tunnel, and the blue fjord spread out before us.

"Are you a free man then?" I said.

"Oh yes," he said. "I'm very free in fact. I haven't had a girlfriend for several years."

Was he gay?

Oh, no, don't say he was one of them?!

He was in fact a bit odd. And those rosy cheeks . . .

"There's not much of a selection up here," he said. "But nor is there much competition. So I figure they cancel each other out."

He laughed.

Not much of a selection. What was that supposed to mean? There weren't many other gays here?

My insides chilled as I stared across the matte blue surface of the sea.

"Torill is a cheery type," he said.

Torill!

False alarm!

I looked at him again. Even though his eyes were on the road some of his attention was on me.

"But she's old," I said.

"Old? Not at all!" he said. "If I had to guess, I would say twenty-eight. Maybe thirty. It's possible. But, first off, she's not old! And, second off, she's sexy. Yes, *very* sexy."

"Well, that hadn't even crossed my mind," I said.

"I'm not eighteen years old, Karl Ove. I'm twenty-four. So twenty-eight isn't old. Or unattainable." He chuckled. "The fact that she may be unattainable *for me* is quite a different matter."

We drove slowly down the narrow road squeezed under the mountainside. The local motorists drove just as fast here as anywhere else, but not Nils Erik, he was the cautious, sensible type, I had begun to realize.

"And you?" he said. "Have you got your eye on anyone?"

I smiled. "In fact, there was a girl on the bus when I was coming here. She's at the gymnas in Finnsnes. Lives in Hellevika."

"Aha!"

"We'll have to see. Other than that I don't know."

"Vibeke's a friendly girl," he said.

"Do you mean fat?"

"No, but you know . . . she's very nice. A bit chubby maybe, but what does that matter? And Hege, she's . . . well, high maintenance, I bet. But attractive. Isn't she?"

"You're game for anything, aren't you?" I said.

"Women are women, that's what I say."

Then the village lay beneath us. Nils Erik pulled up outside my flat, carried in the shopping bags while I took the big cardboard box containing the stereo, then he said good-bye and drove off to his place. I set up the stereo, put on *Sulk* by the Associates, an utterly insane LP that I listened to stretched out on the sofa. After a while I began to write some letters, kept them brief as I had a lot of them to do, what was important right now was not what I wrote but the short story I enclosed with all of them.

In one of the breaks the next day Sture came over to me.

"Can I have a word with you?" he said, scratching his bald head.

"Of course," I said.

"I'd just like to give you a bit of advice," he said. "About the third and fourth graders. I heard you covered the whole cosmos with them yesterday . . ."

"Yes?" I said.

"They're very small, you know. It might not be a bad idea to start at the other end. Make a map of the school here, for example. And then one of the village. And then one of the island. Do you see what I mean? Start with the known and work outward, to Norway, Europe, and the world. And then you can tackle the cosmos. If you're still here, of course!"

He grinned and winked at me so as to appear more of a friend and less of an authority figure. But this was not advice, this was a rebuke. When I met his eyes, my blood was boiling.

"I'll give that some thought," I said, then turned and went.

I was furious while being embarrassed at the same time because I could see he was right. They were so small, probably they hadn't understood a thing, and what had been exciting for me when I was ten was not necessarily exciting for them.

In the staff room I didn't want to talk to anyone, so I sat down at my workstation and pretended I was reading until the bell rang and I could go out to my pupils.

It was strange, I thought, standing by the desk and waiting for them to saunter in, it was strange that I should feel more at home among the pupils than among the teachers in the staff room.

But where were they?

I walked over to the window. There wasn't a soul in the area between the two buildings. Were they on the soccer field perhaps?

I looked up at the clock. It was already five minutes since the bell had rung. Something must have happened, I thought, and walked down the corridor to the door. Sture came striding along from the other end. He opened the door and went out, I followed and saw him break into a run.

There was a fight. Two of the boys had their arms wrapped around each other, one was thrown to the ground, he got back to his feet. Around them stood a cluster of pupils watching. They were completely silent. Behind them lay the village, behind that the mountains and the sea.

I broke into a run too, mostly for appearance's sake because I knew Sture would break this up and I was glad.

The two boys fighting were Stian and Kai Roald. Stian was stronger, it was him who had thrown Kai Roald to the ground, but Kai Roald wouldn't give in and flew at him again.

Both stopped the moment Sture reached them. He grabbed Stian by the back of his jacket and held him at arm's length while he bawled him out. Stian hung his head like a dog. He wouldn't have done that with me, that was for certain.

I came to a halt in front of them.

Kai Roald was looking at the ground. The knees and tops of his jeans were filthy. His eyes were wet with tears.

"What are you doing?" I said. "Are you fighting?"

"Oh, shut up," he said.

I placed my hand on his shoulder. He wrenched himself away.

"Come on, let's go in," I said, then looked at the others in the class. "And the rest of you! What are you doing out here? You haven't even been fighting!"

Kai Roald peered up at me as if he'd been expecting a punishment but now he could see there wasn't going to be one.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go. Kai Roald, you go to the washroom and clean yourself up. You don't look great."

Sture's class was already by the door.

"Any blood?" he asked me.

"No," I said. "Just snot and dirt."

We talked a bit about what had happened; when Kai Roald came back I told him he could fight as much as he wanted as long as he didn't do it on school premises. On weekends you can fight from the moment you get up until you go to bed, and in the afternoons too, but not at school. Can you manage that? I said. He shook his head. It was Stian who started it, he said. OK, I said. You'll have to settle your differences with him when you get home. But not here. If it happens again, I'll have to punish you, do you understand? And it isn't worth that. Wait a few hours and you can do whatever you like. Now, though, I'm afraid we'll have to start the lesson. You have to learn too, all of you. Especially you, I said. You don't know anything!

The four girls sent me a particularly sulky expression.

"Nothing at all!" I said. "So, get out your books."

"And how much do you fuckin' know?" Hildegunn said.

Vivian and Andrea laughed.

I raised a forefinger.

"No swearing! I don't want to hear that in the classroom."

"But everyone swears in Northern Norway," Vivian said.

"The same rule applies to swearing as fighting," I said. "Swear as much as you like at home. But not here. I'm serious. I mean it. All right. You can carry on with the exercises you started last time. Page thirteen onward. If you need any help, I'm here. At the beginning of the next lesson we'll go through any problems that arise. OK?"

I went to the window, leaned against the frame, and crossed my arms. Heard Nils Erik's voice at the other end of the open-plan block, he had English with the fourth grade. I thought of Stian, saw that smart-alecky smile of his in my mind's eye, and saw the girls in the class, their eyes watching his every movement. They admired him, I was fully aware of that. Perhaps they even dreamed about him?

They probably did.

The thought stung. He was just a little shit.

I went to my desk, glanced at Hege, who had taken her pupils over to the little library corner, where they sat on cushions in a circle around her and listened while she read.

She noticed that I was watching, looked across and smiled. I smiled back, sat down at the desk, thumbed through the textbook to see what I could do in the next lesson.

When I looked up again, my eyes met Andrea's. Blood suffused her cheeks. I smiled. She raised her hand and lowered her gaze. I got to my feet and went over to her.

"What do you need help with?" I said.

"This part," she said, pointing. "Did I do it right?"

I leaned forward and went through what she had written. She sat motionless, following my finger as it moved down the page. A faint fragrance redolent of apples emanated from her. It must be the shampoo she used, I thought, and felt a quiver spread through my chest. Her breathing, the hair that fell over her face, her eyes staring through it. All so close.

"We-ell," I said. "It looks right to me."

"Does it?" she said, looking up at me. When our eyes met, I straightened up.

"Yes, it does," I said. "Stick with it!"

No one was in the staff room when I entered after the lesson. It was only when I had sat down that I noticed Torill – she was in the kitchenette buttering a slice of bread.

"Did you have a free period?" I said.

She nodded and took a bite, holding a finger up while she chewed and swallowed.

"Yes," she said. "But I've been busy preparing for my next lessons!"

"Good," I said, reaching over for the newspaper on the table. As I browsed through it I was aware of her movements. The slice of bread that went up to her mouth and down again as she hustled around.

She leaned forward and opened the fridge door. I looked up. She was wearing a pair of black stretch pants. I examined her thighs so clearly outlined in them, and her bottom. It was broad but not too broad; on the contrary, it was curvaceous and so utterly feminine.

The blood began to throb in my member, and I crossed my legs without shifting my gaze. How wonderful it would be to sleep with her and feel her thighs and bottom against my body. Oh Lord. To penetrate her. Oh Lord God. Oh. Her breasts cupped in my hands! Oh, just her skin! Oh, just the smooth insides of her thighs!

I swallowed and studied the ceiling. It would never work. Even in the highly unlikely event that I ended up in bed with her or someone like her, it would never work. I knew that.

She stood up with a carton of milk in her hand. Opened it and started filling a glass as she shot me a brief glance. When our eyes met she smiled.

She had noticed everything.

I blushed and smiled back, feverishly trying to think of something that might divert her attention from the color in my cheeks and what I had just seen and thought.

She threw back her head and finished the milk in one swig. Wiped the white moustache off with the back of her hand and looked at me again.

"Would you like some coffee, Karl Ove? You look like you could use some!"

What did she mean? Why did I look like I needed coffee?

"No, thanks," I said.

But a no drew attention!

"Well, actually, maybe I will," I added quickly. "Yes, please!"

"Milk?"

I shook my head. She poured out two cups and brought them over, passed me one and sat down beside me with a sigh.

"You sighed," I said.

"Did I?" she said. "It's just late in the day. I slept badly last night."

I blew on the black, impenetrable surface with the small, light brown bubbles at the edge and took a sip.

"Do I make a lot of noise?" I said. "The music and all that, I mean."

She shook her head. "I can hear you're there," she said. "But that doesn't matter."

"Sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"OK, but tell me if it's too loud."

"Can you hear anything from our flat?" she said.

"Hardly anything. When you walk across the floor, that's all."

"That's just because Georg is away fishing," she said. "I'm a lot quieter when I'm on my own."

"Is he going to be away for long?"

"No, they're back on Saturday actually."

She smiled and her lips were so soft and red and supple against her hard white teeth.

"Oh," I said, and looked up because the door at the end of the room opened and Tor Einar, then Hege and Nils Erik, came in.

"Here they come, in serried ranks," I said.

"Yes, some of us respect lesson times," Nils Erik said. "We know that every minute is important for the pupils' future lives. So we cannot, I repeat, *cannot* finish three minutes before the bell rings. That would be grossly irresponsible. In fact, I would go so far as to say it would be *unforgivable*."

"Yes, regular temps have a heavy cross to bear," I said. "Why didn't you become a homeroom teacher like me? Then you would have had more control over your time, you know."

"It's my ultimate goal to become a head teacher without studying," Nils Erik said. "It's not very common, and it won't be easy, but that's what I've set my heart on." He rubbed his hands and grimaced in a caricature of greed. "Now for a few decent slices of dry bread with a bit of hard goat's cheese!"

Then in came Vibeke, Jane, and Sture. I got up, thinking I should make some room for those who wanted to eat and stood by the window staring out with a cup in my hand.

The sky was gray but not heavy. The girls from my class were standing by the wall on the far side chatting. The eighth and ninth graders were allowed to stay inside if they wanted, and they invariably did, at least the girls. The children in the lower school generally stayed on the other side by the soccer field.

I still hadn't done a break duty.

I turned to the others.

"Who's on playground duty?" I said.

"A wild guess – you," Sture said, leaning against the door frame with one hand pointing in my direction.

I went over to the list on the wall. And yes, it was me.

"Shit, I'd forgotten all about it," I said, and went into the corridor, grabbed my jacket, and put it on as I hurried out.

From the wet-weather shelter a small, plump figure came toward me. This was a boy called Jo. I pretended I hadn't seen him and made for the other side of the playground, where a whole crowd of kids rushed one way, then the other in front of a goal with a heavy gray ball in their midst.

They saw me and stopped the game.

"Do you want to join in?" they said.

"Why not," I said. "For a little while anyway."

"It's you against the rest then!"

"OK," I said.

They gave the ball to the goalkeeper, who kicked it into the melee. There were lots of boys, but their legs were short, so it was relatively easy to get the ball and keep it. Occasionally I knocked some of them flying, they shouted for a free kick, I shouted that they were little weeds, and they were put in again and chased after me. A couple of times I let them have the ball, just to keep them motivated, but in the end I ran toward the goal and shot the ball past the keeper and shouted I had won and the game was over. No, don't go, they shouted, we're going to smash you! Some of the smallest boys grabbed my trousers. I freed myself and had to run a few steps to get away. They were soon engrossed in the game again, and I started to walk over to see to the pupils on the other side.

Jo was standing on his own by the wall with his hat tugged down over his forehead.

"Don't you want to play soccer with the others?" I said as I passed.

He came after me and I had to stop.

"I don't like soccer," he whimpered.

"Just try!" I said.

"No," he said. "Can I come with you instead?"

"Me?" I said. "I'm just walking around."

He took my hand and looked up at me with a smile.

"OK," I said. "If you want."

Didn't he understand how this would look to his classmates, walking around hand in hand with the teacher?

Obviously not.

With the chubby little boy in tow I went toward the other part of the playground, where the pupils in my class had now been joined by the eighth and ninth graders.

"Yesterday I finished my homework and tried the next part," he said, looking up at me again.

"Really?" I said. "That's very good. Did you understand any of it?"

"I think so," he said. "Some of it anyway."

"But if you don't like soccer, what do you like?"

"Drawing," he said. "I love that."

"No outdoor hobbies?"

"I like cycling. With Endre."

"Is he your best friend?"

"Off and on."

I looked down at him. His face was completely expressionless.

So the poor boy had no friends.

His eyes met mine and his face softened into a smile. I rested my hand on his shoulder and crouched down in front of him.

"What about if we go and play soccer?" I said. "You and I can be on the same team."

"But I can't play soccer," he said.

"Get away with you," I said. "Of course you can. All you have to do is run around and kick the ball! I'll help you. Come on, we'll have to hurry if we're going to get a game. The bell will go soon."

"OK," he said, and we jogged over to the goal.

I stopped in front of the boys and raised my arm.

"I'm back," I said. "Jo's on my team. So it's Jo and me against the rest of you. OK?"

"But Jo's so bad!" Reidar shouted.

"You're all bad," I said. "Come on then!"

He really was bad! If I passed the ball to him he could barely kick it. But he was running around now with a smile on his face, and then fortunately the bell rang a couple of minutes later.

"You take the ball, Jo, and put it in the staff room. OK?"

"OK!" he said, and headed off with the ball under his arm. I quickly followed, hoping to catch a brief glimpse of Liv, the girl in the ninth grade, before she went in.

And I did. She was walking beside Camilla as I arrived, and she sent me a stolen glance as she turned into the corridor. I eyed her slim, firm backside, formed to perfection, and a kind of abyss opened inside me.

After the last lesson, I remained in the staff room waiting for the others to go home, partly because I longed to be alone but in a different way from how I was in my flat, and partly because I wanted to use the phone.

Eventually only Richard's car was left in the parking lot. He was in his office but could come into the staff room at any moment, so I sat leafing through an encyclopedia as I waited for him to pack up and go home.

In the past few hours the clouds had slowly darkened, and while I was sitting there the first raindrops began to pitter-patter on the windowpanes. I turned and watched them hitting the asphalt at first without leaving a mark, as though it wasn't really happening, then a few seconds later the dark wetness spread as the heavens opened. It poured down, stripes of rain cut through the air and with such force that I could see the raindrops bouncing off the ground. The water gushed out of the drainpipes from the gutters and down the hill along the side of the building opposite. A hard drumming sound came from the windows and the roof above me.

"Now that's what I call a storm!" Richard said from the door with a smile. He was wearing his green anorak and had a knife on his belt.

"It's no passing shower," I said.

"Are you doing some overtime?" he said, coming in.

"Well," I said. "I was planning to anyhow."

"How has your first week been?"

"It's gone well, I think," I said.

He nodded.

"Next Friday you can talk to Sigrid. The mentor, you know. Wouldn't be a bad idea to write down all the questions and thoughts you have before you meet her. So you can make the best use of the opportunity."

"OK, I'll do that," I said.

He chewed his lower lip and looked like a goat again.

"OK then," he said. "Have a good weekend!"

"You too," I said.

Half a minute later he appeared outside running toward his car with his briefcase over his head.

Keys out, door open, in.

The car lights came on, shivers ran down my spine. The rear lights shone red against the wet black asphalt and the headlights cast two shafts of yellow light against the wall, which seemed to diffuse them as it was lit up.

The pattering rain, the broad Vs of water running down the hill, the overflowing gutters.

Oh, this was the world and I was living in the midst of it.

What should I do? I felt like hammering my fists on the windows, running around the room and yelling, tossing tables and chairs aside, I was full to the brim with energy and life.

"IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT!" I sang out at the top of my voice in the staff room.

"IT'S THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT!

"AND I FEEL FINE!

"AND I FEEL FINE!"

Once Richard's car was out of sight, I went for a walk around the school building to see whether anyone might still be there. The caretaker, for example, could have been pottering around fixing things. But it was deserted, and after I'd made sure this was the case I went into the little telephone cubicle and dialed Mom's number.

She didn't answer.

Perhaps she'd been working late and had stopped by a supermarket on the way home, if she wasn't eating out.

I called Yngve. He picked up right away.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hi, this is Karl Ove," I said.

"You're in Northern Norway, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course. How are things?"

"Fine. Just got back from lectures. Going to chill first and then I'll be off."

"Where to?"

"Hulen nightclub probably."

"Lucky you."

"You're the one who chose to go to Northern Norway. You could have moved to Bergen, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"How are things up there? Do you have a flat and everything?"

"Yes. It's nice. Started teaching on Tuesday. Actually it's really a lot of fun. I'm going out tonight too. But not to Hulen exactly. It's a local community center."

"Any nice girls up there?"

"Yeees . . . There's one I met on the bus. That might develop into something. Otherwise they've all left home. Seems like they're either schoolgirls or housewives."

"It'll have to be schoolgirls, then, huh?"

"Ha ha."

There was a brief silence.

"Did you get my short story?" I said.

"I did."

"Have you read it?"

"I have but only quickly. I skimmed through it. I was going to write to you about it. Not easy to do that on the phone."

"But you did like it, didn't you? Or you're not sure yet."

"Yes, I did. I liked it well enough. It was nice and lively. But let's talk about it later, as I said, OK?"

OK.

Another silence.

"What about Dad?" I said. "Heard anything from him?"

"Nothing. You?"

"No, nothing. Thinking about calling him now."

"Say hello from me. It'll save me having to call him for a few weeks."

"I will," I said. "I'll write to you in the week."

"That'd be good," he said. "Catch you later!"

"OK," I said, and hung up, went into the staff room, and sat on the sofa with my feet up on the table. Something about the conversation with Yngve had depressed me, but I didn't know what. Perhaps that he was going to Hulen in Bergen with all his friends while I was going to a party in a village in the middle of nowhere and didn't know anyone.

Or was it the *well enough*?

Yes, I did. I liked it well enough, he had said.

Well *enough*?

I had once read a short story by Hemingway, it was about a boy who accompanied his father, who was a doctor, to an Indian reservation – a woman was giving birth, it didn't go so well, as far as I remembered, perhaps the woman had even died – anyway after they had been there they went back home and that was that. All very straightforward. My short story was just as good, I knew that. The context was different, but that was because Hemingway wrote in a different era. I wrote in today's world, and that was why it was as it was.

But what did Yngve really know? How much did he read? Had he even read Hemingway?

I got up and went back into the telephone cubicle, took the slip of paper from my back pocket, and dialed Dad's number. May as well get it over with.

"Yes, hello?" he said. Brusque voice. The conversation was going to be brief, no doubt about that.

"Hi, this is Karl Ove," I said.

"Oh, hi, son," he said.

"I'm all set up here now," I said. "And I've started working."

"That's good," he said. "Are you doing all right?"

"Yes."

"That's good."

"How are things with you?"

"Well, same as always, you know. Unni's at home and I've just got back from work. Now we're going to eat. But it was nice that you called."

"Say hello to Unni!"

"Will do. Bye."

"Bye."

The deluge had eased when I headed down the hill from school to my flat, but it was still raining enough for my hair to be soaked by the time I opened the door. I dried it in the bathroom with a towel, hung up my jacket, put my shoes by the stove, and switched it on, fried some potatoes, some onions, and a sausage, which I chopped up into pieces, ate it all at the sitting-room table as I read yesterday's paper, then went to bed, where I fell asleep within minutes, swathed by the comforting pitter-patter of rain on the window.

I woke to the bell ringing. Outside it had not only stopped raining, as I saw when I got up to open the door, the sky over the village was also blue.

It was Nils Erik.

He was holding his arms to his sides like two brackets, with his knees bent outward, his lips compressed into a zany smile, and his eyes wide and staring.

"Is this where the party is?" he squeaked in an old man's voice.

"Yes, it is," I said. "It's here. Come in."

He didn't move.

"Are there any . . . any . . . any really young girls here?" he said.

"How young?"

"Thirteen?"

"Yep! Come on in! It's freezing!"

I turned my back on him and went in, took a bottle of white wine from the fridge and opened it.

"Do you want some white wine?" I shouted to him.

"My wine should be as red as a young girl's blood!" he wheezed from the hall.

"Nasty," I said. He came into the kitchen with a bottle of red wine in his hand and put it on the counter. I passed him the corkscrew.

He was wearing a blue Poco Loco shirt, a black leather tie, and a pair of red cotton trousers.

The impression he made on people didn't bother him anyway, I thought with a smile. Not caring what others thought about him was an essential part of his personality, it seemed.

"I must say you're colorful tonight," I said.

"You've got to strike while the iron is hot," he said. "And I've heard you have to dress like this if you want to attract women up here."

"Like that? Red and blue?"

"Exactly!"

He put the bottle between his knees and pulled out the cork with a pop.

"Wonderful sound!" he said.

"I'm just going to have a quick shower. Is that all right?" I said.

He nodded.

"Of course. I'll put some music on while you're in there, OK?"

"No problem."

"No one can say that we aren't polite young men," he said with a laugh.

I went into the bathroom, undressed at speed, turned on the water and stepped under the shower, hastily washed under my arms and between my legs, looked at my feet, leaned my head back and wet my hair, then I turned the shower off, dried, put some gel in my hair, wrapped the towel around my waist, and went into the sitting room, past Nils Erik, who was on the sofa with studiously closed eyes listening to David Sylvian, and into the bedroom, where I put on clean underpants and socks, a white shirt, and black trousers. I buttoned up my shirt, then put on my shoelace tie and went back to Nils Erik.

"But I was told that's exactly how you *shouldn't* dress!" he said. "If you want them to flock to you. White shirt, shoelace tie with eagle, and black pants."

I tried to come up with a smart retort, but failed.

"Ha ha," I said, filling my glass with white wine and drinking it in one long swig.

The taste was of summer nights, discos bursting at the seams, buckets of ice on the tables, gleaming eyes, tanned bare arms.

I shuddered.

"Not used to drinking?" Nils Erik said.

I sent him a withering glance and refilled my glass.

"Have you heard the new Chris Isaak single?" I said.

He shook his head. I went and put it on.

"It's brilliant," I said.

We sat for a while without speaking.

I rolled a cigarette and lit it.

"Did you have a look at my short story?" I said.

He nodded. I got up and lowered the volume.

"I read it before I left. It's good, Karl Ove."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes. Lively style. Actually I don't have much more to say than that. I'm not exactly a literary expert or a writer."

"Is there anything you particularly liked?"

He shook his head.

"Nothing really, no. The writing's even and good. Hangs together well."

"OK," I said. "What do you think about the ending in relation to the rest?"

"It was a strong ending."

"That's what I want, you know," I said. "Something completely unexpected, the part about the father."

"It is as well."

He filled his glass. His lips were already red from the wine.

"Have you read Saabye Christensen's *Beatles* by the way?" he said.

"Hell yes," I said. "It's my favorite novel. That was what made me decide to become a writer. That and *White Niggers* by Ambjørnsen."

"Guessed as much," he said.

"Oh? Is it similar?"

"It is."

"Too similar?"

He smiled.

"No, I wouldn't say so. But I can see you were influenced by it."

"What did you think of the blood part? The part that comes in the middle? Where everything changes into the present tense?"

"I don't think I noticed that."

"That was what I was most pleased with, in fact. I describe him seeing Gordon's blood and veins and flesh and sinews. It's pretty intense in the middle there."

Nils Erik nodded and smiled.

Then there was another silence.

"It was much easier to write than I'd thought," I said. "It's the first short story I've ever written. I'd written things in papers and that sort of thing before, but that's different. That was sort of why I came up here. I just wanted to try and write a book. And then I began and well . . . yes, all I had to do was write. It wasn't difficult at all."

"I see," he said. "Are you planning to go into writing as a career?"

"Yes, yes, that's what this is all about for me. I'm planning to write another short story this weekend. Have you read Hemingway, by the way?"

"Oh yes. Part of growing up."

"Sort of like that, yes. Straight to the point. Simple and clear. With weight behind it."

"Yes."

I refilled my glass to the brim and drank it in one go.

"Have you wondered what it would have been like if we had applied for a different school?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's just by chance that it happened to be Håfjord. It could have been anywhere. Then we would have had to adjust to whoever lived *there*, wouldn't we, and life would have been very different from what's going to happen *here*."

"Not to mention the fact that two completely different people would have been listening to wine and drinking Chris Isaak. Or vice versa. The wine would have been listening and Chris Isaak drinking. Well, have you ever heard the like? Or is it: have you ever leard the hike? I'm all inside out! Spoutside up! Upside down!"

Nils Erik laughed.

"*Skål*, Karl Ove, and I'm glad it's you sitting there and not someone else!"

We raised our glasses and said *skål.*

"Although, if it'd been someone else, would I have said the same to him?"

At that moment the doorbell rang.

"That must be Tor Einar," I said, getting up.

He was standing with his back to me and staring down at the village when I opened the door. The gray August light hung between the mountainsides, seemingly of a completely different texture from that which illuminated the sky, for that was blue and gleamed like metal.

"Hi," I said.

Tor Einar turned in a slow, studied manner. Here was a guy who had plenty of time.

"Hi," he said. "May I enter?"

"Step right in."

He did so in the same punctilious way I had associated with his personality from the first moment I saw him. It was as though he had thought through his movements a couple of times before he executed them. All with a smile playing on his lips.

He raised his hand and waved in greeting to Nils Erik.

"What are you two talking about?" he said in broad dialect.

Nils Erik smiled.

"We're talking about fish," he said in his own dialect.

"Fish and fanny," I said in mine.

"Salty fish and fresh fanny or fresh fish and salty fanny?" Tor Einar asked.

"What's the filleting difference, can you tell me that?" I said.

"Yes, now listen here: salty sole and sole salt, they're not the same thing. Nor are fish and fanny. But they're close. Incredibly close."

"Soul salt?" I asked.

"Yes. See, now you're saying it."

He laughed, hitched up the knees of his trousers, and sat down beside Nils Erik.

"Well?" he said. "Have you done a roundup of the week?"

"That's what we were doing," Nils Erik said.

"They seem to be a good bunch," Tor Einar said.

"Are you thinking about the teachers?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "In fact, I already know them all, apart from you two."

"But you're not from here?" Nils Erik said.

"My grandmother lives here. I've been up every summer and Christmas since I was small."

"You've just finished gymnas as well, haven't you?" I said. "In Finnsnes?"

He nodded.

"You don't know someone there called Irene, do you?" I said. "From Hellevika?"

"Irene, sure," he said, brightening up. "Not as well as I'd like, I must admit. How come? Do *you* know her?"

"That would be saying too much," I said. "But I met her on the bus on my way here. She seemed nice."

"Are you meeting her this evening? Is that the plan?"

I shrugged. "She's coming anyway," I said.

Half an hour later we were walking up the hill from the flat. I was drunk in that pure joyful way you can be from white wine, when your thoughts collide with one another like bubbles and what emerges when they burst is pleasure.

We had been at my place, I thought, and this filled me with pleasure.

We were colleagues and on our way to becoming friends, I reflected.

And I had written a damn good short story.

Pleasure, pleasure, pleasure.

And then there was this light, dim down among humans and things human, attended by a kind of finely honed darkness which became diffused in the light though did not possess or control it, only muted or softened it, high up in the sky it was gleamingly clean and clear.

Pleasure.

And there was this silence. The murmur of the sea, our footsteps on the gravel, the occasional noise coming from somewhere, a door being opened or a shout, all embraced by silence, which seemed to rise from the ground, rise from objects and surround us in a way which I didn't formulate as primordial, though I sensed it was, for I thought of the silence in Sørbøvåg on summer mornings when I was a child there, the silence above the fjord beneath the immense Lihesten Mountain, half hidden by mist. The silence of the world. It was here too, as I walked uphill, drunk, with my new friends, and although neither it nor the light we walked in was the main event of the evening it played its part.

Pleasure.

Eighteen years old and on my way to a party.

"That's where she lives," Tor Einar said, pointing to the house I had strolled past one evening a few days ago.

"Big house," Nils Erik said.

"Yes, she lives with someone," Tor Einar said. "His name's Vidar and he's a fisherman."

"What else!" I said, stopping at the door and raising my arm to ring the bell.

"Here everyone just walks in," Tor Einar said. "We're in Northern Norway now!"

I opened the door and went in. From upstairs came the sound of voices and music. Smoke hung in the air above the stairs. We quietly took off our shoes and went up. The floor above was open plan with the kitchen straight ahead, a living room at the back to the left, presumably the bedroom was at the back on the right.

There was a group of perhaps ten people in the living room chatting and laughing, squeezed around a table covered with bottles and glasses, cigarette packets and ashtrays. They were all stocky, many had moustaches, age-wise they ranged between twenty and forty.

"Here come the teachers," one of them said.

"Perhaps we'll be given detention this evening," another said.

Everyone laughed.

"Hi, folks," said Tor Einar.

"Hi," said Nils Erik.

Hege, the only woman there, got up and brought in some chairs from the dining-room table by the window.

"Sit yourselves down, boys," she said. "If you need glasses, you'll find them in the kitchen."

I went in and stood alone staring up at the mountainside behind the house while mixing myself a screwdriver. For a moment I lingered in the doorway observing the people around the table, thinking they looked like trolls sitting there with their variously colored drinks, depending on what they mixed with their vodka – a variety of juices, Sprite, Coke – with their pouches of tobacco from which they made endless rollies and with their moustaches, their dark eyes and the succession of stories, thinking how they came from the four corners of the earth to meet here once a year and act out their exotic natures among their own kind.

However, it was the other way round. They were the rule and I was the exception, the teacher among fishermen. So what was I doing here? Shouldn't I be at home writing rather than here?

It had been a mistake to go into the kitchen alone. Nils Erik and Tor Einar had already been through the introductory rites, they were now comfortably ensconced alongside the fishermen, and I could have done that too, tagged along behind my colleagues and slipped in without being noticed.

I took a swig and went in.

"And here we have the writer!" one of them said. I recognized him at once, he was the fisherman who had dropped by to see me on the first day, Remi.

"Hi, Remi," I said, holding out my hand.

"Have you been on a name-learning course or what?" he said, grasping it. Shook it up and down in a way that had not been done since the 1950s.

"You're the first fisherman I've ever met," I said. "So of course I remember your name."

He laughed. I was pleased I'd had a drink before we left. If I hadn't, I would have stood tongue-tied in front of him.

"The writer?" Hege said.

"Yes, he writes, this guy does. I've seen it with my own eyes!"

"I didn't know that," she said. "Do you have such fancy ideas?"

I sat down and nodded to her while smiling semi-apologetically and taking the tobacco pouch from my shirt pocket.

For the next hour I said nothing. I rolled cigarettes, smoked, drank, smiled when the others smiled, laughed when they laughed. Looked at Nils Erik, who was pretty drunk and seemed to be in on the jokey tone but wasn't, he was different, there was something light and Østlandish about him, always on the outside. Not that they rejected him, because they didn't, it was just that his jokes were of a fundamentally different character, which in this context seemed to expose him. He made puns, they didn't, adopted a variety of roles, made faces and raised and lowered his voice, they didn't. When he burst into laughter it was somehow unrestrained, bordering on the hysterical, it struck me; that too was completely different from them.

Tor Einar was more on their level, he knew the appropriate tone and was on nodding terms with everyone there, although he was not one of them either, I could see; he was not an insider, he was more like an ethnological researcher who knows his stuff well enough to be able to mimic it because he likes it so much, and perhaps that was the nub, he *liked* the tone, whereas for them the tone just came naturally to them. They had never thought about whether they liked it or not.

Tor Einar slapped his thighs when he laughed, which I had only ever seen in films. He would occasionally also rub his hands up and down his thighs when he talked.

The pre-party, as they called it here, excluded discussion. Issues regarding politics, women, music, or football were not on the agenda. What they did was tell stories. One story gave way to the next, laughter billowed across the table, and the tales they came up with, they being the trolls they were, all had their origins in the village and the people who lived there, which despite its modest proportions appeared to be an inexhaustible treasure trove of stories. There was the fisherman in his sixties who had been seasick all his life and who only needed to jump on board his trawler to start feeling ill. There was the gang of fishermen who after a good season had hired the suite at the SAS hotel in Tromsø and spent vertiginous sums of money in the course of a few intense days of abandon there. One man called Frank, with the fleshy face of a child, was said to have burned his way through twenty thousand kroner, and it took me a while to realize that "burned" meant exactly that, he had set fire to it. Then someone had been drunk shitless in an elevator, they said, and again it took me a while to catch on that this had to be interpreted literally: he had been so drunk that he'd shat himself. Judging by the conversation it had indeed happened in the elevator. Frank in particular got so drunk that waking up in his own shit was not an unusual occurrence, from what I could glean. His mother, who was the older teacher at the school, had a hard time, it seemed, because he still lived at home. Hege's stories were different, but no less bizarre, such as the one about the girlfriend who had been terrified before an exam and whom she had taken into the forest and hit on the head with a bat so that she would have a justifiable reason for being absent. I stared at her. Was she pulling our legs? It didn't seem like it. She met my gaze and grinned, and then narrowed her eyes to a slit and frowned, opened them again, smiled and looked away. What did that mean? Was it the equivalent of a wink? Or did it mean that I shouldn't believe everything I heard?

They not only knew one another well, they knew one another inside out.

They had grown up and gone to school together, they worked together, they partied together. They saw one another virtually every day and had done so virtually all their lives. They knew one another's parents and grandparents, many of them were first or second cousins. One might conclude this was boring, indeed intolerably boring in the long run, because nothing new ever entered their lives, everything that happened, happened among the 250 people who lived here and who knew everyone else's most intimate secrets and quirks. But such did not appear to be the case; quite the contrary, they seemed to be having a whale of a time, and if there was anything that marked the atmosphere among them, it was their carefree attitude and their joy.

While sitting there I was formulating what I was going to write in the letters I would send south, such as: "They all had moustaches! It's absolutely true! All of them!" Or: "And the music they listened to, do you know what it was? Bonnie Tyler! And Dr. Hook! How long ago is it since that music was heard anywhere in the world? What is this godforsaken place I have ended up in?" And: "Here the expression 'to drink yourself shitless' means just that. Say no more . . ."

When at last I got up to go to the john, I had drunk just over a third of my bottle of vodka and I knocked against the man sitting next to me, who was holding a glass in his hand and spilled some of the contents.

"So . . . rry," I said, straightening up and stepping across the living-room floor.

"One does the talking and the other does the drinking!" he said behind me and laughed.

He must have been referring to Nils Erik and me.

As soon as I got some speed up my balance was fine.

But where was the bathroom?

I opened a door. It was a bedroom. Hege's bedroom, I presumed, and closed the door as fast as possible. If there was one thing I didn't like, it was seeing other people's bedrooms.

"The bathroom's on the other side," a voice behind me said from the kitchen.

I turned.

A man with brown eyes, thick, collar-length dark hair, and a moustache that hung down on either side of his mouth looked at me. It had to be Vidar, Hege's partner. There was something about the self-assured way he stood there that told me this.

"Thank you," I said.

"No problem," he said. "Just don't piss on the floor, that's all."

"I'll try not to," I said, going into the bathroom. I leaned against the wall while peeing. Smiled to myself. He had looked like a bass player from a 1970s band. Smokie or someone like them. And incredibly muscular.

What was she doing with such a macho?

I flushed the toilet and stood swaying in front of the mirror. Smiled at myself again.

When I emerged from the bathroom, they had decided to leave. They were talking about a bus.

"Do buses run at this hour?" I said.

Remi turned to me. "It's our band bus."

"Is there a band here? Are you in it?"

"Yes, I am. We call ourselves Autopilot. We play at dances in the community centers around here."

I followed him down the stairs. This was getting better and better.

"And what instrument do you play?" I said, putting on my coat in the hall.

"Drums," he said.

I put my arm around his shoulder.

"Me too. Or I did. Two years ago."

"You don't say," he said.

"Yes," I said, retracting my arm, leaning forward and trying to put on a shoe. Bumped into someone. Vidar again.

"Sorry," I said.

"That's fine," he said. "Did you remember your bottle?"

"Oh, no, shit," I said.

"It's this one, isn't it?" he said, holding up a bottle of vodka.

"Yes, that's the one," I said. "Thank you very much! Thanks!"

He smiled but his eyes were cold and impassive. That wasn't my problem though. I put the bottle on the floor and concentrated on my shoes. When they were on, I staggered out under the light night sky, down to the road, where the rest were waiting. The bus was parked in a driveway a hundred meters away. One of them opened the door and got into the driver's seat, we clambered aboard and moved toward the back of the big old vehicle. It was furnished with sofas and tables and a bar, all in plywood, and plush, it seemed. We sat down, the engine started with a growl and it was out with the bottles and off down the road. As we jolted along following the bank of the fjord we had a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

What an adventure.

I sang *Pølsemaker, pølsemaker, hvor har du gjort av deg* – Sausage maker, sausage maker, where have you gone, at the top of my voice while swinging my arms and trying to get the others to join in. The bus had conjured up memories of the old film in which Leif Juster was a bus driver, and Leif Juster had made me think of the film *The Sausage-Maker Who Disappeared.*

An hour or so later the bus pulled up in front of the community center, I jumped out and was swallowed up in the overcrowded room.

* * *

When I woke, at first, I couldn't remember a thing.

Everything was a complete blank.

I didn't know who I was or where I was. All I knew was that I had woken up from something.

But the room was familiar, it was the bedroom in my flat.

How had I gotten here?

I sat up and could feel that I was still drunk.

What time was it?

What had happened?

I held my face in my hands. I had to have something to drink. Now. But I was too wiped out to go into the kitchen and slumped back on the bed.

I had been to the pre-party and on a bus. And had sung. Sung!

Oh no, oh no.

And I had put my hand on his shoulder. As if we were pals. But we weren't. I wasn't even a man. Only a stupid Sørlander who couldn't even tie a knot. With arms as thin as drinking straws.

No, now I *had* to have something to drink.

I sat up. My body was as heavy as lead and totally uncooperative, but I forced my feet onto the floor, braced myself mentally, and pushed myself onto my legs.

Oh God.

The yearning for my bed was so strong that I had to mobilize all the willpower I had not to go back. The few paces to the kitchen exhausted me, I had to hang over the counter for a while before I could summon the energy to run the tap, fill a glass, and drink. One more, and one more. And the distance to my bedroom seemed so immense that I stopped halfway and lay down on the sofa instead.

I hadn't done anything stupid, had I?

I'd danced. Yes, I'd danced with all and sundry.

Hadn't there been a woman in her sixties too? Whom I had smiled at and danced with? And pressed myself against?

Yes, there had.

Oh my God. Oh my God.

Oh Christ.

Then it was as though the pressure inside me was ratcheted up, although there was no particular place that hurt, everything was painful, and the pain grew and grew, it was unbearable, and then my stomach muscles went into a spasm. I swallowed, dragged myself to my feet, and tried to hold it back as I stumbled toward the bathroom, the pressure mounting and mounting, that was all that existed, and then I snatched at the toilet seat, flung it up, knelt down, wrapped my arms around the bowl, and spewed a cascade of yellow and green vomit into the water with such force that it splashed back into my face, but it didn't matter, nothing mattered anymore, it was so wonderful to feel the relief, so fantastically wonderful.

I slumped to the floor.

Oh God, how good it was.

But then it came back. The muscles in my stomach writhed like snakes. Oh God. I leaned over the bowl again, caught a glimpse of a pubic hair next to my forearm resting on the porcelain as the cramps tore through my empty stomach, and I opened my mouth and groaned ooooh, ooooooh, ooooooh, and nothing came out.

But then, without warning, a gob of yellow bile was expelled. It slid down the white porcelain, a sliver still hung from my mouth and I wiped it away, and I lay down on the bathroom floor. Was that the last? Was it over now?

Yes.

Suddenly everything was as serene as in church. I lay in a fetal position on the bathroom floor enjoying to the full the calm that had settled over my body.

What had I done with Irene?

Everything inside me tensed up.

Irene.

We had danced.

I had pressed myself against her, hard, rubbed my erect dick against her stomach.

And then?

Anything else?

It was as if this one scene was surrounded by darkness on all sides. I remembered it but nothing of what came before or after.

Anything bad?

I imagined her in a ditch, strangled, with torn clothes.

No, no, what nonsense.

But the image returned. Irene in a ditch, strangled, her clothes torn.

How could the image be so clear? Her blue trousers, with those wonderfully full thighs beneath, a white blouse ripped open, part of a naked breast exposed, her eyes lifeless. The mud in the ditch, between the scattered blades of grass, yellow and green, the insane light, late in the night.

No, no, what nonsense.

How did I get home?

Hadn't I been standing by the bus when the band stopped playing and the parking lot outside the community center was packed with people laughing and screaming?

Yes.

And Irene was there!

We were kissing!

Me with a bottle of booze in one hand, drinking straight from it. She grabbed my lapel, she was the type of girl who grabbed lapels, and then she looked up at me, and then she said . . . ?

What did she say?

Oh hell, no.

Out of nowhere the snakes in my stomach entwined themselves again, and since there was nothing left below they were furious and squeezed so hard that I groaned. OOOOOHH, I went. OOOHHHH. I wrapped my arms around the toilet bowl and hung my head over the hole, but nothing came, I was empty.

CHRIST ALMIGHTY! I shouted. STOP THIS! NOW!

Then came a mouthful of unbelievably thick bile, I spat it out and thought that was it, but it wasn't, my stomach continued to churn, and I tried to alleviate it by hawking, from the bottom of my throat, for if only a little came up surely the vomiting would stop.

OOOHH. OOOHH. OOOHH.

Some phlegm came up.

There. That's the way.

Finished now?

Yes.

Ah.

Oh.

I grabbed the edge of the sink with one hand and pulled myself up. Rinsed my face with cold water and staggered into the sitting room, not too difficult, fine, lay back down on the sofa, thought I should find out what the time was but didn't have the energy, all that counted now was to wait for my body to recover and then the day could begin. After all, I was going to write another short story.

I had experienced blackouts like this, after which I remembered only fragments of what I had done, ever since I first started drinking. That was the summer I finished ninth grade, at the Norway Cup, when I just laughed and laughed, a momentous experience; being drunk took me to places where I was free and did what I wanted while it raised me aloft and rendered everything around me wonderful. Only recalling bits and pieces afterward, isolated scenes brightly illuminated against a wall of darkness from which I emerged and disappeared back into, was the norm. And so it went on. The following spring I went to the carnival with Jan Vidar, Mom had made me up as Bowie's Aladdin Sane, the town was heaving with people wearing curly black wigs, hot pants, and sequins, everywhere there was the throb of samba drums, but the air was cold, people were stiff, there was a huge amount of embarrassment to be overcome all the time, and this was visible in the processions, people were squirming rather than dancing, they wanted to feel emancipated, that was what this was about, they were not, they wanted to be, this was the 1980s, this was the new liberated and forward-looking era in which everything Norwegian was pathetic and everything Mediterranean was alive and free, when the sole TV channel which had informed the Norwegian population for twenty years about what one small circle of educated people in Oslo considered important for them to know was suddenly joined by new, very different TV channels that took a lighter approach, they wanted to entertain, and they wanted to sell, and from then on these two entities fused: entertainment and sales became two sides of the same coin and subsumed everything else, which also became entertainment and sales, from music to politics, literature, news, health, in fact everything. The carnival marked this transition, a nation moving away from the seriousness of the '70s to the levity of the '90s, and this transition was visible in the awkward movements, in the nervous eyes and the wild triumphant looks of those who had overcome this awkwardness and nervousness and were now wiggling their lean bottoms on the backs of the trucks that crawled through Kristiansand's streets on this cold spring morning with a light drizzle in the air. That was how it was in Kristiansand and that was how it was in all the other towns in Norway of any size and any self-respect. Carnival was the rage and would become a tradition, they said, every year these stiff white men and women would affirm their emancipation to the best of their ability on trucks, decked out as Mediterraneans, dancing and laughing to the drums that former school-brass-band musicians played with such a seductive, hypnotic beat.

Even two sixteen-year-olds like Jan Vidar and me understood that this was sad. Of course there was nothing we wanted more than a Mediterranean-style explosion in our day-to-day reality, for there was nothing we yearned for more than inviting breasts and bums, music and loads of fun, and if there was anything we wanted to be, it was dark-skinned, confident men who took these women at will. We were against meanness and all for generosity, we were against constraints and for openness and freedom. Nevertheless we saw these processions and were overcome by sadness on behalf of our town and country because there was an unbelievable lack of pride about all this, indeed it was as if the whole town was making a fool of itself, without realizing. But we did realize and we were sad as we strolled around, each with half a bottle of spirits in an inside pocket, becoming more and more drunk and cursing our town and the idiotic people in it while always keeping an eye open for faces we knew and could perhaps get together with. That is, girls' faces, or in a pinch boys' faces we knew who were with girls' faces we didn't know. Our project was doomed, we were never going to meet girls this way, but we didn't give up as long as there was a glimmer of hope, we strolled on, getting drunker and drunker, more and more depressed. And then, at some point, I disappeared from myself. Not from Jan Vidar, he could see me of course, and when he said something to me he received an answer so he imagined that everything was fine, but it wasn't, I had disappeared, I was empty, I was in the void of my soul, there was no other way for me to describe it.

Who are you when you don't know you exist? Who were you when you didn't remember that you existed? When I woke up in the studio in Elvegaten the following day and knew nothing about anything, it felt as if I had been *let loose* in the town. I could have done anything, because when I was as drunk as I was, there were no longer any limits in me, I did everything that entered my head, and what would not enter a person's head?

I called Jan Vidar. He was in bed asleep, but his father dragged him to the phone.

"What happened?" I said.

"We-ell," he said, keeping me on tenterhooks. "Strictly speaking nothing happened. That's what was such crap."

"I don't remember any of the last part," I said. "Somewhere on the way to Silokaia, that's the last thing I remember."

"Really? Nothing?"

"No."

"Don't you remember standing on the back of a truck and mooning at everyone?"

"Did I do that?"

He laughed.

"No, of course not. No, relax, man. Nothing happened. I mean, yes, something did happen when we were walking home. You bent all the wing mirrors along one street. Someone shouted, "Hey!" at us and so we ran for it. I didn't notice any difference in you. Were you that drunk?"

"Yes, it was the spirits."

"I fall asleep when I get that drunk. Jesus, though, what an awful evening. You won't get me to go to carnival again, that's for sure."

"Do you know what I think?"

"What?"

"When they have the carnival next year we'll be there again. We can't afford not to be. Not much happens in this fucking hole of town after all."

"True."

We hung up and I went to wash the Aladdin Sane lightning off my face.

The next time it happened was on Midsummer Night, also with Jan Vidar. We had dragged ourselves, each carrying a bag of beer, down to a place on the coast, to some sea-smoothed rocks below the forest in Hånes, where we wandered around drinking and freezing in the pouring summer rain, surrounded by Øyvind's many pals and a few people we knew from Hamresanden. Øyvind had chosen this evening of all evenings to break up with his girlfriend, Lene, so she sat crying on a rock, away from the others. I went over to console her, sat beside her, and stroked her back while telling her there were other boys, she would get over it, she was so young and beautiful, and she looked at me with gratitude in her eyes and sniffled, I thought it was a shame we were outdoors and not somewhere indoors, where there were beds, and that it was raining then outside. Suddenly she looked at her jacket and screamed, her shoulder was covered in blood and, as it turned out, her back too. It came from me, I'd cut my hand without noticing and it was bleeding profusely. You moron, she said, and stood up. This jacket's brand new. Do you know how much it cost? Sorry, I said, it wasn't on purpose, I just wanted to cheer you up a little. Go to hell, she said, and headed toward the others, where in the course of the evening she found herself back in favor with Øyvind while I sat drinking alone staring across the gray surface of the water, which the falling rain continued to dot with small, evocative rings until Jan Vidar came over and sat down next to me and we could pursue the years-long conversation we had about which girls were pretty or not and who we most dreamed of sleeping with, all while we slowly but surely got drunker until in the end everything disintegrated and I drifted into a kind of ghost world.

The ghost world: when I was inside, it went straight through me, and when I woke up from it, I couldn't remember much, a face here, a body there, a room, a staircase, a backyard, pale and shimmering, surrounded by an ocean of darkness.

It was nothing less than a horror film. Now and then I would remember the most peculiar details, like a rock at the bottom of a stream or a bottle of olive oil on a kitchen shelf, everyday items in themselves but as symbols of a whole night's mental activity, in fact all that was left of it, it was bizarre. What was it about that rock? What was it about that bottle? The first two times it happened I hadn't been afraid, I registered it simply as a kind of objective fact. Then, when it happened again, there began to be something eerie about it because I was so out of control. No, nothing had happened and probably nothing was going to happen either, but the fact was, I had no control over my actions at all. If I was basically a nice person, that was how I would be then as well, but *was* I? *Actually?*

On the other hand, I was also proud: occasionally getting so drunk that I couldn't remember a thing was cool.

At that time, I was sixteen that summer, there were only three things I wanted. The first was a girlfriend. The second was to sleep with a girl. The third was to get drunk.

Or, if I am being totally honest, there were only two things: sleeping with a girl and getting drunk. I had lots of other interests, I was full of ambition in all sorts of areas: I liked reading, listening to music, playing the guitar, watching films, playing soccer, swimming and snorkeling, traveling abroad, having money and buying myself bits of equipment, but in effect all that was about having a good time, about spending my time in the most agreeable fashion possible, and that was fine, all of it, but when it came to the crunch there were only two things I *really* wanted.

No, when I *actually* came down to it, there was only one.

I wanted to sleep with a girl.

That was the only thing I wanted.

A fire burned inside me, one that never went out. Even when I was asleep, it flared up, a glimpse of a breast in a dream was all I needed, and I came.

Oh no, not again, I thought every time I woke with underpants sticking to my skin and my pubic hair. Mom washed my clothes and at first I always rinsed them thoroughly before putting them in the laundry basket, but there was something suspicious about that too. What are all these sopping wet underpants doing here? she must have thought, and after a while I stopped and put the semen-drenched underpants, which after a few hours became stiff, as if permeated with salt flakes or something, in the basket, and even though she must have noticed, because it happened at least two, often three, times a week, I dismissed the thought of her bemusement as I replaced the laundry basket lid. She never mentioned it, I never mentioned it, and that was how it was with so much, and probably had to be, in the house where she and I lived alone: some things were said, commented on, pored over, and attempts were made to understand them; others were not articulated, not mentioned, and no attempts were made to understand them.

My urges were strong, but they rumbled in the empty rooms of ignorance, where what happened simply happened. Naturally I could have asked Yngve for advice, after all he was four years older and had endlessly more experience. He had done it, I knew that. I hadn't. So why didn't I ask him for advice?

It was unthinkable. It belonged to the realm of the unthinkable. Why, I didn't know, but it did. Besides, what good would advice do? It would be like receiving advice on how to conquer Mount Everest. Yeah, well, you go right there, and then you keep going straight on up, and there you are.

I would have given absolutely anything to sleep with a girl. Any girl actually. Whether it happened with someone I loved, like Hanne, or with a prostitute, made no difference, if it happened as part of a satanic initiation ceremony with goat's blood and hoods, I would have said, yes, I'm up for that. But it wasn't something you were given, it was something you took. Exactly how, I didn't know, and then it became a vicious circle, for not knowing made me unsure of myself, and if there was one thing that disqualified you, one thing they didn't want, it was a lack of self-assurance. That much I had understood. You had to be confident, determined, convincing. But how to get to that position? How in God's name could you do that? How did you go from standing in front of a girl in broad daylight, with all her clothes on, to sleeping with her in the darkness a few hours later? There was a chasm between these two states. When I saw a girl standing in front of me in broad daylight, there was a bottomless chasm between us. If I stepped off the edge I would fall. What else? Because she wouldn't come halfway, she could see I was frightened, she would withdraw, retreat into herself or turn to someone else. But actually, I thought, actually the distance between the two states was very *short*. It was just a question of lifting her T-shirt over her head, unfastening her bra, unbuttoning her trousers, pulling them off – and then she was naked. It would take twenty seconds, maybe thirty.

There was nothing more deceptive in existence. Walking around, knowing that I was approximately thirty seconds away from all I ever wanted, separated only by a chasm, was driving me insane. Quite often I caught myself wishing we were still in the Stone Age, then all I would have needed to do was go out with a club, hit the nearest woman on the head, and drag her home and do whatever I wanted. But it was no good, there were no shortcuts, the thirty seconds were an illusion, as almost everything concerning women was an illusion. Oh, what a mockery that they were accessible to the eye but in no other way. That everywhere you turned there were women and girls. That everywhere you turned there were breasts under blouses, thighs and hips under trousers, beautiful smiling faces, hair blowing in the wind. Pendulous breasts, firm breasts, round breasts, bouncing breasts, white breasts, tanned breasts . . . a naked wrist, a naked elbow, a naked cheek, a naked eye looking around. A naked thigh in shorts or a short summer dress. A naked palm, a naked nose, a naked neck. I saw all this around me constantly, there were girls everywhere, the supply was infinite, a well, no, I was drifting in an *ocean* of women, I saw several hundred of them every day, all with their own individual ways of moving, standing, turning, walking, holding and twisting their heads, blinking, looking – take for example a feature such as their eyes, which expressed their utter uniqueness, everything that lived and breathed was here, was revealed, regardless of whether the gaze was meant for me or not. Oh, those sparkling eyes! Oh, those dark eyes! Oh, that glint of happiness! The alluring darkness! Or, for that matter, the unintelligent, stupid eyes! For in them too there was an appeal, and no small appeal either: the stupid vacant eyes, the open mouth in that perfect beautiful body.

All this was never far from my mind, and all of them were thirty seconds away from the only thing I wanted – but on the other side of a chasm.

I cursed this chasm. I cursed myself. But no matter how frustrating this was, no matter how depressing this became, women shone with undiminished radiance.

Then a chance presented itself.

Some weeks after the dismal Midsummer Night party I traveled with the soccer team to Denmark. The town we were going to was called Nykøbing, on the island of Mors in the Limfjord. We stayed in a kind of hostel, perhaps it was a boarding school, just outside the town, surrounded by large fields bordered by shady old deciduous trees. In the evenings some of us sneaked out, it wasn't allowed, but the town wasn't far away and as long as we didn't miss the training sessions a blind eye was turned, if indeed our absence was noticed at all. We bought cheap wine from the supermarkets, sat outside on the benches drinking, and went to the nearby discotheque. On the second evening I met a Danish girl, and we got together every day for the rest of the time we were there. She was sweet and lively and intense, we sat on the benches and made out, danced in the disco, one night we went for a walk in the park, and on the final evening I thought, now's the time, I wouldn't have another opportunity, it was tonight or never.

On our last night everyone was outdoors; we started with a barbecue on the beach, the group leaders had bought beer, and when that was gone we took a taxi to a big restaurant in a forest not so far from where we were staying. She was coming, she'd said, and she did too, greeted me in the same warm way she usually did, stretching up on her toes, giving me a kiss and grasping my hand. We sat down at a table, I was knocking back the wine to summon up the courage for what I was about to attempt. In the bar I confided my intentions to Jøgge and Bjørn, told them I was going to try to get her into our room and go all the way. They smiled, wished me luck. It was a wonderful evening, outside, the grayish-black clouds hung heavily over the green trees, inside, under the glittering chandeliers, people mingled, they drank and laughed and danced, there was a smell of sweat and perfume, cigarette smoke and alcohol, she sat at our table and talked to Harald, but kept looking in my direction and she lit up when she saw me coming with another bottle of wine in my hand. My stomach ached as I sat down next to her. She leaned forward, we kissed, I was about to pour wine in her glass, she held up a palm, she had to work the following day. She had a sudden idea: did I want to go back to her place? But we're leaving tomorrow, I said. No, she said, no, you're not. You're never going home, you're staying here with me. You can go to school here! Or find a job! What do you say to that? Fine, I said, that's what we'll do.

We laughed and a wave of anguish washed through me: soon we would be in my room, soon she would be standing close to me and whispering, convinced I knew what I was doing.

"Feel like going for a walk?" I said.

She nodded.

"What about the wine?" she said.

"We'll be back," I said, and got up. Put my hand on her shoulder and guided her out of the room. Turned and met the eyes of Jøgge and Bjørn, they gave me a thumbs-up and smiled. Then we were outside.

She looked up at me.

Where are we going?

Into the forest? I said. I took her tiny hand in mine and we set off. I had already kissed her breasts, on a bench I had put my head up her jumper and kissed everything I found, she had laughed and held me tight. This was what I did with girls, lay on top of them, made out with them, and kissed their breasts. Once I had pulled down a girl's panties and poked a finger inside, that was already two years ago now.

A shiver ran through me.

"What is it?" she said, wrapping an arm around me. "Are you cold?"

"A bit maybe," I said. "It's turned colder."

The big heavy clouds that had been drifting in and were now over the forest had cast a pall over the gathering darkness between the tree trunks. A gusty wind had picked up. Above us the top branches swayed.

Blood was pounding through me.

I swallowed.

"Would you like to see where we're staying?" I said.

"Yes, I'd love to."

The moment she said that I had an erection. It pressed hard against my trousers. I swallowed again.

In the dusk the light in the buildings where we were staying was a deep yellow. It hovered around the lamps in halos. I felt sick and my palms were damp with sweat. But I was going to do it.

I stopped and put my arms around her, we kissed, her tongue was smooth and small. My dick was throbbing so much it hurt.

"It's over there," I whispered. "Are you sure you want to go in with me?"

A bewildered flicker appeared in her eyes. But she said nothing apart from yes.

I took her hand again, squeezed it hard, and we walked quickly over the last two hundred meters. Hugged her again outside the unmanned reception area, almost suffocating with desire. Down the corridor to the room I shared with three others. Key out, into the lock with trembling hand, a twist, handle down, door open, and in we went.

"You back already, Karl Ove?" Jøgge said with a laugh.

"Have you brought a visitor with you?" Bjørn said.

"How nice!" Harald said. "Would you like a beer, Lisbeth?"

There was nothing I could say. They were my roommates and had just as much right to be there as me. Nor could I say that they had run back here as a cruel joke, or the cat would have been out of the bag, and although Lisbeth may well have guessed my plans, this was not the sort of thing that could be said out loud. Or at least not when the others were here, what would she think, that I was making fun of her?

"What the hell are you lot doing here?" I said.

Jøgge smiled. "What are *you two* doing here?"

I glared at him. He was doubled up with laughter on the bed.

Harald passed Lisbeth a beer. She took it and smiled at me.

"How funny that your friends came too," she said.

What? Did she mean that?

She looked around. "Anyone got a cigarette?"

"We're soccer players," Harald said. "Only Karl Ove smokes."

"Here," said Bjørn, tapping out a Prince Mild from his packet and passing it to her.

Such a wonderful opportunity as this would not come up again for several years. And they had ruined it out of pure devilry.

Lisbeth put her hand in my back pocket and moved close to me. My dick was like a crowbar again. I sighed.

"Have a beer, Karl Ove," Jøgge said. "Can't you take a joke?"

"Yeah," I said. "Very funny."

He writhed with laughter again.

We stayed there for half an hour. Lisbeth chatted with all of them. After we had finished the beer, we went back to the restaurant. Lisbeth left at one, the rest of us stayed until early morning. The next day I met her briefly, we exchanged addresses, and she started to cry. Not much, there were only a few tears running down her cheeks. I hugged her. Lisbeth, I said. We can meet in Løkken before very long. It's only a ferry trip away for me. Can you make it, do you think? Yes, she said, and smiled through the tears. I'll write to you so that we can organize the details, OK? Yes, she said. We kissed, and when I turned around she was standing there watching me.

The Løkken idea was nonsense of course, just something I had said to lighten the atmosphere. She was nothing to me, I was in love with Hanne and had been all winter and spring. Everything had been about her, all I wanted was to be close to her, not to sleep with her, not even in the hope of a kiss or a caress, no, that wasn't it, it was the light and the excitement I was filled with when I saw her that attracted me and which I occasionally thought was not of this world, it came down to us from another world. How else could it be explained? She was a normal girl, there had to be thousands of girls like her, but she alone, by being exactly the way she was, could make my heart tremble and my soul glow. Once that spring I had knelt down on the road before her and asked her to marry me. She was pushing a bicycle, it was dark and raining, we were walking up by the blocks of flats in Lund, and when I did it she just laughed. She thought I was playing the fool.

"Don't laugh," I said. "I mean it. In all seriousness. We can get married. We can move to a house on an island and stay there, just you and me. We can do that! *No one* can stop us if that's what we decide to do."

She laughed again, that wonderful trilled laugh of hers.

"Karl Ove!" she said. "We're only sixteen!"

I got up.

"I know you don't want to," I said. "But I mean it. Do you understand? You're the only girl I think about. You're the only girl I want to be with. Should I act as if this didn't exist?"

"But I'm going out with someone else. You know that very well!"

"Yes, I do," I said.

I didn't need reminding. She only went on these walks with me because she felt flattered and because I was so different from the other boys she knew. Any hope that one day I would be going out with her was gone, nevertheless I didn't give up, I never would. So, standing on the deck of the Danish ferry, with the wind blowing in my hair, squinting into the low afternoon sun, surrounded by blue sea on all sides, I was thinking about Hanne, not Lisbeth.

In fact, I wasn't going to go home when we arrived in Kristiansand, I was off to a class party in a cabin on an island, and Hanne would probably be there too. I had written a few letters to her over the summer, two of them from Sørbøvåg, where I walked along the river alone with my Walkman, without a soul in sight, thinking only of her, and where I got up in the night and went outside, under the starry sky, walked up the river valley to the waterfall, climbed up alongside to sit high on a plateau beneath the stars, and thought of her.

She had answered my letters with a postcard.

But after Lisbeth my confidence was high, and even the sight of the vast sea could not dent it, or the urges in me, which were so vast that I was driven outside at night and tears formed in my eyes at all the beauty that existed in the world, but I couldn't turn these urges to any use, nor could I sublimate them.

"Hi, Elk," Jøgge said behind me. "Would you like a last beer?"

I nodded, and he passed me a can of Tuborg and stood next to me.

I opened it, foam squirted over the shiny lid. I slurped it up. Then I tipped my head back and took a real swig.

"There's nothing like drinking for four days in a row!" I said.

He laughed in that strange manner of his, it was almost ingressive, which was so easy to imitate and indeed everyone did.

"She's really something, that Lisbeth," he said. "How did you catch her?"

"Catch? I've never caught a girl in my life," I said. "You're asking the wrong guy."

"You were making out for a week. She went back home with you. If that's not catching, I don't know what is."

"But that wasn't me! It was her! She just came up to me! Then she put her hand on my chest. Like this."

I placed my hand flat against his chest.

"Hey, stop that!" he shouted.

We laughed.

"I don't know," he said, looking at me. "Do you think I'll ever get a girl? Honestly?"

"*Ev*er? *Hon*estly?"

"Cut the crap. Do you think there's someone who will have me?"

Jøgge was the only person I knew who could ask questions like that and really mean them. He could be completely open. He was as kind as could be. But handsome? Maybe not many would call him that. Nor elegant. Robust, that was perhaps the word. Solid. A hundred percent reliable. Intelligent. A good person. A sense of humor. But he was no male model.

"There's got to be someone," I said. "You aim much too high. That's your problem. You want . . . well, who do you want?"

"Cindy Crawford," he said.

"Now you cut the crap," I said. "Come on. Which girls do you usually talk about?"

"Kristin. Inger. Merethe. Wenche. Therese."

I spread out my arms.

"There you are. The cream! You'll never get any of them! You've got to understand that!"

"But those are the ones I want," he said with his broadest grin.

"Same here," I said.

"Oh?" he said, turning his head toward me. "Thought it was just Hanne with you?"

"That's something else."

"What's that then?"

"Love."

"Oh my God," he said. "I think I'll join the others."

"I'll come with you."

They were playing cards around a table in the café, drinking Coke now, we were approaching land. I sat down with them. Harald, his protégé, Ekse, Helge, and Tor Erling were there. They didn't like me, I had no real relationship with any of them, except on occasions like this. I was tolerated, but no more than that. A sarcastic comment was never far away. It didn't matter though, I couldn't give a shit about them.

Jøgge was different. We had been in the same class for two years, discussed politics until smoke came out of our ears, he was a Fremskrittsparti man, a right-winger of all things, I was a Sosialistisk Venstreparti supporter, the left. He liked good music, strangely enough, out there in farming country, he was the only person I knew who had an ounce of good taste. He had lost his father when he was little, lived at home with his mother and younger brother, he had always had big responsibilities. Now and then people tried to tease him, he was an easy target, but he just laughed and so they gave up. The crowd we were sitting with used to bait him in a good-natured way and if he reacted they would just imitate his laugh, then he went quiet or laughed along with them.

Yes, he was a good man. He went to the business gymnas, as a couple of others on the team did, the rest went to the technical school, and I had written a few essays for him and been paid for it, he'd been concerned that they shouldn't be too good, the teachers would never swallow that. Once, when he had been in the danger zone, I'd written a poem for him to hand in and his teacher considered that way out of character for Jøgge. But he scraped through; he was asked to interpret this poem, which he managed to do and was awarded a passing grade.

I had been a little disappointed because I'd put my heart and soul into that poem and I'd had a top grade in mind. But this was the business gymnas, so what could you expect?

In town, in one of the cafés, I would have probably looked in a different direction if Jøgge had walked in, he was a different breed, the wrong breed, but he may have known that himself. At any rate, I never saw him in such surroundings.

"Hey, Casanova, want another beer?" he said now.

"Why not," I said. "But then who are you? Anti-Casanova?"

"My name is Bøhn, Jørgen Bøhn," he said, and laughed.

An hour and a half later I walked ashore in Kristiansand with my big seaman's kitbag over my shoulder. The others were going up to Tveit, I was going to a party with Bassen, who was waiting for me when I came out of customs.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said.

"Have a good summer?"

"So-so. And you?"

"Good."

"Any women?" I said.

"Of course. A couple, I guess."

He laughed, and we headed for the bus station to catch a bus to the ferry quay. We had a kind of competition running that year, to see who could make out with the most girls in our class, we chatted about that as we sat drinking beer and waiting for Siv to come in her boat and pick us up. The approaching night was the last chance to change the score, which was heavily weighted in Bassen's favor: he had been with seven; me, only four.

Occasionally I wondered what school would be like in the autumn. He was going down the science route, I was doing social subjects, until now we had been in the same class, which meant it was natural to hang out together.

In one of the first lessons we'd sat next to each other, and after the homeroom teacher had handed out slips of paper for us to write down three personal qualities we had, Bassen had looked at my answer. *Somber, torpid, and serious*, I had written.

"Are you a complete idiot?" he had said. "You should add *lacking in self-knowledge*! I've never seen anything like it. Somber and torpid, you've got to be kidding! Who's put these ideas in your head?"

"So what did you write?"

He showed me.

Down to earth, honest, horny as hell.

"Throw that away. You can't write that!" Bassen said.

I did as I was told. Then on a new piece I wrote, intelligent, shy, but not really.

"That's better," he said. "Jesus! *Somber and torpid*!"

The first time I went to his house, late that autumn, I was filled with respect, I could hardly believe it, he was all I wanted to be, and even later, when we saw more of each other, that thought was never far away. Also now. His presence pervaded every part of me, I admired everything he did, I noticed every look he cast, even across the sea in boredom, and reflected on it.

Why did he want to meet me? I had nothing that was of any use to him.

When we were together I always left early so that he wouldn't discover how boring I really was. There was a kind of fever in me, two conflicting emotions, such as on the spring morning when we ditched school and went by moped back to his place and listened to records on the lawn. It was fantastic, yet I had to cut it short, something told me I wasn't worthy or couldn't fulfill his expectations. So I lay on his lawn with my eyes closed, like a cat on hot bricks, listening to Talk Talk, whom we had discovered at the same time. "It's your life," they sang, and everything should have been great, it was spring, I was sixteen years old, had ditched school for the first time, and was lying on the grass with my new friend. But it wasn't great, it was unbearable.

He probably thought I feared a reprimand for skipping school and that was why I got up to go. How could he have known that it was because it was much too good? Because I liked him too much.

Now we hadn't said anything for maybe five minutes.

I rolled a cigarette to fill the silence with a normal activity. He glanced at me. Took a packet of Prince Mild from his shirt pocket, poked a filter tip in his mouth.

"Got a light?" he said.

I passed him a yellow Bic lighter. He lit up and blew out a cloud of smoke, which hung in the air for a few seconds in front of him before dissolving.

"How's it going with your mom and dad?" he said, passing me the lighter. I took it, lit my rollie, crushed the empty can with my free hand and threw it down into the rocks by the water.

Dusk fell over the islands in front of us, heavy with the low-pressure system. The sea was calm and gray. The can clattered against the rocks below.

"It's going OK, I think," I said. "Dad's living in Tveit now with his new girlfriend. Mom's in Vestland. She'll be home in a few days."

"Is it still the two of you living up there?"

"Yes."

Around the headland came a boat. The person at the helm had long blond hair that shone against all the gray, and when we got up and lifted our rucksacks she waved and screamed something, which was reduced to a faint squeal across the hundred meters between us.

It was Siv.

We loaded our rucksacks on board, sat down, and ten minutes later we moored beneath her cabin.

"You're the last," she said. "So now finally we can eat."

Hanne was there. She was sitting at the table. Dressed in a white shirt and jeans. Her bangs had grown, I noticed.

She smiled, a touch embarrassed.

Probably caused by the letters I had sent.

We ate shrimp. I drank beer, and the intoxicating effect on me was greater and more deeply seated than I had ever experienced before, presumably because of all the drinking over the previous days. It affected not only my head and my thoughts, it started in the depths of my body and slowly spread, and I knew that the wave that was coming would be long lasting.

And so it was. We cleared the sitting room and danced as night fell over the archipelago, we went outside and swam in the darkness, gingerly I walked along the diving board, above me the sky was black, below me the sea was black, and when I dived it felt as if I would never reach the water, I fell and fell and fell and then suddenly I was enveloped by cold, salty water, I saw nothing, everything was black, but it was not dangerous, a few strokes and I broke the surface and could see the others standing on land like small, pale trees in the darkness.

Hanne was waiting for me with a towel, which she wrapped around my shoulders. We sat high up the mountainside. Some of the girls below were swimming naked.

"They're skinny-dipping," I said.

"I can see," Hanne said.

"Don't you want to join them?"

"Me? No! That's the last thing I would do."

Silence.

She looked at me.

"Would you like me to?"

"Yes."

"Thought so!" she said with a laugh. "What about you?"

"The water's so cold. It would disappear."

"It?" she said, and smiled at me.

"Yes," I said.

"You're a strange boy," she said.

There was another silence. I gazed at all the islets, a touch blacker than the sky above. A ribbon of light hung over the horizon. Surely day couldn't be coming already?

"It's great sitting here with you," I said. "I love you."

She shot me a rapid glance. "I'm not so sure about that."

"How can't you be? I don't think about anyone but you. When I was in Vestland – oh, by the way, it was fantastic, even though you weren't there – I was full of you, in a way. Absolutely drunk."

"You drink too much," she said. "Couldn't you be a bit more careful? For my sake?"

"Drunk with you," I said.

"I know that! But seriously. You don't have to drink so much, do you?"

"Happy clappy Christian? Intoxicated by Jesus?"

"No, don't make jokes. I *am* a bit worried about you. Is that a problem?"

"No."

We fell quiet. On the diving board there were two figures fighting. One was Bassen, I guessed.

Both fell in the water. Those watching on land screamed and clapped.

Somewhere in the distance a lighthouse flashed. Music blared out from an open door in the cabin behind us.

"Actually you know nothing about me," she said.

"I know enough."

"No, what you see is something else. It's not me you see."

"You're wrong there," I said. "You're actually wrong there."

We stared at each other. Then she smiled.

"Well, shall we join the others?" she said.

I sighed and got up. "For a bit more to drink, if nothing else," I said.

I held out my hand and pulled her up.

"You promised!" she said.

"I promised nothing. Hanne?" I said.

"Yes?"

"Can I hold your hand the short distance to the cabin?"

"Yes."

I put on my trousers and jacket and danced to "Don't You (Forget About Me)" by Simple Minds with Bassen while Hanne sat at the table chatting to Annette and watching us.

I stood next to her and poured vodka and juice into a glass.

"You're so sexy when you wear a jacket," she said.

"Do you think so too?" I said, looking at Annette.

"No," she said. "Of course I don't. Aren't you two going to kiss soon?"

"Not in this life by the look of things," I said.

"Perhaps in heaven then?" she said.

"But I don't believe in God," I said.

Hanne laughed, and I went over to Bassen, who was poring over the record collection.

"Find anything?"

"Well," he said. "There's some Sting. But I need some sleep. I'm off to England tomorrow. I don't want to miss the boat."

"You can sleep on the boat," I said. "You don't need to go to bed now."

He laughed. "Why not? You'll have a free hand when I'm out of the way."

"OK, you win. I didn't stand a chance."

He took out the inner sleeve and held it at an angle so the record slid out. With his thumb on the edge and his other fingers on the label in the center, he placed it on the turntable.

"How's it going with you and Hanne?" he said, swinging the pick-up arm to the first groove and lowering it with the little lever.

"It's not," I said.

"You looked pretty happy out there on your rock."

"That's as far as it goes," I said.

Then "If You Love Somebody Set Them Free" streamed out of the loudspeakers, and soon everyone inside was dancing.

We slept in the loft, I lay dozing till late in the morning and dragged out the time for as long as I could after that, I didn't want it to end, I wanted to be there, in the happiness I had felt, but then Siv had to take the last group back, and I jumped on board, sat quietly in the bow on the way across, found a seat to myself right at the back of the bus, pressed my forehead against the window and gazed out at the rolling Sørland countryside, which gradually became more and more urban until we reached the bus station and I got onto a bus that would take me home, to where Dad was living now with Unni.

I had caught this bus almost every day for three years, but it felt like a whole life. I knew every bend, indeed every tree on the route, and I was on such familiar terms with many of the people who got off or on that we nodded to one another even though we had never exchanged a word.

It had been good on the island. Perhaps I'd never had such a good time.

On the other hand, it was only a class party.

Then there was Hanne.

Each in our own sleeping bag, we had lain face-to-face, whispering for maybe an hour before we fell asleep. She had also tried to whisper when she was laughing, and when she did I had thought, I can die now, it won't matter.

"Can I give you a goodnight kiss?" I said as we were about to go to sleep.

"On the cheek!" she said.

I levered my way forward a few centimeters on my elbows, she half turned her cheek to me, I moved my head slowly toward it, changed direction at the last minute and gave her a juicy kiss on the mouth.

"You cheat!" she said with a laugh.

"Goodnight," I said.

"Goodnight," she said.

That was how it had been.

And surely it is impossible for that whole evening and night not to mean something?

She had to feel something for me.

She had to feel something.

She had said several times that she wasn't in love with me. She liked me, she said, very much even, but it was no more than that.

Now she was going to change schools and start at Vågsbygd Gymnas, where she lived.

At least that would release me from the torment of seeing her every day!

The bus indicated it was going to Kjevik, and at that moment a plane flying low thundered over us, touched down, and screamed along the runway at a speed that made it seem as if we were standing still.

Flashing lights, roaring engine. We were living in the future.

I might bump into her now and then in town, we could have lunch together, go to the cinema, I could take her swimming with me on Saturday mornings. Gradually she would realize she was in love with me. She would finish the other business, tell me with a glow in her eyes that now there was nothing to stop us anymore.

But then?

When we were together?

Visit each other in the evenings, kiss, and eat pizza? Go to the cinema with her friends?

That was not enough.

I *wanted* her. Not as part of a gymnas existence, a gymnas girlfriend, she meant more than that. I wanted to move in with her. Be with her day and night, share everything with her. Not in town, with everything that went on there constantly around us, but in the skerries or perhaps in the forest, no matter where, as long as it was a place where we could be completely alone.

Or in Oslo, a large town where no one knew us.

Then I could go shopping after returning from lectures because I would study, and make dinner for her, there in our own flat.

Then we could have a child.

The bus stopped in front of the tiny terminal building, and a man wearing a cap and carrying a little suitcase got on board, paid, and walked down the bus whistling as he went. He sat down in the seat in front of me.

I threw my arms in the air. The whole bus was empty! And he has to sit right there!

He smelled of sweet aftershave. His neck was covered in a scattering of thin hairs. His earlobes were fat and red. A farmer from Birkeland.

Child?

I didn't want one, I didn't want to work from nine to four, that was a trap I would steer clear of, but it was different with Hanne, that was about something else.

Jesus, no, of course we wouldn't get married, of course we wouldn't live in the skerries, of course we wouldn't have children!

I smiled. It had to be the wildest idea I'd ever had.

On the other side of the runway, across the road, was Jøgge's house. There was light in the windows, and I leaned forward to see if I could catch a glimpse of him. But, if I knew Jøgge, he would be lying on his waterbed listening to Peter Gabriel.

I woke up the next morning to the drone of a vacuum cleaner in the room underneath. I didn't move. The vacuuming stopped and other sounds became more prominent: the clink of bottles, the hum of the dishwasher, water running into a bucket. They had been having a party when I arrived. The last I had seen of them before sneaking up to my room the night before had been his contorted face and her laying a hand on his shoulder. That was the first time I had seen him drunk and the first time I had seen him cry. After a while the door was opened, footsteps crunched on the gravel outside, and then I heard their voices just under my window.

There was a bench with a table where Dad used to sit in the summer in that characteristic way of his, one leg crossed over the other, his back bent slightly forward, often holding a newspaper in his hands and a smoking cigarette between his fingers.

They laughed. Her voice was high-pitched, his deeper.

I got up and tiptoed over to the window.

The sky was a little misty, it softened a tone, but the sun shone and the air in the garden was perfectly still and quivered.

I opened the window.

And they were indeed sitting on the bench beneath, leaning against the wall with their eyes closed to the sun. Both tipped their heads back and looked up at me.

"Well, isn't that our Kaklove?" Dad said.

"Good morning, early bird!" Unni said.

"Good morning," I said, securing the window with the latch. I didn't like the way their voices seemed to embrace me, as though it was us three now. It wasn't true; it was the two of them and me.

But I liked the role of the rebellious teenager even less. The last thing in the world I wanted was to give them any reason at all to blame me for anything.

I ate a few slices of bread in the kitchen, carefully cleaned up afterward, brushed the crumbs on the plate and table into the trash bin under the sink, fetched the Walkman from my room, tied my shoes up, and went down to see them.

"I'm off for a walk," I said.

"You do that," Dad said. "Are you going to visit a buddy?"

He didn't know the name of a single one of my friends, not even Jan Vidar, whom I had been friends with for three years. But now he was sitting beside Unni and wanted to show that he was a good father who knew his son's habits.

"Yes, guess so," I said.

"Tomorrow I'll start moving my stuff down. It would be good if you were here. I might need some help carrying."

"Of course," I said. "OK, bye."

I wasn't going to a friend's. Jan Vidar was working at a bakery in town this summer, Bassen was on his way to England, Per was probably grafting at the floor factory, and what Jøgge was doing I had no idea, but it wasn't, and never had been, natural for me to get on my bike without a specific aim. I felt like being alone though, and I put on my headset, pressed play, and allowed myself to be engulfed in music as I walked downhill. The countryside lay serene before me, and the few clouds, above the ridges on the other side of the river valley, were motionless. I followed the road down, it was quiet too, because, apart from a farm a kilometer farther up, there was barely a house on this side for some distance. Only forest and water.

The green of the spruce needles shone brightly in the sunshine, it was almost black in the shadows, but there was something light about all the trees, it was the summer that did that, they weren't brooding or turned into themselves as in winter, no, they let the warm air filter through and stretched toward the sun, like everything else living.

I walked along the old forest path. Even though it was only a couple of hundred meters above our house I hadn't been there more than two or three times, and then only in winter, wearing skis. Nothing happened there, it was deserted and none of the kids up here gravitated toward that path: down at the bottom was where it all happened, that was where people lived.

If I had grown up here, I might have been familiar with every bush and rock, as I was with the countryside around our house in Tybakken. But I had lived here for only three years and no roots had developed, nothing meant anything, not really.

I turned off the music, pulled the headset down over my neck. Above me the air was so full of birdsong that it felt as if I could *see* it. Now and then there was a rustle in the undergrowth beside the path, that must have been birds too, I mused, but I didn't see any.

The path rose gently, in constant shadow from the high trees growing on both sides. At the top there was a small lake, I lay down on my back on the grass not far away and stared at the sky, listening to music, I played *Remain in Light*, and thought about Hanne.

I had to write another letter to her. It had to be so good that she wouldn't be able to think about anything else but me.

Dad didn't need much help from me with moving the following afternoon. He carried all the boxes himself, loaded them onto the big white rental van, and drove off to town, three trips was all it took; it was only when it came to the furniture that he needed a helping hand. With it aboard he slammed the doors shut and shot me a glance.

"Let's keep in touch," he said.

Then he laid a hand on my shoulder.

He had never done that before.

My eyes went moist and I looked down. He removed his hand, clambered up into the driver's seat, started the engine, and drove slowly downhill.

Did he like me?

Was that possible?

I wiped my eyes on my T-shirt sleeve.

That was that, I thought. I would never live with him again now. From the edge of the forest came the cat, his tail held high. He stopped by the door and looked at me with his yellow eyes.

"Do you want to go in, Mefisto?" I said. "Are you hungry too?"

He didn't answer, he rubbed his head against my leg as I went to open the door, darted in toward his dish, and stood there staring up at me.

I opened a new can, dumped a large pile in the dish, and went into the living room, where a faint trace of Unni's perfume hung in the air.

I opened the terrace door and stood on the step outside. Even if the sun no longer shone on the house, it was still warm out there.

Per came up the hill, walking with his bicycle at his side.

I went to the edge of the slope.

"Have you been working?" I shouted.

"By the sweat of my brow!" he shouted back. "Not like some people I know who sleep all day!"

"How much did you earn for your pension today?"

"More than you'll ever earn in the course of your whole life."

I watched him chuckling. He was the type that chuckled and had always been older than his years.

He raised a hand in salute, I did the same and then I went inside.

Two of the pictures on the living-room wall had gone. Half the records, I assumed, and half the books. All his papers, the desk and the office equipment. The sofa in front of the TV, the two Stressless leather chairs. Half of the kitchen utensils. And of course all his clothes.

But the house didn't seem to have been stripped.

In the room beside the hall the telephone rang. I hurried over.

"Hello, this is Karl Ove," I said.

"Hi, Yngve here. What's new?"

"Dad's just left with the last load. Mom will be here soon. So I'm on my own with the cat. Where are you?"

"I'm at Trond's still. I was thinking of coming over. Tomorrow actually, but if Dad's gone, I might come tonight."

"Could you? That would be great."

"I'll see. Arvid would have to drive me. He might have time. Anyway, maybe see you tonight then!"

"Fantastic!"

I cradled the phone and went to see what there was in the fridge.

When Mom drove up the hill an hour later, I had fried some sausages, onions, and potatoes, sliced some bread, put out the butter and set the table.

I went to meet her. She drove the car into the garage, got out, stretched up on her toes, grabbed the door, and closed it.

She was wearing white slacks, a rust-red sweater, and sandals. She smiled when she saw me. She seemed tired, but then she had been driving all day.

"Hi!" she said. "Are you alone?"

"Yes," I said.

"Did you have a nice time in Denmark?"

"Yes, great. And what about you? Did you have a nice time in Sørbøvåg?"

"Yes, I did."

I leaned forward and gave her a hug. Followed her into the kitchen.

"Have you made some food?!" she said.

I smiled.

"Take the weight off your feet. You've been driving all day. I'll put some water on for tea. I didn't know exactly when you would get here."

"No, of course. I should have called," she said. "Tell me then. How was it in Denmark?"

"It was really good. Some fantastic fields. We played a couple of games. And then we went out on the last night. But the best part was the class party. That was really great."

"Did you meet Hanne there?" she said.

"Yes. That was the great part."

She smiled. I smiled too.

Then the phone rang. I went in and answered it.

"Dad here."

"Hi," I said.

"Is Mom there now?"

"Yes. Do you want to talk to her?"

"No, what should I talk to her about? We were wondering if you would like to visit us on Monday. A little housewarming party."

"Love to. When?"

"Six. Have you heard anything from Yngve?"

"No, I think he's on Tromøya."

"Tell him he's invited too if you hear from him."

"OK, will do."

"Good. See you."

"See you."

I put down the phone. How could his voice be so cold now when he'd put his hand on my shoulder only a few hours ago?

I went into the kitchen, where Mom was pouring hot water into the teapot.

"That was Dad," I said.

"Oh?" she said.

"He invited me to dinner."

"That's nice, isn't it?"

I shrugged.

"Have you heard from him this summer?"

"No, only from his solicitor," she said, putting the teapot on the table and sitting down.

"What did the lawyer have to say?"

"Well . . . it's all about how to share the house. We can't agree, but it's nothing you have to worry about."

"Have to? I can worry about it if I want, can't I?" I said as I put the spatula in the pan and transferred some sausages, potatoes, and onions onto a plate.

"You don't have to take sides. I suppose that's what I mean," she said.

"I took sides years ago," I said. "When I was seven I took sides. So that's nothing new. Or a problem."

I stuck the fork into a bit of sausage that had curled up in the heat, put it to my mouth, and sank my teeth into it.

"But if things go the way it looks as if they're headed, we won't have much money in the future. That is, you'll get your payments from Dad of course. They're yours to dispose of as you like, I suppose. But as I've got to buy his share of this house, it's going to be tough economically for me."

"That doesn't matter," I said. "It's only money. That's not what life's about."

"True enough." She smiled. "That's a good attitude to have."

Yngve and Arvid arrived at about ten. Arvid just poked his head around the door to say hello before leaving again while Yngve dragged a suitcase and a big bag up to his room, which he had hardly used in the three years we'd lived there.

"You're not going tomorrow, are you?" I said when he came back down.

"Nope," he said. "The plane leaves the day after. Perhaps. I've got a standby ticket."

We went into the living room. I sat down in the wicker chair, Yngve sat beside Mom on the sofa. Outside, two bats flitted to and fro, disappearing completely in the darkness of the mountains across the river, then reappearing against the lighter sky. Yngve poured coffee from the Thermos.

"Well," he said. "I suppose it's debriefing time."

Throughout our childhood we three had sat chatting, that was what I was used to, but this was the first time we had done it without Dad living in the house, and the difference was immense. Knowing that he couldn't walk in at any moment, forcing us to think about what we were saying and doing, changed everything.

We had chatted about everything under the sun then too, but never so much as a word about Dad, it was a kind of implicit rule.

I had never thought about that before.

But we couldn't talk about him now, that would have been inconceivable.

Why?

Perhaps it was bound up with loyalty. Perhaps with a fear of being overheard. But irrespective of what had happened during the day and irrespective of how upset I was, I never talked to them about it. To Yngve on his own, yes, but not when the three of us were together.

Then it was as though a dam had burst. Everything suddenly flowed into the same channel, into the same valley, which was soon full of something that excluded everything else.

Yngve began to talk about himself, and it wasn't long before we were going through one incident after the other. Yngve told us about the time the B-Max supermarket opened and he was sent off with a shopping list and some money, under strict instructions to bring back a receipt. He had done that, but the sum in his hand hadn't tallied with the till receipt and Dad had marched him into the cellar and given him a beating. He told us about the time his bike had had a puncture and Dad had beaten him. I, for my part, had never been beaten; for some reason Dad had always treated Yngve worse. But I talked about the times he had slapped me and the times he had locked me in the cellar, and the point of these stories was always the same: his fury was always triggered by some petty detail, some utter triviality, and as such was actually comical. At any rate we laughed when we told the stories. Once I had left a pair of gloves on the bus and he slapped me in the face when he found out. I had leaned against the wobbly table in the hall and sent it flying and he came over and hit me. It was absolutely absurd! I lived in fear of him, I said, and Yngve said Dad controlled him and his thoughts, even now.

Mom said nothing. She sat listening, looking at me then Yngve. Sometimes her eyes seemed to go blank. She had heard about most of these incidents before, but now there was such a plethora of them she might well have been overwhelmed.

"He had such chaos inside him," she said at length. "More than I realized. I saw him angry of course. I didn't see him hitting you. He never did when I was around. And you didn't say anything. I tried to compensate for his bouts of anger. To give you something else . . ."

"Relax, Mom," I said. "We got through it. That was then, not now."

"We always talked a lot, didn't we," she said. "And he was manipulative. He was. Very. But he did also have some self-awareness. He made that clear to me. So I . . . well, I always saw it from his side, what happened. He said he had so little communication with you, and it was because I stood between you and him. And in a way that's true. You always turned to me. When he was there you left. I had a bad conscience about that."

"What happened happened, and it's fine," Yngve said. "But what I have a problem with is that when you moved here I was left to cope on my own. You didn't help me. I was seventeen years old, at gymnas, and had no money."

Mom took a deep breath.

"I know," she said. "I was loyal to him. I shouldn't have been. That was wrong of me. It was a big mistake."

"Come on," I said. "It's over, all of it. It's just us now."

Mom lit a cigarette. I looked at Yngve.

"What shall we do tomorrow then?"

He shrugged.

"What do you feel like doing?"

"Swimming maybe?"

"Or we could go to town? Check out some record shops and cafés?"

He turned to Mom. "Can I borrow your car?"

"Yes, you can."

Mom went to bed half an hour later. I knew all she was thinking about was what we had been saying and she would be lying awake and reflecting. I didn't want her to feel like this, to be so tormented by it, she didn't deserve that, but there was nothing I could do.

When we heard the creaks in the ceiling on the other side of the living room, Yngve looked at me.

"Coming out for a smoke?"

I nodded.

We walked quietly into the hall, put on shoes and jackets, and crept out to the opposite side of the house from where she was sleeping.

"When are you going to tell her you smoke?" I said, watching the flame from the lighter flicker across his face, the glow that came to life when the lighter died.

I heard him blowing out the smoke.

"When will *you*?"

"I'm sixteen. I'm not allowed to smoke. But you're twenty."

"All right, all right."

I was a little offended and walked a few steps into the garden. There was a heavy aroma coming from the big bush with white flowers at the end of the potato patch. What was it called again?

The sky was light, the forest beyond the river dark.

"Did you ever see Mom and Dad hug?" Yngve said.

I walked back to him.

"No," I said. "Not that I can remember. Did you?"

He nodded in front of me in the semidarkness.

"Once. It was in Hove, so I must have been five. Dad was yelling at Mom so much she burst into tears. She was standing in the kitchen crying. He went into the living room. Then he went back and put his arms around her and consoled her. That's the only time."

I started to cry. But it was dark, and not a sound came from me, so he didn't notice.

Before we left for town I went to find Mom. She was wandering around the garden with a pair of large gloves on, trimming the edges of the beds with shears.

"Could you give me some money?" I said. "I spent all I had in Denmark."

"I'll see what I've got," she said, and went indoors to get her bag. I followed.

"Is fifty OK?" she said, taking a green banknote from her purse.

"Have you got a hundred? I was thinking of buying a record or two."

She counted her coins.

"Ninety. That's all, I'm afraid."

"It'll have to do then," I said, went back to the car, which stood idling on the gravel drive, and got in beside Yngve, who was wearing his Ray-Bans.

"I'm going to buy myself a pair when I get the money," I said, pointing to the sunglasses.

He set off down the hill.

"Buy them when you get your first student loan," he said.

"That's *two* years away."

"You'll have to get a job then. Piling planks at Boen or whatever it is you do there."

"I was thinking of doing record reviews," I said. "And interviewing bands, that sort of thing."

"Oh?" he said. "That sounds like a good idea. Who for?"

"*Nye Sørlandet*."

We drove along the narrow road under the deciduous trees, past the old white houses, the river glinting beneath us. When we reached the waterfall and I saw some figures lying on the cliff beside it, I turned to him.

"Let's go swimming afterward. We can fit in both," I said.

"We could," he said. "At Hamresanden?"

"Ye-es."

"Do they sell ice cream there?"

"Of course they do. They may even have soft ice cream."

I took Yngve to Platebørsen, the record shop in the town's old *børs*, the stock exchange, a situation I relished, now I was the one who knew where everything was and what was good.

He held up a record. "Have you got this one?"

"No? What is it?"

"The Church. *The Blurred Crusade*. You've *got* to have this one."

"OK. I'll get it."

I also had enough money for a Nice Price record and bought the Talking Heads' 77. Yngve was going to wait until his student loan came through before he bought any records.

We sat down in the café outside the library and smoked and drank coffee. I hoped someone I knew would come by, so that Yngve wouldn't think I had no friends in town and because the ones I had would see me sitting with Yngve.

But there didn't seem to be anyone in town today.

"Where did Mom buy the records at Christmas?" Yngve said. "Do you remember?"

For Christmas Yngve had been given The The's debut album by Mom while I got *Script of the Bridge* by the Chameleons. I had never heard of the Chameleons, but they were absolutely fantastic. Yngve thought the same about The The. We couldn't figure out how she had managed this. There was hardly anyone here in town who followed the indie scene more closely than Yngve and me. Well, she said, she had gone into a record shop and then she had described first Yngve, then me, and the assistant had pulled out these two records.

I asked which shop it was, she told me, and over the Christmas period I popped in. Harald Hempel was behind the counter. So now I understood. He played with Lily and the Gigolos, and what he didn't know about good music wasn't worth knowing.

"It's in Dronningens Gate," I said. "Shall we head down there?"

"Do a little tour?"

As we drove away from the last shop I pointed to a building in the next block.

"That's *Nye Sørlandet*. The paper I was talking about."

Yngve glanced up as we passed. "Looks small," he said.

"Well, it's the second biggest newspaper here. Like *Tiden* in Arendal, more or less."

I cast an eye up and down Elvegaten, where Dad lived now, to see if I could see him. But I couldn't.

"What's better, do you think?" I said. "Writing an application or going to speak to them?"

"Going to speak to them."

"OK. I'll do that then."

"Have you heard that Simple Minds are coming, by the way? To Drammenshallen."

"Really?"

"Yes. It's not for a while yet, but the tickets are on sale soon. You should go and see them."

"OK. And you?"

"It's too far away and too expensive. But for you it's only a train ride."

"OK," I said, and leaned back in the seat. As we drove I tried to imagine what it would have been like here without a road, without the housing estates, as it must have been once. Untouched bays and coves, vast, perhaps impenetrable, forests. The beach at Hamresanden no more than a strip of sand along the riverbank and the sea inlet. No caravans, no tents, no cabins, no stalls, no people. No shops, no petrol stations, no houses, no chapel, nothing. Just forest, mountain, beach, sea.

It was an impossible image.

"Let's forget about Hamresanden," Yngve said. "Mom'll probably have dinner ready soon anyway."

"OK," I said. "I feel like listening to the Church record anyway."

I was never upset when people left, the way that Mom always was. Except when it was Yngve. And then I wasn't upset, there were no strong emotions at play, it was more a kind of melancholy.

So I didn't join Mom when she drove Yngve to Kjevik, instead I cycled down to see Jan Vidar and went with him to the river, where we swam and stayed for an hour. We paddled across the rapids, then we slid down over the smooth algae-slippery overhang into the current beneath, which it was impossible to fight, all you could do was let yourself be carried along, swim a couple of strokes, and steer patiently toward the bank.

Afterward we lay on a rock, our arms down by our sides, drying in the sun, our sneakers beside us, Jan Vidar's folded glasses in one of his.

On this particular day, Merethe and Gunn were there too. They lay on the bare rock in the middle of the rapids, both in bikinis. It excited us that they were there, our pulse rates shot up sky high, even though we were lying quite still. The effect was contrary to nature. At least that was how it felt to me.

Merethe was wearing a red bikini.

She was two years younger than we were, still in the eighth grade, about to start the ninth, but what did that matter?

I couldn't go out with her, but what did my body care about that?

Oh, how unbelievably frustrating it was to lie there ogling her. Seeing her thighs, which spread as she lay on the rock, seeing that little area between her thighs, the red material nestling against her, just there. And, oh yes, her breasts.

When we got up we hoped they would see us and perhaps be thinking the same as we were. But they were so blasé, so worldly wise, that not even we, Jan Vidar and Karl Ove, were good enough for them.

We climbed up the waterfall above them, swam into the current, were carried down into the rapids and into the broad deep river beyond.

They didn't bat an eyelid.

We were used to that though. We had spent three summers like that now. My insides ached and I presumed the same was true for Jan Vidar. At any rate, like me, he was squirming on the rock where we lay.

We could no longer tell each other that our chance would come because we didn't believe it would.

Why had they ruined my opportunity in Denmark?

What a dirty trick that had been. They had got so little out of it, an extra little laugh maybe, while what they had ruined for me meant everything.

I told Jan Vidar about it.

He laughed.

"You had it coming to you. How could you be so foolish as to tell Bjørn and Jøgge?"

"It was all planned," I said. "Absolutely everything! It was perfect! And then . . . nothing."

"Was she good-looking?"

"Yes, she was. Very good-looking."

"Better looking than Hanne?"

"No, no, no comparison. Like apples and pears."

"What?"

"It's impossible to compare Hanne with some Danish girl I want to fuck. Surely you can see that?"

"What are you going to do with Hanne?"

"Well, I'm not going to talk about her in this way for starters."

He smiled and closed his eyes.

The following afternoon I went to Dad's. I had put on a white shirt, black cotton trousers, and white basketball shoes. In order not to feel so utterly naked, as I did when I wore only a shirt, I took a jacket with me, slung it over my shoulder and held it by the hook since it was too hot outside to wear it.

I jumped off the bus after Lundsbroa Bridge and ambled along the drowsy, deserted summer street to the house he was renting, where I had stayed that winter.

He was in the back garden pouring lighter fluid over the charcoal in the grill when I arrived. Bare chest, blue swimming shorts, feet thrust into a pair of sloppy sneakers without laces. Again this getup was unlike him.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said.

"Have a seat."

He nodded to the bench by the wall.

The kitchen window was open, from inside came the clattering of glasses and crockery.

"Unni's busy inside," he said. "She'll be here soon."

His eyes were glassy.

He stepped toward me, grabbed the lighter from the table, and lit the charcoal. A low almost transparent flame, blue at the bottom, rose in the grill. It didn't appear to have any contact with the charcoal at all, it seemed to be floating above it.

"Heard anything from Yngve?"

"Yes," I said. "He dropped by briefly before leaving for Bergen."

"He didn't come by," Dad said.

"He said he was going to, see how you were doing, but he didn't have time."

Dad stared into the flames, which were lower already. Turned and came toward me, sat down on a camping chair. Produced a glass and bottle of red wine from nowhere. They must have been on the ground beside him.

"I've been relaxing with a drop of wine today," he said. "It's summer after all, you know."

"Yes," I said.

"Your mother didn't like that," he said.

"Oh?" I said.

"No, no, no," he said. "That wasn't good."

"No," I said.

"Yeah," he said, emptying the glass in one swig.

"Gunnar's been round, snooping," he said. "Afterward he goes straight to Grandma and Grandad and tells them what he's seen."

"I'm sure he just came to visit you," I said.

Dad didn't answer. He refilled his glass.

"Are you coming, Unni?" he shouted. "We've got my son here!"

"OK, coming," we heard from inside.

"No, he was snooping," he repeated. "Then he ingratiates himself with your grandparents."

He stared into the middle distance with the glass resting in his hand.

Turned his head to me.

"Would you like something to drink? A Coke? I think we've got some in the fridge. Go and ask Unni."

I stood up, glad to get away.

Gunnar was a sensible, fair man, decent and proper in all ways, he always had been, of that there was no doubt. So where had Dad's sudden backbiting come from?

After all the light in the garden, at first I couldn't see my hand in front of my face in the kitchen. Unni put down the scrub brush when I went in, came over and gave me a hug.

"Good to see you, Karl Ove." She smiled.

I smiled back. She was a warm person. The times I had met her she had been happy, almost flushed with happiness. And she had treated me like an adult. She seemed to want to be close to me. Which I both liked and disliked.

"Same here," I said. "Dad said there was some Coke in the fridge."

I opened the fridge door and took out a bottle. Unni wiped a glass dry and passed it to me.

"Your father's a fine man," she said. "But you know that, don't you?"

I didn't answer, just smiled, and when I was sure that my silence hadn't been perceived as a denial, I went back out.

Dad was still sitting there.

"What did Mom say?" he asked into the middle distance once again.

"About what?" I said, sat down, unscrewed the top, and filled the glass so full that I had to hold it away from my body and let it froth over the flagstones.

He didn't even notice!

"Well, about the divorce," he said.

"Nothing in particular," I said.

"I suppose I'm the monster," he said. "Do you sit around talking about it?"

"No, not at all. Cross my heart."

There was a silence.

Over the white timber fence you could see sections of the river, greenish in the bright sunlight, and the roofs of the houses on the other side. There were trees everywhere, these beautiful green creations that you never really paid much attention to, just walked past; you registered them but they made no great impression on you in the way that dogs or cats did, but they were actually, if you lent the matter some thought, present in a far more breathtaking and sweeping way.

The flames in the grill had disappeared entirely. Some of the charcoal briquettes glowed orange, some had been transformed into grayish-white puffballs, some were as black as before. I wondered if I could light up. I had a packet of cigarettes inside my jacket. It had been all right at their party. But that was not the same as it being permitted now.

Dad drank. Patted the thick hair at the side of his head. Poured wine into his glass, not enough to fill it, the bottle was empty. He held it in the air and studied the label. Then he stood up and went indoors.

I would be as good to him as I could possibly be, I decided. Regardless of what he did, I would be a good son.

This decision came at the same time as a gust of wind blew in from the sea, and in some strange way the two phenomena became connected inside me, there was something fresh about it, a relief after a long day of passivity.

He returned, knocked back the dregs in his glass and recharged it.

"I'm doing fine now, Karl Ove," he said as he sat down. "We're having such a good time together."

"I can see you are," I said.

"Yes," he said, oblivious to me.

Dad grilled some steaks, which he carried into the living room, where Unni had set the table: a white cloth, shiny new plates and glasses. Why we didn't sit outside I didn't know, but I assumed it was something to do with the neighbors. Dad had never liked being seen and definitely not in such an intimate situation as eating was for him.

He absented himself for a few minutes and returned wearing the white shirt with frills he had worn at their party, with black trousers.

While we had been sitting outside Unni had boiled some broccoli and baked some potatoes in the oven. Dad poured red wine into my glass, I could have one with the meal, he said, but no more than that.

I praised the food. The barbecue flavor was particularly good when you had meat as good as this.

"*Skål*," Dad said. "*Skål* to Unni!"

We held up our glasses and looked at each other.

"And to Karl Ove," she said.

"We may as well toast me too then." Dad laughed.

This was the first relaxed moment, and a warmth spread through me. There was a sudden glint in Dad's eye and I ate faster out of sheer elation.

"We have such a cozy time, the two of us do," Dad said, placing a hand on Unni's shoulder. She laughed.

Before he would never have used an expression such as *cozy*.

I studied my glass, it was empty. I hesitated, caught myself hesitating, put the little spoon into a potato to hide my nerves and then stretched casually across the table for the bottle.

Dad didn't notice, I finished the glass quickly and poured myself another. He rolled a cigarette, and Unni rolled a cigarette. They sat back in their chairs.

"We need another bottle," he said, and went into the kitchen. When he returned he put his arm around her.

I fetched the cigarettes from my jacket, sat down and lit up.

Dad didn't notice that either.

He got up again and went to the bathroom. His gait was unsteady. Unni smiled at me.

"I teach my first course at gymnas in Norwegian this autumn," she said. "Perhaps you can give me a few tips? It's my first time."

"Yes, of course."

She smiled and looked me in the eye. I lowered my gaze and took another swig of the wine.

"Because you're interested in literature, aren't you?" she continued.

"Sort of," I said. "Among other things."

"I am too," she said. "And I've never read as much as when I was your age."

"Mm."

"I plowed through everything in sight. It was a kind of existential search, I think. Which was at its most intense then."

"Mm."

"You've found each other, I can see," Dad said behind me. "That's good. You have to get to know Unni, Karl Ove. She's such a wonderful person. She laughs all the time. Don't you, Unni?"

"Not all the time." She laughed.

Dad sat down, sipped from his glass and as he did so his eyes were as vacant as an animal's.

He leaned forward.

"I haven't always been a good father to you, Karl Ove. I know that's what you think."

"No, I don't."

"Now, now, no stupidities. We don't need to pretend any longer. You think I haven't always been a good father. And you're right. I've done a lot of things wrong. But you should know that I've always done the very best I could. I have!"

I looked down. This last he said with an imploring tone to his voice.

"When you were born, Karl Ove, there was a problem with one of your legs. Did you know that?"

"Vaguely," I said.

"I ran up to the hospital that day. And then I saw it. One leg was crooked! So it was put in plaster, you know. You lay there, so small, with plaster all the way up your leg. And when it was removed I massaged you. Many times every day for several months. We had to so that you would be able to walk. I massaged your leg, Karl Ove. We lived in Oslo then, you know."

Tears coursed down his cheeks. I glanced quickly at Unni, she watched him and squeezed his hand.

"We had no money either," he said. "We had to go out and pick berries, and I had to go fishing to make ends meet. Can you remember that? You think about that when you think about how we were. I did my best, you mustn't believe anything else."

"I don't," I said. "A lot happened, but it doesn't matter anymore."

His head shot up.

"YES, IT DOES!" he said. "Don't say that!"

Then he noticed the cigarette between his fingers. Took the lighter from the table, lit it, and sat back.

"But now we're having a cozy time anyway," he said.

"Yes," I said. "It was a wonderful meal."

"Unni's got a son as well, you know," Dad said. "He's almost as old as you."

"Let's not talk about him now," Unni said. "We've got Karl Ove here."

"But I'm sure Karl Ove would like to hear," Dad said. "They'll be like brothers. Won't they. Don't you agree, Karl Ove?"

I nodded.

"He's a fine young man. I met him here a week ago," he said.

I filled my glass as inconspicuously as I could.

The telephone in the living room rang. Dad got up to answer it.

"Whoops!" he said, almost losing his balance, and then to the phone, "Yes, yes, I'm coming."

He lifted the receiver.

"Hi, Arne!" he said.

He spoke loudly, I could have listened to every word if I'd wanted to.

"He's been under enormous strain recently," Unni whispered. "He needs to let off some steam."

"I see," I said.

"It's a shame Yngve couldn't come," she said.

Yngve?

"He had to go back to Bergen," I said.

"Yes, my dear friend, I'm sure you understand!" Dad said.

"Who's Arne?" I said.

"A relative of mine," she said. "We met them in the summer. They're so nice. You're bound to meet them."

"OK," I said.

Dad came back in and saw the bottle was nearly empty.

"Let's have a little brandy, shall we?" he said. "A digestif?"

"You don't drink brandy, do you?" Unni asked, looking at me.

"No, the boy can't have spirits," Dad said.

"I've had brandy before," I said. "In the summer. At soccer training camp."

Dad eyed me. "Does Mom know?" he said.

"Mom?" Unni said.

"You can have one glass, but no more," Dad said, staring straight at Unni. "Is that all right?"

"Yes, it is," she said.

He fetched the brandy and a glass, poured, and leaned back into the deep white sofa under the windows facing the road, where the dusk now hung like a veil over the white walls of the houses opposite.

Unni put her arm around him and one hand on his chest. Dad smiled.

"See how lucky I am, Karl Ove," he said.

"Yes," I said, and shuddered as the brandy met my tongue. My shoulders trembled.

"But she has a temper too, you know," he said. "Isn't that true?"

"Certainly is," she said with a smile.

"Once she threw the alarm clock against this wall," he said.

"I like to get things off my chest right away," Unni said.

"Not like your mother," he said.

"Do you have to talk about her the whole time?" Unni said.

"No, no, no, not at all," Dad said. "Don't be so touchy. After all, I had him with her," he said, nodding toward me. "This is my son. We have to be able to talk as well."

"OK," Unni said. "You just talk. I'm going to bed." She got up.

"But Unni . . ." Dad said.

She went into the next room. He stood up and slowly followed her without a further look.

I heard their voices, muted and angry. Finished the brandy, refilled my glass, and carefully put the bottle back in exactly the same place.

Oh dear.

He yelled.

Immediately afterward he returned.

"When does the last bus go, did you say?" he said.

"Ten past eleven," I said.

"It's almost that now," he said. "Perhaps it's best if you go now. You don't want to miss it."

"OK," I said, and got up. Had to place one foot well apart from the other so as not to sway. I smiled. "Thanks for everything."

"Let's keep in touch," he said. "Even though we don't live together anymore nothing must change between us. That's important."

"Yes," I said.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes. It's important we keep in touch," I said.

"You're not being flippant with me, are you?" he said.

"No, no, of course not," I said. "It's important now that you're divorced."

"Yes," he said. "I'll ring. Just drop by when you're in town. All right?"

"Yes," I said.

While putting on my shoes I almost toppled over and had to hold on to the wall. Dad sat on the sofa drinking and noticed nothing.

"Bye!" I shouted as I opened the door.

"Bye, Karl Ove," Dad called from inside, and then I went out into the darkness and headed for the bus stop.

I waited for about a quarter of an hour until the bus arrived, sitting on a step smoking and watching the stars, thinking about Hanne.

I could see her face in front of me.

She was laughing; her eyes were gleaming.

I could hear her laughter.

She was almost always laughing. And when she wasn't, laughter bubbled in her voice.

Brilliant! she would say when something was absurd or comical.

I thought about what she was like when she turned serious. Then it was as if she was on my home ground, and I felt I was an enormous black cloud wrapped around her, always greater than her. But only when she was serious, not otherwise.

When I was with Hanne I laughed almost all the time.

Her little nose!

She was more girl than woman in the same way that I was more boy than man. I used to say she was like a cat. And it was true there was something feline about her, in her movements, but also a kind of softness that wanted to be close to you.

I could hear her laughter, and I smoked and peered up at the stars. Then I heard the deep growl of the bus approaching between the houses, flicked the cigarette into the road, stood up, counted the coins in my pocket, and handed them to the driver when I stepped on board.

Oh, the muted lights in buses at night and the muted sounds. The few passengers, all in their own worlds. The countryside gliding past in the darkness. The drone of the engine. Sitting there and thinking about the best that you know, that which is dearest to your heart, wanting only to be there, out of this world, in transit from one place to another, isn't it only then you are really present in this world? Isn't it only then you really experience the world?

Oh, this is the song about the young man who loves a young woman. Has he the right to use such a word as "love"? He knows nothing about life, he knows nothing about her, he knows nothing about himself. All he knows is that he has never felt anything with such force and clarity before. Everything hurts, but nothing is as good. Oh, this is the song about being sixteen years old and sitting on a bus and thinking about her, the one, not knowing that feelings will slowly, slowly, weaken and fade, that life, that which is now so vast and so all-embracing, will inexorably dwindle and shrink until it is a manageable entity that doesn't hurt so much, but nor is it as good.

Only a forty-year-old man could have written that. I am forty now, as old as my father was then, I'm sitting in our flat in Malmö, my family is asleep in the rooms around me. Linda and Vanja in our bedroom, Heidi and John in the children's room, Ingrid, the children's grandmother, on a bed in the living room. It is November 25, 2009. The mid-'80s are as far away as the '50s were then. But most of the people in this story are still out there. Hanne is out there, Jan Vidar is out there, Jøgge is out there. My mother and my brother, Yngve – he spoke to me on the phone two hours ago, about a trip we are planning to Corsica in the summer, he with his children, Linda and I with ours – they are out there. But Dad is dead, his parents are dead.

Among the items Dad left behind were three notebooks and one diary. For three years he wrote down the names of everyone he met during the day, everyone he phoned, all the times he slept with Unni, and how much he drank. Now and then there was a brief report, mostly there wasn't.

"K.O. visited" appeared often.

That was me.

Sometimes it said "K.O. cheerful" after I had been there.

Sometimes "good conversation."

Sometimes "decent atmosphere."

Sometimes nothing.

I understand why he noted down the names of everyone he met and spoke to in the course of a day, why he registered all the quarrels and all the reconciliations, but I don't understand why he documented how much he drank. It is as if he was logging his own demise.

Starting school again after the holidays was like being sent back to Go: it turned out that everything was as it had been when I started gymnas the previous year. The class was new, the pupils and teachers unknown. The sole difference was that there had been twenty-six girls in the sophomore class while there were only twenty-four in the junior class.

I sat on the same seat, in the left-hand corner at the back, seen from the front, and I behaved in the same way: spoke up during lessons, discussed what teachers said, got into fights with other pupils over political or religious issues. When the breaks came everyone in the class joined the crowd they belonged to or the friends they had from before, and I invested all the physical and mental strength I possessed into avoiding the humiliation it was to be left standing somewhere on your own.

I went up to the library and read books such as *The Falcoln Tower* by the twenty-year-old writer Erik Fosnes Hansen, only four years to go until I am twenty, I thought, perhaps my name will be on the front of a book then? I sat in the classroom on my chair pretending I was doing homework. I walked up to the gas station opposite the school premises and bought something, anything, more often than not an Oslo newspaper because I couldn't read it with others around and so that was a plausible reason for sitting alone in the canteen during the endlessly long lunch break. Or I acted as if I was searching for someone. Up and down the stairs, through the long corridors, sometimes to Gimlehallen or over to the business school, in pursuit of a fictional person whom I searched for high and low. But usually I stood smoking by the entrance, because that act by its very nature determined where I should be, where I was entitled to be, where there were also others, my "friends" to those who wondered.

My fear of being seen as friendless was not without some justification. One day there was a new note on the notice board. A student who had recently moved to the town and didn't know anyone at the school wanted someone to be friends with, if anyone was interested they could meet him by the flagpole at twelve the next day.

The area around the flagpole at twelve the next day was packed with pupils. Everyone wanted to observe this friendless creature, who naturally enough didn't show up.

Had it been a hoax? Or had this friendless creature got cold feet when he saw the crowd?

I suffered with him, whoever he was.

One day I went to *Nye Sørlandet* and asked to speak to the person responsible for the newspaper's music section. I was shown into the office of someone called Steinar Vindsland. He was young with dark, big hair that was cut short at the back and on the sides, much in the style of the bass player in Simple Minds, and had a bristly chin and a gleam in his eye. I said who I was and what I wanted.

"Well, we don't have a regular record reviewer," he said. "I usually do the reviews, but I've got so many other jobs to do it would be great if someone else could do that."

He studied me.

I had dressed for the occasion, put on my black and white checked shirt, which was like the one The Edge wore, studded belt, and black trousers.

"So who do you like?"

I told him, and he nodded.

"We'll give you a spin. Look," he said, rummaging through the piles of records spread across the desk. "Take these with you and write about them. If it's good, you're our new record reviewer."

I sat down and wrote all weekend, draft after draft, and when Monday came round I walked down to the newspaper after school and delivered six handwritten pages. He read them standing up in his office, at a disconcertingly fast tempo. Then he fixed me with his gaze.

"I'm looking at our new record reviewer," he said.

"Did you like it?"

"It's good. Have you got a few minutes?"

"Yes."

"I'll take a few shots of you and do a little profile. Ask you a couple of questions. Are you at Katedralskolen?"

I nodded. He grabbed a camera from the table, lifted it to his face, and pointed it at me.

"Sit down there," he said, indicating the corner of the room.

My spine ran cold as I heard the clicks of the camera.

"Here," he said. "Grab these records and hold them up facing me."

He passed me three LPs and I held them up while staring into the lens with as serious an expression as I could muster.

"You like U2, you said. Who else?"

"Big Country. Simple Minds. David Bowie. And Iggy, of course. Talking Heads. R.E.M.'s *Chronic Town*, have you heard it? Fucking great."

"Oh yeah. Do you have a mission statement?"

I could feel my cheeks burning.

"Nooo," I said.

"Any particular axes to grind? Musically speaking? The gigs we get in town? Music programs on NRK? Any views on that?"

"Yes, well, it's shocking that there's only one good music program on the radio and nothing on TV."

"Great!" he said. "You're still sixteen, right?"

"Yes."

"That's it then. We'll run it tomorrow. You start next week. Is that all right?"

"Yes."

"Pop in on . . . say Thursday and we can discuss the nitty-gritty."

He shook my hand.

"And by the way," he said on the way out.

"Yes," I said.

"You can't write in longhand. That won't work. If you don't have a typewriter, get one!"

"OK," I said. "Thank you."

Then I was outside on the street.

It was too good to be true. I was *the* record reviewer for a *newspaper*! Sixteen years old!

I lit a cigarette and set off. The dry asphalt, the windows darkened in places with exhaust fumes, all the cars made me think I was in a city. I was a music journalist on my way through the streets of London. Coming hotfoot from a hectic editorial office.

Steinar Vindsland had been exactly as I had imagined a journalist to be. Unbelievably fast. Everything happened fast. They had deadlines, that was why they had to nail their articles at breakneck speed.

And he knew about music. Probably knew Harald Hempel. Maybe some of the bands in Oslo.

Now I could meet them!

I hadn't even thought about that. But now that I was a music reviewer I could hang out with the bands when they came to town.

No joke!

Fifteen meters in front of me was the crossroads between Dronningens Gate and Elvegaten. Since I was in the area I ought to go and see either Dad or Grandma and Grandad.

There was just one problem: I didn't have more than seven kroner on me and after five o'clock my student card was no longer valid on the bus.

But I ought to be able to borrow what I needed. After all, I had a job now.

I stopped by the traffic lights, which were red, pressed the button on the blue box and closed my eyes to get an impression of what it would be like for a blind person to be standing here.

Perhaps it was more important to visit Grandma and Grandad? I hadn't been to see them since Dad moved out. Perhaps now that Dad was divorced they were afraid they might lose contact with me or that I might stick with Mom.

I could see Dad on Tuesday after the meeting with Steinar.

Steinar!

At that moment the ticking started. The signal for the blind. I opened my eyes and walked over the pedestrian crossing, past the large square building with the supermarket and onto Lundsbroa Bridge, where the smell of sea was always stronger and the light also seemed stronger, probably because it reflected off the water, which widened out at this point.

A couple of white sails were visible in the distance. A double-ender was on its way in. I stopped, placed my hands on the brick parapet and leaned over. The water around the columns was a deep green.

Once Dad had fallen in here. This was about the only story he had told us about his childhood. He had been given a sound beating by Grandad, he had said, and had been put under the stairs, where he stayed for several hours.

Whether that was true or not, I didn't know. Dad had also said he had once been a promising soccer player and played for IK Start, which turned out to be a lie. Another time he had said that everything the Beatles did was plagiarism, they had stolen the songs from an unknown German composer and when I, twelve years old and a big Beatles fan, asked him how he knew, he said he had played the piano when he was young, and one day he had played some tunes by this German composer, whose name he couldn't remember, and discovered they were the same as the Beatles' songs. He still had the music at home. I believed him, of course; it was Dad who had told me. The next time we go there, could you find the sheets of music and play them on the piano? I had asked. No, they were stored away in the loft, it would take too long to find them. And then the realization dawned on me! He was lying! Dad was lying!

This insight was a relief, not a burden, because it was a face-saver for the Beatles.

I kept walking, took the shortcut to the right, came out in Kuholmsveien and walked up the gentle slope, from there I saw the sea widen out, so desolate and blue.

But why had he said we were so poor?

What did that have to do with anything?

I shook my head and passed a garden surrounded by wire fencing, inside which there were three trees groaning with dark red apples. A blue station wagon parked in the adjacent drive glinted in the sunlight.

Grandma poked her head out the window when I rang the bell, disappeared and reappeared a minute later at the door.

"Well, look who it is," she said. "Come in!"

I leaned forward and gave her a hug. She stiffened slightly. I was too old for this now, I thought, and straightened up.

She had the same fragrance as always, and it was as though the whole of my childhood opened inside me as I smelled it. We were going to Grandma's! Grandma's coming! Grandma's here!

"What's that in your ear?" she said.

I had forgotten it!

The two previous times I had been here I had taken the cross out. But not today.

"It's just a cross," I said.

"Yes, times are changing," she said. "Boys wearing jewelery in their ears! But that's how it is nowadays."

"Yes, it is," I said.

She turned and I followed her up the stairs. Grandad was sitting where he always did, in the kitchen chair.

"Well, look who it is," he said.

Under the clock on the wall I saw the tall blue step chair I had always loved, and on the table the coffeepot on the small wire stand that had always been here as well.

"Got your ear pierced?" he said.

"Yes, that's what's in nowadays," Grandma said. She smiled and shook her head. Came over and ruffled my hair.

"I got myself a job today," I said.

"Did you now?" Grandma said.

I nodded.

"At *Nye Sørlandet*, the newspaper. As a record reviewer."

"Do you know anything about music?" Grandad said.

"A little," I said.

"How time flies," he said then. "You're so big now."

"He goes to the gymnas," Grandma said. "He's probably got a girlfriend too, don't you think?" She winked at me.

"No, I'm afraid I haven't," I said.

"You will," she said. "Good-looking fellow like you."

"If you take that cross out of your ear," Grandad said, "the girls'll come running."

"You don't think it's the cross they want then?" Grandma said.

Grandad didn't answer, he picked up the newspaper that he had put down when I arrived. He could spend hours reading it. He absorbed absolutely everything, every little ad.

Grandma sat in the chair and reached for the pouch of menthol tobacco on the table.

"But you haven't started smoking yet, I bet!" she said.

"In fact, I have," I said.

She scrutinized me.

"You have?"

"Not much. But I have tried."

"You didn't inhale though?"

"No."

"Because you mustn't inhale, you know."

She looked at Grandad.

"Hey, Grandad!" she said. "Do you remember who got *us* started?"

He didn't answer, she licked the edge of the paper and shaped the cigarette.

"It was your father," she said.

"Dad?"

"Yes, we were in our mountain cabin. He had brought some cigarettes along. And he told us to try one. So we did. Didn't we, Grandad?"

When she didn't get an answer this time either, she winked at me.

"He's getting senile, I think," she said, put the cigarette between her lips, lit up and then blew a huge cloud of smoke out through her mouth.

No, she didn't inhale. I had never thought about that before.

She looked at me.

"Are you hungry? We ate a little while ago, but if you like I can heat something up for you?"

"Oh, please," I said. "Actually I'm ravenous."

She placed the cigarette on the edge of the ashtray, got up and shuffled over to the fridge in her slippers. She was wearing a blue dress, it went down to her midcalves, which were light brown under her tights.

"If it's in the *fridge*, you don't need to warm it up," I said.

"Don't worry. It's no trouble," she said.

She began to clatter around. I watched Grandad. He was interested in politics and soccer. I was too.

"Who do you think will win the elections?" I said.

"Eh?" he said, lowering the newspaper.

"Who do you think will win the elections?"

"Hard to say. But I'm hoping it will be Willoch. We can't take much more socialism in this country, that's for sure."

"I'm hoping it'll be Kvanmo," I said.

He studied me. With a stern, solemn expression. No, no, that wasn't how it was, because the next moment he smiled.

"You're like your mother there," he said.

"Yes," I said. "I don't want money to control people's lives. Or us to be focused only on ourselves in our own backyards."

"Who should we focus on if not ourselves?" he said.

"People in wretched situations. The poor. Refugees."

"But why should they come here and be maintained by us? You explain that to me," he said.

"Don't listen to him," Grandma said to me, and put a pot on the stove. "He's just teasing you."

"But we have to help those who are less well off, don't we?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "But we have to look after our own first. Then we can help the others. But what they want is to live here. Help is not what they want. We've slogged our guts out and we've done well, and now they want to take over. Without lifting a finger. Why should we allow that?"

Grandma sat down on her chair.

"Why did the man from the laboratory refuse to enter the labyrinth?" she said.

"I don't know," I said, although I knew what was coming.

"Because it was too laborious!" she said, and laughed.

Grandad picked up the newspaper again.

There was a silence. The pot crackled on the hotplate. Grandma lit another cigarette, placed one hand on her other arm and whistled softly to herself.

Grandad turned over a page.

I had exhausted all my conversational topics. We had spent less time on my new job than I had anticipated.

Did I dare take out the cigarettes from my jacket pocket?

Would the cross plus smoking be too much for them? I wondered.

An image of Dad entered my head. Perhaps smoking had been the link, my having smoked twice in his presence without him saying a word.

If it was fine by him, it should definitely be fine by them, shouldn't it?

I took out the packet.

Grandma eyed me.

"Have you got your own cigarettes?" she said.

I nodded. I didn't want to use her lighter, somehow that would be too intimate, or too obtrusive, so I put my hand back into my pocket and took out my own. I lit up.

"I was at Dad's a few days ago," I said. "Things are going well for him."

"Yes, he dropped by yesterday," Grandma said.

"We're trying to maintain the amount of contact we had, even if we live separately," I said. "I think he must have been under a lot of pressure this summer, with the divorce and everything."

"Do you think so?" Grandma said, looking at me as she blew out smoke.

"Ye-es," I said. "They were married a long time. Getting separated is no laughing matter."

"No, it certainly isn't," Grandma said.

"I'll try to keep in touch with you as well," I said. "It's easy enough for me to come by after school. And now that I've got a job I can have dinner here every so often."

Grandma smiled at me. Then she turned, glanced at the pot, which was making some muffled gurgling noises, got up and moved it to the side, switched off the burner, fetched a plate and cutlery, which she placed in front of me on the table.

I stubbed out my half-smoked cigarette in the ashtray. She lifted the pot, held it by one handle, dipped the ladle inside, and served three meatballs, two potatoes, and some onions onto my plate.

"I did it the easy way and heated the potatoes in the sauce," she said.

"Looks fantastic," I said.

No one talked while I ate. I was soon finished.

"Thank you!" I said when I had eaten everything and placed the knife and fork on my plate. "That was fantastic!"

"Good," Grandma said, got up and carried the plate to the sink, rinsed it, opened the dishwasher lid, pulled out the little basket with the tiny fishbone-like plastic spikes, slotted the plate in, and closed it again.

The wall clock said two minutes past five.

If I was going to ask to borrow some money it mustn't look as if I had planned it or even counted on it. After all I could have stayed a shorter time and caught the bus home using my card. It would have to seem spontaneous.

But I didn't need to do it yet.

Could I smoke another cigarette?

My intuition told me that would be a mistake. Too much.

"What's so interesting in the newspaper?" Grandma said. "I read it this morning and there wasn't a damn thing in it."

"I'm reading the obituaries," Grandad said.

"And they're interesting now, are they!" Grandma said, glancing at me as she laughed. "The obituaries!"

I smiled.

"Have you met Dad's new girlfriend?" I said.

"Unni? Yes. We have. Nice girl."

"Yes," I said. "I think she's right for Dad. But it's a bit odd for me, I have to admit."

"I can imagine," Grandma said.

"It doesn't matter though," I said.

"Goodness, no," Grandma said. "I'm sure it doesn't."

She whistled again, turned her hand over to form a little rake and inspected her nails.

"Is there a lot of fruit this year?"

"Yes, it's not bad at all," she said. "Would you like to take some apples with you?"

"Is that OK? They remind me of my childhood."

"I can imagine," she said. "I'll put some in a bag for you." I raised my eyes and stared pointedly at the clock.

"Oh no!" I said. "Is that the time? Ten past five?"

I got up and rummaged through my pockets for money. Took it out, counted it, pursed my lips.

"The last bus went at five," I said. "My travel card isn't valid after five. And I don't have enough money."

I glanced at Grandma, then lowered my eyes.

"I could hitchhike though," I said.

"I'll see if I've got some you can have," Grandma said. "It's such a long way. You really should take the bus."

She got up.

"I'll be off then," I said to Grandad.

He put down the newspaper.

"Bye then," he said.

"Bye," I said, following Grandma down to the hall. She took a small purse from an off-white coat hanging up, opened it, and looked at me.

"How much does the bus cost?"

"Fourteen kroner," I said.

She passed me two twenty-krone notes.

"So you can buy yourself something nice with the rest," she said.

"I'm just borrowing it," I said. "You'll get it back next time."

She snorted.

For a moment we stood in the hall without moving. I could feel she was waiting for me to go.

Had she forgotten the apples?

For a few seconds I was at a loss to know what to do. She had said I could take some with me, so surely it wouldn't be unreasonable to remind her?

But she had just given me some money for the bus. I didn't want to bother her.

She turned her head, saw her reflection in the mirror, put a hand on top of her hair and patted it in place.

"Did you say you had some apples? I could take a few with me and Mom could try some. I'm sure she misses them too."

"Oh, that's right," she said. "The apples."

She opened the door beside the staircase that led down to the cellar.

In the meantime I inspected myself in the mirror. Pulled at the back of my T-shirt to straighten the neck. Ran my fingers through my hair to make it stand up more. Smiled. Put on a serious face. Smiled.

"Here you are," Grandma said, coming up the steps. "You've got a few here."

She passed me a bag, I took it, went out onto the front doorstep and turned to Grandma.

"Bye then!" I said.

"Bye," she said.

I turned and set off. The door shut behind me.

At the Rundingen shop I lit a cigarette while waiting for the bus. There was only one every hour, but I was lucky: the next one arrived after only a few minutes.

I boarded and while I was waiting for my ticket and change, I squinted down the bus.

Wasn't that Jan Vidar?

Yes, it was.

He was sitting gazing out the window, his chin resting on his hand. Didn't notice me until I reached his seat. He removed the small Walkman earplugs.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," I said, plumping down onto the seat. "What are you listening to?"

"B.B. King actually," he said.

"B.B. *King*!" I said. "Have you gone nuts?"

"He's a damn good guitarist," he said. "Believe it or not."

"Him?" I said.

Jan Vidar nodded.

"He's so fantastic that when he plays, his guitar is *horizontal*," I said. "Haven't you seen? It's like he's playing a steel guitar."

"Where do you think Led Zeppelin got everything from?" he said. "They're old blues boys."

"Yes, of course. I know that," I said. "But that doesn't mean *we* should listen to it. Blues is a pile of shit, if you ask me. Fine for inspiration for something else, but on its own? It's just the same old song again and again."

"If you can play like him, you can play anything," Jan Vidar said. "You were the one who always talked about feeling. Who said that was why Jimmy Page was better than Ritchie Blackmore or Yngwie Malmsteen. I agree with you now. We don't need to discuss the point any more. But for feeling, brother, just listen to this guy!"

He passed me the earplugs, I put them in, he pressed play. I listened for two seconds before taking them out.

"Same song," I said.

He looked a bit annoyed.

"Are you annoyed or what?"

"No, why should I be? I know I'm right."

"Ha ha," I said.

The bus stopped at the lights before the E18.

"Why were you at Rundingen?" Jan Vidar said. "Have you been visiting your grandparents?"

I nodded.

"But before that I was at *Nye Sørlandet*."

"What were you doing there?"

"I've got work there."

"Work?"

"Yes."

"What as? Paperboy?" He laughed.

"Ha ha," I repeated. "No, as a music journalist. I'm going to review records."

"Are you? Fantastic! Really?"

"Yes, I start next week."

There was a silence. Jan Vidar drew up his knees and put his feet on the seat opposite.

"And you?" I said. "Where have you been?"

"Out with a friend. We've been jamming."

"Where's the guitar then?"

He tossed his head back.

"On the seat behind."

"Is he good?"

"Better than you anyway."

"That's not saying much," I said.

We smiled. Then he gazed out the window. I glanced behind us, in case someone I knew was sitting there and I hadn't noticed them. But there was just a boy I hadn't seen before, perhaps a seventh year, and a woman of around fifty with a white shoe-shop bag on her lap. She was chewing gum, which was a mistake, chewing gum didn't go with her glasses and hair.

"Do you remember when you stood in for me?" Jan Vidar said.

"Of course," I said.

He had been a paperboy. Over time he had built up a long, challenging route. Then he had to have a holiday and I was given his job for a week. He didn't go anywhere, just lazed around while I was working, and then we went swimming or biked out to a friend's. But after three days there were so many complaints from people on the route that he had to take over. One hell of a holiday that was, he had said. But he didn't look too upset.

"I still can't understand how you could make such a mess of it," he said now.

I shrugged. "Actually I did the best I could."

"Unbelievable," he said.

He had gone over the route with me twice, there were two or three quirks to watch out for – some wanted the newspaper through the door, others had boxes with identical names on them – and I couldn't remember these nuances when I was standing there, even though he had repeated them several times, so I improvised and followed my gut instinct.

"That was only last year!" I said. "At first I thought it was several years ago!"

"That was a good summer, that was," he said.

"Yes, it was."

We entered the forest after the Timenes crossroads. The sun was shining on the hilltop trees but completely absent here. I associated the bus stop we passed with Billy Idol, we had been to one of those half-baked parties we sometimes ended up at and as we had been going home in the freezing cold I had been humming "Rebel Yell."

"I think I can associate some memory with every damn bus stop from here to home," I said.

He nodded.

Topdalsfjord opened in front of us on the right. The water was a gleaming blue close to the shore, but farther out it was foam-tipped in the breeze. A couple of families were sitting on the beach and children were wading in front of them.

It would soon be autumn.

"Any nice girls at school?" I said.

"Not that I've seen. And at Katedralskolen?"

"Actually, there's a great one in my class. But she's a Christian, first of all."

"That's never deterred you before."

"No, but she's the perfection type. Pentecostalist. Well, you know the type, down jackets and Bik Bok and Poco Loco clothes."

"Second of all?"

"She doesn't like me."

"Seen much of Hanne?"

I shook my head. "Spoke to her on the phone a couple of times, that's all."

I wondered whether Jan Vidar wasn't sick of hearing about Hanne, so I didn't follow up, even though I was burning to talk about her. Instead we sat silent for the last ten minutes, lulled into the regular drone of the bus that we both knew so well. It felt as if we had been catching the bus for the whole of our lives. Up and down, back and forth, day after day. Bus, bus, bus. We knew all about buses. We were bus experts. In the same way that we were experts on pointless cycling and endless footslogging, not to mention the very center of our existence, something we knew very well: using the grapevine to stay up to date with what was happening. What? Someone had *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* on video? Right, over we cycled, a tumbledown house with piles of garbage outside, and a complete stranger, a dubious but also dopey-looking twenty-year-old, who was just standing there when we arrived, in the middle of the yard, with no discernible aim, he was just standing there, and when we showed up he turned toward us.

The house was situated right in the middle of a field.

"Heard you'd got a copy of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*," Jan Vidar said.

"That's right," he said. "But I've just lent it to someone."

"Oh," said Jan Vidar, looking at me. "Better head back then, eh?"

An eighth grader who was alone at home and had invited a few friends round? Right, off we trudged, knocked on the door and were invited in, they were watching TV, had nothing to drink, there were no girls and they were just some twats with nothing in their heads, we stayed nevertheless, the alternative was no *better*, that was the point, if we were completely honest.

And we frequently were.

Oh! Someone somewhere had got a new guitar.

Right, onto our bikes and off we pedaled to see it.

Yes, we were good at using the grapevine. But what we were best at, what we were really the kings of, that was buses and sitting around in bedrooms.

No one could beat us at that.

None of this led anywhere. Well, we probably weren't very good at doing things that led somewhere. We didn't have particularly good conversations, no one could say we did, the few topics we had developed so slowly we ourselves assumed they had nowhere to go; not one of us was a great guitarist, although that is what we would have loved to be, more than anything else, and as far as girls were concerned, it was rare we came across one who wouldn't object if we pulled up her sweater so that we could lower our heads and kiss her nipples. These were great moments. They were luminous shafts of grace in our world of yellowing grass, gray muddy ditches, and dusty country roads. Yes, that was how it was for me. I assumed it was the same for him.

What was this all about? Why did we live like this? Were we waiting for something? In which case, how did we manage to be so patient? Because nothing ever happened! *Nothing* happened! It was always the same. Day in, day out! Wind and rain, sleet and snow, sun and storm, we did the same. We heard something on the grapevine, went there, came back, sat in his bedroom, heard something else, went by bus, bike, on foot, sat in someone's bedroom. In the summer we went swimming. That was it.

What was it all about?

We were friends, there was no more than that.

And the waiting, that was life.

Jan Vidar jumped off the bus at Solsletta, guitar case in hand, I continued as the sole passenger to Boen, where I also jumped off and plodded home with my rucksack on my back and the bag of apples in my hand.

Mom had been waiting for me with dinner.

"Hi," she said as I went in through the door. "I just got home too."

"Look," I said, holding out the bag. "Apples from Grandma."

"Did you pop in?"

"Yes, they send their love."

"Thanks," she said.

I lifted the lid off the pot. Tomato sauce and chunks of fish, probably pollock.

"I had dinner there," I said.

"That's fine," she said. "But I'm starving."

She put the cat down on the floor, straightened up and took a plate.

"And how did you get on at *Nye Sørlandet*, Karl Ove?" I said.

"Oh!" she said. "I'd completely forgotten."

I smiled. "I got the job! He just skim-read the reviews and I was home and dry."

"You worked hard on them," she said, placed some bits of pollock on the plate, lifted the lid of the second pan and spooned out a potato. It wobbled around as she lowered the spoon and rolled off when she turned it.

"And they're going to make a little article about it," I said. "It'll run tomorrow."

"Run" was a genuine journalistic expression.

"Very nice, Karl Ove," she said.

"Yes, but there's a snag."

She put the plate on the table, took cutlery from the drawer and sat down. I took a seat opposite her.

"A snag?" she said, digging in.

"He said I had to get hold of a typewriter. Writing by hand is taboo. They don't accept it. So I'll have to buy one."

"A new typewriter costs quite a bit of money."

"Come on. We *must* be able to afford one. It's an investment. I'll earn some money doing this. Surely you can understand that?"

She nodded as she chewed.

"Perhaps there's one there you can borrow?" she said.

I snorted.

"First day at work? And then you walk in and ask to borrow a typewriter?"

"Well, maybe that isn't such a good idea," she said.

The cat rubbed against my leg. I bent down and scratched his chest. He closed his eyes and began to purr. I picked him up, he stretched out on my lap with his paws on my knees.

"How much will one cost, do you think?" Mom said.

"No idea."

"When I get my salary next month it should be OK. But for now, I'm afraid I'm flat broke."

"But that's too late, don't you understand?"

She nodded.

"I know what you're going to say," I said. "If there's no money, there's no money."

"That's how it is, sadly," she said. "But you can ask your father as well, you know."

I said nothing. It was true, I could. He had enough money. But would he give some to me?

If he wouldn't, there would be an embarrassing situation. He would feel I was demanding something from him, and if he said no, or felt forced to say no, it would be me who had put him in this predicament. And by then it would be too late, he couldn't suddenly say yes after saying no.

"I'll ask him," I said, caressing the cat behind the ear. He writhed in pleasure with his eyes closed.

"There's a letter for you, by the way," Mom said. "I left it on the dresser in the hall."

"A letter?"

I put the cat down on the floor, I didn't like to have to do that when he had been having such a good time, but the little twinge in my conscience was gone the very next second because I didn't get letters that often.

My name on the envelope, written in a girl's hand.

The postmark was almost unreadable.

But it was airmail, and the stamps were Danish.

"I'm going to my room," I said. "Are you OK eating alone?"

"Yes, of course!" Mom said from the kitchen.

In my bedroom I sat down on the chair by the desk, tore open the envelope, took out the letter and started reading.

Nyk M 20 August 85
Hi, Karl Ove,
Hope you're fine. I don't know if you are because you haven't written, although you promised you would. Why not? I wish you could see me running to our post box when I get up. Well, if you don't want to write I won't be annoyed, I love you too much for that, but I have to admit I will be upset if I never hear from you again. Are you coming to Denmark? And if so, when? It has been boring here since you left. During the day I'm with my friends. In the evening I go to the disco. But this will soon be over as I'm moving to Israel on 14 September. I'm really looking forward to that. I would just love to see you before I go.

Perhaps you think I'm stupid to make so much of the short time we had together? That's probably because you're the only boy I've ever fallen in love with. So, don't disappoint me, write to me now.

A girl who loves you,
Lisbeth

I pushed the letter aside. My chest was riven with despair. I *could* have slept with her. She had been willing! She wrote that she was in love with me, that she loved me, of course she would have said yes.

She knew where we were heading and what I was thinking, of that I was sure.

Bloody Jøgge!

Those *fucking* dickheads!

A sudden inspiration made me pick up the envelope and look inside.

There was a photo.

I took it out. It was Lisbeth. She wasn't smiling, she was looking into the camera with her head tilted. She was wearing a yellow sweatshirt with NIKE emblazoned across it in big red letters. Her bangs hung over her forehead on one side, covering one eye. A stray lock of hair hung down behind one ear on the other.

Her neck was bare. She had a nice long neck.

Her lips were also beautiful, full, almost disproportionately full compared with her narrow face.

Oh, she looked seriously displeased.

But I could remember what it was like to hold her. How she had laughed when she put her hand up my shirt, against my chest, and I straightened up and took a deep breath.

"You're pumping yourself up!" she said. "Relax. I like you as you are. You're fantastic."

And she was Danish.

I put the picture and the letter back in the envelope, tucked it into the diary that I kept in the drawer, and got to my feet.

Mom was washing the dishes when I went to the kitchen.

"Karl Ove," she said. "I've just had a thought. Dad had a typewriter once. It's probably still around. I can't imagine he would have taken it with him. Have a look up in the barn, in the cardboard boxes."

"*He* had a typewriter?"

"Yes, he did. He used it to write letters for a few years."

She rinsed a glass in cold water and placed it upside down on the grooves in the drainer.

"During the first few years we were together he wrote poems as well."

"*Dad?*"

"Yes, he was very taken by poetry. Obstfelder was his favorite. He liked Vilhelm Krag as well, I remember. The Romantics."

"*Dad?*" I repeated.

Mom smiled.

"They weren't very good though."

"I can believe that," I said, and went into the hall, put on my shoes, and walked up to the back of the barn, which actually was the front because this was where the great barn door was, and inside was where the hay was stacked. The floor beneath, which Dad had used, consisted of small rooms which had been converted into a flat in the 1970s. But here nothing had been done.

I went in and thought, as I had done so many times before, it was strange that we owned such a large room. And that we didn't use it for anything.

Well, except for storage, that is.

All the old farming implements hung on the wall: cart wheels, harnesses, rusty scythes, mucking-out forks, and hoes. In some places Dad had written the nicknames he had used for me, in chalk, he did that when we moved in and when he was so happy about everything.

They were still there.

Kaklove

Loffe

Love

Klove

Kykkeliklove

Boxes were stacked against the wall facing me. I had never looked inside them. That would have been inconceivable when Dad lived here, he often sat in the flat beneath the old floorboards and would definitely have come up to check if anyone had been walking around. And then I would have had to have an *extremely* good reason for being here, let alone rummaging through our old possessions.

I found clothes I remembered Mom and Dad wearing when I was smaller: flared trousers they must have bought the winter they had been in London together because you couldn't get such big bell-bottoms in Norway, even in the 1970s, Mom's white coat, Dad's large orange jacket with the brown lining he had worn to go fishing, shawls and skirts and scarves, sunglasses, belts, boots and shoes. Then there was a box of pictures we used to have on the walls. A couple of boxes containing old kitchen utensils.

But no typewriter!

I opened a couple more boxes, flicked through them. Came to one containing what looked like magazines in plastic bags.

Comics I had forgotten I had?

I opened the top one.

They were porn mags.

I opened the next.

Also porn mags.

A whole storage box full of pornographic magazines?

Whose were they?

I laid some of them on the floor and began to leaf through. Most were from the '60s and '70s. The centerfolds had bikini marks; all the breasts and bottoms were white. Many of the women were posing outdoors. Standing behind trees, lying in fields, all the colors of the '70s, big breasts, some sagging, with big nipples.

I sat there with an erection, turning the pages. A couple of the magazines were from the '80s and there was nothing strange about them. The ones from the '60s had no shots of girls with their legs open.

Had he had all these magazines at home during all that time? Down in his office?

And, not least, had he actually bought them?

I put them in a pile and stood musing. I ought to hide them. First of all this wasn't anything Mom should see. Second I would like to go through them again.

Or would I?

He had read them. *He* had pored over them.

I couldn't do that. It was too disgusting.

I decided to put them all back as they had been. Mom would never go through these boxes anyway.

I couldn't make this add up. All the years when I had been small, indeed, oh God, from the time before I was born until last year, he had been buying porn mags and keeping them at home.

Shit.

I opened the other boxes, and in the penultimate one I found the typewriter. It was an old manual model, I should have known, and if I had seen it before the magazines I would have been disappointed, I might even have rejected it and insisted on Mom or Dad buying me another one, but now, after finding his magazines, it didn't matter.

I carried it back and showed it to Mom, who was resting on the sofa.

"That's good enough, isn't it?" she said, her eyes half closed.

"Yes, it'll have to do," I said. "Are you going to sleep?"

"I'll just have forty winks. Can you wake me in half an hour if I'm not up?"

"OK," I said, and went up to my room, where I read Lisbeth's letter once again.

She had written unequivocally that she loved me.

No one had ever done that before.

Was that how it was with Hanne? When I said I loved her? Because I didn't love Lisbeth. I liked her writing that she loved me, but it meant no more than that. It was nice, and I was happy that she had written it, but it existed outside me, she existed outside me. Not like Hanne.

Was that how Hanne felt about me?

That was what she said.

Was she playing with me?

Why didn't she want me? Want to be with me?

Oh, how I wanted her!

That was all I wanted. She was all I wanted!

Really.

But if she didn't want me, I wasn't going to get any further. So it didn't matter.

I decided to give her a taste of her own medicine. It wouldn't matter anyway.

I stood up, went downstairs to the telephone, lifted the receiver and dialed all the numbers except the last. Gazed out the window. Two blackbirds were in the bush across the drive, pecking at the small red berries growing on it. Mefisto watched from a crouch position, his tail wagging to and fro.

I dialed the last number.

"Yes, hello," Hanne's father said.

I hated it when he answered because his daughter was going out with someone else, not me, and he knew what I was trying to do. Sometimes we chatted for more than an hour on the phone. So he probably didn't like me phoning.

"Hello, Karl Ove here," I said. "Is Hanne in?"

"Just a moment, Karl Ove, and I'll have a look."

I heard his footsteps going down the stairs and watched Mefisto creep closer to the two birds, which continued to jerk their heads and peck at the red berries undeterred. Then came the sound of light steps and I knew it was Hanne, and my heart beat faster.

"Hi!" she said. "Funny you should ring. I was just thinking about you!"

"What were you thinking?" I said.

"About you, that was all."

"What are you doing this evening?"

"I'm studying. French. It's a level up from last year. Quite difficult. How's it going with your French?"

"Same as last year. I knew nothing then, and I know nothing now. Do you remember the test I got a Good in?"

"Yes, I do. You were proud of that."

"Was I? Well, usually I got Poor. So, of course I was pleased. But what I did was incredibly simple. The text was long, right, with lots of French words in it. So I just used them in my answer, adapted them a bit and added a few of my own. And, hey presto, a Good."

"You're so smart!"

"Yes, aren't I."

"What are you doing?"

"Well, nothing special actually. I've received a letter I've read a few times."

"Oh? Who from?"

"A girl I met in Denmark."

"Oh? You didn't tell me about her!"

"No. So much happened I thought . . . well, it wouldn't be of any interest to you."

"It certainly is!"

"Right."

"What does she say?"

"She says she loves me."

"But you were only there a week!"

"A lot happened in that week, as I said. We slept together."

"Did you?" she said.

"Yes," I said.

Silence.

"Why are you telling me this, Karl Ove?"

I didn't reply at first. Then I said, "I told you this wouldn't interest you. Then you said it would. So I thought I may as well tell you."

"Mm," she said.

"And then . . . Well, when it was happening I thought a lot about us. That perhaps it wasn't . . . well, you know. Perhaps I don't feel all the things I have said I do. For you, I mean. The letters this summer . . . I think somehow I was in love with love. Do you know what I mean? When I met Lisbeth . . ." I said, and paused to let the name achieve maximum impact ". . . it was somehow real. Flesh and blood. Not just thoughts. Then I got her letter and I realized I was in love with her. And it's fantastic! There wasn't anything between you and me anyway. And there's nothing now. So, yes, just thought I had to say that."

"Yes," she said. "It's good you told me. It's good to know."

"But we're still friends."

"Of course we are," she said. "You can fall in love with whoever you like. We're not in a relationship."

"No."

"But I am a bit sad nevertheless. It was so wonderful in the cabin. With you."

"Yes," I said. "It was."

"Yes."

"Well, you'd better get back to your French."

"Yes," she said. "Bye. Thanks for ringing."

"Bye."

I rang off.

Now it was ruined. That was what I wanted. And now it had happened.

In the first break the next day I jogged up to the petrol station over the E18 to buy the latest *Nye Sørlandet*. Grabbed a copy from the stand and thumbed through the pages at the back.

My cheeks burned when I spotted a photo of myself.

There was a big spread, almost a page, and the photo took up two-thirds of the space. I was sitting and looking straight at the reader with three records fanned out in front of me.

I skimmed through the text. It said I was a young man who was passionate about music and that I was critical about society's marginalization of rock. Personally, I liked British indie bands best, but I promised to be open to all genres, even the Top Twenty.

I hadn't said that, not in so many words, well, I probably hadn't said it at all, now that I thought about it, but I had *meant* it and Steinar Vindsland had understood.

The photo was brilliant.

I paid, folded it, and walked back down to the school with it in my hand. In the classroom, which was filling up, I placed it on my desk, leaned back in my chair, tipping it against the wall as I usually did, and watched the others.

I doubted any of them read *Nye Sørlandet*, except on rare occasions, hardly anyone did. The only newspaper that was any good was *Fædrelandsvennen*. So having it there spread out on my desk might therefore cause a few eyebrows to be raised. Why have you brought *Nye Sørlandet* with you to school?

They would imagine I had brought it from home! To show off!

I rocked forward again and folded the newspaper. No, I hadn't brought it from home to show off. I had bought it at the petrol station and where else would you go with it? That was why I had it with me.

But what the hell. Shouldn't I just say?

Straight out?

As long as it didn't seem as if I was bragging?

But it wasn't bragging, it was true, I was a record reviewer now, and today there was an interview with me in the newspaper I had bought at the petrol station opposite the school.

There was no point hiding it either.

"Hi, Lars," I said. He was the least dangerous boy in the class. He turned to me. I held up the newspaper.

"I'm the record reviewer," I said. "Do you want to see?"

He got up and came over; I opened it at the right page.

"Not bloody bad," he said, straightening up. "Hey! Karl Ove's in the paper!" he shouted across the room.

It was more than I could have hoped for, the very next moment he was standing with a crowd around him, all staring at the photo of me and reading the article.

In the evening I browsed through my old music magazines and studied the record reviews and articles. There were three kinds of writer, I concluded. There were the witty, smart, often malicious writers like Kjetil Rolness, Torgrim Eggen, Finn Bjelke, and Herman Willis. There were the serious, ponderous types like Øivind Hånes, Jan Arne Handorff, Arvid Skancke-Knutsen, and Ivar Orvedal. And then there were the knowledgable, clearheaded writers who went straight to the point, like Tore Olsen, Tom Skjeklesæther, Geir Rakvaag, Gerd Johansen and Willy B.

It was as though I knew them all. I really liked Jan Arne Handorff. I understood virtually nothing of what he wrote but sensed his passion, somewhere deep in the wilderness of all those foreign-sounding words, while every second reader's letter accused him of being incomprehensible, although he didn't seem to care, he steered a straight line, further and further into the impenetrable night. I also had huge respect for those who could puncture opponents with a killer comment. I adopted it, to deal with my opponents. Its sole importance was that it worked. And many reviewers were vicious.

When a band changed direction and became more commercial, such as Simple Minds was doing for example, taking the easy route, they didn't think twice about confronting the band and asking for an explanation. Why? You were so good, you had everything, so why sell out? Playing at stadiums? What are you doing? What is in your heads? And if the band wouldn't respond, often they didn't, Norway was not exactly the most important country for groups on the up, they still peppered them with caustic remarks.

I had written only three record reviews, the ones Steinar Vindsland had read. In them I had tried to be impartial while also being hard, and I had dismissed one record with a couple of sarcastic comments at the end. That was the new Stones' single, I had never liked them, they were terrible, apart from the *Some Girls* LP, which wasn't bad. Now they were over forty and as pathetic as it was possible to be.

I had it in me. I just had to let it out.

Outside it was dark, autumn was wrapping its hand around the world, and I loved it. The darkness, the rain, the sudden cracks in the past that opened when the smell of damp grass and soil rose up at me from a ditch somewhere or when car headlights illuminated a house, all somehow caught and enhanced by the music in the Walkman I always carried with me. I listened to This Mortal Coil and thought about when we used to play in the dark in Tybakken, a feeling of happiness grew in me, but not a happiness of the bright, weightless, carefree kind, this happiness was rooted in something else, and when it met the melancholic beauty of the music and the world that was dying around me, it was like sorrow, beautiful sorrow, romantic sorrow, beauty and pain in one impossible mix, and from there sprang a wild longing to live more. To leave this, to find life where it was really lived, in the streets of cities, beneath skyscrapers, at glittering parties with beautiful people in unfamiliar apartments. To find the one great love and all the restlessness that involved, and then the acceptance, the relief, the ecstasy.

Discard her, find a new one, discard her. Rise and be ruthless, a seducer of women, a man they all wanted but none could have. I put the music magazines in a heap on the bottom of my bookshelves and went downstairs. Mom was sitting and talking on the telephone in the clothes room, the door was open, she smiled at me. I stood still for a few seconds to hear who she was talking to.

One of her sisters.

In the kitchen I took a slice of bread, ate it leaning against the worktop and drank a glass of milk. Went back upstairs and started a letter to Hanne. I wrote that I thought it was best if we never saw each other again.

It felt good to write that, for some reason I wanted to avenge myself on her, to hurt her, to make her think of me as someone she had lost.

I put the letter into an envelope and dropped it into my schoolbag, where it lay until I bought some stamps after school the following day.

I posted it before catching the bus, convinced this was the right course of action.

In the evening, lying on the sofa and reading a book I had borrowed from the school library – Bjørneboe's *Ere the Cock Crows* – it suddenly struck me what I had done.

I loved her, why would I say I never wanted to see her again?

Regret exploded inside me.

I had to get it back.

I rested the book on the sofa arm and sat up. Should I write another letter and say I didn't mean what I had written in the previous one? That I wanted to see her despite what I had written.

It would look absolutely idiotic.

I had to ring her.

Before I had time to change my mind, I went into the room where the telephone was and dialed her number.

She answered.

"Hi," I said. "I just wanted to apologize for the last time I called. I didn't mean to behave as I did."

"You've got nothing to apologize for."

"Yes, I have. But there's something else. To cut a long story short, I sent you a letter today."

"Did you?"

"Yes. But I didn't mean what I wrote. I don't know why I wrote it. Anyway, it's nonsense. So now I'm wondering if you could do me a favor. Don't read it. Just throw it away."

She laughed.

"Now you've really whetted my appetite! Not read it? Do you really imagine I could do that? What did you write?"

"I can't say. That's the whole point!"

She laughed again.

"You're strange," she said. "But why did you write whatever it was you wrote if you didn't mean it?"

"I don't know. I was in a funny mood. But, Hanne, please promise me you won't read it. Throw it away and pretend it doesn't exist. Actually it doesn't really exist anyway, because I don't mean any of what I wrote."

"I'll see what I can do," she said. "But it is addressed to me. It's me who decides what to do with it, right?"

"Yes, of course. I'm just asking you to be extra nice to me."

"Is there anything that's not nice in the letter? Yes, there must be of course."

"Now you know at any rate," I said. "But if you'd like me to go down on my knees and beg, I will. I'm doing it now. I'm on my knees now. Please throw the letter away!"

She laughed.

"Up on your feet, boy!" she said.

"What are you wearing?" I said.

Seconds passed before she answered.

"A T-shirt and jogging pants. I didn't know you would ring. What are you wearing?'"

"Me? A black shirt, black trousers, and black socks."

"I don't know why I asked," she said, and laughed. "I'm going to give you such a brightly colored bobble hat for Christmas that you'll be embarrassed to walk down the street wearing it, but you'll have to because I gave it to you. When you see me anyway."

"That's pure evil," I said.

"Yes, you don't have a monopoly on it," she said.

"What do you mean by that? Surely I'm not evil just because I don't believe in God?"

"I'm just teasing you. No, you're not evil at all. But now they're calling me. I think they've cooked something they want me to taste."

"So you'll throw the letter away?"

She laughed.

"Bye!"

"Hanne!"

But by then she had hung up.

The meeting with Steinar Vindsland was brief and was basically him showing me how to write the reviews, there were special forms they used at the newspaper, some boxes at the top had to be filled out in a special way, and I was given a stack of them. Then he said I should choose three new releases a week from a record shop with whom they had an arrangement. I could keep the records, that was my fee, OK? Of course, I said. You deliver the reviews to me, he said, and I'll fix the rest.

He winked and shook my hand. Then he turned and started to read some papers on the desk, and I went into the street, still with the tension from the meeting in my body. It was only half past three and I went to see if Dad was at home. I stopped outside the door and rang, nothing happened, I stepped to the side and looked through the window, the house looked empty and I was about to head for the bus stop when his car, a light green Ascona, appeared.

He pulled in by the curb.

Even before he got out of the car I could see he was the way he used to be. Rigid, severe, controlled. He undid his seat belt, grabbed a bag beside him, and placed a foot on the ground. He didn't look at me as he crossed the road.

"Waiting for me?" he said.

"Yes," I said. "Thought I'd stop by."

"You should call in advance, you know," he said.

"Yes," I said. "But I was in the neighborhood, so I . . ." I shrugged.

"There's nothing happening here," he said. "So you may as well catch the bus home."

"OK," I said.

"Call next time, OK?"

"All right," I said.

He turned his back on me and inserted the key in the lock. I started to trudge toward the bus. It was right what he had said: I may as well go. I hadn't visited him for my sake but for his, and if it wasn't convenient, it didn't bother me. Just the opposite.

He phoned at half past ten in the evening. He sounded drunk.

"Hi, Dad here," he said. "You haven't gone to bed?"

"No," I said. "I'm up late."

"You dropped by at an inconvenient moment, I'm afraid. But it's very nice of you to come and visit us. It wasn't that. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course."

"Don't give me *yes, of course*. It's important we understand each other."

"Yes," I said. "I know it's important."

"I'm sitting here making a few calls to hear how people are, you know. And I'm relaxing with a *pjall*."

He used the Østland expression *pjall*, which he had recently started to say. Another was *slakk*, off color. He had it from Unni. I'm feeling a bit *slakk*, he had said once, and I had looked at him because it was as though it wasn't him who had used the word but someone else.

"We're having people round for dinner tomorrow evening, a few colleagues, well, you met them up in Sannes, and it would be nice if you had time."

"Yes, I'll come," I said. "What time?"

"Six, half past, we thought."

"Fine," I said.

"Yes, but we don't have to hang up yet. Or do you want to?"

"No," I said.

"I think you do. You don't want to talk to your old dad."

"I do."

There was a brief pause. He took a swig.

"I heard you visited Grandma and Grandad," he then said.

"Yes."

"Did they say anything about Unni and me?"

"No," I said. "Nothing special, anyway."

"Now you have to be more precise than that. They said something, but it was nothing special?"

"They said you'd been there the day before, and then they said they'd met Unni and that she was nice."

"Oh, so that was it?"

"Yes."

"Have you thought about where you want to spend Christmas? Here with us or with your mother?"

"No, haven't given it any thought. It's not for a while yet."

"Yes, that's true. But we have to make plans, you know. We were wondering whether to go south to the sun or celebrate it here. If you come, we'll stay here. But we have to know soon."

"I'll give it some thought," I said. "Maybe I'll talk to Yngve about it."

"You can come on your own, you know."

"Sure, I could. Can we wait and see? I haven't given it any thought at all."

"By all means," he said. "You need time to think. But you'd probably prefer to be with Mom, wouldn't you?"

"Not necessarily," I said.

"All right," he said. "Well, see you tomorrow then."

He hung up and I went into the kitchen and boiled some water.

"Do you want some tea?" I shouted to Mom, who was sitting in the living room, her legs tucked up underneath her, the cat on her lap, and knitting while listening to classical music on the radio.

It was almost pitch black outside.

"Yes, please!" she replied.

When I went in five minutes later, with a cup in each hand, she put her knitting on the arm of the sofa and the cat down beside her. Mefisto placed his paws in front of him, extended his claws, and stretched. Mom swung her legs down onto the floor and rubbed her hands a couple of times, which she often did after she had been sitting still for any length of time.

"I think Dad might be drinking a lot," I said, sitting down on the wicker chair under the window. It creaked under my weight. I blew on the tea, took a sip, and glanced at Mom. Mefisto stood in front of me and a moment later jumped onto my lap.

"Was that who you were talking to just now?" Mom said.

"Yes," I said.

"Was he drunk?"

"Mm, a bit. And he was pretty drunk when I was there for dinner the last time."

"How do you feel about that?" she said.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Feels a little strange maybe. When I went to the party they had here, that was the first time I'd seen him drunk. Now it's happened twice in a very short space of time."

"That's perhaps not so strange," Mom said. "There have been such big changes in his life."

"Yes," I said. "That's true. But he's becoming very hard work. He keeps asking me if he did things wrong when we were growing up, then he gets all sentimental and talks about the time he massaged my leg when I was very small."

Mom laughed.

It was such a rare occurrence. I looked at her and smiled.

"Is that what he says?" she said. "He might have massaged you once. But he did feel a lot of tenderness for you. He did."

"But not later?"

"Yes, of course. Of course he did, Karl Ove."

She looked at me. I lifted Mefisto and stood up.

"Anything you want to listen to?" I said, kneeling in front of the small record collection I'd stacked against the wall. Mefisto walked slowly, the way he did when he was offended, into the kitchen.

"No, play whatever you want," Mom said.

I switched off the radio and put on Sade, which was the only record I possessed that there was the remotest chance she would like.

"Do you like it?" I said after the music had filled the room for a few minutes.

"Yes, it's very nice," she said, putting her cup down on the table beside the sofa and resuming her knitting.

After school the next day I went to Platebørsen, spoke to the assistant, said I had an arrangement with Steinar Vindsland at *Nye Sørlandet* to pick up three records, he nodded, I spent half an hour choosing the ones I would write about, the trick was to choose someone I already knew, preferably someone who had been reviewed elsewhere, so that I had a pattern to follow.

I also bought one with my own money, which Mom had given me that morning. To still my hunger I went to Geheb and bought a cardamom and custard bun, strolled up Markens Gate munching, bun in one hand, records in the other, dropped the paper bag onto the street and was brushing off my hands when a slightly plump but well-dressed elderly man shouted after me.

"Hey, you!" he yelled. "We don't litter in this town! Pick it up!"

I turned, my heart pounding, and eyed him as coldly as I could. I was frightened, but I defied my fears and took a few steps toward him.

"Pick it up yourself if it's so important to you," I said.

Then, my legs trembling with fear and my chest quivering with emotion, I turned my back on him and continued up the street.

I half expected him to come running after me, grab me and shake me, even punch me in the stomach, but nothing happened.

Nevertheless, I walked quickly for several blocks before daring to turn around.

No one there.

How had I dared!

To answer back like that!

Now I had given him something to think about. What the hell was he doing, ordering me around? Who gave him the right?

Wasn't I a free person? No one was going to tell me what to do and what not to do. *No one!*

This bubbled inside me as I walked past the Hotel Caledonien. It was around four o'clock, I had two hours to kill, and I headed for the library, through the side streets so that there was no chance of bumping into him again. Once there, I sat down in the reading room, studied my records for a while before going to find a book from the shelves behind me, there was the first volume of Bjørneboe's trilogy about the history of bestiality, which Hilde from our class had talked about with such enthusiasm. All I had read by Bjørneboe, apart from the few pages of *Ere the Cock Crows* that I had managed yesterday, was *The Sharks*, which I had read when I was twelve as if it were Jack London. But now, perusing the first few pages of this trilogy, I realized that I hadn't understood a thing. This was deep, and it was painful. The opening, with the föhn wind, was fantastic.

Did evil come from outside?

Like a wind dragging people along with it?

Or did it come from inside?

I gazed at the square outside the church, where there were already yellow and orange leaves on the ground. In the street behind, people were walking under umbrellas.

Could I become evil? Find myself borne along by a wind of inhumanity and torture someone?

Or *was* I evil?

Torture wasn't so relevant really, not now, I thought, and continued to read. But this was a book you had barely glanced at before you raised your eyes again. The torture was extreme, the annihilation of the Jews extreme. But it was carried out by regular people! Why did they do it? Didn't they know it was wrong? Yes, of course they did. Is this what they wanted, in their heart of hearts? While they were walking around in their elegant little picture-perfect towns, making sure that everyone was doing what they should and believing that they were so utterly good, was evil what they really wanted if they got the chance? Without realizing it themselves? Was it just something they carried within them, an evil without form, as it were, which emerged when the opportunity arose?

Oh, how stupid it was that they went around believing in a god and a heaven. It was so conceited! So unbelievably conceited! Why would God have selected *them*, people who were so preoccupied with ensuring everyone did the right thing all the time? Those petty-minded fools, why would God bother about *them* of all people?

I almost laughed out loud in the library, but managed at the last moment to stifle it to a giggle.

Looking around me, I saw that no one had noticed. Then, to disguise the fact that I had been looking around, I gazed out through the window again, with my head slightly tilted, so that it resembled an active decision, as if I was searching for something.

Wasn't that Renate?

Yes, it was.

She was going into Peppe's Pizza. And that was probably Mona with her, wasn't it?

For one wild moment I considered going in after them. Bump into them as if by chance, ask if I could join them, sit down, turn on the charm, all casual, catch the bus home with them, it was Friday, they were popular, they were bound to be going to a party, we could have a few beers, I could accompany Renate home, she might hold my hand and ask if I wanted to come in, I would say yes and once inside I would pull off her T-shirt and jeans and spread-eagle her on the bed and fuck her senseless.

Ha ha.

Fuck her senseless, oh sure, Karl Ove.

I went weak at the knees even thinking about it. Yes, I could probably undress her, on a very, very good day I might be able to do that, but that was all I could do. That was where it stopped, then I went weak at the knees.

Renate was two years younger. And had a body that made everyone drool. Where I lived she was *the* body.

Once, on the bus, they had teased me. Not her, she had only been listening, but Mona. And she was *three* years younger!

"You're so good-looking, Karl Ove," she had said. "But you never say anything. Why don't you say anything? What is it with your cheeks? They're so red! Are you coming with us? We're going to Renate's. That would be great, wouldn't it? Or are you a homo? Is that why you're so quiet?"

She was a cheeky little brat with a great big mouth and an even greater belief in herself.

I had been in love with her sister all through the eighth grade and had absolutely no chance. I was so much older than them and couldn't find an answer, she would tie me in knots. Renate was also there, and at least she wasn't three years younger, only two, she was in ninth grade, and she . . . yes, but no, she was listening to all this and saw me rigidly staring out the window, red-cheeked, as though I imagined it was possible to get out of this situation by pretending I could neither see nor hear them.

So hopeless. Couldn't I just fuck them? Well, not Mona, but Renate?

No. That was exactly what I couldn't do.

I lowered my gaze and continued reading. Not many seconds passed before all words other than the ones Bjørneboe had written were gone from my mind. Thank goodness.

Six other guests came to dinner at Dad and Unni's. They had set the big living-room table, there was a white cloth, there were candlesticks, napkins, and silver knives, forks, and spoons. Have a glass of red wine with the food, Dad said, and I did. I said very little, sat watching for the most part, saw their spirits rising as they chatted and laughed. After I had finished one glass I reached out for the bottle and lifted it. Dad saw me and shook his head once. I put the bottle back down. One of them said he had a six-month-old baby at home and now they were discussing whether to have her christened or not. Neither he nor his wife was a believer, but tradition was important for both of them. Was that enough? he asked.

My heart beat faster.

"I got confirmed for money," I said. "And the day I turned sixteen I left the state church."

Everyone looked at me, most with a soft smile on their lips.

"Have you left the church?" Dad said. "Secretly? Who gave you permission?"

"Everyone has permission when they're sixteen," I said. "And, as you know, I am sixteen."

"It may be legal," Dad said, "but that's not the same as right."

"But you left the church too!" Unni said, laughing. "So you can't say your son shouldn't do the same."

He didn't like that.

He hid it behind a smile, but I knew him. He didn't like it. I could feel his chill. She didn't notice. She went on chatting and laughing.

Slowly he warmed up, he drank and his stiffness evaporated, what had been important was important no longer, nor that I was allowed to drink only one glass of wine, I speculated, and I was right, I took the bottle, he didn't notice, I poured, and a completely full glass stood before me.

Dad let go, his aura was great, indeed immense in the room. He was the person you noticed, he was the person eyes sought. But not in a warm way. There was no warmth in their eyes. He was too much, he was too loud, he interrupted in the wrong places, laughed at nothing, uttered inanities, didn't listen. Took offense, went absent for a while, returned as if nothing had happened. Gave Unni a lingering kiss in front of everyone. The others retreated with their eyes and expressions, they didn't want to know what he had to say, it was over the top for their taste, he was inappropriate, I could see that, and I found myself thinking that the idiots knew nothing, understood nothing, they were petty and didn't know it, and that was the worst of it, their bloated opinions of themselves while all they were was petty.

A pattern began to emerge that autumn. Dad drank every weekend, it made no difference whether I visited in the morning or the afternoon or the evening, on Saturday or Sunday, although at the beginning of the week he didn't drink, or at least he drank much less, apart from perhaps the odd blip one evening a week, when he phoned everyone he knew, including me, and rambled on about something or other. I tried to see him at least once, preferably twice a week, and when he wasn't drinking he was stern and formal, exactly as he'd always been, asked me a couple of questions about school and maybe Yngve, and then we would watch TV, not a word was spoken until I got up and said I had to go. He didn't want me there, I could feel that, but I continued to call and ask if I could come at such and such a time, and he said, I'm home then, yes. When he was drunk everything was a mess, he would talk about what a great time he was having with Unni and he didn't spare me the details about his life with Mom, how it had been compared with the life he had with Unni. Then he would cry, or else Unni would make a thoughtless remark and he would leave the room extremely upset, she only had to mention a man's name and he could be on his feet and gone, and the same applied to her, if he mentioned a woman's name she would stand up and leave.

At least once during the course of these evenings, he would talk about my childhood, which then merged into his, Grandad had beaten him, he said, and even though he might not have been a good father to me, he had always done the best he could, this he said with tears in his eyes, there were always tears in his eyes then, when he said he had done the best he could. Often he would mention how he had massaged my leg and how poor they had been in those days, they'd had almost no money, he mentioned that a lot.

I told Mom about some of this. With her I lived a completely different life, my real life; with her I discussed every thought that went through my head, apart from anything to do with girls, and the terrible feeling of being on the outside at school, and what Dad was doing. I told her everything else and she listened, occasionally with a genuinely surprised expression on her face, as though she hadn't thought about what I was saying. Although she had, of course, it was just that her empathy was so immense that she forgot herself and her own thoughts. Sometimes it was as if we were like minds. Or equals at least. Then something changed and the distance between us became apparent. Such as the weeks when I was reading Bjørneboe and for several evenings in a row I went on about the meaninglessness of all things until she burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, and with tears in her eyes, exactly the same as her father, said that wasn't what life was like, look around you! How offended I was for the rest of the week. But she was right, and what was strange was the fact that we had switched positions. Usually I was the one who said life was about enjoyment and that I would never fall into the traps known as duty and the nine-to-four working day, and she said life was a slog, that was the way it was. I subscribed to Bjørneboe's pessimism and the wall of meaninglessness you saw as soon as you started thinking along these lines, I acknowledged the world's misery; however, this did not apply to my own life and the plans I had, which were positive and robust. There was a connection though, since an alternative life, life outside bourgeois values, brought with it some insight into the meaninglessness, was this not the basis for all the thinking about enjoying yourself, not working, not giving a damn, and not conforming to duty? The diary I kept in my gymnas years was full of this kind of reasoning. Was there a god? I wrote at the top of one page, no, there probably wasn't, I concluded three lines later. I wasn't an anarchist in the punk "fuck 'em all" way, I was more structured, there should never be anyone above anyone else, no national state but more of a loose federation of individuals at a local level, in my opinion. No multinational companies, no capitalism, and definitely no religion. I stood for freedom, free people performing free acts. Who would take care of the sick? Mom would counter. We-ell, that could be done locally, couldn't it? Who would pay for it then and in what currency? she would respond. Surely you would need some national institutions? Or would you like to abolish the whole financial system? Why not? What's wrong with the barter system? I would say. But why on earth would we do that? How could all your records be produced in that kind of system? Then I was on shaky ground, two of my worlds were colliding, one that contained everything that was good and cool and one that contained principles. Or, expressed in a different way, what I wanted and what I believed in. I was no eco-vegetarian, for Christ's sake! That wasn't what this was about. However, it was where I ended up if I followed the logic of my basic principles.

A couple of times she received visits from friends in Arendal, a couple of times from old student friends in Oslo, and a couple of times friends she had made in Kristiansand. For them I was the grown-up son, I joined them and chatted away to surprise and impress them, he's so grown-up they said to Mom after I had gone and it was ridiculously easy to make them believe I was.

I spent most of my time outside school writing the three weekly record reviews, but since I wasn't paid in kroner and øre I also worked several evenings at the floor factory. During these months I was especially careful to drop in on Grandma and Grandad because they knew what Dad was doing and it was up to me to show that I was my old self while also, in a way, representing Dad, if life was going well for me this helped to offset the impression that Dad's life gave.

At school I made a few new acquaintances. Bassen hung out with a junior called Espen Olsen, an arrogant kid from Hånes with self-confidence that bordered on the insufferable and who knew everyone it was worth knowing. I was aware of his existence, he was one of those you noticed, the way he mounted the speaker's platform without a second thought when it was election time and spoke to a packed canteen, the self-assurance he had as chairman of Idun, the gymnas association. I stood next to him one break. "See you review records for *Nye Sørlandet*," he said. "Yes," I said. "I saw you once in sophomore year and I had to laugh," he said. "You were wearing a

Paul Young pin next to one of Echo and the Bunnymen! How is that *possible*? Paul fuckin' *Young*?" "He's underrated," I said. He scoffed, loudly. "R.E.M. are good though," he said. "Have you heard Green on Red?" "Of course." Had he heard Wall of Voodoo? Are you joking? Stan Ridgway is the king!

A few weeks later, out of the blue, he invited me to a pre-loading session at his house. Why had he invited me? I wondered. I had nothing to offer; there was nothing he could conceivably need. But I said yes anyway. He would get some beer, don't worry about it, he said, you can pay for it when you're there, and I caught the bus early one Saturday evening, jumped off at the Rebel Yell stop, and plodded up the hill to Hånes, where he lived, not so far from the shopping center where we'd had the catastrophic gig the year before.

It turned out he lived in a terraced house. A man who must have been his father opened the door.

"Is Espen home?" I said.

"Yes," he said, stepping aside. "Come in. He's upstairs."

A woman who must have been his mother was a bit farther back in the hall, bending over, putting on her shoes.

"I don't think we've met, have we?" the father said.

"No," I said, shaking his hand. "Karl Ove."

"So you're Karl Ove," he said.

The mother smiled and shook my hand as well.

"We're going out, as you can see," she said. "Have a nice evening!"

They left and I went up the stairs with some hesitation, this wasn't a house I knew.

"Espen?" I called loudly.

"In here!" his voice answered, and I opened the door to where I had heard it.

He was lying in the bath, his arms down by his sides, with a broad grin on his face. The second I saw him there, naked, I mustered the utmost concentration to look him in the eyes. I couldn't – not for anything in the world – look down at his dick, which was floating on the surface of the water, even though that was my first impulse. Do not look at his dick. Do not look at his dick. And I steeled my gaze, looked him straight in the eye, thinking as I stood there, I had never looked anyone in the eye for such a long time before.

"So you found your way here?" he said with a smile. Lying totally at ease in the bath, as though he owned the whole world.

"Yes, it was easy enough," I said.

"You seem ill at ease," he said, laughing. "Is there something wrong?"

"No," I said.

He laughed again.

"You're looking at me strangely."

"No, I'm not," I said, staring him in the eye.

"Have you never seen a cock before? Is that what it is?"

"When are the others coming?" I persisted.

"At eight, of course. That's what I told you. But you would show up early."

"You told me seven."

"Eight."

"Seven."

"Listen, you pig head. Toss me the towel, will you?"

I grabbed the towel and threw it to him. Before he had a chance to stand up, I turned and went out. My forehead was covered in sweat.

"Is it all right if I wait downstairs until you're ready?" I said.

"Be my guest," he said from inside. "Don't sit down anywhere though!"

I knew he was teasing, but I still didn't sit down anywhere, just wandered around carefully examining everything.

He *had* said seven, hadn't he?

There were pictures of him on one wall, as a baby and a teenager, with another boy who must have been his brother.

When he came down, wearing blue jeans and a white T-shirt, no socks on his feet, he went straight to the stereo and put on a record. Sent me an arch glance as the first chords resounded in the room.

"Do you know who this is?" he said.

"Naturally," I said.

"Who is it then?" he said.

"Violent Femmes."

He nodded and straightened up.

"Aren't they fucking great?" he said.

"They are."

"Beer?"

"Sure, sounds good."

I didn't know any of the others who came, although I had heard about them at Katedralskolen. Trond, tall, thin, fair-haired with a triangular face, an impressively large mouth and equally impressive verbal skills, he knew how to express himself and was never, as far as I could ascertain, tongue-tied. Gisle was his polar opposite, small, black-haired, with dark, intelligent eyes, he didn't say much but what he did say was direct rather than eloquent. Then there were the twins, Tore and Erling, whom it took me several months to tell apart. They were obsessed by music and were always happy, always up for anything, talking over each other and looking at people around them with warmth in their eyes. They had seen me on the train to Drammen the winter before, they said, on the way to the U2 concert. They said nothing about me going on my own to see them or that it was pretty strange. Bassen already knew everyone and belonged to the same group, but something had happened between Espen and him, they barely tolerated each other, although I never found out what had happened.

Tonight Bassen wasn't there, and as I didn't know the others and had barely spoken to Espen, I sat silent for a long time.

Espen was full of jibes, trying to rouse me into action, I understood that, but the sole result was that I became aware of my silence, which lay like a low-pressure system over my thoughts.

I drank though, and the more I drank the more it eased my discomfort. When at last I was drunk I was *there*, in the room with them, babbling away, singing along to the songs at the top of my voice, groaning aloud, oh that one's great! Oh shit, what a terrific song! That is one fantastic band!

This was where I wanted to be, this was how I wanted to be, getting drunk and singing, staggering out to a bus stop, staggering into a discotheque or a bar, drinking, chatting, laughing.

The next day I woke up at twelve. I couldn't remember a thing about what had happened after we caught the bus from Espen's, apart from a few fragments which fortunately were long and specific enough for me to be able to place them, if not in time then at least in space.

But how had I got home?

Tell me I hadn't taken a taxi! It cost 250 kroner, in which case I would have spent all the money I possessed.

No, no, I hadn't, I had been on the night bus because I had been looking at the light on the little slalom slope beneath the school in Ve.

The alcohol was still in my body, and, feeling equal amounts of distaste and delight, which I recognized from previous occasions when I had been drunk, I went down to the kitchen. Breakfast was still on the table and Mom was preparing her lessons at the desk in the living room.

"Did you have a nice time yesterday?" she said.

"I did," I said, put some water on for tea, found some rissoles in the fridge, which I fried, fetched the previous day's paper, and sat at the table eating, reading, and gazing out on the almost completely yellow and orange countryside for two hours. Waking up still drunk wasn't quite as good as getting drunk, but it wasn't far off, I reflected, because that feeling of catching up with yourself, of your body slowly regaining its energy, dynamic energy at that, could have its exultant moments.

The sky above the yellow deciduous trees and the green conifers was dense and gray. The grayness, and the fact that all visibility stopped there, just a few meters above, increased the intensity of the colors; the yellow, the green, and the black were hurled into space, as it were, yet blocked by the gray sky, and that must have been why the colors shone with such abandon. They had the power to lift off and disappear into eternity but couldn't, and so the energy was burned up where they were.

The telephone rang.

It was Espen.

I was happy, he had never called me before.

"Did you get home OK?" he said.

"Yes, but don't ask me how."

He laughed. "I won't. Christ, we were drunk."

"Yes, that's for sure. How did you get home?"

"Taxi. God knows I don't have money for taxis, but it was still worth it."

"Yeah."

"What are you doing up there in farming country?"

"Nothing. Have to write a record review afterward, so I'm staying at home."

"Oh? Which band?"

"Tuxedomoon."

"Them, oh yes. That's just European avant-garde crap, isn't it?"

"It's pretty good actually. Very atmospheric."

"Atmospheric?" he sneered. "You can pan them then. See you on Monday."

At around four, as darkness was drawing in, I sat down at the living-room desk and worked on the review until eight, when I got up and sat beside Mom on the sofa and watched TV for a couple of hours. I shouldn't have, since one of the characters in the British series we were following was a homosexual, and when this was mentioned or referred to, I blushed. Not because I was homosexual and unable to tell her, but because she might have thought I was. And that was ironic because if I blushed whenever the word "homosexual" was mentioned, she definitely would have thought I was, and the idea of that made me blush even more.

In my absolutely worst hours I used to imagine that I really was homosexual.

Sometimes, just before I fell asleep, I would begin to wonder whether I was a boy or a girl. I didn't know! My consciousness struggled furiously to clear this matter up, but the walls of my mind were slippery, I didn't know, I could equally well have been a girl as a boy, until finally it found firm ground and, eyes wide open, fear deep in my chest, I knew for certain I was not a girl but a boy.

And if that could happen, if such doubts could appear, who knew what else might be there? What else could be hidden inside me?

So strong was this fear that I seemed to be watching over myself when I dreamed, it was as though there was something in me that was present in the dream to see what I was dreaming about, to see whether it was a boy or a girl I was lusting after while I slept. But it was never a boy, it was always girls I dreamed about when I was asleep and when I was awake.

I wasn't homosexual, I was fairly sure about that. The doubt was minuscule, a tiny fly buzzing in the vast landscapes of my consciousness, but its existence was enough. Great therefore was the torment when homosexuality was mentioned at school. If I had reddened then, it would indeed have been a catastrophe so terrible that I didn't even dare consider it. The trick was to do something, anything at all really, even if only to rub an eye or scratch your head. Anything that could distract attention from reddened cheeks or explain them.

In football, "homo" was one of the most common terms, are you a homo or what, or you fucking homo, but this did not present a threat and because everyone used it constantly, no one would have ever dreamed that someone actually was one.

And of course I wasn't one either.

When the program was over, Mom made some tea and brought two cups into the living room, where we sat chatting about this and that. Mostly about family matters. She had phoned her sisters – Kjellaug and Ingunn – in the course of the day and now she was telling me what they had said about their jobs, the jobs of their husbands, and everything their children were doing. She had also phoned Kjartan, her brother. We spent most of the time talking about him, he'd had four poems accepted by a literary journal, they would be published in the spring, and he was still thinking of moving to Bergen and studying philosophy. But Grandma wasn't doing well, Grandpa couldn't possibly manage on his own, and Kjellaug lived too far away to help much more than on weekends, she had her own family and farm to take care of, as well as a job.

"But he's studying philosophy at home anyway now," Mom said. "Perhaps that's not such a bad idea. Kjartan's not twenty anymore. I'm not sure university life is as easy as he imagines."

"No," I said. "But you've just studied for a year, haven't you? And you're not twenty anymore either."

"I suppose so," she laughed. "But I have a family. I have you. My identity isn't dependent on student life, if you know what I mean. Kjartan has such immense expectations."

"Have you read his poems?"

"Yes, he sent them to me."

"Did you understand anything?"

"I think so, a bit."

"He showed me one this summer. I understood *nothing*. Someone was walking on the edge of heaven. What does that mean?"

She looked at me and smiled. "Well, what could it mean?"

"Haven't got the foggiest," I said. "Something philosophical?"

"Yes, but the philosophy he reads is about life. And everyone knows something about that."

"Why can't he just write it as it is, straight?"

"Some do," she said. "But there are things you can't say straight."

"Such as?"

She sighed and stroked the cat on the head, which he immediately raised, his eyes closed in ecstasy.

"When I was a student I studied a Danish philosopher called Løgstrup. He's very taken by the philosopher who means so much to Kjartan: Heidegger."

"Yes, I remember the name," I said with a laugh.

"He uses a concept Heidegger writes about," Mom continued. "*Fürsorge*. Care. It's at the heart of nursing science of course. Nursing is about caring for people. But what actually is care? And how do we provide care? It's about being human with another human. But what is it to be human?"

"I suppose that will depend on who you ask?" I said.

"Yes, exactly," she said with a nod. "But is there a feature that is common to us all? It's a philosophical question. And it's important for the job I do too."

"I understand *that*," I said. "But I don't understand why he walked on the edge of heaven for that."

"Are we meant to understand?"

"Why should I read it if I don't understand?"

"Perhaps you should ask Kjartan the next time you meet him."

"About what it means?"

"Yes, why not?"

"No, I can't talk to Kjartan. He's always so angry. Or maybe not angry but grumpy. Or peculiar."

"Yes, he is, but he's not dangerous, if that's what you were thinking."

"No, no," I said.

There was a silence.

I racked my brain for something else to say because it was late and I knew the silence would make Mom wonder about going to bed, and I didn't want that, I wanted to continue talking. On the other hand, I had a review to write, and the longer I sat here doing nothing, the later into the night I would have to work.

"Well," she said. "It's late again now."

"Yes," I said.

"Are you going to stay up and work?"

I nodded.

"Don't stay up too long."

"It'll take the time it takes," I said.

"I suppose it will," she said, getting up. "Well, goodnight."

"Goodnight."

As she walked through the living room the cat stood next to the sofa and stretched. Stared up at me.

"Oh no, Mefisto," I said, shaking my head. "I've got to work, you know."

With the record I was reviewing playing on the turntable, I wrote draft after draft, scrunched up the rejects and threw them into the growing heap on the floor. It was a little after two before I was happy, scrolled the paper out of the typewriter, pushed back my chair, and read through what I had written for the final time.

> *Tuxedomoon*
> Holy Wars *(Cramboy)*
> *reviewed by Karl Ove Knausgaard*
>
> *Tuxedomoon hail from San Francisco but are now based in Brussels. The band is scheduled to play in Norway this winter; they will be playing Den Norske Opera in Oslo on 1 December.*
>
> *Blaine Reininger, Tuxedomoon's front man, has left the band to pursue a very promising solo career, and* Holy Wars *is their first LP without Reininger. It never scales the dizzy heights of* Desire, *but is not a bad LP for all that.*
>
> *The members of Tuxedomoon are classically trained and have grown up with rock music. The result is impossible to classify, but avant-garde rock, futurism, and modernism are handy cues.*
>
> *The band explores uncharted territory and discovers new musical paths. Holy Wars is a beautiful, atmospheric album, although at times I do find it rather inaccessible. It embraces diffuse moods of the past mixed with the future, synthesizer instruments mixed with acoustic. One of the songs on the LP is a medieval poem translated from the French. In my opinion, this track, "St. John," is the strongest offering, with an infectious organ intro and an equally infectious melody.*
>
> *Along with "In a Manner of Speaking" it displays the band's lighter side. Other tracks I would pick out for special mention are "Bonjour Tristesse" and the instrumental "The Waltz."*

Before I went to bed I wrote a note for Mom to say I had worked till late and she shouldn't wake me. Usually she got up an hour before me, had breakfast, drank coffee, and smoked a cigarette while listening to the radio. Then she woke me and, on the days when our timetables coincided, gave me a lift to school. Her school was only a kilometer farther down the road. We wouldn't say much during the half hour the journey took, and it often struck me how different the lull in conversation was from the one I endured with Dad, when the silence burned like a fever inside me. With Mom the silence was painless.

This morning I woke up half an hour late for the bus, saw that I'd had a nocturnal emission, took off my sticky underpants, and walked naked to the closet, where to my horror I discovered that there were no clean underpants.

Why hadn't she washed them? She'd had the whole fucking weekend to do it!

As I entered the bathroom I saw the laundry rack in the middle of the floor covered in clothes, but they were wet. I realized she had washed them the previous evening but had forgotten to hang them up, so she had done it at top speed in the morning.

Oh, how absentminded she was!

This meant I had a choice between finding a pair of dirty underpants in the laundry basket or wearing wet ones off the rack.

I hesitated. It was pretty cold out and it would be no fun walking the kilometer down to the bus wearing wet underpants.

On the other hand, you never knew how close you might be to people in the course of the day. Not that I imagined I smelled, but if I suspected I did, it would make me behave in an even stiffer and more unnatural manner than usual.

What if Merethe, in my class, who could be very flirty, what if she decided today of all days to clap her light blue eyes on me and perhaps come so close that she could stroke me fleetingly on the shoulder or even the chest with one of her exquisite hands?

No, it would have to be the wet ones then.

I showered, had breakfast, saw that I wouldn't make the next bus without rushing, so I decided I might as well catch the one after.

Outside, the sky was blue, the sun hung low, and in the shadow beneath the trees along the riverbank the frozen mist drifted across the tranquil water.

When the bus pulled up at the stop by the school the third lesson was drawing to a close, and since there was no point going now I took the bus to town and went to *Nye Sørlandet* with the three reviews. Steinar was in his office.

"Are you ditching school?" he said.

I nodded.

"Tut-tut," he said, and smiled. "Have you got something for me?"

I produced the sheets of paper from my bag.

"Just leave them there," he said, pointing to the table.

"Aren't you going to look at them?"

He usually skimmed through them before I left.

"No. I trust you. You've done a good job so far. Why should it be any different today? See you!"

"See you," I said, and left. My insides were glowing at what he had said, and to celebrate I went to buy a couple of records, sat down in Geheb and ate a cardamom and custard bun and drank a Coke while carefully scrutinizing the covers. Once I had finished, it was so late it would have been senseless to go to school so I wandered around the streets for a while, then caught an early bus home. I stopped by the postbox down at the crossing; apart from the newspaper, there were three letters in it. Two for Mom, window envelopes: bills. And an airmail letter for me!

I recognized the writing on the envelope and saw from the postmark that it was from Israel. Waited until I was sitting at the desk in my room to open it. Opened it, took out the letter, stood up, put on a record, and sat down again. Began to read.

Tel Aviv, 10/9/1985
Hi Karl Ove,
I arrived in Tel Aviv a month ago. It's great but also hard. I've never done so much cleaning in my whole life as in the last four weeks. It's thirty degrees here and I'm lying on the terrace writing this letter. I've been to the Mediterranean twice and some Israeli boys have taught me how to play Frisbee and surf. But it's impossible to trust the boys here if you've got blond hair. They assume you're on holiday and so, aha, they think, she'll be easy. But I can't forget you. And I don't understand myself. But I think it's because you were/are the boy I've loved most in all my life. So, Karl Ove, no matter how many girls have come into your life, don't forget me, and come to Denmark next year. And if you are nice and write back quickly this time you are très bien.
I'm your fan,
Lisbeth

I got up, went over to the window, opened it, placed my forearms on the frame, and leaned out. The air was cold and crisp, the heat of the sun shining on me barely evident.

She meant it. She was serious.

I stood up, went outside with the letter, sat down on the bench under the window, and read it through once again. I put it down beside me and lit a cigarette.

I could go to Denmark in the summer. And I didn't need to return.

I didn't need to return.

The thought had never occurred to me before, and it changed everything.

With the cold sharp light in my face, beneath the dark blue autumnal sky, in the midst of the forest above the river, it was as though the future was opening itself to me. Not as what I was expected to do, what everyone did, military service in Northern Norway first, then university in Bergen or Oslo, stay there for six years, go home during the holidays, find a job, get married, and have children who became your parents' grandchildren.

But instead go out and disappear from sight. Vanish. Not even "in a few years" but *now*. Say to Mom in the summer: Listen, I'm off and I won't ever be coming back. She wouldn't be able to stop me. She couldn't. I was a free spirit and she knew it. I was my own man. The future, like a door, was open.

The beech trees in Denmark. The low brick houses. Lisbeth.

No one would know who I was, I was just someone who appeared on the scene and would soon leave again. I didn't need to return! No one ever needed to know any more about me, I could go, vanish.

I really *could*.

A car came around the bend below the house, and I recognized the sound of Mom's Golf. I stubbed out my cigarette, buried it under some grass, and got to my feet as the car drew up on the gravel in front of the house.

She jumped out, opened the trunk, and removed two shopping bags.

"Have you come into some money?" I said.

"Yes, it's payday," she said.

"What did you buy for dinner?"

"Fish cakes."

"Great! I'm starving."

Dad's inquiry about Christmas had been a smoke screen, actually he hadn't wanted us there, and he had booked a trip to Madeira for himself and Unni without waiting to hear what Yngve and I wanted to do.

We would go with Mom to stay with her parents in Sørbøvåg. It was the first Christmas without Dad, and I was looking forward to it: everything had been free and easy the few times all three of us had been together after the divorce.

The day school finished I ambled down to Grandma and Grandad's to wish them Merry Christmas; Mom and I would fly to Bergen the following day, meet Yngve there, and catch the boat to Sørbøvåg together.

Grandma unlocked the front door as always.

"Oh, well look who's here," she said with a smile.

"Yes, I was nearby and thought I would come and wish you Merry Christmas," I said, following her up the stairs without hugging her first. Grandad was sitting in his chair, and his eyes lit up for a brief instant when he saw me. At least that was what I imagined.

"The meal's not ready yet," Grandma said. "But I can heat up some rolls for you, if you're hungry."

"Yes, that would be nice," I said, and sat down, took my cigarettes from my shirt pocket, and lit up.

"You haven't started inhaling, have you?" she said.

"No," I said.

"That's good. It's dangerous, you know."

"Yes," I said.

She put the little metal rack on the hotplate and switched on the stove, placed two rolls on top, and took out some butter, a mild white cheese, and brown goat cheese.

"Dad left for Madeira this morning," I said.

"Yes, we heard," Grandma said.

"I'm sure they'll have a nice time there," I said. "You've been there, haven't you?"

"No, we haven't," Grandma said. "No, we've never been to Madeira."

"Perhaps he's thinking of Las Palmas," Grandad said. "We've been there."

"Yes, we've been to Las Palmas," Grandma said.

"I can remember that," I said. "We each got a T-shirt from there. Light blue with dark blue letters. Las Palmas, it said, and there were some palm trees, I think."

"Can you remember that?" Grandma said.

"Yes," I replied.

Because I did. Some events stood out from that time and were etched in my consciousness. Others were more vague. I thought I remembered Grandma once saying there had been a man downstairs in the hall, a stranger, perhaps someone who had broken in. Later I mentioned it to her and Grandma stared at me in surprise, shaking her head. No, there had never been a man in the hall. So where had I gotten that idea from? Other stories I seemed to remember were similarly dismissed as soon as I mentioned them.

A forefather or a forefather's uncle, I thought I had been told, emigrated to America and remarried there, although he hadn't been legally divorced from his wife back home and was, in other words, a bigamist. I mentioned this during a meal we were having that autumn, sitting in the dining room one Sunday, Grandma, Grandad, Dad, Unni, and I. But no one had ever heard this story before, and Grandma looked almost angry as she shook her head. There was also something about a stabbing, I seemed to remember. But if the story hadn't happened and it was just something I believed had happened, how could it have formed in my mind? Had someone told me it in my dreams? Had it been in one of the countless novels I had read when I went to *ungdomsskole*, which in some mysterious way I had superimposed on vague characters in the family and thus drawn myself into the heart of the narrative?

I didn't know.

But it was no fun because I gained a reputation for being unreliable, I was someone who made things up; in other words, I was like Dad. This was ironic because if there was one resolution I had made it was never to lie, precisely on account of him. Well, yes, I might resort to white lies if there was some matter I didn't want others, Mom more often than not, but Dad too, to know. But whatever I hid, I hid for their sake, not for mine. So that at least was not immoral.

"It's good to have a few days' vacation now," I said.

"I'll say," Grandma said.

"Is Gunnar coming here with the others on Christmas Eve?" I said.

"No, they're staying at home. But I imagine we'll pop over."

"All right," I said.

"There we are. They're done," Grandma said, and placed two rolls on a plate she put on the table in front of me. Then she sat down.

She had forgotten to bring a knife and the cheese slicer.

I got up to get them.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Have I forgotten something?"

"Knife and cheese slicer," I said.

"You stay put. I'll get them!"

She went to the drawer and placed them next to me.

"There we are," she said again. "*Now* you've got everything you need."

She smiled. I smiled back.

The crust on the rolls was so crispy that I had crumbs all around my mouth. I ate quickly, not only because this was a habit, but also because they weren't eating, they were sitting quietly while I munched away, so that every slightest movement I made, even if it was only to brush the crumbs off the table, was somehow emphasized.

"Mom's looking forward to the holidays too," I said as I spread margarine over the second roll.

"Yes, I can imagine," Grandma said.

"She hasn't been to Sørbøvåg since the summer, and her parents are getting on now. Especially her mom. She's not doing well, as you know."

"No," said Grandma, shaking her head. "No, she's not."

"She can't even walk anymore," I said.

"Can't she?" Grandma said. "Is it that bad?"

"She's got a walker though," I said, swallowed, and wiped a few crumbs off my lips. "So she can get around at home. But she doesn't go out anymore."

I had never thought about that. She didn't go out anymore, she was always indoors in those small rooms.

"She has Parkinson's, doesn't she?" Grandad said.

I nodded.

"But Mom's enjoying her job," I said. "There's not *so* much new stuff anymore."

Grandma suddenly got up, lifted the curtain, and looked out.

"Thought I heard someone," she said.

"You were just imagining it," Grandad said. "We're not expecting anyone."

She sat down again. Ran her hand through her hair, looked at me.

"Oh yes," she said and got to her feet again. "We mustn't forget the Christmas presents!"

She was gone for a moment, and I looked at Grandad, who had his eyes on the folded soccer paper on the table beside him.

"Here you are," Grandma said from the hall, and came in with two envelopes in her hand. "Well, it's not much, but it'll help a bit. One for you and one for Yngve. Do you think you can carry them both all the way up to Sørbøvåg?"

She was smiling.

"Yes, of course," I said. "Thank you very much!"

"Our pleasure," Grandma said.

I got up.

"Have a good Christmas," I said.

"And a good Christmas to you too," Grandad said.

Grandma walked downstairs with me, gazed into the air while I put on my black jacket and wound the black scarf around my neck.

"Is it OK if I spend some of my present on the bus fare home?" I said, looking at her.

"No, it isn't," she said. "The whole idea is for you to buy something nice. Haven't you got any money?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I'll have a look to see if I've got some coins somewhere," she said, taking her purse from the pocket of the coat hanging in the wardrobe, and passed me two ten-krone coins.

"Merry Christmas," I said.

"Merry Christmas," she said, smiled at me, and closed the door.

As soon as I was out of sight of the house I opened the envelope with my name. There was a hundred-krone note inside. Perfect. I could hurry and buy two records before going home.

In the shop it struck me that actually I could buy four. Yngve had been given a hundred as well, hadn't he? Yes, he had.

I could give him the hundred from my own money. It wasn't as if the note was marked.

We arrived at Sørbøvåg in the evening. Rain, a couple of degrees above freezing, the darkness as solid as a brick wall as we carried our luggage up the road to the illuminated house. The countryside around us was saturated, everywhere water dripped and trickled.

Mom stopped, put down her suitcase, and opened the brown wooden door with the grooves and the window at the top. The smell, a bit musty from Grandpa's cowshed gear hanging in the hall, wafted toward me, and together with the sight of the door and the white wall at the end of the hall, unlocked my whole childhood in an instant.

In those days they would have met us on the drive or at least come out the second the door was opened, but now nothing happened: we deposited our cases on the floor and removed our jackets to the sound of our own breathing and the rustle of our clothes.

"So," Mom said. "Shall we go in?"

Grandpa, who was sitting on the sofa, stood up with a smile to greet us.

"The Norwegian population is going through a growth spurt, I can see!" he said, looking up at Yngve and me.

We smiled.

Grandma was sitting on a chair in the corner looking at us. Her whole body trembled and shook. She was completely in the grip of the illness now. Jaws, arms, feet, legs, everything twitched.

Mom sat down on a stool beside her and held her hands in hers. Grandma tried to say something, but all that came out was a hoarse whisper.

"We'll just carry up our bags," Yngve said. "We'll be sleeping upstairs, I guess?"

"You can do whatever you like," Grandpa said.

We went up the creaky staircase. Yngve took Kjartan's old room, I took the old children's room. Switched on the main light, put my backpack down by the old cot, drew the curtain, and tried to peer through the darkness outside. It was impenetrable, but I sensed the landscape there nevertheless, the wind gusting through seemed to open it up. The windowsill was covered with dead flies. In the corner under the ceiling hung a spider's web. The room was cold. It smelled old, it smelled of the past.

I switched off the light and went downstairs.

Mom was standing in the middle of the floor. Grandma was watching TV.

"Shall we make some supper then?" Mom said.

"OK," I said.

It was Grandpa who did the cooking in this house. He had learned to cook when his mother died, he had been twelve years old and the responsibility had fallen on him. Not many men of his generation had experience of this kind and he was proud that he could cope. But he wasn't very fussy about washing pots and pans and ladles and so on. The grease that had collected in a thick yellowish-white layer at the bottom of the frying pan appeared to have melted and solidified countless times, the saucepans in the cupboard bore scum marks around the top from boiling fish, and there were bits of overcooked potato stuck to the bottom. Otherwise the kitchen wasn't dirty, a cleaner came twice a week, but it was run-down.

Mom and I scrambled some eggs, made some tea, and took in a selection of sliced meats and cheese while Yngve set the table. When supper was ready I went to get Kjartan, who had built himself a house beside the old one a few years ago. Light droplets of rain settled on my face as I walked the three meters to his door and rang the bell. I opened the door, went into the hall, and shouted up the staircase that supper was ready.

"OK, OK, I'm coming!" he called down.

When I went back Mom was standing next to Grandma in the middle of the floor, holding her arm and guiding her slowly toward the table, where Grandpa and Yngve were already seated, Grandpa was telling him all about the various types of salmon breeding. If he had been younger, that is what he would have done, he said. One of the neighbors had done it, down below in the fjord there was a small breeding station, he was earning so much money it was as if he had won the lottery.

I sat down and poured myself a cup of tea. Kjartan came into the hallway, closed the door after him, went straight to a chair and sat down.

"Are you studying political science?" he asked Yngve.

"Hi, Kjartan," Yngve said. As Kjartan didn't respond to the discreet reproof, Yngve simply nodded. "Or comparative politics, as it's called in Bergen. But it's the same thing," Yngve said.

Kjartan returned the nod.

"And you're at gymnas?" he said to me.

"Yes," I said.

I stood up and pulled back a chair for Grandma. She slowly lowered herself onto it, Mom pushed the chair into the table, sat down on her other side while Kjartan started talking. He didn't look at us. His hands transported bread and meat, buttered bread and raised it to his mouth, poured tea and milk into a cup and raised it to his mouth, all somehow independently of himself and what he was saying, this long unstoppable stream of words that issued from his lips. Occasionally he corrected himself, he laughed a little, he even peeked up at us, but otherwise it was as though he had disappeared in order to let the speaker in him speak.

He talked about Heidegger, held a ten-minute monologue about the great German philosopher and his struggle with him, then stopped in midstream and fell quiet. Mom picked up on something he had said, asked whether that was what he meant, had she understood him correctly? He looked at her, smiled briefly, and then continued his monologue. Grandpa, who had previously dominated the conversations around this table, said nothing as he ate, stared down at the table in front of him, occasionally glanced around the table, a cheery expression on his face as though he had remembered something and was about to tell us what, but held back and lowered his eyes again.

"Not everyone here has heard of Heidegger," Yngve said in an unexpected lull. "Surely there must be other topics we can discuss apart from some obscure German philosopher."

"Yes, I suppose there are," Kjartan said. "We can talk about the weather. But what shall we talk about then? The weather is what it always is. The weather is what existence reveals itself through. Just as we reveal ourselves through the mood we are in, through what we feel at any given moment. It's not possible to imagine a world without weather or ourselves without feelings. But both elements automate *das Man*. *Das Man* talks about the weather as though there is nothing special about it, in other words he doesn't see it, not even Johannes," Kjartan said, nodding toward Grandpa, "who spends an hour every day listening to the weather forecast, and always has done, who absorbs all the details, not even Johannes sees the weather, he just sees rain or sun, mist or sleet, but not as such, as something unique, something which reveals itself to us, through which everything else reveals itself in these moments of, well, grace perhaps. Yes, Heidegger is close to God and the divine, but he never fully embraces it, he never goes the whole way, but it's there, in close attendance, perhaps even as a prerequisite for the thinking. What do you say, Sissel?"

"Well, what you say sounds quasi-religious," she said.

Yngve, who had rolled his eyes when Kjartan had started talking about the weather, speared a piece of salmon with his fork and put it on his plate.

"Is it going to be lamb ribs and pork belly this year as well?" Yngve said.

Grandpa looked at him.

"Yes, it is. We've dried the lamb in the loft. Kjartan bought the pork yesterday."

"I've brought some aquavit with me," Yngve said. "You need that."

Mom raised a glass of milk to Grandma's mouth. She drank. A white stream ran from the corner of her mouth.

The countryside was like a tub filled to the brim with darkness. The next morning the bottom slowly became visible as the light was poured in and seemingly diluted the darkness. It was impossible, I reflected, to witness this without feeling it involved movement. Wasn't Lihesten, that immense vertical wall of rock, creeping closer with the daylight? Wasn't the gray fjord rising from the depths of darkness in which it had been hidden all night? The tall birches on the other side of the meadowland, where the fence to the neighboring property was, weren't they advancing meter by meter?

The birches: five or six riders who had kept watch on the house all through the night and now had to pull hard on the reins to curb the restless horses beneath them.

During the morning the mist thickened again. Everything was gray, even the winter-green spruces growing on the ridge beyond the lake were gray, and everything was saturated with dampness. The fine drizzle in the air, the droplets collecting under the branches and falling to the ground with tiny, almost imperceptible, thuds, the moisture in the soil of the meadow that had once been a marsh, the squelch it gave when you stepped on it, your shoes sinking in, the mud oozing over them.

At eleven I walked with Yngve to Kjartan's car, he had borrowed it, we were going to Vågen to buy the last bits and pieces for the Christmas dinner. Sauerkraut, red cabbage, some more beer, nuts and fruit, and sodas to quench the thirst that lamb ribs always produced. And some newspapers, if there were any, I needed them to kill the time until the evening, for childhood Christmases were so deeply rooted in me that I still looked forward to them.

With the wipers swishing back and forth across the windshield, we drove across the yard, through the gate, and down to the road in front of the school, where we turned right and set out on the narrow two-kilometer carriageway to Vågen, which had seemed an interminable distance to me as a child. Almost every meter along the road constituted a special place, the most exciting by far however was the bit leading to the bridge over the river, where I used to hang over the railings for hours just looking.

By car, it took three, maybe four minutes. If I hadn't had my previous attachment to the area, I wouldn't have noticed anything. The trees would have been any trees, the farms any farms, the bridge any bridge.

"Kjartan's incredible," Yngve said. "He doesn't take any account of others at all. Or does he believe everyone's as interested in what he says as he is?"

"I don't know," I said. "Me, I have no idea what he's talking about. Do you?"

"A bit," Yngve said. "But it's not as impressive as it sounds. It's just a question of reading."

He turned in and parked, we walked toward the co-op shop. A woman in a long raincoat came out the door clutching a small child. She was startled to see us.

"Goodness, Yngve! Is that you!" she said.

Who was she?

They hugged.

"This is my brother, Karl Ove," Yngve said.

"Ingegerd," she said, sticking out a hand.

I smiled. Her child clung to her.

"You have grandparents here," she said. "Now I remember. How funny to see you here!"

I wandered across and gazed over Vågen. The water was perfectly still. Some boats were moored to buoys that glowed red in the middle of the fjord in all the gray. When we were little, the Bergen boat used to dock here. Once we had caught it at night, slept on a hard bench, there had been a smell of gasoline and coffee and sea, what an adventure it had been. *Kommandøren* it had been called. Now the *hurtigbåt*, the express boat, had superseded it. The boat didn't stop here anymore.

"Are you coming?" Yngve said from behind me. I turned. The woman and the child were on their way to a car.

"Who was that?" I said.

"Someone I know from Bergen," he said. "She lives with Helge."

On our return, the house smelled of green soap. Mom had washed the floors. Now she was turning her attention to the windowsills. Grandma was asleep in the chair nearby. Mom wrung the cloth over the bucket, straightened up, and looked at us.

"Will you put some porridge on?" she said.

"Yes, I can do that," Yngve said.

"Are we going to put up the tree soon?" I said.

"You can bring it in, if you like," she said.

"Where is it?"

"Actually, I don't know," she said. "Ask Kjartan."

I slipped my feet into a pair of much too small clogs and shuffled over to the other house. Rang the bell, opened the door, shouted hello.

No answer.

I walked carefully up the stairs.

He was leaning back in his Stressless chair and taking in the fjord. He had those big headphones on. Tapping his foot to the music.

Obviously he hadn't heard me. If I walked into his line of vision I would startle him. There was no other option though. Shouting was no good; the music was so loud I could hear it from where I was standing.

I went back out.

Grandpa was walking from the barn to the house. A cat sauntered along behind him.

"Any luck?" Mom asked when I went back in.

"He was busy," I said. "He was listening to music."

Yngve sighed. "I'll go and see him," he said.

Five minutes later he was wrestling with a large straggly Christmas tree in the hallway. We screwed it into the rusty metal stand and then set about hanging decorations on it from a box Mom had located in the meantime. After we had eaten I went for a stroll around the farm, over to the old derelict mink sheds, down to the black mere, past the place where the beehives had been. Farther on, by the remains of the foundations of the house that had once stood there, I smoked a cigarette. There wasn't a sound to be heard, nor a soul to be seen. I threw the stub into the wet grass and walked back to the house. My shoes glistened. In the downstairs bathroom Mom was helping Grandma to take a shower. Yngve sat listening to Grandpa, who was bent forward on the sofa, his arms resting on his knees, and chatting the way he always did.

I plopped down in the other chair.

Grandpa was talking about the time he had fished for herring in the 1920s with his father, how you could hit the jackpot with one cast of the net and how that had actually happened once. His eyes gleamed as he recalled those times. He told us about the skipper who had stood in the bows as they approached

Trondheim one evening, like a baying dog, he said laughing, because what he was baying for was women. He had spent a long time smartening himself up, now he stood at the very front of the boat sniffing the wind as they glided into the illuminated town. Then he talked about the time he had been the explosives boss on a road-building project: in the evenings they had played poker in the workmen's hut and he had won time and time again, but he couldn't spend the money, he had to buy a wedding ring for Grandma and didn't want the money for it to come from gambling, so he kept putting all the money back in the pot and sat watching the sweat pouring from the others' foreheads. He laughed so much he had tears in his eyes as he described how the others had looked, and Yngve and I laughed too, Grandpa's laughter was so infectious it was impossible not to. He was bent double with laughter, unable to speak and tears were streaming down his cheeks. But he not only entertained us with stories of the past, he wasn't given to nostalgia, for as soon as he had regained his composure, he started to tell us about a trip he had made to America to visit his brother, Magnus. About how he had sat alone at night zapping through the endless variety of channels Magnus had, it was incredible, a miracle, and I smiled because he couldn't speak English and understood nothing of what was being said as he sat there mesmerized in front of the television night after night.

Yngve shot me a look and got up. "Are you coming for a breath of fresh air?"

"Yes, you boys do that," Grandpa said, leaning back against the sofa.

It was raining and we stepped under the overhang by Kjartan's front door and lit up.

"How's it going with Hanne then?" he said. "It's been a long time since you mentioned her."

"It's going nowhere," I said. "We chat on the phone now and then, but it won't work. She doesn't want to go out with me."

"I see," Yngve said. "Might just as well forget her then, eh?"

"That's what I'm trying to do."

He ground his heel into the soft gravel. Stopped, looked across at the barn. It was falling to pieces, the paint was peeling off here and there and the ramp to the hayloft was overgrown with grass, but even though the barn was decrepit, it still stood out because the background – the green meadows, the gray fjord, and the leaden gray sky – somehow thrust it forward, somehow elevated it.

Or else it was because the barn had been so important when I was young, it had been one of the most pivotal buildings in my young life.

"By the way, I've met a girl," Yngve said.

"Really?" I said.

He nodded.

"In Bergen?"

He shook his head, took such a deep drag his cheeks were hollow.

"In Arendal actually. It happened this summer. I haven't seen her since then, but we've exchanged letters. And I'm going to meet her on New Year's Eve."

"Are you in love?"

He eyeballed me. Such a direct question could go both ways; he didn't always want to talk about things like this. But he *was* in love of course, he glowed in that peculiarly introverted way at any mention of her and probably wanted to talk about her all the time, at least if he was like me he would, and he was.

"Yes, basically," he said. "That's what it boils down to! To so few words! To one word, in fact!"

"What does she look like then? How old is she? Where does she live?"

"Can we start with her name? That's the most practical."

"All right."

"Her name's Kristin."

"Yes?"

"She's two years younger than me. She lives on Tromøya. She's got blue eyes. Blond curly hair. She's quite small . . . You went to the same school as her. She was in the class two years above you."

"Kristin? Doesn't exactly ring any bells."

"You'll recognize her when you see her."

"You'll have to get together with her then."

"That was the idea." He looked at me. "Why don't you come to the party? At the Vindilhytta cabin? If you're not going to another party, that is."

"I don't have any special plans," I said. "Perhaps I should."

"I'll be going anyway. Come with me!"

I nodded and looked away so that he wouldn't see how happy I was.

When we went back in, Grandpa was asleep with his chin resting on his chest and his arms folded.

It was five o'clock, *The Silver Boys* was starting on TV, I went downstairs from my room dressed and ready. White shirt, black suit, black shoes. The whole house smelled of lamb. Grandma was wearing her finest dress and her hair was brushed. Grandpa was in a blue suit. Kjartan a 1970s-style gray suit. The table was set, a white cloth, the best dinner service, green napkins next to the plates. Four bottles of beer, room temperature, the way it was drunk here, and a bottle of aquavit in the middle. All that was missing was the food, which Yngve had gone to bring in. Grandpa had cooked it.

"There are only five potatoes," Yngve said. "There isn't even enough for one each!"

"I can go without," Mom said. "Then you can have one each."

"Even so," Yngve said. "One paltry potato for Christmas dinner . . ."

I helped him to carry in the dishes of food. Steaming lamb ribs, square pieces of roast pork with crackling, some with tiny bristles intact, mashed swede, sauerkraut, red cabbage, five potatoes.

The lamb was delicious, Grandpa had cured it, soaked it in water, and cooked it to perfection. The sole criticism of the meal, the most important in the year, was the lack of potatoes. You should never skimp on anything, and certainly not the potatoes! But I recovered from my disappointment and no one else seemed to give it a thought. Grandma sat hunched over the table trembling, but her mind was clear, her eyes were clear, she saw us and she was pleased to have us there, I could see. Just the fact that we were there, that was enough for her and always had been. Grandpa wolfed down the meat, his chin glistening with fat. Kjartan hardly touched the food, he rambled on about Heidegger and Nietzsche, a poet called Hölderlin and someone called Arne Ruste, to whom he had sent poems and who had made some kind comments. He mentioned several other names in his monologue and all of them were spoken with a familiarity he seemed to assume everyone shared.

When the meal was over Yngve and I carried the plates and dishes out while Mom whisked the cream for the rice pudding. Kjartan sat in silence alone with his parents.

"I suggest we institute a Heidegger-free zone," Yngve said.

Mom laughed. "But it is quite interesting," she said.

"Perhaps not on Christmas Eve?" I said.

"No, you're probably right there," she said.

"Shall we have the dessert a bit later?" Yngve said. "I'm absolutely full."

"Me too," I said. "The lamb was good this year."

"Yes, it was," Mom said. "A bit salty though maybe?"

"No, no," Yngve said. "It was just right. It was perfect."

"So shall we start on the presents?" I said.

"We could," Yngve said.

"Will you do the honors?"

"OK."

I was given an EP by Yngve, The Dukes of Stratosphear, a sweater and Wandrup's Bjørneboe biography by Mom, a torch by Kjartan, and a big slice of salmon by my grandparents, as well as a check for two hundred kroner. I gave Mom a cassette of Vivaldi she could listen to in the car, Yngve the solo LP by Marty Willson-Piper, the guitarist in the Church, Kjartan a novel by Jan Kjærstad. Yngve read out the names in a confident voice and distributed the presents with a firm hand, I scrunched up the wrapping paper, threw it into the roaring wood burner, and took occasional sips from the cognac Grandpa had brought in. Yngve passed him a present from Kjellaug and Magne's youngest daughter, Ingrid, born many years after her siblings, and when he opened it and saw what it was he stiffened. Suddenly he was on his feet and heading for the wood burner.

"What did you get?" Mom said. "Don't throw it away!"

Grandpa opened the stove door. Mom hurried over.

"You can't burn it," she said, and took the present from him.

Grandpa looked hostile and bewildered at the same time.

"Let me see," I said. "What is it?"

"It's a plaster cast of her hand," Mom said.

The impression of a small hand in plaster, why would he want to burn that?

Kjartan laughed. "Johannes is superstitious," he said. "It means death, that does."

"Yes, it does," Grandpa said. "I don't want to see it."

"We'll put it here then," Mom said, putting the plaster cast out of sight. "She made it at the nursery and sent it to you. You can't throw it away, you know that."

Grandpa said nothing.

Was that a smile on Grandma's lips?

Yngve passed Kjartan a present from him. A bottle of wine.

"Bull's-eye," Kjartan said. He was sitting on a chair at the back of the room with a glass of cognac in his hand, wearing a milder, more conciliatory expression on his face now.

"Perhaps we could listen to our records on your stereo tomorrow, could we?" I said.

"Yes, help yourselves."

Kjartan was sitting by the Christmas tree, which wasn't quite straight, it was leaning toward him, and then while I was looking him in the eye I saw on the margins of my vision that it had started to move. He turned his head. His eyes lit up in panic. The next second the tree crashed down on top of him.

Grandpa burst into laughter. Yngve and Mom and I laughed too. Kjartan jumped up from his chair. Yngve and I straightened the tree, screwed it into position again, and moved it against the wall.

"Even the tree won't leave me in peace," Kjartan said, running a hand through his hair, and then sat down again.

"*Skål,*" Yngve said. "And Merry Christmas!"

After Christmas, we took the express boat to Bergen and flew from there to Kjevik. Mefisto was ecstatic to see us when we arrived, almost clawing my trousers to pieces when I let him lie on my lap during supper.

It was good to be home and it was good to have Yngve there.

The next day he wanted to visit our grandparents on Dad's side, he hadn't seen them since the summer, and I went with him.

Grandma beamed when she saw us standing on the doorstep. Grandad was in his office, she said as we were going upstairs, and Yngve immediately sat down in his chair. With him the atmosphere with Grandma was not as humdrum as it was when I was there on my own; Yngve was much better at hitting the right tone in our family: he joked, made Grandma laugh, and had fun with her in a way that I would never be capable of, even if I practiced for a hundred years.

Suddenly, completely out of the blue, she looked at Yngve and asked him if he had bought something nice with the money.

"What money?" he said.

I flushed scarlet.

"The money we gave you," Grandma said.

"I haven't been given any money," Yngve said.

"I forgot to pass it on to you," I said. "Sorry."

Grandma stared at me as if she couldn't believe her ears. "You didn't give it to him?"

"I'm really sorry. I forgot."

"Did you spend it?"

"Yes, but I only borrowed it. I was going to give him the money back in Sørbøvåg and then I forgot."

She got up and went out.

Yngve sent me a quizzical look.

"We were given a hundred kroner each," I said. "I simply forgot to give you yours. You'll get it later."

Grandma came in with a hundred-krone note in her hand and gave it to Yngve.

"There we are," she said. "Now let's forget all about it."

Yngve did in fact get together with Kristin on New Year's Eve. I saw it all. From the moment they met and she looked up at him with her head tilted and a smile. He had said something and seemed strangely shy. I laughed inwardly. He was in love! Afterward they didn't talk but they did cast occasional glances at each other.

Suddenly they were sitting opposite each other at a long wooden table. Yngve was talking to Trond; she was talking to one of her friends.

They sent each other furtive looks.

Still talking.

Then Yngve got up and was gone for a short while, sat back down, continued to chat with Trond. Picked up a slip of paper and a pen, wrote something.

And then he pushed the slip of paper over to Kristin!

She looked at him, looked at the piece of paper and read what he had written. Looked at him, pinched her thumb and first finger together several times, and he passed her the pen.

She wrote something, pushed the sheet across, he read it. Got up and went over to her, and then suddenly they were immersed in deep conversation, there were only the two of them in the room, and the next time I saw them they were kissing. He had managed it!

After that evening for him everything was about Kristin. He went to Bergen on January 2 and the house felt empty, but only for a day or two until I was used to it, and life continued as it had before with its minor developments in one direction or another, all the unforeseen events that fill our lives, some of which lead to a locked door or a deserted room while others might have consequences that only come to fruition many years later.

I started doing local radio with Espen. We broadcast one program a week, it was live and the basic format was that we played records by our favorite bands and talked about them. I told everyone I knew they should listen, and many of them did, now and then, it was not uncommon for people at school or on the bus to comment on something we had said or some of the music we had chosen. Radio 1 was a small station, there were not many listeners on a normal weekday evening, and *Nye Sørlandet* was not a big newspaper, but between them they gave me a sense that I was on my way.

The radio program meant that I had to stay in town after school, there was no point going home, turning round, and going back, and I made it a habit to pop in to see Grandma and Grandad, they were a safer bet than Dad for food, and I also avoided the uncertainty that a visit to Dad entailed: would he ask me in or not, would it be too much for him or not?

After these long evenings in town, having dinner with my grandparents first, then meeting Espen at the radio station, planning the program with him, and then doing it, I would get on the bus and listen to music the whole weary way home, including the last kilometer, locked inside myself, hardly noticing the white world I was passing through until I removed my headset, opened the door, untied my boots, hung up my jacket, and went into the kitchen to have a bite of supper.

Mom was on the first floor watching TV. When she heard me she switched it off and came down.

"Did you hear it?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

"Was it embarrassing when we got the giggles or was it OK?"

"No, it wasn't embarrassing. Just funny. Karl Ove, Grandma rang while you were out."

"Oh?"

"Yes. It wasn't a pleasant conversation, I'm afraid. She said . . . well, she said you weren't to go there anymore. She said you'd never had anything to eat whenever you turned up, you were shabbily dressed, and were always asking them for money."

"What?!" I said.

"Yes," Mom said. "She said it was my job to look after you and not theirs. It was my responsibility. So now they don't want you to go there."

I started crying. I couldn't help myself, the tears came with such force. I turned away from her, my face contorted into ugly grimaces, I covered it with my hands, and even though I didn't want to, I sobbed.

I took a saucepan from the cupboard and filled it with water.

"This has got nothing to do with you," Mom said. "You have to understand that. This is about me. It's me they want to hurt."

I put the pan on the stove, barely able to see through all the tears, raised my hand in front of my face again, bowed my head. Another loud sob rolled out.

She was wrong, I knew that, this was about me. I had been there, I had physically felt all the silences and all the unease I carried with me, and in a way I understood them.

But I said nothing. The convulsive twitches in my face let up, I took a few deep breaths, wiped my eyes with the sleeve of my sweater. Sat down on a chair. Mom didn't move.

"I'm so angry," she said. "I don't think I've ever been so angry before. You're their grandchild. It's difficult for you now. It's their *duty* to support you. No matter what."

"It isn't difficult," I said. "I'm fine."

"You have hardly anyone around you. The few people you have cannot turn their backs on you."

"I'm absolutely fine," I said. "Don't give it a second thought. I'll manage fine without them."

"I'm sure you will," Mom said. "But they're turning their backs on their own grandchild! Can you imagine! No wonder your father struggles."

"You don't think he's behind this then?" I said.

She looked at me. I had never seen her so furious before. Her eyes were blazing.

"No, I truly don't. Well, not unless he has changed *totally* in these last six months."

"He has," I said. "He's a completely different person."

She sat down.

"And there's one more thing," I said. "That you don't know. Yngve and I were given a hundred kroner each for Christmas. I was supposed to pass the money on to Yngve, but I spent it. Afterward I forgot all about it. When we were there over Christmas it all came out."

"But, Karl Ove," Mom said with a sigh, "even if you'd *stolen* the money that's no reason for them to turn their backs on you. It's not up to them to punish you."

"You've got to understand," I said. "It's obvious they were angry. And what Grandma said is right. I eat whenever I'm there and they give me money for the bus."

"You've done nothing wrong. Don't even think it," she said.

But I did, of course. I lay awake for the first hours of the night as the cold took a grip on the countryside and caused the timber walls of the house and the ice in the river below to creak. Then, in the darkness, I was able to see the matter in a colder, clearer light. If they didn't want to see me, well, then they wouldn't see me. I hadn't gone to visit them for my benefit, I lost nothing by staying away. And there was a sweetness in my decision never to see them again. Not even when they lay on their deathbeds would I go and see them. Indeed, even when they had died and were about to be buried, even then I wouldn't go and see them. Unlike Dad, who during my childhood years had boycotted them for periods, cut off all contact for a month or two, only to resume relations as though nothing had happened. No, I would stand firm. I would never see them again, I would never talk to them again.

If that was how they wanted it, that is how they would get it. I didn't need Grandma or Grandad, they were the ones who needed me, and if they didn't understand that, well, good luck to them.

One afternoon I caught the train alone to Drammen, where Simple Minds were playing at the same venue that U2 had played the year before. I loved their new record, the sound was so monumental and the songs so brilliant I played them again and again that autumn. It was perhaps a bit commercial and the tracks were perhaps not as strong as those on *New Gold Dream*, but I loved it nevertheless. Leaving the concert, I was however somewhat disappointed, not least with Jim Kerr, who had become pretty flabby and actually stopped the gig when a fan ran onto the stage and snatched his red beret. He crouched down at the edge of the stage and said they wouldn't play any more unless he got his hat back. I couldn't believe my ears and from then on it didn't matter how good the songs were, for me Simple Minds were a thing of the past.

I arrived back in Kristiansand by train in the middle of the night. There were no buses and it was too expensive to take a taxi home, so I had arranged with Unni that I would sleep in her flat. She had given me a key; all I had to do was let myself in. So half an hour after I had clambered off the train I inserted the key into the lock, warily opened the door and carefully stepped into the flat. It was a 1950s or '60s build, consisted of two rooms, a kitchen and a bathroom, and had a view of the town from the sitting room. I had been there two or three times before, for dinner with Dad and her, and I liked it, it was an elegant flat. The pictures on the wall were nice, and even though I didn't care much for the Sosialistisk Venstreparti-style ceramic cups and woven fabrics, it was her style, and that was indeed what I noticed about the room, the harmony.

She had made up a bed on the sofa with a sheet and a duvet, I found a book in the bookcase, Johan Bojer, *The Last of the Vikings*, read a few pages, then switched off the light and fell asleep. Next morning I woke to the sound of her clattering around in the kitchen. I got dressed, she set the table in the sitting room and brought in a plate of bacon and eggs, some tea and hot rolls.

We sat chatting all morning. Mostly about me, but also about her, about her relationship with her son, Fredrik, who was having difficulty accepting that our dad had come into her life, about her job as a teacher and life in Kristiansand before she met Dad. I told her about Hanne and my plans to write after I had finished gymnas. I hadn't said anything to anyone because I hadn't formulated the thought before, not in so many words anyway. But now the words just poured out of my mouth. I want to write, I want to be a writer.

When I left it was too late to go to school, so I caught the bus home. The sun was cold and hung low in the sky, the ground was bare and damp. I was happy but not unreservedly so, because chatting with Unni, being open and honest with her, felt like betrayal. Whom I was betraying I wasn't quite sure.

A couple of months later, at the beginning of April, Mom went away for the weekend, to visit a friend in Oslo, and I was left alone at home.

When I returned from school I found a note in the kitchen.

Dear Karl Ove
Take care of yourself – and be good to the cat.
Love,
Mom

After frying some eggs and meatballs for dinner, drinking a cup of coffee and smoking a cigarette, I sat down in the living room with a history book and started to read. The countryside had not yet emerged from the strange interlude between winter and spring when the fields are bare and wet, the sky is gray and the trees leafless, nothing in themselves, everything charged with what will be. Perhaps it has already started to happen, unseen in the darkness, for isn't the air slowly warming up in the forest? Isn't there scattered birdsong coming from the trees after these long months of silence, which had been broken only by the occasional hoarse screams of a crow or a magpie? Had spring not stolen in, like someone wanting to surprise his friends? Wasn't it there, ready any day now to explode into a blaze of green, spewing out its leaves and insects everywhere?

That was the feeling I had, spring was in the offing. And perhaps that was why I was so restless. After reading for an hour or so I got up and walked around the house, opened the door for the cat, which headed straight for the food dish, I thought of Hanne and before I could change my mind I was standing by the telephone and dialing her number.

She was happy to hear from me.

"Are you at home on a Friday evening?" she said. "That's not like you. What are you doing?"

In fact, it was very much like me, but I had probably exaggerated my social life so much that she had integrated it into her perception of me.

"I'm cramming for an exam. And I'm on my own here. Mom won't be home until tomorrow. And so, well . . . I was a bit bored. And I thought of you. What are you doing?"

"Nothing special. I'm a bit bored too."

"Oh good," I said.

"I could stop by," she said.

"Stop by?"

"Yes, I've got my driver's license now, you know. Then we can drink tea and talk until late."

"That sounds perfect. But can you do that?"

"Why wouldn't I be able to?"

"I don't know," I said. "So come over. See you."

An hour and a half later she rounded the bend in the old green Beetle she borrowed from her sister. I shuffled into my shoes and went out to meet her. She looked completely out of place behind the wheel of a car, it struck me as she drove up the hill, driving required a set of movements and actions that I found irreconcilable with her somewhat gauche girlish charm. She performed every maneuver as it had to be done, it wasn't that, but there was something extra which injected a stream of effervescent happiness into my blood. She parked outside the garage door and stepped out. She was wearing the black stretch pants I had once commented on, I had said they looked incredibly sexy on her. She smiled and gave me a hug. We went indoors, I made some tea and put on a record, we chatted for a while, she talked about what was happening at school and I told her what was going on at mine. Some anecdotes about mutual friends.

But we weren't quite in sync.

We looked at each other and smiled.

"I hadn't imagined this when I woke up this morning," I said. "That you would be sitting here this evening."

"Me neither," she said.

A plane came in over the ridge behind our place, the whole house seemed to shake.

"That was low," I said.

"Yes," she said, getting up. "I won't be a minute."

I lit a cigarette, leaned back against the sofa, and closed my eyes.

When she returned she stopped by the garden door and gazed out. I got to my feet, went over to her, stood behind her and gently placed my hands on her stomach. She put her hands on mine.

"It's so lovely here," she said.

The river flowed past, shiny and black, it had flooded the soccer field, only the two homemade goals were visible. The air over the valley had thickened with the dusk. Lights shone in the houses across the valley. Droplets of rain ran down the pane in front of us.

"Yes, it is," I said, moving away from the window. She was in a relationship, she was a Christian, I was just a good friend.

She sat down in the wicker chair, swept the hair hanging over her forehead to one side, and raised the cup of lukewarm tea to her mouth. Her lips were perhaps her finest feature, they formed a gentle curve and at the top seemed to crimp as though not wishing to adapt to the otherwise clean lines of her face. Unless it was her eyes, which I sometimes imagined were yellow, because there was something feline about her face, but of course they weren't. They were gray-green.

"It's getting late," she said.

"You don't have to go yet, do you?" I said.

"Not really," she said. "I don't have anything special on tomorrow. Do you?"

"No."

"When's your mama back?"

Your mama. Only Hanne could say something like that, as though there was still a remnant of childhood in her that hadn't been eroded yet.

I smiled.

"My mama? You make me feel like a ten-year-old."

"Your mother then!" she said.

"She won't be back until tomorrow night. Why's that?"

"I was thinking I might sleep here. I don't like driving in the dark much."

"Can you do that?"

"What?"

"Sleep here?"

"Why shouldn't I be able to?"

"You're in a relationship for starters."

"Not anymore."

"What! Is that true? Why didn't you say?"

"I don't tell you everything, young man," she said, laughing.

"But I tell you everything."

"Yes, you certainly do. But my splitting up has got nothing to do with you."

"Of course it has! It's got everything to do with me!" I said.

She shook her head.

"No?" I said.

"No," she said.

That was a no to me, there was no other way of interpreting it. However, I had given up on her ages ago. She no longer filled my every waking thought, it was several months since she had.

The chair creaked as she shifted position and drew her legs up underneath her.

I liked her. And I liked her being here, in the old house. That was enough, wasn't it?

We sat there for an hour, until the darkness outside was complete and all you could see through the windows was the reflection of the living room.

"It's starting to get late," I said. "Where would you like to sleep?"

"I don't know," she said. "In your room?" She smiled. "I don't like sleeping alone in a house I don't know," she said. "Especially not here. We're almost in the middle of the forest!"

"That's fine," I said. "I'll get a mattress."

I took the mattress off Yngve's bed and laid it on the floor next to mine. Fetched a pillow, sheet, duvet, and cover and put it on while she brushed her teeth downstairs in the bathroom.

She came into the room wearing panties and a T-shirt.

My throat constricted.

Her breasts were so clearly outlined under the T-shirt that I didn't know where to look.

"There we are," she said. "I'm ready. Aren't you going to brush your teeth?"

"Yes, of course," I said, holding her gaze. "I'll do it now."

When I returned she was sitting on the chair by the desk and looking at some pictures Yngve had sent me, which I had left lying around. They were dramatic, in black and white, some of them with me in exaggerated poses.

"How good you look!" she said, holding up one of the photos.

I rolled my eyes. "Shall we go to bed?" I said.

A shudder went through me as she got up.

Her naked thighs.

Her small bare feet.

Her beautifully formed breasts beneath the thin T-shirt.

She lay down on the mattress on the floor, I lay next to her on the bed. She pulled the sheet up to her chin and smiled at me. I smiled back. We chatted a little, she sat up and pushed the mattress closer until it was right under me.

I thought about lying next to her. Lying close to her. Stroking her breasts, stroking her thighs, stroking her bottom.

But she was a Christian. And she was completely innocent, she didn't know who she was or what effect she had on others, she could ask the strangest of questions and that side of her, which I loved, was also the reason I had to stay where I was.

"Goodnight," I said.

"Goodnight," she said.

We lay there, breathing, utterly still.

"Are you asleep?" she said after a while.

"No," I said.

"Can you stroke my back a little? I just love it."

"Of course," I said.

She flipped the duvet to the side and bared her back. I gulped and ran the palm of my hand over her back, back and forth, back and forth.

I don't know how long I was doing it for, a couple of minutes perhaps, but then I had to stop, otherwise I would have gone mad.

"Can you sleep now?" I said, withdrawing my hand.

"Yes," she said, pulling her T-shirt back down. "Goodnight again."

"Goodnight," I said.

She left the next morning, I read all day on the sofa, ate pizza and watched TV with Mom in the evening. She sat with the cat on her lap and a cup of coffee on the table in front of her. I had eaten most of the pizza, then sat with my feet on the table and a glass of Coke in my hand watching *Albert and Herbert*, a Swedish series, it was totally meaningless, it must have been for Mom too, but now that we were sitting there it required an effort to move.

Hanne filled me to the brim. I had thought about her all day. It was a long time since I had erased her from my mind, she didn't want to be with me, but now the whole rusty funfair, once shiny and gleaming, returned once more.

What would have happened if I had snuggled up to her last night?

Suddenly I saw everything in a new light. Suddenly I saw what had really happened.

Oh my God.

That was what she had wanted all along.

Oh, how obvious it was.

Oh my God. Oh my God.

Or was it? Was it only in my mind?

I half sat up, I had to ring her, then I slumped back on the sofa.

"What is it?" Mom said.

"Nothing," I said. "A thought just struck me."

Down at Dad's the dinners had come to a complete halt, at the weekend he generally sat alone drinking, apart from the occasional afternoon when he was sober and received visits from relatives. I had told him that Grandma had rung, yes, he knew, he said, and they're right, your mother should take better care of you. I pay huge sums in child maintenance, you know. Yeah, yeah, I knew. But the fact that I was so upset about not being allowed to go there anymore must have passed him by, or else that was precisely what hadn't happened, for I had said I would pop by on his birthday, he was turning forty-two, and Grandma and Grandad were there. I could smell her perfume in the hallway, but by then it was too late, I couldn't run off now, instead I opened the door to the living room where Grandad's brother Alf and his wife, Sølvi, were sitting, as well as Grandma and Grandad, Gunnar and Tove and their children. I didn't look at Grandma when I said hello, nor when I sat down at the table. I kept my eyes cast down as I ate a piece of cake and drank a cup of coffee. The gathering dispersed, some sat on the sofa, some took their plates out, the conversation swung this way and that. No alcohol was served, of course. I got up and went to the bathroom, when I got back Grandma was in the kitchen.

"That wasn't how we meant it, Karl Ove," she said. "Not like *that*."

"I see," I said, and walked past her.

So now all of a sudden she hadn't said it?

I suppose she hadn't called Mom either.

It then struck me that everyone here had heard about what had happened.

They might have discussed it. Me and my behavior. What the most appropriate way of dealing with it was.

While Dad, who drank himself senseless several times a week, he could just invite them here and pretend nothing had happened and everything was hunky-dory.

Oh shit, why wasn't Yngve here?

Why did I have to deal with all this on my own?

I stood my ground against Grandma and Grandad for a few more weeks, but then, one afternoon when I was down at Dad's, he asked me to go there with him and told me I shouldn't be so childish, I was too old for that, of course I should visit them.

I did, and everything was as it had always been.

Dad formal, Grandad formal, Grandma who kept the wheels in motion, Grandma who winked mischievously, who served us food and who took Dad with her into the garden afterward. It didn't matter to me that Dad had clearly split into two different personalities, one when he was drinking and one when he wasn't, which was the one I was used to and knew, this was just how it was, it wasn't something I gave much thought.

For the whole year, from when he moved out, through all the sentimental drunken babble, all the arguments and reconciliations, through all the jealous spats and all the chaos he created, Dad never tired of telling us about the day when his separation from Mom would become a divorce and he would finally be free to do what he wanted. The moment it happened he would marry Unni. I have such a good relationship with Unni, he said, I'm so happy when I wake up with her beside me, I want to do this for the rest of my life, so we're going to get married, Karl Ove, you may as well prepare yourself for that. Had it not been for the damned law we would have done it a year ago. That's how much it means to me.

That's fine, I said in response, unless I was drunk myself and just smiled stupidly, perhaps even with tears in my eyes because that happened too, I was as sentimental as he was, and we sat there in our chairs, each with moist eyes.

When the day came he was true to his word. It was July. In the morning Yngve, Kristin, and I caught the bus to Dad's flat, where they were walking around nervously, Dad in a flamboyant white shirt, Unni in a white dress made from coarse material. They weren't quite ready; Unni asked if we wanted something to drink while we were waiting. I glanced across at Dad. He was standing with a beer in his hand. Help yourselves to anything in the fridge. I'll get it, I said. I went into the kitchen and returned with three beers. Dad looked at me. Perhaps you might wait a bit with that, he said. It's early yet and it's going to be a long day. But you've got a bottle in your hand yourself! Unni said, and Dad smiled, yes, well, I suppose there's no harm in it.

Getting ready took longer than they had anticipated, I had time for two beers before we went to wait for the taxi to take us to the registry office. The sky was overcast and it was cold. I could feel the effect of the alcohol, it lay like a thin membrane over my thoughts, a canopy of mixed feelings. Yngve and Kristin had their arms around each other. I smiled at them, lit a cigarette, and gazed down at the river, which also seemed heavy beneath the somber sky, but the taxi arrived before I had even taken the first drag. We couldn't all fit in, no one had considered that. Dad said he could walk, it was only around the corner. No, Unni said, not on your wedding day.

"We can walk," Kristin said. "Can't we, Yngve?"

"Of course," he said.

And so it was decided. I went with Unni and Dad to the registry office, where the witnesseses were waiting. I vaguely remembered them from the party at our house the summer before. A small bald man and a large buxom woman with a thick shock of hair. I shook hands, they smiled, we stood waiting in a room, Dad looked at his watch impatiently, soon it would be their turn, but it would be quite a few minutes before Yngve and Kristin arrived.

They came rushing in through the hall, red-cheeked, ready for anything. Dad stared at them blankly, we went in, they stood in front of the official conducting the ceremony with a witness on either side, both said yes, passed each other the rings, after which Dad was married again. They chose a name that was new to both of them, or rather two names, each of which was fine and elegant on its own, but in combination sounded ridiculously stilted and pretentious.

On our way to the Sjøhuset restaurant, where we were going to have lunch, Dad said that one of the names, which was originally Scottish, had some connection with our family as actually in the distant past we had come from Scotland. Unni, for her part, said that the name existed in the ancestral past of her family. I could believe that, but what Dad had said was just nonsense, that much I did know.

Yngve shared my opinion, for our eyes met when Dad started talking.

We were shown to a table at the back of the maritime-themed restaurant and ordered shrimp and beer. Dad and Unni smiled and *skål*-ed, this was their day.

I had five beers there. Dad noticed, he told me to take it easy, not in a particularly unfriendly way, and I said I would, but I was in control. Yngve had the flu, so he wasn't going at it like me. Besides, Kristin was there, he kept turning to her, they sat there laughing and talking about something or other.

I was alternately flying – that must have been because of the alcohol, at least I was able to take the initiative and talk to everyone with ease in that lofty manner that occasionally but not very often took hold of me – and completely on the fringes, when everyone around the table, even Yngve, appeared alien to me, indeed not only that, but also totally irrelevant.

Kristin must have spotted this for she often broke out of her twosome with Yngve and said something to draw me into the conversation. She had done that ever since they got together, she had become a kind of big sister to me, someone whom I could talk to about everything, someone who understood. Yet she wasn't much older than me, so the big-sister role could vanish without warning and we would face each other as equals in age, almost as peers.

Eventually we left Sjøhuset and went back to Dad's. The witnesses didn't join us, they would be coming to the dinner in the evening, which had been booked at the Fregatten restaurant in Dronningens Gate. I continued drinking at Dad's place and was starting to get quite drunk, it was a wonderful feeling and slightly odd as it was light outside and all the passersby on the street were pursuing their everyday activities. I sat there, getting more and more pie-eyed, without anyone noticing, as far as I could judge, since the sole manifestation of my drunkenness was that my tongue was looser than usual. As always, alcohol gave me a strong sense of freedom and happiness, it lifted me onto a wave, inside it everything was good, and to prevent it from ever ending, my only real fear, I had to keep drinking more. When the time came Dad ordered a taxi, and I staggered down the stairs to the car that would take us the five hundred meters to Fregatten, and this time there was no question of there not being enough space. Once there we were shown to our table, close to the window in the big room, which was otherwise completely empty. I had been drinking since ten o'clock, now it was six, and it was only by the grace of God that I didn't fall through the window as I went to pull out my chair and sit down. I barely registered the presence of the others, no longer heard what they said, their faces were blurred, their voices a low rustle as though I was surrounded by faintly human-like trees and bushes in a forest somewhere, not in a restaurant in Kristiansand on my father's wedding day.

The waiter came, the food had been pre-ordered, what he wanted to know now was what we were going to drink. Dad ordered two bottles of red wine, I lit a cigarette and gazed at him through listless eyes.

"How's it going, Karl Ove? Are you all right?" he said.

"Yes," I said. "Congratulations, Dad. You've got a lovely wife, I have to say. I really like Unni."

"That's good," he said.

Unni smiled at me.

"But what should I call her?" I said. "She's a kind of stepmother, isn't she?"

"Call her Unni, of course," Dad said.

"What do you call Sissel?" Unni asked me.

Dad looked at her.

"Mom," I said.

"Then you could call me mother, couldn't you?" Unni said.

"I'll do that," I said. "Mother."

"What *nonsense*!" Dad snapped.

"Was the wine good, Mother?" I said, staring at her.

"Yes it was," she said.

Dad fixed his eyes on me. "That's enough of that now, Karl Ove," he said.

"OK," I said.

"So where are you going on your honeymoon?" Yngve said. "You haven't told us."

"Well, there'll be no honeymoon right away," Unni said. "But we've got a room booked at this hotel tonight."

The waiter came and held a bottle in front of Dad.

Dad nodded, not interested.

The waiter poured a little into his glass.

Dad tasted it, smacked his lips. "Exquisite," he said.

"Excellent," the waiter said, and filled all the glasses.

Oh, how welcome that warm dark taste was after all the sharp, cold, bitter beers!

I knocked it back in four long gulps. Yngve sat with his head supported on one hand staring out the window. He must have had his other hand resting on Kristin's thigh, judging by the crook of his arm. The two witnesses sat silent on either side of Unni and Dad.

"We've ordered the food for half past six," Dad said. He looked at Unni. "Perhaps we should inspect the room in the meantime?"

Unni smiled and nodded.

"We won't be long," Dad said, getting up. "You just relax and enjoy yourselves."

They kissed and left the room hand in hand.

I looked at Yngve, he met my gaze, then turned away. Dad's two colleagues were still silent. Usually I would have felt responsible for them and asked them some trivial question in the hope that it might interest them, if not me, but now I couldn't care less. If they wanted to sit there eyeing us, let them.

I filled my glass with red wine and drank half of it in one swallow, and then I went for a piss. I found myself in a long corridor, which I followed to the end without seeing a toilet anywhere. I walked back and down some stairs. Now I found myself in a cellar of some kind, completely white with a dazzling light and some sacks piled against the wall. Back up I went. Was it here? Another corridor, carpeted this time. No. I came out by the reception desk. Bathroom? I said. Beg your pardon? said the receptionist. Sorry, I said. But do you know where the bathroom is? He pointed to a door on the other side of the room without looking at me. I lurched toward it, had to insert an extra step to stop myself falling, opened the door, leaned against the wall, here it was, thank God. I went into one of the cubicles and locked the door, changed my mind, unlocked it, the toilet was empty, wasn't it? Yes, no one around. I hurried over to the washstand, unzipped, pulled the thing out and pissed in the sink. The yellow stream filled the whole basin for a brief instant before being sucked down the drain. Once I had finished I went back into the cubicle, locked the door, sat down on the toilet seat, rested my head on my hands, and closed my eyes. The next second I was gone.

At one point I seemed to hear someone calling my name, Karl Ove, Karl Ove, I heard, as though I was on some mountain plateau, I thought, and someone had been sent out in the mist to find me. Karl Ove, Karl Ove. Then I was gone again.

Next time I came around it was with a jolt. I hit my head against the cubicle wall. The toilet was completely silent.

What had happened? Where was I?

Oh no. This was the wedding day! Had I fallen asleep? Oh no, I had fallen asleep!

I hurried out, washed my face in cold water, walked past reception and into the dining room.

They were still there. They stared at me.

"Where on earth have you been, Karl Ove?" Dad said.

"I think I dozed off," I said, sitting down. "Have you eaten?"

"Yes," Unni said. "We've just finished. Would you like to have something now? We're waiting for dessert."

"Dessert's fine," I said. "I'm not that hungry."

"There"ll be coffee and brandy afterward," Dad said. "You'll pick up then, you'll see."

I finished the wine in my glass and refilled it. My head ached a bit, not much, it was as if a door had been opened a fraction, out streamed the pain, and I knew the wine was doing me good, it seemed to be closing the door again.

When we left it was no later than half past nine. I was drunk, but not as drunk as when I arrived, the sleep had diminished the effect of the alcohol, which the wine and brandy had not managed to replenish. But Dad's drunkenness had escalated prodigiously, he was standing with his arms around Unni waiting for the taxi, the notion of walking five hundred meters had not occurred to him, and it was only with great difficulty that he managed to squeeze himself onto the black leather seat.

Dad went to get some beer from the fridge when we got home. Unni put out some peanuts in a bowl. Yngve had taken a turn for the worse, he had a temperature and was lying on the sofa. Kristin was sitting in the chair next to me.

Unni brought a blanket and spread it over Yngve. Dad stood some distance away watching.

"Why are you wrapping the blanket round him?" he said. "Isn't he big enough to do it himself? You've never wrapped a blanket round *me* when *I've* been feeling a bit off color."

"Oh yes, I have," Unni said.

"Oh no, you haven't!" Dad almost shouted.

"Calm down now," Unni said.

"That's something, coming from you," Dad said, and went into the kitchen, where he sat down in a chair with his back to us.

Unni chuckled. Then she went in to pacify him. I drank half the beer in one go, belched up the froth, and realizing that Kristin was there, swallowed a couple of times with my hand in front of my mouth.

"Sorry," I said.

She laughed. "That's definitely not the worst thing that has happened this evening!" she said, so low that it could only be heard around the table, and then laughed in an equally muted tone.

Yngve smiled. I went to get another beer from the fridge. As I passed the newlyweds Dad got up and went back into the living room.

"I'm going to ring Grandma," he said. "They didn't even send me so much as a single flower!"

I opened the fridge door, took out a beer, and then, suddenly, I was back in the living room reaching for the opener on the table.

Yngve and Kristin were staring awkwardly into the middle distance. Dad was speaking in a loud voice.

"I got married today," he said. "Have you two realized? It's a big day in my life!"

I threw the bottle top onto the table, took a swig, and sat down.

"You could at least have sent some flowers! You could at least have shown that you care about me!"

Silence.

"Mother! Yes, but, Mother, please!" he shouted.

I turned.

He was crying. Tears were streaming down his cheeks. When he spoke his face contorted into an enormous grimace.

"I got married today! And you didn't want to come! You didn't even send any flowers! When it was your own son's wedding!"

Then he slammed down the receiver and stared into space for a few moments. Tears continued to run down his cheeks.

Eventually he got up and went into the kitchen.

I belched and looked at Unni. She got to her feet and ran after him. From the kitchen came the sound of sobbing and crying and loud voices.

"What do you think?" I said after a while, looking at Yngve. "Shall we go out on the town while we're at it?"

He sat up.

"I'm not well," he said. "I think I might have a high temperature. I should probably go home. Let's ring for a taxi."

"Without asking Dad first?" I said.

"Without asking Dad what?" Dad said from the doorway between the two rooms.

"We were thinking of slowly making a move," Yngve said.

"No, stay for a while," Dad said. "It's not every day your father gets married. Come on, there's more beer. We can enjoy ourselves a bit longer."

"I'm not well, you know," Yngve said. "I think I'll have to go."

"What about you then, Karl Ove?" he said, gazing at me through his glazed, almost completely vacant eyes.

"We're sharing a taxi," I said. "If they go, I have to go."

"Fine," Dad said. "I'll go to bed then. Goodnight and thanks for coming today."

Straight afterward we heard his footsteps on the stairs. Unni came in to see us.

"That's how it is sometimes," she said. "Lots of emotions, you know. But you go. We'll see you soon and thanks for coming!"

I got up. She gave me a hug, then she hugged Yngve and Kristin.

Outside I had to sit down on the curb, I was much too tired to stand up for the minutes it would take the taxi to arrive.

When I woke up in bed the next day there was something surreal about all that had happened, I wasn't certain of anything, other than that I had been more drunk than I had ever been before. And that Dad had been drunk. I knew how drunkenness appeared in the eyes of the sober and was horrified, everyone had seen how drunk I had been at my father's wedding. That he had also been drunk didn't help because he hadn't shown it until right at the end when we were alone in his flat and all his emotions were flowing freely.

I had brought shame on them.

That was what I had done.

What good was it that I only wanted the best?

I spent the last weeks of the summer in Arendal. Rune, the program director at the radio station, ran a kind of agency, he sold cassettes to local gas stations, and when one evening I complained that I didn't have a summer job, he suggested I sell his cassettes on the street. I bought them from him for a fixed sum, he didn't care about only making a small profit, and so I could sell them at whatever price I liked. The towns in Sørland were full of tourists in the summer, purse strings were loose, if you were selling music from the charts you were bound to be in with a chance.

"Good idea," I said. "My brother's living in Arendal this summer. Perhaps I can set up there?"

"Perfect!"

And so one morning I loaded a bag of clothes, a camping chair, a camping table, a ghetto blaster, and a box of cassettes into Mom's car, which Yngve had at his disposal all summer, sat in the passenger seat, put on my new Ray-Bans, and leaned back as Yngve engaged first gear and set off down the hill.

The sun was shining, which it had done all July, there was very little traffic on this side of the river, I rolled down the window, stuck out my elbow, and sang along with Bowie as we raced through the spruce forest, the gleaming river appearing and disappearing between the trees, occasionally alongside sandbanks where children were swimming and screaming and shouting.

We talked about Grandma and Grandad, whom we had visited the previous day, about how time seemed to stand still there compared with the house in Sørbøvåg, where in the past two years it seemed to have accelerated and caused everything to go into decline.

We drove through the tiny center of Birkeland to Lillesand and from there onto the E18, the stretch I knew inside out after all the journeys back and forth in my childhood.

I put on a cassette by the Psychedelic Furs, their most commercial LP, which I loved.

"Have I told you about the girl who came up to me in London?" Yngve said.

"No," I said.

"'You're the spitting image of the lead singer in Psychedelic Furs,' she said, and then she wanted someone to take a photo of us together."

He looked at me and laughed.

"I thought it was Audun Automat from Tramteatret you looked like?" I said.

"Yes, but that's not quite as flattering," he said.

We drove past Knut Hamsun's Nørholm property, I leaned forward to look past Yngve and into the grounds, I had been there once, on a class trip when I was in ninth grade, we were shown round by Hamsun's son and saw the cottage where he wrote and a few pieces of furniture he had made.

Now it was empty and looked overgrown.

"Do you remember Dad saying he had seen Hamsun on the bus to Grimstad once?"

"No," Yngve said. "Did he say that?"

"Yes, an old man with a stick and a white beard."

Yngve shook his head. "Imagine all the lies he's told us over the years. There must be tons we still believe without realizing it."

"Yes," I said. "I can't say I'm sorry he's moving."

"No," Yngve said. "Me neither."

Dad and Unni had gotten jobs in Northern Norway, they were going to work at the same gymnas and during recent weeks had packed everything they owned and sent it north. They would be driving up in a couple of days.

"Has Kristin recovered from the wedding?" I said. "I assume it must have been a bit of a shock?"

"It was somewhat special, yes," he said.

We drove down to Grimstad, past the Oddensenter Mall, the old Hotel

Norge, where Hamsun had done some of his writing, up the steep incline, and onto the wide plain.

"And what was that business with the hotel?" I said. "They booked a room at the hotel where we ate, they even went up to see it. But did they sleep there?"

Yngve shrugged. "Perhaps they went back there after we left?"

"Didn't look like it."

"No, but there are a few things in their lives they don't plan. Such as when they said, if you remember, they wouldn't be having a honeymoon. But the day after they caught the boat to Denmark and stayed at a hotel in Skagen."

"That's true," I said.

We drove past Kokkeplassen, Mom's old workplace, where I had been at a nursery for a year, and I craned my neck, there had been a cliff there, we had climbed up a tree over the cliff every day, I seemed to remember. But it wasn't a cliff, it was just a little slope, I could see now. And the tree must have been chopped down. Then we motored down the hill with Arendal below us and beyond it the island of Tromøya, in all its nostalgic splendor, flooded with sunshine.

"Well?" Yngve said. "Are you going to find a spot right now?"

"May as well," I said.

Nothing had been arranged in advance; Rune thought all you had to do was ask in a shop whether they minded if you set up outside in the street and used their electricity, and then hope they didn't charge you a commission. Offer them a couple of hundred if they dithered was his advice.

Yngve parked the car, we walked down the pedestrianized street, I popped into a randomly chosen boutique and asked whether it was all right if I sold cassettes in the street outside and if they had a socket I could use. Might attract customers for them, too.

No problem.

Once that was arranged we drove up to his studio. He had taken his prelims that spring, after finishing the foundation year in comparative politics before Christmas, and now he was working at the Central Hotel in town to earn some money for a trip to China he and Kristin were planning later in the autumn.

The studio he rented was by Langsæ, outside Arendal, and I would be staying for three weeks, sleeping on an inflatable mattress on the floor.

We hadn't spent so much time together since we were little.

The next day he drove me to the town center with all my paraphernalia. It was fantastic standing there in the quiet morning streets, with the sea so blue and heavy and still before us, erecting the old yellow '70s camping table, arranging the cassettes on it – Genesis, Falco, Eurhythmics, Madonna, and anything else that sold well in those months – pulling the cable from the shop, plugging in the cassette recorder, sitting down on the chair, putting on my shades, and pressing play.

The King of Arendal, that was me.

Beside my table was an ice cream stand, and soon after I arrived a girl started work there. She swept the street in front, carried in a few boxes, came out with a rag in her hand and wiped the outside of the window, went back in, and stayed there.

She looked great. Reddish hair, freckles, big curves. When I saw her next, half an hour later, she was wearing a white apron.

Terrific!

But she didn't look in my direction, not once.

That could be arranged.

Gradually people began to trickle by, they walked up and down the small pedestrian street, passed my table several times, I kept a careful eye on them and was quick to recognize faces and bodies. Some of them stopped and examined my selection of cassettes, and if they pointed to one, I jumped up, took an unopened one from the box beside the table, pocketed the money they passed me, thanked them, registered a cross on a sheet of paper I kept handy and sat down.

What a job!

At eleven, sales began to take off with a vengeance. Through to one I sold loads of cassettes, then business flagged until I shut up shop at a few minutes to four, when Yngve came to pick me up.

At his place I counted out the money due to Rune and put it in a plastic bag. The rest I spent when we went out in the evening. I bought bottles of white wine in ice buckets, danced, chatted to whoever came over to Yngve's table. White wine, that was the discovery of the summer for me, it slid down like water, and the buzz it produced made me feel light and happy.

The next day the girl in the ice cream stand smiled at me when she arrived. A little smile, it was true, but unmistakeable.

I knocked on her window at eleven and asked if I could have a glass of water.

She handed me one.

"We're neighbors," I said. "What's your name?"

"Sigrid," she said.

Her accent was curious. The "r" was hard. She also pronounced the "d."

"Where are you from?"

"Iceland," she said with a beam.

That was as far as we got, she didn't come over to exchange a word or two, a little smile and a nod sufficed: the day had begun.

A couple of evenings later she was suddenly standing in front of me at the disco. I was so drunk that everything except her face was blurred. When I woke up in her bed the next morning I couldn't remember how I had got there, was mystified as to how I had managed it, everything was black apart from a couple of scenes from her room: she is lying on the bed wearing only panties and I'm on top of her, we're making out, I kiss her magnificent breasts, I put my hand between her legs, no, she says, absolutely no way, and I get up and take off my underpants and stand in front of her in all my glory, which can't have impressed her as much as I must have imagined it would because she laughed at me and said no again.

I held my head in shame. I had of course registered long ago that she wasn't there, but I hadn't considered where she was until the next second, when I sat up and said hello into the empty room.

No answer. Was she in the toilet perhaps?

I stood up.

Oh no, I was *still* naked.

On the table in the middle of the room there was a note.

Hi, King of Arendal!
I've gone to sell some ice cream.
See you again, maybe.
S.
(Put the door on the latch when you leave.)

Why on earth had she underlined *maybe*?

I got dressed, stuffed the note in my back pocket, put the door on the latch as she had requested, and went down the narrow, gloomy, and musty-smelling staircase. I hadn't the slightest idea where I was. For all I knew, I could have been kilometers out of town.

The sunlight hit me in the eyes as I emerged.

A street, a house on the other side.

Where was the town?

I followed the street down, rounded a corner and suddenly saw where I was. Somewhere up by Skytebanen!

I strolled down to the center, gave the ice cream stand a wide berth, and sat down in Pollen with a Coke and a bag of rolls. The mere smell of seawater put me in a good mood.

After watching the boats entering and leaving the harbor, the gulls circling, and the cars heading along Langbrygga on the other side, all beneath a deep-blue, motionless sky, I went to see Yngve at the hotel. He was dealing with some guests, I sat down on the sofa and observed him, his patient smile and polite nod, speaking in English, dressed in his not quite immaculate hotel uniform.

When they had gone he came over to me.

"Where did you get to then?"

"I went back to the ice cream girl's place," I said, and could hear what a wonderful sentence that was to say.

"How was it? Are you two together now?"

"Don't think so. She wasn't there when I woke up. But she left me a note and underlined the word *maybe*. *See you again, maybe.* What do you think that means?"

He shrugged, suddenly uninterested.

"Kristin will be at my place tonight, by the way."

"Where should I sleep then?"

"In the bathroom."

"Seriously?"

"It's no problem, is it?"

"No, of course not. I was thinking of you two."

"Don't worry, it'll be fine. I've warned her. Anyway, I stayed at her place last night."

It was fine too, though it felt a little strange lying on the mattress in the bathroom listening to Yngve and Kristin giggling and laughing and chatting in subdued voices in the bed.

As I walked down the pedestrian street the next morning I was excited. I had got up extra early to be there before her, I thought that would give me an edge. She arrived, smiled her little smile, and went into her stand. I stayed where I was, sold loads of cassettes, and when I finally did go over to her it was to ask for a glass of water.

I was given one.

"Thanks for the other night," I said.

"Thank *you*," she said.

"I was thinking of going out tonight. Would you like to come?"

She shook her head.

"Tomorrow night then?"

She shook her head again. "You're not my type," she said with a smile. "We could meet though."

"When?"

She shrugged and smiled again.

I went back to my table and the days passed. She attended to her business in her stand, I attended to mine, once in a while our glances met and we smiled.

That was all.

I bought a felt pen and some cardboard from a bookshop and hung a sign on the tree beside the table. ORGINAL CASSETTES, I wrote, then the price and the names of some Top Twenty artists. It wasn't long before a man in his midforties stopped and said it was "original," not "orginal." I was good at writing, my spelling was perfect, so I said no, you're wrong, that's how it's spelled. There's not another "i" in "orginal." I stuck to my guns, he stuck to his, and eventually he walked away shaking his head.

The money was rolling in. People were crazy about my cassettes, buying four or five at a time, so when evening came and I went out with Yngve I didn't stint myself. I drank as I had never drunk before. If I ran out of cash all I had to do was sell some more cassettes the next day. Once a week Rune dropped by in his red car with fresh stock. And now and then someone I knew from the old days happened by. Dag Lothar, for example, who had a summer job in a bank and was the same as always. Geir Prestbakmo, who was at vocational college and rode around on a brand-new moped, he was his old self as well. And then John, the class tough guy, who just loafed around, as he put it.

Yngve and I went to the other side of Tromøya one day, to the place where Dad had always taken us swimming. Yngve parked the car by the rifle range, we walked down through a dense prickly thicket, I relished the incomparable smell of heather, pine needles, and salt water, the massive gray ridge that had been there for so many million years, and then the sight of the sea below. The air was thick with insects. I stamped my foot down hard at every step, the area was full of adders, at least it had been when I was growing up.

Once Dad and I had encountered one only a few hundred meters from where I was walking now, it was spring, the snake had been stretched out on a stone slab in the sun. I must have been about ten. Dad went crazy, started throwing stones at it, I watched as they seemed to sink into the snake's body as they struck, the adder tried to get away, it was hit again and again until it lay still beneath a pile of stones. But as we were about to walk on, out it wriggled again. Dad went closer, continuing to throw stones at it, he wanted me to do the same, I was on the point of throwing up, the snake was still now, Dad ventured closer and crushed its head with the big rock he was holding in his hand.

I turned. Yngve was behind me. We walked along the spine of sea-smoothed rocks and found a warm spot by the water's edge. I went down to examine the great sinkhole in the rock, which wasn't so big anymore, dived into the foaming water, swam out to the long island maybe a hundred meters away and then back again. Lay down to dry in the sun, ate biscuits and oranges, smoked and drank coffee. Yngve suggested going with him to Kristin's place afterward, so that would save him having to take me to the town center. Is that all right? I said, of course, he said, they're incredibly open and kind. Anyway, the rest of the family's on holiday, so she's the only one there.

A few hours later he pulled up outside their house. We watched a video and ate pizza. Yngve had been there a lot over the past six months, he liked her parents, her brother and sister, and they liked him. He was like a son in the house, I could see.

Her sister's name was Cecilie and she was one year younger than me, I saw some photos of her and was impressed. Her brother was much younger than them, he was still at primary school.

I stayed the night and slept in Cecilie's bed. We decided to go out together the following night, Kristin would bring along some girlfriends, but first we would eat in a restaurant, just us three.

I drank two bottles of white wine with the food, and when we went to the discotheque I had three more.

And who should I meet there but the girl from the ice cream stand!

The four of us took a taxi to Tromøya. I sat in the front seat. We had stood wrapped around each other making out while we waited for it to come, and, still dazed by that, I stretched my arms back toward her. She took my hands and caressed them. Her hands were very rough, I noticed.

"Oh, Karl Ove," Yngve said from behind me.

They laughed.

Furious, I retracted my arms.

"How much have you had to drink, actually?" Yngve said.

"Five," I said.

"Five *bottles* of wine?" Yngve said. "Are you kidding?"

"No," I said.

"No wonder you're behaving so weirdly. If it had been me, I would have been lying in the street snoring."

"True," I said.

The taxi stopped, I paid, we went into the house.

The same thing happened there, with the sole exception that this time she was *absolutely* naked. But no, she didn't want to. Alabaster skin, full-bosomed and beautiful, she lay there saying no, no, no.

When I awoke next morning she was gone.

Still drunk, I went upstairs and into the kitchen, where Yngve and Kristin were having breakfast.

"She caught the bus a while ago," Kristin said. "She said to say hello and thank you for yesterday."

For a change, the sky was overcast. I decided to give this day a miss, lie on the sofa and read until Yngve went in to do his evening shift. The next day she wasn't there. There was a girl in her twenties at the hatch. I asked her where Sigrid was, she said she had finished, yesterday had been her last day. Did she have any idea where she was? No, she didn't.

I went to Kristin's a couple more times, and on the last evening the family had returned from their holiday. I said hello, they were as nice as Yngve had said they were, we rented a video of *Apocalypse Now*, Kristin sat leaning against Yngve while I sat beside Cecilie, we exchanged occasional glances and smiled, we were so clearly the little brother and sister on the floor below our two siblings, who, if they had decided to get married, would not have surprised anyone.

There was a tension in the air, I felt it all evening, but what kind of tension was it?

We were a bit shy with each other, was that what it was?

I saw how Cecilie sometimes tried to wrest the initiative, as though wanting to make it clear that she was not only on an equal footing with her sister but also very distinct from her.

I liked to see that. Her will, how that led the way and she followed.

She did ballet, and she was good, Kristin had said; after leaving school she was going to take the ballet school entrance exams.

The way she threw herself onto the sofa. The way her face could suddenly become quite open and artless when she smiled.

But this was no good. There was no point even thinking about it.

Yet I did.

There was only a week left of the summer job and I joined Yngve whenever he drove to Kristin's, I enjoyed being in her home too, there was such a nice atmosphere, they were good people and it was reflected everywhere in the house.

I saw how Yngve was treated and how happy he was. I thought to myself, come on now, don't be an idiot, just let him have it all.

But I also thought about Cecilie, because when she was in the room, I could feel her presence with the whole of my body.

And I knew it was the same for her too.

First of all her parents left and went to bed. Then Yngve and Kristin left and went to bed.

We sat alone in the big living room, on opposite sides of the table. We made conversation, for we couldn't talk about or show anything of what we felt, or rather of what I felt and of what I imagined she also felt.

"I was there when they got together," I said. "At Vindilhytta. You should have seen it. It was really sweet."

"Yes, they are sweet," she said.

"Yes," I said.

What kind of situation was this I suddenly found myself in? In a house on Tromøya alone with the sister of Yngve's girlfriend?

Nothing wrong with the situation. Only with my feelings.

"Well," she said with a yawn. "Time to go to bed."

"I'm going to stay up for a bit," I said.

"See you at breakfast then."

"Yes, goodnight."

"Goodnight."

She disappeared down the stairs, moving in that self-assured elegant way she had. Thank God I was going home soon and could put all this behind me.

The following evening, which was the last, I went to see Yngve, he was on the evening shift and served me an enormous pizza, which I ate at the table in the lobby while he worked and came over for a chat whenever he could. He said Cecilie and Kristin were in town. Kristin was coming over soon. He didn't know what Cecilie was doing. But she came as well, I joined them, it was the last night, in just a few hours I would be home again. Nevertheless, even though I knew it was stupid, I stayed close to Cecilie, we walked side by side, we had nothing to say to each other, we just walked and listened to each other's breathing, which was deep and tremulous, and then we hugged and kissed, again and again.

"What are we doing?" I said. "Can we do this?"

"I've been thinking about that ever since I first saw you," she said, holding my face between her hands.

"Me too," I said.

We stood wrapped in each other's arms for a long time.

"At the last moment," Cecilie said.

"Yes," I said.

"Now you mustn't have any regrets," she said. "Or rather, of course you can. But tell me if you do. Do you promise?"

"I won't have any regrets," I said. "I promise. Are you at home next weekend?"

She nodded.

"Can I come and see you?"

She nodded again, we kissed for a last time and then I went, turned, she waved, I waved.

Yngve was standing behind the counter studying a sheet of paper when I went into the hotel to get the keys. I said nothing about what had happened. Were we going out together now? I wondered as I walked up Arendal's steep hills in the hazy darkness of the late-summer night. In which case how strange it would be for Yngve and me to be going out with two sisters! Wasn't there something a bit circus-like about this? Roll up, roll up, come and see the two brothers who go out with two sisters! But why should I care? He lived in Bergen while I lived in Kristiansand, and soon he and Kristin would be in China.

This had completely bowled me over.

She was walking home now too, also bowled over.

Yngve drove me to the bus the following morning. I didn't say anything then either. When I sat down in a window seat and looked for him, he was already on his way up the street.

I closed my eyes and could feel how thoroughly exhausted I was. As the bus turned into Grimstad town center I was asleep and didn't wake until it passed Kristiansand Zoo. I jumped off at the Timenes intersection and caught a different bus for the last part up to Boen. Out of habit I looked for a glimpse of Jan Vidar in his window as the bus crossed Solsletta, but he wasn't there and his car wasn't in the driveway either.

I took out a cigarette and looked down at the waterfall, the last kilometer home was a drag, but I did finally manage to motivate myself and set off with my bag on my back.

As I came up the last hill I saw Mom by the barrel we used to burn paper in. A thin, almost transparent flame flickered back and forth over the edge. She caught sight of me and walked down.

"Hi," she said with a smile. "How was it?"

"Fine," I said. "How's everything here?"

"I've been fine," she said.

"Good," I said. "Think I'll have a shower and change."

"You do that," she said. "I've made dinner. Just have to heat it up. Are you hungry?"

"Yes, starving."

In the evening I sat at my desk reading, but I couldn't settle down, my thoughts raced this way and that, and everywhere they went they confused me, none of them were as they had been. Now and then I looked out the window, saw the garden merge imperceptibly into the dense forest behind the little potato patch, felt the trees close to us waiting or listening, darkness always gave me this sense, and as the gentle gusts of wind grew stronger the leaves trembled and the branches swayed. A week ago I had never seen her, hardly knew who she was. Now we were going out.

What about Hanne?

And the girl in the ice cream stand, what had that been?

It was as though I was faced with a jigsaw puzzle made of pieces from several sets. Nothing fit, nothing made any sense.

I went downstairs to Mom in the living room.

"Are you sure you've been fine while I've been away?" I said.

She put down the book she was reading on the table.

"Yes," she said. "I really have been."

"You weren't lonely?"

She smiled. "Not at all. I was at work. There was a lot to do. And then it was wonderful to come up here afterward."

Presumably roused by our voices, the cat padded across the floor with a sleepy face. He jumped straight into my lap and rested his heavy head on my thigh.

"How about you?" she asked.

I shrugged.

"It was fine," I said. "I liked selling the cassettes on the street. In a way I lived from hand to mouth. Earned money during the day and spent it at night."

"Oh?" Mom said. "What did you spend it on?"

"Well, different things," I said. "I went out for meals a lot. That costs money. And then I had a beer once in a while with Yngve. But I've saved a bit too. I've brought a bag of money back with me. Nearly three thousand kroner."

I hadn't counted the money, in fact I had forgotten all about it, so now I got up and went into the hall to check and keep it in something more suitable than a plastic bag.

But the bag wasn't there.

I had dropped it on the floor just inside the door, hadn't I?

Yes. On top of the shoes. A white Beisland bag it had been. Full of creased notes.

Had Mom put it away?

I went back into the living room.

"The bag that was in the hall," I said. "Did you move it?"

She looked up at me, her index finger keeping her place on the page.

"A plastic bag in the hall?" she said. "I threw it away."

"Chucked it away? Are you crazy? There was three thousand kroner in it!"

And it wasn't even mine, it was Rune's. In fact, he should have had more than that because I had spent quite a chunk of his money during the past few days there.

"You had money in it?" Mom said. "And you left it on the floor? How was I supposed to guess?"

"Where did you throw it?"

"In the barrel. Where we burn paper."

"Have you burned it? How could you? Have you burned the money?"

I shook my hands in the air. Then I dashed into the hall, slipped on a pair of shoes, and ran up the slope.

There was the bag.

But was the money in it?

I snatched at it and looked inside.

Oh, thank God. There it was.

I took the bag, emptied the money onto the floor of my room, counted it, there was a bit more than three thousand two hundred kroner, put it in a drawer, and went down to the living room.

"You found it?" Mom said.

I nodded. Put on a record, ran my eye along a bookshelf, eventually picked out Hamsun's *Pan*, sat down on the sofa, and began to read.

There was a week left before school began and I decided to spend it writing some reviews, went down to town, dropped in on Steinar Vindsland, it was good I came, he said, he had been trying to get hold of me, had called a couple of times without any luck.

"Thing is I'm finishing here. I've got a new job on *Fædrelandsvennen*. You can probably keep going here, but I can't guarantee it, after all it was me who hired you."

"That's a shame," I said.

"Yeah, well," he said. "Anyway, I have an offer for you. I'll be responsible for the young adults and music sections. How would you feel about writing for *Fevennen*? It wouldn't be record reviews, Sigbjørn Nedland does that, as I'm sure you know. But material for young adults, and then maybe reviews of gigs and interviews with bands."

"That would be good," I said.

"Great," he said. "So I'll see you!"

Nye Sørlandet was a sinking ship, that was common knowledge, so this was good news. *Fædrelandsvennen* was a paper everybody read. If I wrote something there, everyone would see it.

I went to Platebørsen and bought five LPs to celebrate my promotion, which was how I considered it. I had taken the money from the plastic bag, the odd couple of hundred kroner wouldn't make any difference anyway, somehow I would have to find the money to pay Rune.

When I returned home Yngve rang, eager to know what had happened on the last evening. Cecilie had been so strange and secretive and was writing a letter to me.

I told him.

"So you're going out with Cecilie?"

"Yes, I guess you could say that."

"Isn't that a bit weird?"

"Yes. Does it matter?"

"No . . . maybe it doesn't."

"Good!"

But it made no sense to me. Two days later the letter arrived. She was confused, it had been like a dream, she wrote, and she shouldn't tell me, but when she had left me that evening, tears had been streaming down her cheeks. On the Friday I went to see her, we were alone, we had to edge our way forward. We talked about what had actually taken place. She said she had been so intrigued by me after all the things that Kristin had told her and the photos she had seen. She had wondered whether perhaps something might happen, and after she had seen me she wanted something to happen, but it couldn't, after all we were just the younger siblings. I said I had felt the same. She said Yngve had looked at us one evening, first at her, then at me, then at her again. It had been in the air. Yes, I said, and I ached. We didn't know each other, didn't know what it was, but then it happened again, suddenly we were embracing, kissing each other, and then we went to bed . . .

But we didn't make love. I thought she was so young, we didn't know each other, and I ought to tread carefully . . .

No, that wasn't the real reason.

The real reason was that I came before anything had happened.

I was so ashamed that I lay totally still so as not give myself away.

And not only then, it happened every time we were together in the ensuing weeks.

At the first editorial meeting I attended at *Fædrelandsvennen* I suggested writing an article about the Sissel Kyrkjebø phenomenon. She was lauded by all the newspapers, had sold an unimaginable number of records, but why actually? I asked.

"Good idea. Go for it," Steinar said.

"Why does Sissel sell?" I called the article. "Savor the name," I wrote. "Sissel Kyrkjebø . . ." And then I made fun of all the associations you could make, with Christianity, the farming community and nationalism, she was even wearing traditional dress on the LP cover. She stood for everything I disliked, it was false, manipulative, clichéd, a dreadful picture postcard of the world, who could bear the beauty of it, and on top of everything in such an undemanding form?

There were lots of letters to the editor over the following days. One opened with the words "Karl Ove Knausgaard. Savor the name," then feasted on its associations with the sterility of rocks (*knaus*) and the scant yield of a farm (*gaard*). *Fædrelandsvennen* was a popular newspaper, it was loyal to its readers, the qualities that I preferred – innovation, the avant-garde, provocation – were not for the likes of them, and in the months that followed there was a conspicuously large number of glowing articles about Sissel Kyrkjebø.

I loved it, finally my name had been raised above the anonymous ranks of the crowd, not much, though not so little either.

The weekend after the article appeared Yngve came to visit, and as usual we dropped in on Grandma and Grandad. On this occasion Gunnar was there. He rose to his feet and stared straight at me as we entered the kitchen.

"Well, here he is, the world champion," he said.

I smiled at him inanely.

"Who do you think you are?" he said. "Do you realize what an idiot you've made of yourself? No, you don't, do you? You think you're something special."

"What do you mean?" I mumbled, even though I knew all too well what he was talking about.

"What makes you think that you of all people are right and everybody else is wrong? You, a seventeen-year-old schoolkid! You don't know anything. Yet you assume the lofty position of an arbiter of taste. Oh, it's so pathetic!"

I said nothing, studied the floor. Yngve did the same.

"Sissel Kyrkjebø is a popular artist loved by everyone. And she gets good reviews. Then you come along and say everyone's wrong! You! No!" he said, and shook his head. "No, no, no!"

I had never seen him so angry or worked up before, and I was shaken.

"Well, I was actually on my way," he said. "Good to see you, Yngve. You're still in Bergen, right?"

"Yes, for the time being," he said. "But I'm going to China in the autumn."

"There you go," Gunnar said. "Off to see the world!"

Then he left, and we turned to Grandma and Grandad, who had been sitting at the kitchen table minding their own business during this little interlude.

"I agree with you anyway," Yngve said as we got into the car to go home. "I think what you wrote was perfectly reasonable."

"Yes, of course it is," I said, laughing, there was something exhilarating about all this.

Cecilie and I talked for hours on the telephone. She trained hard, was enormously disciplined and determined, things came to her easily and she was open to life. But there was also something closed inside her, or silent, I didn't know quite what, but I noticed it. At the weekend I hitchhiked to her place, unless she came to mine. I preferred to be there because I too was treated like a son of the house, though not with the same acceptance as Yngve, I sensed, we were younger and siblings of the other two, something to do with that meant we weren't taken as seriously, I felt, as though we were imitations, as though we weren't ourselves or people in our own right.

When we were alone, we *were*, of course. Autumn descended upon us, we walked into the deepening gloom, hand in hand or entwined, Cecilie delicate yet strong-willed, open yet closed, full of platitudes yet passionately herself.

One evening we went to the primary school I had once attended, not so far from their house. I had been twelve when I left, now I was seventeen. The five years felt like an eternity, there was almost nothing that connected me with the person I had been, and I remembered next to nothing of what I had done then.

But when I saw the school before us, hovering in the mist and darkness, my memories exploded inside me. I let go of Cecilie's hand, approached the building, and pressed my hand against the black timbers. The school really existed, it wasn't merely a place in my imagination. My eyes were moist with emotion, it was as though the whole bounteous world that had been my childhood had returned for an instant.

And then there was the mist. I loved mist and what it did to the world around us.

I remembered Geir and me running around with Anne Lisbet and Solveig in the mist, and the memory had such power that the thought was painful. It tore me to pieces. The soft gravel, the trees glinting with humidity, the lights shimmering, shimmering.

"Strange to think that you actually went to this school," Cecilie said. "I don't connect you with Sandnes at all."

"Neither do I," I said, gripping her hand again. We walked alongside the building, toward the annex, which in my imagination was brand new. I craned my neck the whole way, running my gaze over everything I could, absorbing it all.

"We must have been here at the same time, no?" I said as we clambered down the slope to the football field.

"Yes," she said. "When you were in the sixth grade, I was in the fifth."

"And Kristin was in eighth grade and Yngve his first at gymnas," I said.

"And now I'm in the second at gymnas," she said.

"Yep, the world is tiny," I said.

We laughed, walked across the empty field, and followed the gravel path through the forest to Kongshavn. Only a few hundred meters farther on, the sensation of coming home, of recognizing, was gone, we were stepping into the outer zone of childhood, where I had been only a few times and where the scenery assumed a dreamlike quality which I both recognized and discovered anew.

Everything was so odd. It was so odd to be here, and it was odd to be with Cecilie, the sister of Yngve's girlfriend. It was also odd to go home to Mom and our life there, which differed so starkly from the life I lived away from home.

I had started at another local radio station, it was bigger, all the equipment was new, the rooms were fantastic, they had asked if I wanted to work for them and I did. I still played football, I still wrote for the newspaper, and I went out more and more often. When I wasn't with Hilde, Eirik, and Lars, I drank with Espen and his friends, or with colleagues from the radio station, unless I was hanging out with Jan Vidar. It was hard to take Cecilie into this world. She was something different for me. When I sat in Kjelleren drinking she was infinitely distant; when I was sitting next to her she was infinitely near.

One problem was her devotion to me, it placed me in a superior position, which I didn't want. Yet I was inferior to her, indeed as low as anyone can be, that was where I was for the weeks that became months because what I was slowly realizing, the terrible truth that my relationship with her had revealed, was that I couldn't make love to anyone. I couldn't do it. A naked breast or a hurried caress across the inside of a thigh was enough, I came long before anything had begun.

Every time!

So there I lay, beside her, this girl who was such a delight, and I was pressing my groin against the mattress in an attempt to hide my humiliating secret.

She was young, and for a long time I hoped she wouldn't realize, she probably did though, but I doubted she could imagine it was a permanent condition.

One evening she mentioned that her mother had asked whether she had considered going to the doctor for the contraceptive pill.

She said this with a smile, but there was expectation in her voice, and I, trying to repress it, or deceiving myself into believing this really wasn't happening, began to look for a way out. Not that I didn't want it, I did too of course, no, there were other problems, greater ones, for example, that we lived in separate towns and that I couldn't spend *all* my weekends with her.

Those were my thoughts, at the same time I thought about her devotion, it was immense, she would do anything for me, I knew that, not least through her letters, which were permeated with longing even though they were written barely hours after we had last seen each other.

No, I had to get out of this relationship.

She came over one Saturday morning at the beginning of December, intending to stay until the following day, when her parents would come to pick her up, they wanted to meet Mom, after all she was the future mother-in-law of both of their girls. It was a kind of endorsement of our relationship, and perhaps I didn't want this. We went for a walk, the countryside was frozen, the grass in the meadow below the house glittered with rime in the light from the street lamps, afterward we had dinner with Mom, and then we caught the bus down to the Hotel Caledonien, Cecilie was wearing a red dress, we danced to Chris de Burgh, "Lady in Red," and I thought, no, I can't finish this, I don't want to finish it.

We caught the night bus home, walked hand in hand over the last part, it was cold, she snuggled up to me. We entered the house, took off our coats and I thought: I'm going to do it now. We went upstairs, Cecilie first, she opened the door to my room.

"What are you doing?" I said.

She turned and gaped at me in surprise.

"Going to bed?" she said.

"You're sleeping in there," I said, pointing to Yngve's room, which was adjacent to mine.

"Why?" she said, looking at me with big eyes.

"It's over," I said. "I'm breaking it off. I'm sorry, but it's not working out."

"What did you say?"

"It's *over*," I said. "You have to sleep in there."

She did as I said, her every movement leaden. I undressed and went to bed. She was crying, I could hear her clearly, the wall was thin. I put my fingers in my ears and went to sleep.

The next day was torture.

Cecilie cried, Mom was wondering what was wrong, I could see, but she didn't ask, and neither of us wanted to say anything. After a while her parents drove up. Mom had laid out a big brunch, now we had to sit there and have a nice time, both families. But Cecilie was silent, her eyes were red. Our parents made conversation, I chimed in with an occasional comment. Of course they knew something was wrong, but not what, and probably thought we'd had an argument.

But we had never argued. We had laughed, played, chatted, kissed, gone on walks together, drunk wine together, and lay naked in bed together.

She didn't cry while they were there, she sat quietly and ate very slowly, her movements constrained, and I could sense her parents were very concerned, it was as though they were embracing her with their presence and their actions.

Then at last they left.

Thank God they were going to Arendal. It was far away, and the bridge Yngve represented between the two families was even farther away.

Sometime between Christmas and New Year Dad phoned. He was drunk, I could hear that from the slur. He didn't quite have full control of his voice, there was an added timbre, although the tone didn't sound any more resonant or complex as a result.

"Hi," I said. "Merry Christmas. Are you still in the Canaries?"

"Yes," he said. "We're here for a few more days. It's wonderful to get away from the darkness, you know."

"Yes," I said.

"We're going to have a baby," Dad said. "Unni's pregnant."

"Is she?" I said. "When will she give birth?"

"Just after the summer."

"That's good news," I said.

"Yes, it is," he said. "Now you'll have another brother or a sister."

"That'll be strange," I said.

"I don't think it'll be strange," he said.

“Not in that sense,” I said. “Just that there’ll be such a large difference in age between us. And we won’t be living together.”

“No, you won’t. But you’ll be siblings anyway. That’s as close as you can get.”

“Yes,” I said.

In the kitchen Mom was setting the table. The coffee machine was chugging away with small puffs of steam rising from it. I quickly rubbed my arm several times.

“Is it nice where you are?” I said. “Can you swim there?”

“Oh yes, you bet you can,” he said. “We lie by the pool all day. It’s wonderful to get away from the darkness in Norway, we think.”

There was a silence.

“Is your mother there?” he said.

“Yes,” I said. “Would you like a word with her?”

“No, what would I have to talk about with her?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Don’t ask such stupid questions then.”

“All right.”

“Did you go to Sørbøvåg at Christmas?”

“Yes, we’ve just got back. Half an hour ago in fact.”

“They’re still alive?”

“Oh yes.”

“And Grandma was ill?”

“Yes.”

“You know that’s a hereditary illness she has, don’t you? Parkinson’s.”

“Is it?” I said.

“Yes, so you’re vulnerable. You could get it. And then you’ll know where it came from.”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it,” I said. “Dad, food’s ready here. Have to go. Say hello to Unni and congratulations!”

“Give me a call sometime, Karl Ove, when we’re back. You hardly ever call.”

"Will do. Bye."

"Bye."

I put the phone down and went into the kitchen. The cat had settled on the chair under the table, I could see his bushy tail hanging over the edge. Mom opened the oven door and put some frozen rolls on the shelf.

"There wasn't a lot of food in the house," she said. "But I found some rolls in the freezer. How many do you want?"

I shrugged.

"Four maybe."

She added one more and closed the door.

"Who was it on the phone?"

"Dad."

I pulled out the chair beside the cat and sat down.

"He's in the Canaries, isn't he?" Mom said, crossing the floor to the fridge.

"Yup," I said.

She took out one white and one brown cheese, fetched a chopping board from the counter, put it on the table, and placed the cheeses on it.

"What did he have to say? Were they having a good time?"

"He didn't say much. Just wanted to talk. He was a little drunk, I think."

She put the slicer on top of the white cheese. Removed the pot from the coffee machine, filled the cup on the other side of the table.

"Do you want some?" she said.

"Yes, please," I said, passing over my cup. "But he said one thing that was a bit strange. He said Parkinson's was hereditary. And that I was in the danger zone."

"Did he say that?" Mom said, meeting my eyes.

"Yes, that's precisely what he said."

I cut the rind off the white cheese, moved it to the edge of the plate, changed my mind and threw the rind in the bin under the counter.

"Not much is known about that," Mom said.

"Don't worry," I said. "You don't think I'm worried about it, do you?"

She sat down. I opened the fridge, took the juice from the door and looked at the date: December 31. Shook it. There was a drop left.

"Did he really say that?" Mom said.

"Yes," I said. "But don't give it another thought. He was a bit drunk, as I said."

"Have I ever told you about the first time he met Grandma and Grandpa?" she said.

I shook my head. Opened a cupboard and took out a glass.

"They made a deep impression on him, both of them. But especially Grandma. He said she was like nobility."

"Nobility?" I said, sitting down and pouring the juice into my glass.

"Yes. He saw something special in her. Dignity, he said. You know, it was tough, very different from what he was used to. We weren't poor in any real sense, we always had food and clothes, but things were tight, they were. At least, compared with his childhood home. I don't know what he'd been expecting. But he was surprised. Perhaps also because they dealt with him in a way he was unused to. They took him seriously. They took everyone seriously. Perhaps it was as simple as that."

"How old was he then?"

She smiled.

"We were nineteen, both of us."

"Do you want some juice by the way?" I said. "There's a drop left."

"No, you take it," she said.

I emptied the carton and threw it into the sink. A perfect aim. The sudden noise made the cat stir.

"He talked about her eyes," Mom said. "I can remember that. He said they were piercing yet gentle at the same time."

"That's true," I said.

"Yes, he's always been good at observing others, your father," she said.

"You wouldn't believe it now, the way he behaves," I said, taking a sip of the juice.

The acid taste made me grimace.

"That's partly why I'm telling you," she said. "So you can appreciate that he's more than what he's showing at the moment."

"I realize that," I said.

Some steam escaped from the gap at the top of the oven door and from the outlet at the back of the stove. How long had they been in now? Six minutes? Seven?

"He was a very gifted person. There were so many sides to him. Much more so than any of the others around him – when I met him anyway. And there can be no doubt that it was a problem that his talents were never really appreciated when he was growing up. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes, of course."

"Mm."

"But if he was as gifted as you say he was, how could he do to us what he did when we were growing up? I was petrified of him. All the time."

"I don't know," she said. "Perhaps he was confused. Perhaps he was driven by external demands incompatible with what was inside him. He grew up with so many demands on him, so many rules and regulations, and when he met me I brought along other demands that probably didn't suit him at all. Well, obviously they didn't."

"Yes, he mentioned something about that," I said.

"Did he?"

"Yes."

"So you talk about all this?"

I smiled.

"I wouldn't exactly say that. It's more him sitting there and moaning. But I think the rolls are done now."

I got up, walked around the table, opened the oven door, took out the burning-hot rolls one by one as quickly as I could, put them in the bread basket, and set it on the table.

"Lots of external rules and monumental internal chaos, is that your diagnosis?" I said.

She smiled.

"You could put it that way," she said.

I split open a roll and then handed her the bread knife. The butter I spread melted the second it made contact with the grayish surface, which was partly doughy from the heat. I cut myself two slices of brown cheese and placed them on top. They melted too.

"Why didn't you just leave?" I said.

"Leave Dad?"

I nodded with my mouth full.

"I've wondered about that many times myself," she said. "I don't know."

We ate for a while without speaking. It was odd to think we had been in Sørbøvåg only this morning. It seemed like much longer. It was a different world.

"Well, I don't have a good answer to that," she said at length. "There were so many reasons. Divorce would have been a defeat. And then we'd been together all our lives. That creates a lot of bonds of course. And I loved him, that goes without saying."

"I don't quite understand that," I said. "But I hear what you're saying."

"You can say what you like about your father," she said. "But he wasn't boring to live with."

"No," I said, and stood up to get my tobacco pouch from my jacket in the hall.

"What about Kjartan then?" I said as I returned. "Surely there's a kind of inner chaos in him too?"

"Is there?" Mom said.

"Isn't there?" I said, and opened the pouch, took a rolling paper, filled it with tobacco, and plucked a bit out to create better air flow.

"Maybe," she said. "At any rate, he's searching for something. He's been searching all his life, I would say. Now he's found it he's holding on to it."

"You're thinking of communism?"

"For example."

"What about you?" I said, rolling the paper back and forth around the tobacco. "Are you searching?"

She laughed.

"Me, no! I'm trying to survive. That's what I'm doing."

I licked the gum on the edge, stuck it down, and lit up.

The next evening I went out, first of all I sat around drinking with a few others in a gymnas friend's house, we pinched a few beers from the cellar and were thrown out, ran downhill to town, everywhere was covered with snow, it cracked and creaked beneath our shoes, and the freezing-cold wind was all around us, buffeting against our faces as we walked, we forced our way through, it was endless. At the Shell station in Elvegate we flocked around a little man who had been talking to one of the girls there and laughed at him, we sang, "Here comes toughie, toughie, toughie, tough," and then, "Here comes dickie, dickie, dickie, dick" to the tune of "Here comes Pippi." I kicked him in the ass as he turned and everyone laughed. After we had paid and left, he was standing there waiting for us all, with a pal. The pal was much bigger than him. Who could possibly have guessed? "Him," the little man said, pointing at me over by the pumps. The big pal came over to me, said nothing, then looked me straight in the eye. A second passed, perhaps two, then he punched me. I collapsed in a heap. Hot blood ran from my nose down onto the concrete. What happened? I thought. Had he punched me? It didn't hurt.

Behind me I heard Hauk. I'm only sixteen! he was shouting. I'm only sixteen! I'm only sixteen! I sat up. They ran down the hill. Hauk and two others in front of him, the big man at the back. He was brandishing a knife. I got up and went over to the girls, whom no one had threatened. Marianne dashed into the toilet and emerged with an armful of paper, and I wiped off the blood. Not long afterward, Hauk and the others returned from the opposite direction, they were still frightened, went into the kiosk and asked the assistant to call the police. The sparkle went out of the evening, the group dispersed, suddenly I was the only person left who wanted to keep going, and I had to catch a taxi home, sitting on the back seat while my nose and head pounded and throbbed.

The moment I opened the door, I knew that Yngve had come home. Luggage scattered across the floor, his jacket on a hook, his sturdy boots. I decided to surprise him. My joy at the idea made my chest bubble with excitement, and when I opened the door, switched on the light and shouted, "Da-da!" and he sat up in bed, utterly bewildered, I burst into laughter. I completely lost control, just kept on laughing, he looked at me, what happened, he asked, what's up with your nose, I was laughing so much I couldn't answer, he said, go to bed, Karl Ove, we can talk tomorrow.

"Did you just get back from China?" I said, continuing to laugh, closed the door behind me, and went into my room, where I undressed and climbed into bed still cracking up. My head felt as if it were a box full of objects swaying to and fro whenever I moved it. Now they were continuing to sway even though my head was still, I noticed, and then I fell asleep.

I woke up with my face aching. I remembered what had happened and sat up in horror.

Then I remembered Yngve was here.

Great.

There was a faint smell of smoke, they had lit the fire. Their low voices could be heard from the floor below, they were probably sitting in the kitchen having breakfast.

I put on a T-shirt and a pair of jeans and went downstairs.

They looked at me. Yngve smiled.

"Just need to wash up," I said, and went into the bathroom.

Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.

My nose was slightly crooked, the bone beneath the bridge. In addition, it was extremely swollen and my nostrils were full of crusted blood. I washed it carefully and went back into them.

"What happened to you yesterday?" Yngve said.

"Someone punched me," I said, sat down and put a roll on my plate. "I didn't do anything. A guy at the gas station came over and just punched me. Then he ran after the others I was with and chased them down the hill with a knife. Thugs."

Mom sighed, but she said nothing and in a second it was over because Yngve talked about China, which I assumed he must have been doing for a long time. He was full of it. He talked and talked, and I could visualize it:

throngs of people swarming around Kristin when they arrived, attracted by her blond hair, what fun it had been on the Trans-Siberian Railway, how wild it had been in Tibet and how foreign the colors were. Big yellow rivers and tree-clad cliffs, the alien cities and cheap hotels, the Great Wall of China, ferries and trains, crowds of people everywhere, dogs, hens, as far from the deserted snow-covered frozen countryside as it was possible to be.

Two days later, on New Year's Eve, Yngve went to Vindilhytta while I went down to Bassen's wearing shiny new shoes and a suit I had rented. Hanne was there. I drank vodka and juice, I wanted to dance with her, we did, I drank more, I said we should get together even though it was ages since I had last seen her, it was almost an obsession, she laughed off my suggestion, I was offended, danced with other girls, got more and more drunk, and at twelve when everyone gathered together on the road, including people from the other houses in the vicinity, things degenerated, people lit rockets and held them until the very last second so that they whizzed around the ones standing there, people screamed and shouted, there were bangs and explosions, and I watched Hanne, she was shivering, and she was so beautiful, she really was, why couldn't I be hers and stand there with my arm around her? I thought, and then a rocket landed by her feet.

People screamed and ran away.

But this was my chance, so I ran forward, I went to kick it away and just as I did, it exploded. It was a bizarre feeling, my calf went all hot, and looking down I saw my trousers in tatters. Blood was flowing. There was even a big hole in my shoe! I refused to go to the emergency room, someone washed the blood off with a cloth and wound a bandage around my leg, I shouted that I was Hamsun's Lieutenant Glahn and had shot myself in the foot so that Hanne would realize how much I loved her, jumped around in tattered trousers and with the bandage soaked in blood, I'm Lieutenant Glahn, I yelled, and I have a vague memory of sitting on a chair in a corner and crying, but I am not absolutely sure. At any rate I got home at five, I remember asking the taxi driver to stop by the mailboxes, as I always did, so the engine noise wouldn't wake Mom, and I put my trousers and shoes at the back of the wardrobe before going to sleep. The next morning I took off the bandage, put it in a plastic bag and shoved it to the bottom of the rubbish bin, washed the wound, which was quite deep, put a plaster over it, and went in to have a hearty breakfast.

We don't live our lives alone, but that doesn't mean we see those alongside whom we live our lives. When Dad moved to Northern Norway and was no longer physically in front of me with his body and his voice, his temper and his eyes, in a way he disappeared from my life, in the sense that he was reduced to a kind of discomfort I occasionally felt when he called or when something reminded me of him, then a kind of zone within me was activated, and in that zone lay all my feelings for him, but he was not there.

Later, in his notebooks, I read about the Christmas when he called from the Canary Islands and the weeks that followed. Here he stands before me as he was, in midlife, and perhaps that is why reading them is so painful for me, he wasn't only much more than my feelings for him but infinitely more, a complete and living person in the midst of his life.

It was Yngve who found his notebooks. A few weeks after the funeral he rented a large car, drove back to Kristiansand and got Dad's things from the garage, and then he drove to the Østland town where Dad had lived for his last years and collected the little that was left there, then he had it all sent to Stavanger, and he put it into the loft until I arrived and we could go through it together.

When he called that evening in the autumn of 1998, he said that for a moment he had been convinced Dad was alive and was following him in a car on the motorway.

"There I was, in a car full of his things," he said. "Can you imagine how furious he would have been if he'd found out? It's absolutely absurd of course, but I'm *sure* it was him following me."

"It gets me in the same way," I said. "Whenever the phone rings or someone buzzes at the door, I think it's him."

"Anyway," Yngve said, "I've found some diaries he'd been keeping. Well, actually, they're notebooks. He jotted down a few notes every day. From 1986, 1987, and 1988. You've got to read them."

"Did he write a diary?" I said.

"Not exactly. Just some notes."

"What does he say?"

"You'll have to read them."

When I went to Yngve's some days later, we threw away nearly everything Dad had left behind. I took his rubber boots, which I still wear ten years later, and his binoculars, which are on my desk as I am writing this, and a set of crockery, as well as some books. And then there were the notebooks.

Wednesday 7 January

Up early, 5:30. Pjall.

The shower was cold.

Bus 6:30 from Puerto Rico. Took a quick swig here too.

At the airport. Bought a Walkman. Dep. 9:30. Delayed – Kristiansand 16:40. Flight to Oslo 17:05. Problem.

The same in Alta. Met Haraldsen here. Via Lakselv (–31°C)

Taxi home. Cold house. Warmed myself on duty-free. Hard day.

Thursday 8 January

Tried to get up for work. But had to call Haraldsen and throw in the towel. Grinding abstinence – stayed in bed all day . . . I made an attempt to read Newsweek. *Managed a few TV progs. School tomorrow?*

Friday 9 January

Up at 7:00. Felt lousy at breakfast.

Work. Survived the first three lessons. Had terrible diarrhea in lunch break and had to give the HK class a free. Home for repair – rum and Coke. Incredible how it helps. Quiet afternoon and evening. Fell asleep before TV news.

Saturday 10 January
Slept in. Downed the sherry in the kitchen. Evening spent in the company of blue Smirnoff!

Sunday 11 January
Had a feeeling when I woke up it was going to be a bad day. I was right!

Monday 12 January
Slept badly. Tossing and turning and hearing voices. Work. Started with English background. Hard going when you're out of shape. Evening classes even more stressful!

Tuesday 13 January
Another sleepless night. My body won't accept being without alcohol. Went to work.

Tuesday 20 January
Another bad night. Always like that when you don't take any "medicine." After an hour and a half you're too exhausted to do a good job. Lutefisk for dinner – my favorite. I had a siesta after dinner – a very long nap – up at 10. Worked till 3. Working through the night is the norm now!

And so it goes on. He drinks every weekend, but also more and more often during the week, and then he tries to stop, to have some alcohol-free days or even weeks, but it doesn't work, he can't sleep, he is restless, hears voices, and is so worn out it's almost a relief when he finally goes to the liquor store or buys beer and comes home, and all his inner conflict eases.

Under "Wednesday 4 March" his notebook just says *Yngve, Karl Ove, Kristin*. We went up north in the winter vacation to visit them. Dad paid for us all. Unni had invited her son, Fredrik, who was there when we arrived. I flew with Kristin from Kristiansand to Bergen, I was a bit nervous about it of course, because of what had happened between Cecilie and me, but she didn't say a word about it and treated me as she always had. Yngve joined us in Bergen, then we flew up to Tromsø, where we changed to a propeller plane for the last part.

The terrain beneath was wild and deserted, there was barely a house or a road to be seen, and when we reached the airport there was no pilot announcement of a slow descent, no, the plane simply swooped down like a bird of prey that had seen its victim, I thought, and the moment the wheels touched down on the runway, we braked and were hurled forward toward the seat in front.

The passengers filed out of the plane across the tarmac to the tiny terminal building. It was cold and overcast, the countryside was white with a scattering of shiny black patches where the rock was too steep for snow to settle.

Dad stood waiting in the arrivals hall. He was formal and tense. Asked us how the trip had been, didn't listen to the answer. His hands shook as he inserted the key into the ignition and let go of the hand brake. He was silent for the whole journey through the vast misty desolate terrain to the town. I observed his hand, he rested it on the gearshift, but as soon as he raised it, it shook.

The building he parked under was outside the center, facing the sea, on an estate that must have been built in the 1970s, judging by the shape of the houses. They had rented the entire upper floor and had a big balcony outside the living room. The windows were gritty, I supposed the salt from the spray had caused that, even though it was several hundred meters to the sea from there. Unni met us in the doorway, smiled, and gave everyone a hug. A boy who must have been Fredrik was sitting in a chair watching TV and got up to say hi.

He smiled, we smiled.

He was tall, had dark hair, and was a distinct presence in the room. When he sat down again I went into the hall for my backpack and caught a glimpse of Dad as I passed the open kitchen door. He was standing by the fridge and knocking back a beer.

Unni showed us where we would be sleeping. I left my things there. When I got back the first bottle was on the table while he was attending to the second. He belched quietly and put the bottle down next to the first, wiped the froth from his beard, and turned to me.

The tension was gone.

"Are you hungry, Karl Ove?" he said.

"I guess I am," I said. "But there's no hurry. We can eat when it suits you."

"I've bought steaks and red wine today. We can have that. Or shrimp. They've got good shrimp up here, you know."

"Both fine by me," I said.

He took another beer from the fridge.

"It's good to have beer on a holiday," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"You can have some later, with the food," he said.

"Great," I said.

Yngve and Kristin had sat down on the sofa. They were looking around the way you do when you are somewhere new, discreetly absorbing their surroundings, constantly aware of each other, not necessarily with their glances but in the total way that lovers can be when everything is about the two of them. Kristin was a miracle of joy and naturalness, and that rubbed off on Yngve, he was fully open to it and wore an almost childish glow that he only had when he was with her.

Fredrik sat in his chair on the other side of the table and shyly answered the questions Yngve and Kristin asked him. He was a year younger than me, lived somewhere in Østland with his father, played soccer, was interested in fishing, liked U2 and the Cure.

I sat down in the chair beside him. On the wall above the sofa hung the blue picture by Sigvaldsen that Dad had taken with him after the divorce, on the two longer walls there were more pictures we used to have at home. The suite of furniture in the other corner was the one Dad had always had downstairs in his office, one of the carpets on the floor came from there, too. I recognized the furniture from Unni's flat.

Dad sat down on the sofa. He put one arm around Unni, in his other hand he held a bottle of beer. I remember thinking I was glad Yngve and Kristin were here.

Dad asked Yngve a question, which he answered briefly but not in an uncivil tone. Kristin slowly tried to bring harmony to the situation with questions about the town and the school where they worked. Unni answered.

After a while Dad turned to Fredrik. His tone was light and good-natured. Fredrik's body language was dismissive, it was obvious he didn't like Dad, and I could understand why. Only an imbecile would not have heard the false ring to Dad's voice, as though he were talking to a child, and not realized that he was doing this for Unni's sake.

Fredrik gave a surly response, Dad stared into the middle distance for some seconds, Unni said something kind but reproachful to Fredrik, who writhed with discomfort.

Dad sat motionless, drinking. Then he got to his feet, hitched up his trousers, and went into the kitchen, where he started making dinner. We stayed in the living room chatting with Unni. By the time the food was on the table, at about eight, Dad was drunk, he wanted to calm the waters but his efforts were too bumbling and he made a fool of himself. Fredrik in particular suffered. We were used to Dad, we had nothing else, but Fredrik had lost his mother to this idiot.

Dad sat silent for a long time with a stupid, disgruntled expression on his face. Then he got up and went into the bedroom. Unni followed him, we heard their voices, they came back as though nothing had happened, chatted about the holiday they'd had and the dispute they were having with their travel company. It transpired that Dad had collapsed in Gran Canaria, fallen over in the room, and had been taken to the hospital by ambulance. He said it was heart failure. At any rate he had sued the tour operator because there had been several incidents – arguments with the reps, arguments with other tourists at the hotel – and now they were sure that everyone had been against them, indeed bullied them almost, and that had led to Dad's heart problem. He had been kept at the hospital for two days. He showed us photos, and some of them were an unpleasant sight: we saw photos of a couple on a terrace, the camera zoomed in, the couple got up, shook their fists, and walked toward the camera. What were they doing? See how nasty they were, Dad said. What fatheads. They're as bad as Gunnar. What's wrong with Gunnar then? Yngve said. Gunnar? Dad repeated. OK, I'll tell you. For a whole summer he was snooping round the flat in Elvegate. He was supposed to be keeping an eye on me, you know, making sure I wasn't drinking. He's so self-righteous, that brother of mine. He told me so too, that perhaps I ought to cut down, can you imagine? Is he his brother's keeper? I was an adult when he was only knee-high to a grasshopper. Can't a man have a beer in his own garden? He really went too far. And just look how he ingratiates himself with Grandma and Grandad. He's after the cabin. He's always wanted the cabin. And he'll get it in the end. He'll inject them with his poison as well.

I didn't say anything. Met Yngve's gaze.

How could he stoop so low? They were brothers, Gunnar was his younger brother, and he not only had some order in his life, the children he brought up were close to him, they trusted him, I could see that whenever I saw them, there was not a trace of fear in their eyes, on the contrary, they liked their father. If he had told Dad he was drinking too much, he was perfectly within his rights, who else was going to tell him? Me? Ha ha, don't make me laugh. And the cabin? Gunnar was the only one of the brothers who used it and always had, he loved living out there. Dad didn't. If Dad got his hands on the cabin, he would sell it.

I watched him, he sat there with his eyes brimming and the slightly stupid expression around his mouth he always had when he was drunk.

"Perhaps it would be best to show the slides tomorrow," Yngve said. "It's already late."

"What slides?" Dad said.

"Of China," Yngve said.

"Oh, that's right, yes," Dad said.

Unni stretched her arms above her head.

"Well," she said. "Now I really *do* have to go to bed."

"I'm coming too," Dad said. "I'll just have a few words with my two boys, who have come a long way to see their dad."

Unni ruffled his hair and went into their bedroom. As soon as the door was closed Fredrik got up.

"Goodnight," he said.

"Are you off, too?" Dad said. "You aren't pregnant, are you?"

He laughed, I looked at Fredrik and raised my eyebrows to indicate to him that he wasn't alone in what he thought.

"I'm beat too," Kristin said. "Either it's the journey or it's the sea air. Whichever it is, it's goodnight anyway!"

After she had gone the three of us sat there saying nothing. Dad gazed into the air and finished his beer, then went to get another. I wasn't drunk, but I could feel the alcohol.

"So here we are," Dad said.

"Yes," I said.

"Just like in the old days. Do you remember, in Tybakken? Yngve and Karl Ove. Sitting in the kitchen and having breakfast."

"How could we ever forget?" Yngve said.

"Yes," said Dad. "It wasn't an easy time for me either. I'd like you to know that."

"Times aren't easy for lots of people," Yngve said. "But it's not everyone who takes it out on their children."

"No," Dad said.

He started crying.

"I'm so happy to have you here," he said.

"Do you have to get so sentimental?" Yngve said. "Can't we talk about this in a normal way?"

"Unni's got a new life in her belly now. It'll be either your brother or your sister. Think about that."

He smiled through the tears, dried them, emptied the bottle, and rolled himself a cigarette.

Yngve and I exchanged glances. It was hopeless, you got nothing from him but hot air.

"I'm going to bed," Yngve said.

Dad said nothing as he left. I didn't want him to be on his own and stayed a little while longer, but when he made no sign of either leaving or speaking, and just sat there staring into the room, eventually I got up too and went to bed.

After breakfast the next day Yngve, Kristin, Fredrik, and I went to town and wandered through the snow-covered, windblown, night-black streets. While Yngve and Kristin went into a clothes shop I sat in a café chatting with Fredrik. We exchanged a few names of bands, established a kind of base, and then we started talking about what we could actually do in this godforsaken town. We couldn't just sit on our hands in the flat. He said there was a swimming pool not far away, perhaps we could go there later in the day? That's a good idea, Unni said when we went home. Yes, a great idea, Dad said from inside the living room. I haven't been to a pool in years. Are you going to join them?! Unni said. Yes, why not? he said. I could see Fredrik wasn't happy, but I thought it might be OK, the evening was a long time away. Unni drove us because Dad had drunk a couple of beers. We went into the changing room with our gear and sat down on the bench.

Dad started undressing.

I turned away. I had never seen him undress, I had never been in the same room as him before when he was doing something so intimate. Sitting on the bench, he folded his trousers, rolled his socks in a ball, and undid his shirt.

I felt myself getting hot and flustered, didn't know where to look or what to do with myself, because now he was taking off his underpants and for a few seconds he was completely naked.

I had never seen him naked before, and a shudder went through me as I cast my eyes over him.

He looked at me and smiled.

Everything else had been removed, there was just the smile he sent me before turning away to put on his trunks.

I put on mine and together we walked into the spacious swimming area.

When we returned home, Unni had made dinner, a fondue, Dad drank a bottle of red wine on his own, afterward Yngve and Kristin showed their slides of China. Unni had borrowed a projector from school. They talked and explained, Dad sat and looked on with no interest at all, I could see Yngve was getting annoyed, why did it bother him, I thought, he should give up on Dad.

Fredrik was ironic with Dad, who got angry and rebuked him, which made Unni furious, she went to her room, he struggled to his feet and followed, they shouted at each other while, in the living room, we pretended everything was fine. Something smashed against the wall, a shout became a scream, then there was silence. Dad emerged, said nothing, had a drink, suddenly looked up at us and grinned that inane grin of his, looked at Fredrik and said they could go fishing tomorrow if he wanted, his sons weren't interested in fishing.

Of all the days Dad described in his notebooks this is the only one I have a clear memory of, presumably because I saw him naked for the first and only time in his life.

In the notebook he wrote:

> Friday 6 March
> *With K.O. and Fredrik in the swimming pool.*
> *Nice to swim again. Home for fondue and slides of China.*
> *Talk after. Too much to drink. Scenes. Unni fed up – broke clock.*
> *Shame.*

On the last evening in Northern Norway I was alone again in the living room after the others had gone to bed. I smoked, made myself some tea, read a book I found, got up and found their photo album, wanting to see the disconcerting pictures once more, and at the back I came across some papers from which it emerged that the travel company had been informed by the hospital where Dad had been admitted that the heart problems had been induced by an excess of medicine and alcohol.

I read this with a chill that ran through my whole body.

Medicine?

What sort of medicine was he taking?

There were several documents, I flicked through them, some were connected with a lawsuit he had clearly been involved in that spring. The trigger was an incident with a Securitas guard at the bus station in Kristiansand, and as I read it I remembered that he had mentioned something about it once, he had been harassed, but I knew nothing about him taking the matter to the law courts. However, he had lost resoundingly and had been ordered to pay the costs.

What was he doing?

I put the photo album back, brushed my teeth, and went into the narrow room where my bed was, undressed, got into bed, switched off the light, and rested my head on the pillow.

But I couldn't sleep. After a while I got up, sat down on the sofa closest to the little telephone table, picked up the receiver, and dialed Hanne's number.

I would do this on occasion, call her in the night. If her father answered, I would put down the receiver, but he never did, she had a phone next to her room and was always quick to answer. Also this time.

We chatted for an hour. I told her about what was going on here, that I would have a brother or a sister by the end of the summer and I wasn't sure what that would be like. I told her about my father and about Yngve and Kristin. She listened, laughed when I said something funny, and somehow the heaviness in me lifted and we began to talk about other things, the exams that were in the offing, all my ditched classes, her choir, what we would do after we left school.

Suddenly the door burst open and Dad charged in.

"I have to hang up," I said, and put down the receiver.

"What on earth are you doing?!" he said. "Do you know what the time is?"

"Sorry," I said. "I was trying to speak as softly as I could."

"And who said you could use the phone? How long have you been talking?"

"An hour."

"An hour! Do you have any idea how much that costs? I paid for your ticket here! And this is how you thank me? Go to bed, now."

I lowered my head so that he wouldn't see the tears in my eyes, got up, my body half-turned away from him, and walked to my room. My heart was pounding, terror had spread to every part of me, I was shaking as I lifted a leg to pull off my jeans.

I waited until I was sure he had gone to sleep, then tiptoed out again, found a pen, some paper, and an envelope, wrote an ironic note about how sorry I was for having used his precious phone, anyway here was the money for the call. Then I put a hundred-krone note in the envelope, sealed it, wrote his name on it, and slipped it onto the bookshelf, where he would probably find it after I had gone.

At home I seldom gave Dad a thought, apart from when he called or his name came up. But there were still problems. I had gradually begun to live a double life. I liked being at home in the evening with Mom, we either drank tea and chatted, listened to music, watched TV, or did our own work, but I also liked being out at night and drinking. I didn't have a driver's license and buses were few and far between, but Mom always said she would pick me up, it wasn't an issue, all I had to do was call, even if it was in the middle of the night. I called, she answered, an hour later I opened the car door and hopped in. She had no objection to me having a glass, but she wasn't happy if I was drunk, to put it mildly, so I had to hide that from her. I solved this by sleeping at people's houses or I said she didn't need to pick me up, there were people around with a car, and sometimes there were, then I got a lift, sometimes I took a taxi, sometimes the night bus. She didn't wait up, she trusted me, from my behavior at home she had every reason to. And it was the real me when I was with her. It was also the real me when I was with Hilde. It was also the real me when I got drunk with Espen or any of the others at school. I was the real me, but the real *me*s were irreconcilable.

There were other matters I hid from Mom. For example, my missing school. I did it more and more, I was absent almost more often than I was present. She caught me one day, I hadn't gone to school, I was at home relaxing, she turned up earlier than usual and we had a fight. She said I had to go to school, it was important, I had to get a grip on what was important. She said I'd had a strict upbringing, much too strict, and now she was trying to give me some freedom, but I was abusing it. This was all about norms and they had to come from me. I said school wasn't the most important thing in my life, she said that was all well and good, but now you're at school, this is what you do and you have to fulfill your obligations. Can you promise me that? Yes, I could. I didn't keep the promise, but I camouflaged what I did better. I had a more-than-understanding homeroom teacher, he had realized I was having a difficult time, on a school trip he had been sitting on the seat next to me and said, I know you're having a difficult time at the moment, Karl Ove, say if there is anything I can do to help or if there is anything you want to talk to me about. I smiled and said I would, and for a few seconds tears were imminent, the concern for me had come out of the blue, but the next moment they were gone. Naturally enough it wasn't because I was going through a difficult time that I had been ditching school, on the contrary it was because I liked doing it so much, drifting around, meeting people in cafés, stopping by the radio station, buying records, or just lying around at home and reading. I had decided ages ago that I would not continue my education after school, what we learned was just nonsense, basically what life was about was living, and living in the way you want, in other words, enjoying your life. Some enjoyed their lives best by working, others by not working. OK, I was aware that I would need money, which meant that I would also have to work, but not all the time and not on something that would deplete all my energy and eat into my soul, leaving me like one of the middle-aged half-wits who guarded their hedges and peered across at their neighbors to see if their status symbols were as wonderful as their own.

I didn't want that.

But money was a problem.

Mom had started working overtime to make ends meet. As well as her job as a teacher at the nursing college she had agreed to do extra shifts at Eg Hospital on weekends and holidays. The house must have been making deep inroads into her money. She had bought Dad out and taken on big loans. I barely noticed, I had the money I earned from the newspaper and Dad's child support, and when that was gone it was still possible to get something out of Mom, so that was fine. She did occasionally criticize my priorities, how could I buy three new LPs one Friday afternoon when I was walking around in shoes with the sole flapping off? They're just material things, I responded, objects, while music was completely different. This was the spirit, for Christ's sake. This is what we need, really, and I do mean *really*, and it's important to prioritize it. Everyone prioritizes. Everyone wants new jackets and new shoes and new cars and new houses and new caravans and new mountain cabins and new boats. But I don't. I buy books and records because they say something about what life is about, what it is to be a human here on earth. Do you understand?

"Yes, you're probably right, in a way. But isn't it terribly impractical to walk around with your soles coming off? And it doesn't look very good, either."

"What do you want me to do? I don't have any money. I prioritized music this time."

"I'll have a little surplus this month. You can have it to buy some shoes. But you'll have to promise me you'll spend it on shoes and nothing else."

"I promise. Thanks very much."

And so from her office in the nursing college I went to town and bought some sneakers and a Nice Price LP.

At Easter the soccer team was going to a training camp in Switzerland, of course I wanted to go with them, but it was quite expensive and Mom said no, she was sorry, she wished it didn't have to be like this, but that was how it was, we didn't have the money.

A week before the departure date she slapped the money on the table in front of me.

"Hope it's not too late," she said.

I called the coach, not too late, no, he said, you can come along.

"Wonderful!" Mom said.

During the days before we were due to leave I finished an article on Prince that I had been mulling over for ages. His new record, *Sign o' the Times*, was absolutely brilliant and I wanted everyone to know.

Then we left. Bus through Denmark and Germany, spirits were high, we were drinking duty-free beer on the way, and when we got to the hotel, Bjørn, Jøgge, Ekse, and I jumped off while the bus continued over the border to Italy, where a Serie A match was on the program. We preferred to be in a bar drinking. When they came back at ten we were in a fantastic mood while they were exhausted after the journey and everyone wanted to go to bed early. I shared a room with Bjørn, it was on the fourth floor and more luxurious than any room I had ever slept in, with attractive furniture, mirrors, and a carpet on the floor. We reclined on the beds, bottles of beer in hand. It was eleven at the latest, what about a trip into town to have a look? The rule was no noise after ten, by eleven everyone was supposed to be in bed, but they hadn't exactly posted guards on the doors. We waited for a while, not wishing to risk meeting anyone in the corridors, then we went out, hailed a taxi, mumbled, "Downtown," leaned back, and were driven along unfamiliar streets with the soft light from the street lamps shining down over us. The driver stopped in a square, we paid, got out, and strolled toward the center. Soon we came across a large building, we could hear music inside, there were bouncers on the door, we went in. There were discotheques, bars, an enormous casino, and a stage where beautiful women stripped and other scantily clad women, equally beautiful, wandered around the audience.

Bjørn and I exchanged glances. What was this fantastic place?

We drifted round, looking and drinking, hung around the stage and watched the striptease, discovered to our horror that the scantily clad girls who were walking between the tables were the same ones as those dancing on the stage, hardly had we watched one go up than she was down and walking past us on the floor. We went into a disco, bar-hopped there, wandered around the room with the roulette tables, where the men were dressed in dark suits and all the women wore evening gowns, ended up in front of double doors at the other end and saw a hall beyond, with groups of people standing around chatting while waiters dressed in black and white carried trays of wineglasses and canapés. We didn't talk to anyone else, drank nonstop, left at about half past three in the morning, and six hours later were running around a field in a semiconscious state. Slept for a couple of hours before the next round of training, had dinner, drank a few beers in the bar, and then it was off to find a taxi to go to this palace, where we floated around like in a dream until the following morning. Then we had to get up and go skiing in the Alps, there was something dreamlike about that too, for the sky was completely blue, the sun was shining, everywhere we looked white mountains towered in the air, and after a few minutes on the lift, with our skis dangling beneath us, everything was perfectly still. As though we had passed into another state. All that could be heard was the low hum of the lift close to us, otherwise it was completely and utterly still. A sense of jubilation filled me, for the silence was as vast as an ocean, while there was also something painful about it, as there is in all joy. The silence high up in the mountains, surrounded on all sides by beauty, allowed me to see myself or become aware of myself, not in relation to my psyche or my morality, this had nothing to do with my personal qualities, this was all about being here, this body which was ascending, I was here now, I was experiencing this, and then I would die.

I slept on the bus back, had a headache when I awoke, drank a few beers in the bar, had dinner, downed a few more because tonight everyone was going out, there was a disco near the hotel, we were there until one in the morning. I danced and drank and had a good word for everyone I saw. On the way back Bjørn and I climbed up onto a roof. It wasn't any old roof, it was a Swiss roof, turret after turret soared upward, we shinned up, climbed and sweated and finally stood aloft, roughly thirty meters above the parking lot, where a small crowd had gathered. Our legs trembled as we shouted into the night, then we crouched down and began the descent. When there were only a few meters left two men with flashlights ran over. The beams wandered back and forth in the blackness. *Polizei*, they said, and came to a halt beneath us. One was holding his ID card and shining the flashlight on it. That must be Chief Inspector Derrick, I giggled. We jumped down. Our football coach came over to us, he could speak some German, and explained the situation to the two police officers, who, despite their skeptical glares, let us go. On our way down the hill to the hotel one of the players from the senior team came over to us. He said he thought we were so courageous, we were so tough, going out and drinking every night and climbing up that roof, he really looked up to us, he said, and wished he could do things like that, he didn't dare, he wasn't as brave as we were and, he said, I admire you.

That was the word he used. Admire.

I would never have believed it, I said to Bjørn after he had disappeared into the group behind us. No, said Bjørn. That wasn't bad, I said. He admires us. Bjørn looked at me. Shit, I said, the police coming and shining their flashlights on their badges. *Polizei! Polizei!* We laughed. Then it struck me that he knew we had been out drinking at night. Did that mean everyone knew? What did it matter anyway? The worst that could happen was that we would be barred from playing, but this was the fifth division we were talking about and the end-of-school festivities were in sight, so it wasn't a big deal.

When we returned everyone had gathered in our room. Some of the senior team had brought girlfriends with them on the trip, a couple were here, and I saw Bjørn talking to one of them, Amanda, who went out with Jøran. She was around twenty-five. Was Bjørn really trying it on with her? Here?

Yes, he was. As people began to withdraw he did too and I was left alone on my bed, I fell asleep fully clothed, only to be awoken an hour later by Bjørn shaking me.

"Amanda's coming," he said. "Could you go somewhere else? For half an hour?"

Befuddled by sleep, I got up.

"OK," I said, went to the window and opened it.

"You're not going to go out there, are you? This is the fourth floor or have you forgotten?"

"No," I said. "It'll be fine."

Beneath the window, all the way, ran a brick ledge almost the width of my feet. Two meters above it there was another. I stood on the lower one, gripped the upper one tightly and then shuffled along centimeter by centimeter. Bjørn watched me with his head out the window.

"Don't do this," he said. "Come back."

"Now you're with Amanda and I'm here. I'll be back in half an hour."

He eyed me for a moment. Then he closed the window. I looked down. There was a large fountain outside the entrance, around it an open square, on the margins a few parked cars. A high brick wall separated the hotel grounds from the road beyond. There was no one around, but that wasn't so strange, it had to be three in the morning at least.

I slowly shuffled toward the window of the room adjoining ours. The curtains were drawn, there was nothing to see. I edged back, stopped by the window, leaned forward and peered in. They were lying on Bjørn's bed and kissing, their legs intertwined, Bjørn's hands were sliding up and down her thigh under her dress. I straightened up, took a few steps to the side, squinted down again. Still deserted. How long had I been there now? Ten minutes? I let go of the ledge with one hand, patted my jacket for cigarettes and my lighter, succeeded in knocking one out, sticking it in my mouth, and lighting it without swaying once. When the cigarette was finished and lay like a small glowing eye on the tarmac far below, I shuffled sideways and banged on the window. Bjørn jumped to his feet. Amanda sat up. Bjørn came over to the window, Amanda ran out the door, Bjørn turned, ready to give chase, or so it seemed, but then he reconsidered and opened the window for me.

"Five more minutes," he said. "Couldn't you have given me five more minutes?"

"How was I supposed to know?" I said. "From where I was standing it didn't look like you were making much progress."

"Were you watching?"

"Not at all," I said. "I was just kidding. But now I want to get some sleep. You should too, if you ask me. You've got a tough day with Jøran ahead of you."

Bjørn snorted. "He's too conceited to believe she would want anyone else."

"He's all right, I think," I said.

"Sure, I do too," Bjørn said. "But Amanda's more than all right."

He laughed. I lay down on the bed and fell asleep in an instant, without having found the answer to the enigmatic and somewhat vexing question: why would Amanda want Bjørn? What had he done to deserve that?

On the last evening in Lucerne the bus stood with its engine idling outside the hotel after dinner. Everyone was going out on the town. The destination was a secret. It turned out, however, to be our casino. While the other juniors wandered around slack-jawed, Bjørn and I sat nonchalantly at a table in the striptease venue drinking white wine.

"I got her number today," Bjørn said. "She said I should phone her when we were home."

"Why on earth would she do that?" I said. "Has she left Jøran?"

Bjørn shook his head. "No. They're together. But aren't you happy for me?"

"Yes, she's nice."

"Nice? She's great. Absolutely great. And she's twenty-four!"

We finished our wine and went for a look round. I lost sight of Bjørn fairly soon and cruised around on my own. By the door to the big hall, on a sudden impulse, I looked in. What's going on in here? I asked a small bald man with glasses. It's a conference, he answered. Who for? I said. Biologists, he said. OK, I said. Interesting! He withdrew, I went in, people were gathered around the small tables, but far fewer than earlier in the week. On one of them lay a little green and white card. I went over and inspected it. It was a name tag. I pinned it to my lapel and walked toward the big door. It opened onto a conference hall, rows of seats in a wide, gradually ascending semicircle around a speaker's podium. A man was talking below. Stills were being shown on a screen behind him. The room was slightly more than half full. I walked down past a few rows, entered one, people stood up just as in the cinema, and I sat down, crossed my legs, and concentrated on the speaker. Now, I said to myself in a low voice. Imagine that. Fascinating! After twenty minutes, during which I spent as much time looking at the other people in the audience as the speaker, whose grating microphone voice filled the whole auditorium and hung like a constant annoying thought in the background, I got up and went back to the disco. Most of the junior players were inside watching the striptease, it appeared. I went in too and when Jøgge spotted me he came rushing over.

"Can I borrow some money?"

"How much do you need? I have some but not much."

"A thousand? Have you got that much?"

"What are you going to do with a thousand kroner?"

"Actually I need two thousand. That's what champagne costs."

"Two thousand for champagne? Are you out of your mind?"

"If you buy an expensive drink for one of the women, you're allowed to talk to them. And if you buy champagne, you can go off with them."

"And that's what you want to do?"

"Of course. If only I had the money! Have you got it or not?"

He looked around.

"Come on. Please. I need two thousand kroner. I've never slept with a woman. I'm eighteen years old and I've never had sex. You have. But I haven't. And it costs two thousand kroner. Come on. Please, please."

He went down on his knees in front of me. Held up his hands in supplication.

And, even worse, he was serious.

"I want to sleep with a woman. That's all I want. And I can do it here. I don't give a shit if they're prostitutes. They're unbelievably beautiful, all of them. Come on. Show some mercy. Harald! Ekse! Bjørn! Karl Ove!"

"I don't have that much," I said. "I may have enough for a little chat . . ."

"This is serious!" Jøgge said, back on his feet. "This is my chance. There aren't any places like this in Kristiansand."

"Sorry, Jøgge. Would have liked to help you," said Bjørn.

"Same here," said Harald.

"For Christ's sake, come on," Jøgge said.

"You'll have to try the old-fashioned method," Bjørn said. "Hit on someone. The place is full of girls."

"Easy for you to say," Jøgge said.

"Come on. Let's go in and see the action," Bjørn said, dragging Jøgge with him.

I had never experienced such an alcoholic high as the one I had that night. It was like a cool green river flowing through my veins. Everything was in my power. As we stood at the bar I noticed a girl on the dance floor, she might have been a year or two older than me, with blond hair and a beautiful, yes, an unbelievably beautiful face. When her gaze met mine a second time I didn't hesitate, I trotted down the two steps to the dance floor. At that moment the music she had been dancing to changed and, along with three other girls, she walked over to a wall. I followed her. I stopped and said I had seen her dancing and she looked fantastic. You looked amazing, I said. She smiled and said thank you and looked at me with her head tilted. I asked her if she was American. Yes, she was. Did she live in the town here? No, she lived in Maine. They all came from Maine. Where was I from? A small barbaric country up north, I said. We are in fact the first generation to eat with a knife and fork. I turned and nodded to the other members of the team, who were watching me from the bar. I'm with them, I said. We're soccer players at a training camp here. Do you want to dance?

She nodded.

She wanted to dance!

We glided onto the floor. I put my arms around her. The feeling of her body against mine provoked an electric storm in my head. Round and round we went, sometimes I pressed her close to me, sometimes I held her away from me and looked into her eyes. What's your name? I whispered. Melody, she whispered. Melody? I repeated. No, Melanie! she said with a smile.

When the song was over I thanked her and joined the others, who were still hanging around the bar.

"How did you manage that?" Bjørn said.

"I just asked. Had no idea it was so easy. It's crazy."

"Go back to her. You can't stay here!"

"OK. I'll just have a little drink. Just my luck this is our last night."

The bus was supposed to be outside waiting at three. It was half past two. I had no time to lose. Nevertheless I hesitated, although I could still feel her, a kind of phantom joy, her breasts, oh, her breasts, the feeling of them against my body, the light pressure, the arousal, I had all that inside me, and if I went down there now it would disappear in a new situation, which might not go that well. I knocked back two glasses of wine in quick succession and walked over again. Her eyes lit up when I appeared. She wanted to dance. We danced. Afterward we stood in the corner chatting, the others were beginning to make tracks toward the exit, I said I had to go, she wanted to go with me, I took her hand, we stopped outside, a stone's throw from the bus, which was waiting with the engine running. Where do you live? I asked. She said the name of a hotel. No, not here, but in Maine, I said. I'll write to you. May I? Yes, she said. Then she told me her address. I had nothing to write with. Did she? No. Hurry up, came shouts from the bus, we're going now. I'll memorize your address, I said. Say it again. She said it, I repeated it twice. You'll get a letter, I said. She nodded and looked at me. I leaned forward and kissed her. Put my arm around her and pressed her into me. Now I have to go, I said. All the best to you in your barbaric country, she said with a smile. I paused by the bus door and waved to her, then clambered on board.

Everyone clapped. I bowed to the right, then the left and sat down next to Bjørn. Drunk, happy, and confused, I waved to her as the bus drove past.

"Damn it – if only it could have happened on the first evening," I said.

"Did you get her address?"

"Yes, I've memorized it. She lives in . . ."

I had forgotten. I couldn't drag it up for the life of me.

"Didn't you write it down?" Bjørn said.

"No. I relied on my memory."

He laughed. "You idiot," he said.

We carried on drinking in my room. Bjørn accidentally broke a lamp, he was turning around with a bottle in his hand and hit the glass dome, which shattered. Someone else, I don't recall who, smashed the other one out of pure devilry. Then I took down the big picture hanging on the wall, which had irritated me all week, and threw it out the window. It exploded into smithereens on the street five floors down. Lights came on in the room beneath us. Shit, what was the point of that? Bjørn said, no problem, I said, we can just take one of the pictures in the corridor and hang it here, they'll never notice. What about the picture downstairs? I'll get it, I said, and did as I promised. Took the elevator down, went past the unmanned reception into the square, where I collected all the fragments I could find and put them in the pool around the fountain, close to the nearest wall, so that you could only see them if you were standing over them. On my way back along the corridor I grabbed one of the pictures hanging on the wall. The incident must have sobered people up, because the room was empty when I returned, apart from Bjørn, who was lying on his back with his mouth open and his eyes closed. I got into bed and switched off the light.

The next day was all about packing, having breakfast, and getting ready to leave. The hotel manager came out as we were stowing the baggage in the bus, he wanted to know who had been in Room 504, that was Bjørn and I, we went over, and he, the little man, was so angry that he was jumping up and down in front of us. People like you shouldn't be allowed to stay in a hotel! he yelled. You have to pay for this! It was all very unpleasant. We apologized, said we hadn't meant anything by it and we would pay. I think we even bowed to him. The others stood around grinning. The team coach, Jan, came over, said he would handle this, the hotel would be properly compensated for any damage we had caused, he was extremely sorry, they were young, anything could happen, we bowed again and got on board, people like you shouldn't be allowed to stay in a hotel! he yelled again. Jan took out his wallet and passed him a wad of notes, the bus started up, he jumped on, we drove slowly onto the road while the hotel manager glowered at us with hatred in his eyes.

Once at home, I quickly fell back into my old self, or it fell back into me. At school, where teachers focused on exams, I stayed in the shadows, I skulked around in the breaks and in class filled my notebooks with my scribblings. The trip to Switzerland had been a procession of triumphs, and I hoped the *russ* – graduation – celebrations would be the same. At home I wrote the social studies special paper in one night, a twenty-page comparison of the Russian revolution with the Sandanista revolution in Nicaragua, which I had followed with interest for several years, and I wrote a letter to a hotel in Switzerland asking them for the address of a guest, if at all possible, as in my possession I had a purse I would like to return, belonging to an American girl, whose name was Melanie, surname unknown, but she had stayed at the hotel over Easter.

At the end of April I had a party at home. As editor of the *russ* newspaper, a duty I shared with Hilde, I probably should have been on the *russ* committee, as had always been the case, but for some reason we were excluded. Perhaps because Hilde and I didn't really fit in there, or because we hadn't accepted our posts with the requisite nonchalance, what did I know? Whatever the reason, I invited the whole of the committee, as well as many others, home one Saturday evening. Mom was sleeping at a friend's and would be home in the afternoon, so I had told everyone that they must not under any circumstances arrive before six. But at three a red *russ* camper chugged up the hill. In it were Christian and two girls. He wanted to drop off the beer, he said. But I told you six o'clock, I said. Yes, but now we're here, he said. Where can I leave it?

Ten minutes later there was a stack of beer crates in the kitchen. The stack went from the floor right up to the ceiling. It was fair to say the ceiling was low, but Mom, whom Christian barely greeted when he entered the kitchen, was not enamored of the sight. What's this? she said after they had gone. Are you going to drink all of this? You're not going to have some drunken orgy here, are you? I won't allow it. Relax, I said. This is a *russ* party. Everyone's eighteen. There'll be quite a bit of drinking. But I'll take responsibility for everything. I promise you. It'll all be fine. Are you sure? she said, eyeing me closely. There's enough beer here for a hundred people. How many crates are there actually? Yes, but take it easy. There's a lot of drinking at *russ* parties. But that's the whole point. Is it really? she said. Not the whole point, I said. But it is an important element. I know you don't like the idea, and I'm sorry it's here, but everything will be fine, I promise you. Well, anyway, it's too late to do anything about it now, she said. But had I known what I know now, you wouldn't have had my blessing. Promise me you won't drink much yourself now. You're responsible for everything going well, you know. Yeah, yeah, I said.

We had dinner beside the yellow beer-crate tower, Mom got in her car and drove to town, I put on a record, grabbed a beer, and lounged on the sofa waiting for the others to come.

A few hours later the drive was full of *russ* vehicles. Everywhere there were screaming girls and boys in red *russ* outfits, all holding bottles of beer. Music was pounding from several of the cars, and in the living room the stereo was so loud that the music coming from the speakers was distorted. Three or four times more people had come than had been invited.

At one in the morning everything seemed to build up to a climax. Christian screamed and kicked a big hole in the bathroom door. Trond was sitting in the kitchen beating out the rhythm of the music on the edge of the table with two large knives, every beat was a new notch. People were throwing up on the doorstep outside the living room, people were throwing up on the path between the cars, people were throwing up in Yngve's bed. Behind the lilac bush a couple was going at it standing up. Others were jumping up and down to the music, roaring for all they were worth. People stood on car hoods and roofs, one of them naked, swirling his sweater around his head. Even though I had made up my mind not to give a damn, and had succeeded by getting drunk, I carried a constant horror within me that, at various points, would surface in my consciousness, no, oh no, I thought then, only to recede as I got wrapped up in one of the many incidents going on around me.

At three the tempo began to slow down. Some people were still dancing, some were fooling around, some were asleep, lying across the table, hunched in corners, outside under bushes. I sat on the sofa in front of the TV making out with a girl, we had hardly exchanged a word, she had been sitting there, I sat down beside her, we started to kiss. She was dark-haired, everything about her was dark, even her clothes, she was the only one not dressed in a red outfit but in a black sweater, black skirt, and black tights. Want to come with me to the room over there, I whispered, she nodded, I had drunk a lot and was thinking this will make everything different because now I didn't give a shit about anything, wasn't nervous about anything, and I took out my keys and unlocked the door to my room, held my arm around her, she pulled off the little handbag she wore diagonally across her chest, lay down on the bed, *my* bed, it reverberated through my brain, I rolled her sweater over her head, kissed her dark nipples, rubbed my face between them, lovingly and lingeringly, here we go, I thought, now I've got a girl here, now it's going to happen, and my legs were trembling as I sat up to pull down her tights, she let me do it, I took off my trousers, this is it, she was naked, her skin shone white in the dark, I put my hand between her legs and felt the curly though still smooth hair, and I was naked, and I squirmed a bit, she said you're so heavy on top of me, I pushed down with my arms and then my dick was in her pubic hair, I thrust, farther down, she said, I moved and there it was, wet and soft and then, no, no, oh for Christ's sake, no.

Long shudders like electric shocks went through me as she lay there, her eyes wide open, staring up at me.

No, no, no.

I hadn't even penetrated her. A couple of centimeters maybe, no more. And then it was over. I fell on top of her and kissed her neck. She pushed me away and half sat up. I reached out for her, touched her breasts, but she just got up, pulled on her panties and tights, and left the room.

In the morning I woke to a discussion outside my half-open door. I recognized the voices of Espen, Trond, and the girl from the night before. No, she said, it wasn't me. Yes, it was. I saw you. You went into his bedroom. No, it wasn't, she said. But we saw you. Yes, I went in with him, he was going to sleep, but I came out again *right away*, she said. Nothing happened. Ha ha ha! said Espen. You were doing it in there. No, we weren't, she said. And where were you going just now? Were you going in? Why would you go in if you hadn't slept together? You know him, don't you? No. I was going to get something I'd left in there. What's that? My bag.

I hastily got up, put on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, grabbed her bag, and went out to them.

"Here you are," I said, passing her the bag. "You forgot this."

"Thank you," she said without meeting my eyes, and went downstairs.

"What a disaster this house is," Espen said.

"I can imagine," I said.

"I'll help you clean up."

"Great."

"I'll get Gisle and Trond to give a hand." He looked at me. "Did you sleep with Beate then?"

"Was that her name?" I said. "Yes, I did."

"She says you didn't."

"I heard."

"Why?"

"How should I know?" I said.

Our eyes met.

"Well," I said. "Better go down and inspect the hell."

There was nothing that could be done about the door, it would have to be replaced. Nor about the slashes to the table. But all the rest? Couldn't that be scrubbed clean? We cleaned the house all morning. Espen, Gisle, and Trond went home at one, I continued on my own with a steadily increasing sense of panic in my chest because no matter how much I cleaned things up, the place still looked as if a party had hit it.

Mom came at five. I went out to meet her so that it wouldn't come as a shock. I didn't want her to see it before I had told her.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said. "How did it go?"

"Not so well, I'm afraid," I said.

"Oh?" she said. "What happened?"

"It got a bit out of control. Someone kicked in the bathroom door, among other things. And there are a lot of other bits and pieces. You'd better see for yourself. I'm really sorry."

She looked at me.

"I had a feeling," she said. "We'd better go in and see."

When the inspection was over, she sat down at the kitchen table, ran both hands over her face, and looked up at me.

"It's dreadful," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"What will we do about the door?" she said. "We can't afford a new one."

"Are we so hard up?"

"I'm afraid so. Who kicked it in?"

"Someone called Christian. An idiot."

"Surely he should replace it?"

"I can tell him to."

"Please do that."

She got up with a sigh.

"I suppose we'd better eat," she said. "I think there are some pollock fillets in the fridge. Shall we have those?"

"OK."

She went to the hall and hung up her coat, I found the two packs of fish, she started washing some potatoes while I sliced the frozen blocks into pieces.

"We've had this conversation before," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"You have to make your own decisions. And if they're bad ones, you have to live with the consequences."

"Of course," I said, and sprinkled flour, salt, and pepper onto a plate, turned the by now soft fish in the mixture, put the frying pan on the burner, and watched the knob of butter slide across the black surface as the heat took hold, not unlike a house, it struck me, when the clay base it stands on starts slipping. Slow, erect, with a final dignity before it subsides.

"A year's wear and tear in one night," she said. "Or even more."

"The house was built in 1880," I said. "One year's not so much."

She ignored me.

"You're eighteen years old. I can't tell you what to do anymore. I can't control you. All I can do is be here for you and hope you will turn to me if you need help."

"OK."

"I could have tried to stop you, but why should I? You're an adult and you have to take responsibility for your actions. I trust you. You're free to do what you want. But you have to trust me too. And treat me like an adult. What we share is this house. We share the responsibility for it."

She squirted some soap onto one hand, rubbed both of them together under the running tap, and dried them on the kitchen towel.

"You're washing your hands of me, I can see," I said.

She raised a smile, but it was mirthless.

"This is serious, Karl Ove. I'm worried about you."

"You have no reason to be," I said. "What happened here, well . . . it was a *russ* party, no more, no less."

She didn't answer, I put the fish fillets into the pan, diced an onion, and added the little cubes, poured in a can of tomatoes, sprinkled in spices, and sat down with the Saturday newspaper, flipped through to the page where my Prince article, which I had handed in several weeks ago, had finally appeared in print. I held it up for her.

"Have you seen it?" I said.

That Monday I went to Christian and told him the door was smashed beyond repair. Oh yeah, he said. You kicked it in, I said. Yes, it was me, he said. So you should replace it, I think, I said. No, he said. What do you mean *no*? I said. I mean what I said, he replied. No. It was your party. But it was you who broke the door, I said. Yeah, he said. So you won't replace it? I said. No, he said. And then he turned and left.

When I got back home from school there was a letter with a foreign stamp in the post box. I opened it at once and read it walking up the hill. It was from the manager of the Grand Hotel in Lucerne. He wrote that, unfortunately, all the rooms were registered by surnames and therefore he couldn't help me with Melanie's address, but I could try the two travel bureaus involved, whose addresses he added afterward: one in Philadelphia and one in Lugano.

I put the letter back in the envelope and went in. Bang went my plan to write letters for a year and then make a surprise visit, with the exciting possibility that it was there, in America, that my future lay.

For the rest of the spring I was drunk almost all the time. The first thing I did when I woke up in the *russ* van or on a sofa at a friend's or on a bench in the park was to get my hands on something to drink and continue where I had left off. And there was little that beat starting the day with a beer and walking around drunk in the morning. What a life. Going here, there, and everywhere, having a drink, sleeping whenever an opportunity offered itself, eating something maybe, and then just carrying on. It was fantastic. I loved being drunk. I came closer to the person I really was and dared to do what I really wanted to do. There were no limits. I only went home for a shower and a change of clothes, and once, when I was sitting in the living room with a six-pack of Carlsberg, which I drank while waiting for the *russ* van to come and pick me up, Mom suddenly flew into a rage. She had tolerated so much, but she drew the line here, at this, sitting alone and drinking in the living room, she would not put up with it. I could choose: either I stopped drinking or found myself somewhere else to live. It was a simple choice, I got up, grabbed the beer, said good-bye, and went out, down the road, where I sat on the slope, lit a cigarette, and opened a beer while waiting for the van. If she didn't want me to live at home, well, I wouldn't live at home.

"What are you sitting there for?" Espen said when the van pulled up in front of me.

"I`ve been thrown out," I said. "Actually, it doesn't matter."

I got in, we drank what we had on the way to town, bought some more crates of beer at a supermarket, went on toward Vågsbygd, where we were meeting that night, a grass plain by the sea with an ancient deciduous forest sloping upward, where we sat drinking, where I disappeared into myself and walked around without a thought in my head. It was great, as always. The interpersonal shit I usually got bogged down in meant nothing, I was footloose and free, everything was as cold and clear as glass. I asked after Geir Helge, a lean, sociable guy with glasses and a Mandal dialect. He smoked hash, everyone knew that, and now I wanted to try it too. I had been considering it for a long while. Smoking hash was a stigma, if you did you were on the outside, you were no longer a decent person, you were on the way to becoming a junkie. In any case that was how it was in Kristiansand. And the idea of it being the beginning of a road that would lead me to a life as a junkie was incredibly appealing and filled life with destiny and meaning. Being a junkie, just living for drugs, renouncing everything else, for me that was the worst of the worst. Junkies had abandoned their humanity, they were a kind of devil, it was terrible, terrible, the worst, hell. I laughed at those who associated hash with heroin, it was propaganda, nothing else, smoking hash was a bid for freedom for me, but although hash was completely harmless, it was in the same category as harmful drugs, in a way, smoking it made me a drug addict, and what an immense and exhilarating thought that was.

I wanted to steal, drink, smoke hash, and experiment with other drugs –

cocaine, amphetamines, mescaline – to get high and live the great rock-and-roll lifestyle, to feel to the last drop of my blood that I couldn't give a flying fuck about anything. Oh, what appeal there was in that! But then there was all the rest of me inside that wanted to be a serious student, a decent son, a good person. If only I could blow that to smithereens!

This was an attempt to do that. The thought of smoking hash, the thought that I could actually do it, that I could actually become a junkie, if I ever dared, it was only a question of *doing* it, making the move, this simply made my insides explode with happiness and excitement as I walked up the slope under the leafy trees to where Geir Helge hung out. I asked if he had anything to smoke, I said I had never done it before, he would have to show me, which he was more than happy to do. After we'd finished I walked slowly down the slope and into the crowd. At first I didn't notice anything in particular, perhaps I was too drunk, Geir Helge had said something about this, that it didn't always work the first time and it didn't always work if you were too drunk. But when I got into the back of the *russ* van, which was empty, something happened. I moved my shoulder and it was as though the joint had been lubricated with oil, yes, as though the whole of me was full of oil. A tiny, tiny movement anywhere was enough to fill my body with sensual pleasure. So I sat there wagging a finger, lifting one shoulder, shaking a hip, and wave after wave of pure sensuality washed through my body.

Espen stuck his head in.

"What are you up to? Are you feeling OK?"

I opened my eyes and straightened up. The movement was so vigorous that a jolt of pleasure rippled through me.

"I'm fine," I said. "I'm having an absolutely fantastic time. But I want to be alone. I'll be out afterward."

I wasn't, I fell asleep, and in the following days I smoked as much hash as I could, as well as drinking. The last nights before Constitution Day, May 17, I was so stoned and drunk that I didn't know where I had been, and when I woke up that morning I was in a *russ* van, we were parked in some square, and outside the windows, the streets were lined deep with people. Vaguely I remembered we had been to Tresse and that at some point we had been sitting under a tarpaulin in a double-ender moored to the pontoons, together with some uncommunicative and inert man, and that Espen had later run over and dragged Sjur and me away, the man was dead, he said, but when we stood by the boat it was empty. Espen desperately ran up and down, and then I remembered nothing else. How many minutes of the long night were left? Ten maybe?

Once we came across a tramp, he was sitting on a bench in the park, we stood around him talking. He said he had sailed with Leif Larsen during the war, running refugees and agents between the Shetlands and Norway. From then on I called him the Shetland Shit. Laughed and repeated it as often as I could. Hey, Shetland Shit! After a while I went behind him to have a piss, and then I pissed on him, up and down his back. Then we drifted on through the night, settling here, settling there, there was always someone with a beer or a bottle of spirits. I laughed, danced, drank, and made out with whoever was there. I could go over to a girl in the class and tell her she had always been on my mind, I had always stolen furtive glances at her, it was a lie, but it did the trick, everything had opened up. Everything was open.

When I woke up in the *russ* van on the seventeenth of May and saw I was surrounded by festively dressed people on all sides, I was frightened. But not even that mattered, I just had to drink a couple more beers and the fear was gone, and we would go out and sell more *russ* newspapers so that we had the money for more beer, and when it was midnight I was as free as could be after several days' drinking, running through the streets and shouting, chatting to strangers, joking with some, harassing others, happy but also extremely tired, and it was in this state, racing back and forth through the procession, streets on both sides packed with people, all wearing their best clothes, suits, and national costumes, and Norwegian flags everywhere, that I suddenly heard someone shout my name.

It was Grandma and Grandad.

I pulled up in front of them with a grin on my face. Gunnar's son was there too, and it wouldn't have surprised me if I was the first drunk he had ever seen. They stared at me through icy eyes, but it didn't matter, I laughed and carried on, there were two days left to the exams, and I didn't want them to end. The final party was held at the Fun Senter, and the atmosphere was on the wane, however much I tried to resist it, and I and two others caught a taxi to Bassen's late at night. He wasn't at home, the house was empty, and we leaned a ladder against the first floor where there was a window ajar. Once inside we sat on the living-room carpet and smoked hash from perforated Coke cans. When Bassen turned up the following morning, he was furious, naturally enough, but not so much so that we couldn't catch a couple of hours of sleep, but we all knew that the fun was definitively over. I was still drunk when I woke up, but this time there was no hair of the dog, and I was already beginning to sink deeper and deeper into myself on the bus home, it was terrible, everything was terrible. Mom said nothing about having thrown me out, we barely spoke, I lay in the bath with a layer of scum on the surface of the water. I was tired and went to bed early, we had the Norwegian exam the following day, but I couldn't sleep. My hands were trembling, but that wasn't all that trembled, the flex on the lamp writhed back and forth like a snake whenever I looked at it. The floor sloped, the walls leaned, I sweated and tossed and turned with my head full of random images. It was dreadful, a night of hell, but then morning came and I got up, dressed, and caught the bus to school. I was unable to concentrate, every twenty minutes I signaled to the proctor, who accompanied me to the toilet, where I washed my face.

Of all the things I had done and that would come back to haunt me during these days the encounter with my grandparents was the worst. But surely they couldn't know that I had drunk *so* much, could they? Surely they couldn't know that I had not only been drinking but also smoking hash, could they? No, they couldn't. And in my diary for the beginning of June that year I wrote that the months I had been a *russ*, celebrating the end of school, were the happiest in my life. I used those words: the happiest in my life.

Why did I write that?

Oh, I was so happy. I laughed and was free and friends with everyone.

At the end of June, I left home, Mom drove me to a flat at the hospital, I worked there for a month, was together with Line, drank wine in the evenings and on weekends, smoked hash whenever I could get my hands on it. Espen rejected it point-blank, it was filth, he said, and he continued to insist that the story about the man he had found dead the night before May 17 was true. One afternoon he called up to say there had been an article in the newspaper about a man discovered floating in the harbor. "That's him!" Espen said. I didn't know if he really meant it or was just trying to get as much mileage from the joke as he could. He said he had a vague memory, as if in a dream, of him dumping the body overboard. Why would you have done that? I said. I was drunk, he answered. No one else but you saw any dead man. It's just a fantasy. No, he said, it's true. What about the man sitting with us in the boat? Don't you remember him? Yes, I do. You saw him then? Yes. He was dead. Now, come on, Espen, if he'd been dead, why would you have heaved him over the side and then run to get us? I don't know.

The month had been packed with such incidents, I wasn't sure whether they had happened or not, and this combined with the feeling I had that everything was possible, that there were no limits, and the enormous tracts of time of which I remembered nothing caused me to begin to lose sight of myself. It was as though I had disappeared. In part I liked this, in part I didn't. The routines at the hospital, where I was mostly responsible for setting and clearing the tables at mealtimes and otherwise helping with anything of a practical nature, neutralized this feeling but didn't erase it because in the evening I always went out, drank with the people I met, it was summer and there was always someone around I knew. One evening we were refused admission to Kjelleren, so Bjørn and I climbed up on the roof of the block behind, ran all the way across the rooftops, found a skylight, crawled in, went down to Kjelleren, which was absolutely empty, it must have taken us an hour. We went up a few floors, entered a flat, someone woke up and shouted at us, we said we had gone in the wrong door, walked amid gales of laughter to Tresse, a square in the center of town where Bjørn's dad had a flat and we could sleep. In the morning I rang the hospital and said I was ill, they probably didn't believe me, but what could they do?

That night I drank with a radio technician, Paul, who had driven us to an Imperium concert in Oslo, and on the way home, in the middle of the night in Telemark, at twenty degrees below, the car skidded, left the road doing a hundred kilometers an hour, brushed against a lamppost, flew through the air, and landed in a ditch. We're going to die, I thought, and the idea of it didn't bother me in the slightest. We didn't die, the car was a write-off but we were in good shape. It was a great story, one we could tell others, also the sequel, the old house whose door we knocked on, the rifle standing in the hallway, the feeling of being in another, nastier world than our own, and the incredible cold outside as we hitched for more than two hours wearing sneakers and suit jackets. We hung around talking about that at Kjelleren, Paul and I and his girlfriend, she was wonderful, perhaps twenty-three, twenty-four, I had secretly had my eye on her for ages, and when she suggested taking a taxi back to her place to smoke some dope, of course I said yes, we smoked, and when I smoked I sometimes became so unbelievably horny, and sitting next to her on the sofa it hit me at once, I grabbed her, she laughed and wriggled away, saying she loved Paul, and then she put her hand between my legs and laughed even more and said you've grown up. Downstairs in Kjelleren she had been quiet most of the time, Paul had smiled at us, he trusted her, which he was right to do.

At work the next day they said nothing, but I noticed of course, I wasn't someone they were interested in keeping however much effort I made to mollify them. I had the job for only a month, and when the time was up, I went back to our house, which was no longer ours, Mom had sold it, for the next two days we packed everything into boxes, and then a big removal van came and took it all.

Except for one thing, and that was the cat.

What should we do with the cat?

Mefisto?

Mom couldn't have the cat where she was going to live, and I definitely couldn't take him to Northern Norway.

We would have to have him put down.

He wound around our legs, Mom put a tin of liver paste in his carrier, he ran in, Mom closed the door, put the carrier on the passenger seat, and drove to the vet in town.

That afternoon I lay on the rocks beneath the waterfall and swam. When I got back, Mom's car was in the garage. She was sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee. She got up when I entered, walked past me without saying a word, her eyes downcast.

"So is Mefisto dead now?" I asked.

Mom didn't answer, just shot me a glance, then opened the door and went out. Her eyes were brimming.

That was the first time I had seen Mom cry.

Eight days later, in a fetal position on the sofa in Håfjord, I lay asleep after emptying the contents of my stomach into the toilet, so wonderful. My sleep was light, the revving of a car engine somewhere was all it required for me to open my eyes. But I didn't have anything to do, I had no duties, I could lie in bed and sleep all Saturday and Sunday. Monday was an eternity away, I mused as I lay there feeling sleep steal over me again.

There was a ring at the door.

I went to answer it, surprised at how light my body felt.

It was Sture.

"It's soccer practice," he said. "In fifteen minutes. Had you forgotten? Or are you too muzzy after yesterday?"

"I'm a bit fuzzy," I said with a smile. "But not muzzy."

I ran my hand through my hair.

"I haven't brought any cleats with me. I was thinking of buying some but I forgot. So I suppose you can count me out."

Sture brought his arm forward from behind his back. Two pairs of cleats hung from his hand.

"Forty-five?" he said. "Or forty-six?"

"Forty-five," I said, taking them.

"See you up there then?"

"OK, see you there."

I hadn't played soccer for a couple of months, and it felt strange to run around on a field again, especially this field, for there was something about the spot, squeezed in under the gleaming green mountain slopes, the sea straight ahead, which went against everything I associated with soccer. It didn't improve matters that the team I was playing on were all fishermen, the whole bunch of them. A couple of them were good, particularly one called Arnfinn, who resembled one of the English midfield players we used to see on Saturday afternoon TV in the 1970s, balding and red-haired, relatively short, stocky with a paunch, not the quickest in the world, but he made things happen around him as soon as he had the ball, whether he was flicking it on, hitting a cross, or threading a forward through, without even raising his head, as though he didn't have to see, he could sense everything. He tackled me a few times, it was like running into a tree. He was good. Their striker was good, a tall, thin guy who was surprisingly fast, and their goalie, Hugo, was also decent. The rest were like me, perhaps a bit worse, with the exception of Nils Erik, who could hardly have played before and warmed up by doing the kind of knee bends that had probably last been witnessed in the '50s.

After the game we went to the changing rooms by the swimming pool, showered, and sat in the sauna. Everyone apart from Nils Erik and me was as white as snow. Many had freckles on their shoulders and backs, many were very hairy, and when they walked around, strutting naked and teasing one another, I had the impression they almost belonged to a different race. I still had a tan after the summer, with a white patch where my trunks had been, I didn't have a single hair on my arms or chest or shoulders, just some barely visible down, and my back was as straight as a pillar, not broad and bulging like theirs. Not to mention my biceps, which were as thin as twigs while their arms were the width of tree trunks. And as for my chest, it was as flat as could be, like a board, and looked nothing like the kegs they walked around with. Not that their bodies were magnificent specimens, they weren't, many had spare tires and flab, no one had a chest arched into two well-defined halves from muscle training, no one had six-pack abs, that was another world for them. What they respected, I could see, was strength. So it made no difference to them if a belly hung over a belt or the odd double chin rolled over a collar.

We sat on the three benches in the sauna, someone had opened some beer; Hugo, the goalie, passed one over.

"Actually I have to work this evening," I said, "but one can't hurt."

"Good," he said, and gave it to me.

Froth streamed out of the bottle. The glass was green and cold.

"It was fun last night!" he said.

"Yes, it was," I said.

"That was Irene you were all over, wasn't it?"

I smiled and paused.

"We saw you! Not bad, one week in Northern Norway and Karl Ove's got himself a girlfriend!"

"Coming up here and taking our women! You stay down south, you southern bastard!" someone else said.

They laughed. I laughed too.

"But old Pinocchio here just wanted to dance," Hugo said, looking at Nils Erik.

Pinocchio! *That* was who he looked like!

"Yes," Nils Erik said. "I really like dancing. I used to dance a lot at Horten's Dance Academy!"

They looked at him and smiled uncertainly. I had to laugh. At that moment, Sture came in, he flicked his towel at one of the players to make room for him. He was slim and not as well built as the others, but slight he was not, there were muscles on him too. In addition, he had a beard and was bald and confident. I had been a bit nervous that, as a teacher, he wouldn't be able to cope with them, but within seconds I saw that this was not the case.

He turned and looked up at me.

"We've got a match on Tuesday evening. You're in, aren't you?"

I nodded.

"You'll be the center back."

"Center back?" I echoed.

"Yes," he said. "That's what I said."

He winked and turned away. I finished the beer and belched, got up, and went into the shower. Nils Erik followed and stood beside me.

He had a big dick, it hung down and smacked against his thighs.

Why would someone with such red cheeks who liked to go on long walks in the forest have such a big cock? I wondered. What would he do with it?

"Did you used to do outdoor calisthenics or what?" I said.

"Calisthenics? No."

"Looked like it with your warm-up exercises," I said.

He laughed and did a few knee bends in the shower.

"Was that what you meant?" he said.

"Exactly," I said. "Don't teach my class that in the gym lessons, just so you know. It would totally destroy their self-confidence."

Two or three more came in and turned on the showers. In seconds the air was full of steam again.

"Are you coming up to my place afterward?" Hugo said. "There's a gang of us having a drink."

"I'd love to," I said, "but I can't."

"Me neither," Nils Erik said. "Two nights in a row is too much."

"What wimps!" Hugo said.

That stung, I didn't want to be a wimp and I could drink him under the table any day of the week, but I couldn't go, I had to write.

I said good-bye to Nils Erik at the crossroads and walked down to my flat. Slung the bag down on the floor in the hall, stopped by the mirror and ran my fingers through my hair to make it stand up, sniffed the air a couple of times: what was that smell? Perfume? Had someone been here?

There was a folded piece of paper on the sitting-room table I was sure I hadn't left there.

I opened it. It was from Irene.

Hi Karl Ove,

Well, Hilde and I've been here on a big surprise visit. While you were at soccer practice we sat here making ourselves comfy. We've had a look at all your records. Wow, what a collection! We can see you've got a few more now than when we were here last. Good for you.

You seem like an all-right guy and I hope to get to know you better. I've missed you. I've just been waiting to see you again. But it'll have to be another time because we've gotta go now.

Hugs and kisses from Irene

Had they just come in and sat down?

Yes, they must have.

And then left again?

I opened the door and stepped out to look for them, in case we had just crossed paths.

Nobody.

Just the sound of the sea, the vast gray sky, a couple of tiny figures walking along the road at the bottom of the hill.

I went back in and boiled a whole packet of spaghetti, fried all the old potatoes I had in the fridge, and soon I was in the sitting room with a steaming mountain of spaghetti and browned potatoes on a plate in front of me, I applied ketchup liberally and wolfed it down. Wonderful. Then I made some coffee, put Led Zeppelin's first LP on the record player, turned the volume up almost full, and walked up and down clenching my fists and nodding my head. Now I'll show them. And then, pumped up with adrenaline and anger, I sat down and started to bang away on the typewriter.

The short story I wrote was based on a dream I'd had that summer. I had been doing exercises in some kind of net that stretched endlessly into the darkness on all sides, it was slippery but thick and strong, like an enormous sinew. This net turned out to be in my own brain. In other words I had turned the relationship around: my thoughts didn't exist in me, I existed in my thoughts. The dream had been a sensation, but when I wrote it down it dissipated into nothing, so I crumpled up the paper and threw it away, turned the record over and started afresh. This too was based on a dream, and in this too what I was standing on stretched into the darkness on all sides, however, unlike in the first dream, this darkness was broken by bonfires. Bonfire after bonfire burned around me as I walked. To my right there was a mountain, ahead of me the sea, that was all, nothing happened, there were just these elements, and I wrote it all down.

Oh shit, this was no good either!

All the fires in the darkness, the tall mountain and the immense plain, it had been so extraordinary!

On paper it was nothing.

I moved to the sofa and started writing my diary instead. "Have to work on transferring the moods from inside to outside," I wrote. "But how? Easier to describe people's actions, but that's not enough, I don't think. On the other hand, Hemingway did it." I raised my head and looked out at the mountains above the fjord. "But I'm happy here anyway. Who would have thought it? And I've met someone. Very pretty. Think I might have a chance. Rock 'n' roll!"

Early that evening the upstairs front door opened. The footsteps that followed across the floor were heavier and more solid than Torill's, and I remembered she had said her husband was coming home today. Life in the rooms above me now was completely different. They were laughing, music was blaring, and when I went to bed they were at it above my head.

Oh, it went on for ages.

She screamed, he groaned, something was thumping to a regular, rhythmic beat, perhaps the bed knocking against the wall.

I thrust the pillow over my head and tried to think about something else.

But it didn't work, how could it, I knew who she was and what she looked like.

All went quiet. I dozed off.

I'll be damned if they didn't start up again.

I went to the sofa and lay down there. It was as though a shadow had fallen over me. The anticipation I had felt when I had thought that something might happen with Irene collapsed like an old mineshaft and tumbled in on me.

I couldn't do it.

I was eighteen years old, I was a teacher, I had my own place and an enormous record collection for my age with almost exclusively good music. I was good-looking, I could occasionally pass for someone in a band with my coat, black jeans, white basketball shoes, and black beret. But what good was that if I couldn't do the only thing I really wanted to do?

At last they finished, for the second time, and like a child I fell asleep on the sofa, lost to the world.

I wrote all the next day, started work listening with clenched fists to Led Zeppelin, then sat tapping away for four hours without a break. I returned to the style of the first short story, and this time I had the two boys smashing a shed window on the estate where they lived and stealing the porn mags. The writing went well, except that I couldn't find an ending. One boy couldn't go home to his enraged father, something else had to happen, but what?

In the evening I walked up to the school. I still suffered pangs of conscience at being there alone, it felt as if I was snooping, but I wasn't, I thought, and dropped the big bunch of keys on the staff-room table with a clatter, opened the door to the small telephone cubicle, and dialed Mom's number.

She answered at once.

"How's it going?" I said.

"Very well," she said. "In fact, I was thinking of writing to you this evening."

"Did you get the short story?"

"Yes. Thanks for that."

"So what do you think?"

"I think it's very good. I was surprised. I thought, really, this is *literature*!"

"Is that true?"

"Yes. You tell a story, there are two wonderful characters, and the writing is so alive. It's as though I'm there when I'm reading it."

"Was there anything you particularly liked?"

"Well . . . no, not really, no. I think everything's very good."

"The ending?"

"You mean the part with the father?"

"Yes."

"That's what the story is about, isn't it?"

"It is, yes. As well."

There was a silence.

"What about Kjartan? Have you heard anything from him? Actually, I sent it to him too."

"No, I usually call him on Sundays. I'll talk to him afterward."

"Say hello from me."

"I'll do that. How are you?"

"Fine. Yesterday I went to soccer practice. Tomorrow I'm back in harness."

"Is it hard work?"

I blew out my cheeks.

"No, in fact it's quite easy. I honestly don't understand why teachers have to go to college for three years. It might be different with big classes though. There are only five or six students in each class here."

"Are you absolutely sure?"

"About what?"

"That it's so easy," she said.

I smiled. "Typical of you to be skeptical," I said. "But, no, of course there are problems, too."

"Have you gotten to know anyone?"

"Yes, some of the teachers. Especially one, Nils Erik. People up here are unbelievably open. They drop by and ring your doorbell all the time."

"Oh?"

"Yes, all sorts of people. Even my students!"

"Sounds as if you're having a good time."

"Yes, that's what I said."

We chatted for another half an hour, then I hung up and sat on the sofa to watch *Sportsrevyen* on TV. IK Start had lost again, things were beginning to look grim for them. If they didn't get their act together, they would be relegated.

Two days later Richard came into my lesson and beckoned to me.

"There's a call for you," he said. "I'll take your class in the meantime."

A call?

I hurried into the staff room and grabbed the receiver, which was lying next to the phone.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hi, this is Irene."

"Hi!"

"Are you working?"

"Yes."

"Did you get my note?"

"Yes. A bit of a surprise, I can tell you!"

"That was the idea! Listen, Karl Ove, would you like to see me? There's someone going to Håfjord on Friday, and I can get a lift."

"Yes, that would be great."

"I'll be over then. Bye."

"OK, bye," I said, and hung up.

Richard hadn't only kept an eye on the class, I could see, he was drawing something on the board and explaining it. He smiled at me, but there was a cold expression in his eyes, wasn't there?

In the break he took me aside.

"Just a moment, Karl Ove. No personal calls when we're teaching."

"It wasn't my fault she called," I said. "Couldn't you have taken a message? Then I could have called her back in the break."

He eyed me. "She said it was important. Was it?"

"Yes," I said.

He winked and went into his office.

Jesus.

When I opened my box at the post office after school there were three letters in it. One from a debt-collection agency threatening legal action if I didn't pay. That was the dinner suit I had rented on New Year's Eve, it had been damaged, and since I didn't have the money to replace it, I had tossed it, hoping that, in time, they would forget the whole business. I still didn't have the money, so the case would have to run its course. What could they do if I didn't pay? Put me in prison? I didn't have any money!

The other letters were from Hilde and Mom. I didn't open them until I got home, letters were a party, everything had to be perfect when I read them.

Steaming coffee in a cup, music on the stereo, a rollie in my hand, and one ready on the table.

I started with the one from Mom.

Dear Karl Ove,

You're probably waiting for more feedback, so here's Kjartan's: he was enthusiastic about your story – "it's literature and he has talent" was one of the comments I remember. He considers you his peer and sends you (via me) his latest piece of work, he's having a crack at prose now. And he urged you to push ahead with your writing but thought you probably lacked someone to discuss matters with and wondered if there were any writing courses/seminars in the area you could attend. Which is what he does. He also suggested getting in touch with a reader (publishing house). (I'm less certain about that – think it's too early in your personal development – but I'm passing on his thoughts.)

It sounds to me as if you've made the transition from "the warm nest of *home" to the "great wide world" without any problems as you can see the positive sides of life. The transition isn't always painless. But then again maybe home wasn't that warm a nest either. Maybe you are less exposed where you are now; your music must help.*

Other news from my end? My mind is mainly on the psychiatric nursing school. Recently, though, I have been out and about and I found an old house, an abandoned school with large, attractive, grand rooms complete with acquired wisdom and knowledge. I could imagine teaching my psychiatric nurses there!

In Sørbøvåg the patients are as fragile as ever – helpless, destitute, with an indomitable will to live, an inextinguishable determination to cope, to manage at all costs. It's good to be there in the sense that it's good to have people close to me. But the conditions there eat away at your own will and zest for life. I don't know how they keep going. Their lives are full of difficulty just managing their daily existences – like getting up, putting their clothes on, cooking, etc. – and yet they have this energy and determination.

Grandpa thinks he's going to live to be a hundred. That makes him happy! Grandma, even with her physical and mental problems, continues to follow what's going on, or perhaps more what went on, she mixes up the past and the present. The distinction is not always that clear for Grandpa either. It's depressing to witness their frailties, but without them life would be very empty. Talking to Auntie Borghild is often a solace though, she is sharp and wise, has experienced a lot in life, and is secure – on top of that, she's a good talker. I've been thinking about going to see her one evening this week for a chat.

I can see writing is an earnest business for you. It must be good to have found something you want to invest time and effort in. The possibilities are endless if you have the courage. That's what I believe.

As for the sweater, I've bought a pattern that can be adapted to suit you. But at the moment I have no desire to either knit or crochet. I might buy one here or send you the money. We'll see. Good luck with everything!

Love, Mom.

Could it be true that Kjartan had said I had talent? And that I should send my short story to a publisher?

She would never have written it if it wasn't.

But what did she mean by my *personal development*? Either the texts were *good* or they *weren't*?

I opened the letter from Hilde. As expected, I was showered with superlatives. She was looking forward to reading more, she wrote in that open-hearted passionate way only she had.

I put it aside and sat down in front of the typewriter. As soon as I had plugged it in, I knew what should happen in the bonfire stories.

They were burning dead bodies! All the fires across the whole of the unending plain were funeral pyres! At first he didn't understand, but then he went closer and that was when he saw. They were pushing a kind of flat wooden spade under each body and *lifting* it into the flames.

I finished the story in an hour, *tore* the sheet of paper out of the typewriter, and hurried up to the school to copy it.

Three days later Irene stood at my door.

I invited her in.

The mood was tense, she tried to handle it as well as she could, we drank tea and chatted, nothing happened.

When she was about to go, she put her arms around me and as she looked up at me I bent down and kissed her.

She was warm and soft and full of life.

"When will we see each other again?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "When would be good for you?"

"Tomorrow?" she said. "Are you home then? I can get someone to drive me here."

"Yes," I said. "Come tomorrow."

I stood in the doorway and watched her walk toward the car. My member ached with desire. She turned and waved, then she got into the car and I closed the door, went in, and sat on the sofa. I was full of feelings for her, but they were not unambivalent, I liked her and wanted her, but did I like her *enough*? She had been wearing blue jeans and a blue denim jacket, surely everyone knew that didn't go? At least girls knew. And her note, all the dialect, I hadn't really liked that.

We should get drunk together, then all the ambivalence would be gone. And if I was drunk enough, would I be able to see her naked without . . . well, without *that* happening?

I was asleep when she buzzed the next evening. I dashed into the hall and opened the door. She had her thumbs in her pockets and was smiling at me. Behind her a car was waiting with the engine idling.

"Feel like making a trip to Finnsnes?" she said.

"Definitely," I said.

The same friend who had been with her the first time, and whose name I had forgotten, was sitting next to the driver, a guy my age, maybe her boyfriend, maybe not. I got in beside Irene, and then we were off. Like everyone here, he drove fast. The music was loud, Creedence Clearwater Revival, obviously a local favorite, and by the bottom of the hill I had a bottle of beer pressed into my hand. All the way there I wanted her, she was so close to me, especially when she laid her arms on the seat in front and leaned forward to chat with the others. They asked me some questions, I answered and asked them some questions, and Irene filled the silences by chatting with the two in front. Occasionally she turned to me and explained the background to what they were talking about, her face constantly alternating between a smile and a great tremulous earnestness the times our eyes met.

After around an hour the driver parked in front of the discotheque in Finnsnes, we went in, found a table, and ordered some wine, which we shared. We danced, she pressed against me, I wanted her so much I didn't know where to start. Foolish small talk, what good was that? I knocked back the wine to fill the abyss in me, my pulse accelerated, soon we were dancing all the time. On the way home, at a hundred and twenty over the long flats, we sat in the back kissing. When "Stand by Your Man" came on, I leaned back and laughed, I would write about this in my letters, that's how redneck this place was, this was what my life was like now. She asked me what had made me laugh, nothing, I said, I'm just happy.

At the turnoff to Håfjord the car stopped.

"You'll have to walk from here," the driver said. "We're going on to Hellevika."

"Isn't that a hell of a distance?" I said.

"No, it'll take you an hour max," he said. "If you walk quickly, you'll make it in three-quarters of an hour."

I kissed Irene one last time, opened the door, and stepped out.

In the car they were laughing, I turned, she stuck her head out the window.

"We were just kidding. Jump in. Of course we'll drive you all the way home."

Through the tunnel, along the fjord. The sea and the mountains lay very still, wrapped in the gray, equally still, night air.

"Would you like to sleep here?" I whispered to Irene as we approached.

"I'd love to," she whispered back. "But I can't. I have to go home. But I can next weekend. Are you here then?"

"Yes," I said.

"Then I'll come," she said.

On Mondays I had gotten into the habit of walking up to the school an hour before classes started, I ran my eye over what had to be done that day, and when the bell rang, I was more often than not sitting at my desk waiting for the pupils to come in. I would talk to them about what they had done since I last saw them.

On this Monday something was brewing, I could sense it as soon as they entered the room. They sat down on their chairs in their usual clumsy way. Andrea looked at Vivian, who put her hand up.

"Is it true you're going out with Irene from Hellevika?" she said.

The other girls giggled. Kai Roald rolled his eyes, but he was grinning too.

"What I do when I'm not at school is none of your business," I said.

"But you normally ask us what we did over the weekend," Andrea said.

"Yes, I do," I said. "And you may ask me what I did. I'll tell you."

"What did you do?" Kai Roald said.

"On Saturday I was at home all day. In the evening I was in Finnsnes. On Sunday I was at home."

"Ooh!" said Vivian. "And who were you *with* in Finnsnes then?"

"That's got nothing to do with you," I said. "Shall we get started?"

"No!"

I raised my arms in mock frustration.

"Do you have something else to say then?"

"*Are* you going out with Irene?" Andrea said.

I smiled, didn't answer, put the box I had brought in on the desk, and handed out the books. We had Norwegian now, the novel they were going to read was *Poison* by Alexander Kielland, one of the few class sets we had. I had started on it the previous Monday, their reading was so bad, I had told the mentor about this in the session I had with her, she advised me to read a book with the class, and that was what we were doing.

"Oh no," they said when they saw the green 1970s cover. "Not that one! We don't understand a word!"

"It's in Norwegian," I said. "Don't you understand Norwegian?"

"But it's so old-fashioned! We really don't understand it."

"Kai Roald, you set the ball rolling."

Oh, how painful it was to listen to. First of all, he was a bad reader anyway, but Kielland's style and the dated language destroyed any flow there was and reduced everything to single syllables, hesitation, coughing, and stammering. None of them had any idea about the plot. I regretted having chosen this book, but it wouldn't look good if I just gave up, so I continued to torment them all the way through the lesson, and would do the same the following Monday.

I was on playground duty in the break, so I went to the vestibule in the staff room to get my coat while the pupils ran into the yard behind me.

"Your father phoned, Karl Ove," Hege said, coming toward me with a note in her hand. "He said to ring him back. Here's the number."

She passed me the note, I hesitated for a moment. The pupils shouldn't be outside unsupervised. On the other hand, Dad was a teacher himself, and if he rang during working hours, it was bound to be important.

Oh, of course. The baby must have been born.

I went in and dialed the number.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hi, Dad, this is Karl Ove. I was told you'd rung."

"Yes, you're a big brother now," he said.

"Oh great!" I said. "Boy or girl?"

"A little girl," he said.

Was he drunk or just very happy?

"Congratulations," I said. "That's wonderful."

"Yes, it's wonderful. We've just come home. I'd better look after them now."

"Everything OK with Unni?"

"Oh yes. We'll talk later. Bye."

"Bye. And congratulations once again!"

I put down the phone and went out, smiled at Hege, who sent me a look, buttoned up my coat, and hurried through the vestibule into the playground. I had hardly emerged before Reidar slunk up to me. He could be unbearably clingy and exploited every situation to make sure he was the center of attention. In the classroom he would answer everything, comment on everything, always know better, always want to be the best. With me and the other teachers he was always ingratiating. He was a particularly detestable boy. He reminded me of myself when I was younger. I took every opportunity to try to eradicate this behavior as it would make his life difficult later, but there was scant reward for my efforts, after every harsh word, there he was, right back like a steel spring.

When I found out that he was the brother of Andrea in my class, I felt slightly better disposed toward him, she was my favorite student, and their being siblings touched me in a way, although I didn't really understand why it should.

"Karl Ove, Karl Ove," he said, tugging at my coat.

"Yes, what is it?" I said. "And don't pull at my coat!"

"Can I go back into the classroom?"

"What do you want to do?"

"I forgot my Super Ball. I just want to get it. Please, please, please!"

"No," I said, walking toward the football field.

He followed me.

"If Torill had been on playground duty, she would have let me," he said.

"Do I look like Torill?" I said.

He laughed. "No!"

"Off you go," I said. "Scram!"

He ran off, slowed to a walk, and stopped near five other kids in his class, who were skipping just beyond the school wall.

A gust of wind blew across the field, whirled up sand and dust from the road, I blinked a few times to clear my eyes.

It was strange to think that Dad had become a father again.

I turned and looked toward the school building. Two ninth-grade girls came out the door and set off down the hill. Both wearing tight jeans, white sneakers, and big jackets. One with dark hair pinned up at the back, the other with light brown permed hair and big curls that kept falling in front of her eyes and making her toss her head. She had such an elegant neck, long and white and slender. And such a fantastic ass.

No, I couldn't walk around with such thoughts in my mind, I would end up going crazy or in prison.

I smiled, turned back, and looked toward the usual gang playing soccer, across at the kids skipping, who seemed to be fine.

Oh no, Fatty was making a beeline for me.

"Hi!" he said, fixing me with his sad and happy eyes.

"Hi," I said. "Have you been skipping?"

"Yes, but I was out right away."

"Life's like that," I said.

"Can I come to your flat today?" he said.

"My flat? Why?"

"A little visit would be nice, wouldn't it?" he said.

I smiled. "Yes, that's true. But today isn't so good. I have to work. But bring a friend along and drop by another day."

"OK," he said.

I took the watch from my pocket and checked the time.

"Two minutes to the bell," I said. "If we walk slowly, we'll be at the door by the time it rings."

He held my hand and we walked to the entrance together.

Andrea and Hildegunn were standing with their hands in their back pockets under Richard's window and watched us as we approached.

"*Poison*'s so boring," Andrea said. "Can we do something else?"

"It's a Norwegian literary classic," I said.

"We don't give a shit what it is," Hildegunn said.

I raised an admonitory finger to them.

They laughed and the bell rang.

On Saturday I played my first home game. Our jersey was green with thin white stripes, white shorts, and green socks. I played center back while Nils Erik, wearing tights under his shorts, shuffled up and down the touchline.

There were quite a lot of people watching, most of them on the touchlines, a few on the slope facing. Vivian and Andrea were there, I waved to them before the match started, and when someone shouted, "Come on, Karl Ove," a few minutes later I looked across and smiled. It was Vivian, while Andrea was yanking at her jacket to make her stop.

We won 1–0, the mood in the dressing room afterward was buoyant, everyone was going out for a drink, the majority to Finnsnes, as far as I could glean, and there was no shortage of invitations, but I couldn't go, Irene was coming.

On the way down to my place I popped into the staff room and called Yngve.

"How's it going?" I said.

"It's going fine," he said.

"Where's the letter you promised?"

"Oh that," he said. "I've had so much to think about recently."

"Like what?"

"Like breaking up with Kristin."

"Is it really over?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

There was a silence.

"Karl Ove, I'm actually on my way out," he said. "I'm going to the film club tonight. We can talk later, can't we?"

"Yes," I said.

We hung up, I put on my jacket, locked the door, and left. The sky was gray and a strong wind was blowing off the sea. The tips of the waves in the middle of the fjord were white. I put a ready-made lasagna in the microwave when I returned home, ate it straight from the white plastic packaging, and drank a beer with it. I had just opened a second when a car pulled up outside.

That's probably for me, I thought, and got a hard-on. When the bell rang a second later, I stuffed one hand in my pocket to hide it and opened the door.

"Hi," said Irene.

The car hooted its horn and set off down the hill.

"Hi," I said.

She took a step forward and hugged me. I took my hand out of my pocket to reciprocate the hug and held back my groin so that she wouldn't notice.

"Nice to see you," she said. "I've been looking forward so much to coming here. I've almost been counting the hours!"

"Me too," I said. "Come in!"

"I have to go back tonight after all," she said. "But that's a long time away. Someone's going to pick me up at half past eleven. Is that OK?"

"Of course," I said.

I put the beer on the counter, opened a bottle of white wine, and filled two glasses. If this was going to work, I would have to drink, and drink something stronger than beer, that much was clear.

"*Skål*," I said, looking into her eyes.

"*Skål*," she said, smiling.

I put on a Chris Isaak record, I had worked all this out in advance, the muted, melancholic yet slightly wild mood fit perfectly.

She sat down on the sofa. I sat beside her, but not so close. She was wearing the same blouse she'd had on the first time she had been here. I couldn't see her full breasts underneath, but I sensed their presence as indeed I sensed her thighs under the tight blue jeans.

Oh.

"That was fun in Finnsnes," she said.

"Yes, it was," I said. "Are they an item, the two others who were with us?"

"Eilif and Hilde?"

"Yes."

She laughed. "No, they're brother and sister. They've always been good pals. *This* close," she said, holding two fingers entwined.

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?" I said.

"No," she said. "Do you?"

"Yes, a brother."

"Older or younger? No, let me guess. Older?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"You're not the big brother type."

I smiled and refilled my glass. Knocked it back in one gulp.

"That's true," I said. "I've got a sister too. A half sister."

"Had you forgotten?"

"She's just a few days old!"

"Is she?"

"Yes, she is. A newborn baby. I haven't seen her yet. My father remarried."

Conversation flagged.

We looked at each other and smiled.

The silence continued.

It had to happen now. We had no time to lose. It had to happen now even though I couldn't feel the wine at all.

"What do your parents do?" I said, and cursed myself. A bigger turn off was hard to imagine.

But she answered politely. "Dad's a fisherman. Mom's a housewife. And yours?"

"My dad's a gymnas teacher, my mom's a teacher at a nursing college."

"And you're a teacher here!" she said. "Chip off the old block!"

"I'm not a teacher," I said. "And I'm not going to be one either."

"Don't you like it?"

"Yes, I do. But I don't want to spend my life teaching. I'm doing it for a year to earn money."

"How do you want to spend your life then?"

"I'm going to write. I'm going to be a writer."

"Are you? How exciting!"

"Yes, it is. But I'm not sure I'll make it."

"No," she said. "I mean, of course you will." She looked me in the eye.

"Would you like a bit more wine?" I said.

She nodded. I filled her glass. She took a sip. Then she got up and walked around the room. Stopped by the desk.

"So this is where you write," she said.

"Yes," I said.

She gazed out the window.

I emptied my glass and got up. Went over to her. Smelled the fragrance of her perfume, it was fresh, light, like a meadow.

"Nice view you've got from here," she said.

I swallowed and gently wrapped my arms around her. It was as though she had been waiting because she immediately leaned back, I rested my cheek against hers and stroked her stomach, she turned to me, I kissed her.

"Oh," she said, turning around and wrapping her arms around me. We kissed, long and lingering. I pressed against her. I kissed her neck, I kissed her cheek, I kissed her naked arm. My ears were rushing, my chest was pounding.

"Come on. Let's go to my bedroom," I said, took her hand and led her in. She got onto the bed and lay back, I clambered on top of her. With trembling hands I unbuttoned her blouse, underneath she was wearing a bra, I fumbled around trying to get it off, she laughed, sat up, reached behind her back and undid the hook, let the bra fall, and her breasts were freed. Oh God, how big and beautiful they were. I kissed them, my mind was running wild, first one, then the other, the nipples stiffened in my mouth and she said oh oh and I began to fumble with her trouser buttons, eventually managed to undo them, pulled them off, tore off my own, wrestled my sweater over my head and got on top of her again, felt her skin against mine, she was so wonderfully soft, I pressed against her, as hard as I'd ever done before, I rubbed against her, and then, oh no, for Christ's sake, it can't be true, not now! Not now!

But it was. A jerk, a spasm, and it was all over.

I lay quite still.

"What's up?" she said, looking at me. "Something happened?"

She half rose, supporting herself on her forearms.

"Nothing," I said, turning away. "I was just thirsty. Think I'll get something to drink. Do you want anything?"

If I could leave the bedroom without her seeing, I could "spill something" in the kitchen so that she wouldn't realize that the big wet patch on my underpants was sperm, she would think it was juice. And it worked. Standing in front of the fridge, I opened a carton of apple juice, poured some into a glass, some onto my underpants and my stomach.

"SHIT!" I shouted.

"What happened?" she said from the bedroom.

"Nothing," I said. "I've just spilt some juice. What did you say again? Did you want some?"

"No, thanks," she said.

When I went back in to her she covered her top half with the duvet, she clung to it. I sat on the edge of the bed with the glass in my hand. The moment was gone, the chance had slipped through my fingers, now I had to repair the situation.

"Ah, that's good," I said. "Shall we have a smoke? I haven't smoked since you arrived. You obviously exert a magnetic influence on me."

I smiled and got up, casually pulled on my trousers and sweater, went into the living room and put on a record, played the Housemartins this time. There was no need for Chris Isaak and his hypnotic moods anymore. Then I sat down on the sofa, filled my wineglass, and rolled a cigarette. After a while Irene appeared, also dressed.

How the hell could I get out of this?

Was it possible to raise this situation from zero to the heights we had previously scaled?

All the excitement was gone. Irene sat down at the other end of the sofa, straightened her rumpled hair with her hand, then reached out for her glass.

When she looked at me a smile was playing around her lips and there was a glint in her eye.

A pain shot through my chest.

Was she mocking me because I wasn't good enough?

"I think I'm seriously falling in love with you, Karl Ove Knausgaard," she said.

What?

Was she making fun of me?

But there was nothing of that detectable in her eyes, they were warm and happy and passionate.

What was she thinking? Did she imagine that I had refrained from taking her and all she had to offer out of chivalry? Could she not see that I couldn't do it? That I would never be able to do it? That a kind of freak, a monster, was lurking behind what she saw?

"Do you like me a little bit too?" she said.

"Of course!" I said. But the smile I sent her couldn't have been very convincing. "Irene," I said. "Why don't we go for a walk? It's still nice out."

"Yes," she said. "Good idea. Let's do that."

I regretted my suggestion the moment we were outside. Here there was only one walk, which was along the road between the houses and back again. We wouldn't be on our own for a meter of it, we would be seen everywhere.

Irene held my hand and smiled up at me. Perhaps it didn't matter, I thought, and smiled back.

We set off downhill. Neither of us said a word. The light pressure from her hand, which I felt now and then, and her presence only a few centimeters from me, were enough for my lust to return. Around us the countryside was at peace. The sea was perfectly calm. Some clouds hung motionless on the horizon and above the mountains on the other side, which in the gathering dusk were completely black. All I wanted to do was throw her to the ground and take her. But I couldn't. Not here, not anywhere, not at home, I had just tried that, I hadn't succeeded, it hadn't worked. I could have yelled, I could have screamed. I wanted her, I could have her, but I wasn't able to do it.

Darkness hovered above the sea, between the mountains, beneath the sky: floor, walls, and roof. The first stars had begun to burst through. There wasn't a soul around.

"Are you going to go back to Kristiansand after you've finished here?" Irene said.

I shook my head. "Definitely not," I said. "That's the last place on earth I want to live."

"Is it so awful?"

"Yes, you have no idea."

"I've been there. Dad's got some family there."

"Oh? Where?"

"I think it's called Vågsbygd," she said. "But I don't remember exactly."

"Yes, that's what it's called," I said.

We had reached the bend at the end of the village, by the chapel. She stopped and put her arms around me.

"We're going out now," she said. "Aren't we?"

"Yes," I said.

We kissed.

"My writer," she said with a smile.

This time it was obvious she was teasing me. But also that she liked the idea.

Oh Christ, when was this going to end? I could barely walk I was so excited by having her this close to me.

We went on, she told me a bit about what she was doing in Finnsnes, I told her a bit about what I had done in Kristiansand.

As we approached my flat and I saw the school standing there like a social-democratic fortress, it struck me that we could walk up there, I could unlock the pool and we could have a swim. Have a shower together, have a sauna together, swim together. But as I imagined it the certainty that I wouldn't be able to perform and that it would be impossible to conceal it sank its claws into my breast.

I unlocked the door, we chatted and drank some more wine. The silences became longer and more uncomfortable until it was half past eleven and I could finally accompany her to the door and kiss her good-bye.

She looked back once on her way to the car. Her eyes were gleaming. Then she got in, the door closed, and she was gone.

The next day I tried to write. It didn't go very well, and the evening's defeat cast a shadow over everything. Not only over my individual lessons and what I did in them but the whole of my accursed life. There was a reason for this, and I knew the reason, but it was somehow ill defined, surrounded by a fog-like vagueness, something deep, deep in the mists of my mind.

The fact was I had never masturbated. Had never beat off. Had never played with myself. I was eighteen years old now and it had never happened. Not once. I hadn't even tried. My lack of experience of this meant that I both knew and didn't know how to do it. And once I hadn't done it as a twelve- or thirteen-year-old, time passed and it slowly became unthinkable, not in the sense of unheard of, more in the sense of beyond my horizons. The direct result of this was that I had heavy nocturnal emissions. I dreamed about women, and in my sleep not even touching was required, it was enough just to lay my eyes on them, standing there, with their beautiful bodies, and I came. If I was close to them in my dreams, again I came. My whole body jerked and convulsed through the night, and my underpants were soaked with semen in the morning.

I had read porn magazines like everyone else when I was growing up, but it had always been with others around me, in the forest with Geir or Dag Lothar or some of the other boys, never alone, not once had I taken a magazine home, I wouldn't have dared. There were few things I found more stimulating and exciting than looking at a porn magazine, but the desire it aroused in me never led to masturbation as there were always others around. At most I would lie on my stomach and rub my groin against the ground while I read. When I was alone at home I sometimes flicked through the mail-order catalogs that existed then, staring at the lingerie or bikini models, and my throat constricted as I studied the cloth pressing against the soft arch between their thighs, or the nipples occasionally visible under their bras or bikini tops. But that was where it stopped, at the constricted throat, the throbbing heart. I didn't masturbate. This was never a conscious decision, it wasn't that I told myself, no, I'm not doing that. Everything was vague and unclear, unconscious and tenebrous. By the time I was in my teens it was too late. Reading porn magazines in the forest was over and not replaced by anything else. In my teens I didn't see a single pornographic film and didn't read a single pornographic magazine. Desire was never focused on one point, it broadened out, it was large and nebulous and hard to handle. Somewhere

I knew that my situation with regard to girls, or Irene, as she was the one in question now, would improve dramatically if I just started masturbating. Nevertheless, I didn't. Even though I knew this, at the same time I didn't, it belonged to the unthinkable, and that was where I was on this day, with the aroma of Irene still clinging to the sheets, I should have, I had to, I wanted to, but I didn't.

No, I played Led Zeppelin at full volume, summoned all the concentration I had, and tried to race ahead with a new short story. When darkness fell I let it enter the flat too, apart from on the desk, where a small lamp shone like an island in the night. There was me and my writing, an island of light in the darkness, that was how I imagined it. And then I went to bed and slept until the alarm clock woke me and another Monday at Håfjord School began.

The first thing the pupils did when I entered the classroom was to tease me about Irene.

I let them run on, then fixed them with a stare, said, now that's enough of that nonsense, we have to start work if anything is to become of you. They took out their books and started work, I walked around and helped them, I liked the way they went from being a small, chatty, giggly class to falling into step and just being themselves.

Sitting like this, without speaking, without looking at each other, fully occupied with their own work, it was as though their ages melted away. Not that I no longer saw them as children, it wasn't being children that defined them but their personalities, who they were in themselves and probably always would be.

I didn't think about Irene much at school, these thoughts came afterward, alone in my flat, like an adrenaline rush through my body. And then the despair. Never one without the other. She saw a purpose in us, she wanted something from me, and although I liked her I wasn't in love, to start with we had nothing to talk about. I wanted to have her, but that was all I wanted.

Was she in love with me?

I doubted it. It was probably more that I was different, not one of her classmates but a teacher, not a thirty- or a forty-year-old but still her age, not from here but from the south.

In a year I would be gone, and she would still be here in her last year at gymnas. That wasn't the best basis for a relationship, was it? Besides, I was going to write and I couldn't tie up all my weekends, which I would have to do if this became serious.

In my head the arguments raged back and forth. On Tuesday we had a soccer match, it took us an hour to get to the field, which was made of shale and became so dusty that the players looked like Bedouin shadows. We lost narrowly, but I scored a goal in the melee after a corner. On Wednesday I received my first copy of *Vinduet*, the new journal I had subscribed to, in the post. The theme was literature's relationship with other art forms, I couldn't grasp any of it, but the mere fact that I had a literary journal on my desk was good enough. In the evening Hege came by, she had gone up to the school to do some work and on her way back she had decided on an impulse to see how I was. On Thursday I went to Finnsnes with Nils Erik, we went to the liquor store and the library, I bought a bottle of vodka and took out two novels by Thomas Mann, *The Confessions of Felix Krull* and *Doctor Faustus*. On Friday I went to school to call Irene. There was no one in the staff room and I took my time, brewed up a pot of coffee, watched some TV, paced back and forth a good deal. In the end I went into the cubicle, put the note on which I had written her number on the machine, dialed the number, and put the receiver to my ear.

Her mother answered. I introduced myself, she called, "Irene, it's Karl Ove," I heard footsteps and some thumping.

"Hi!" she said.

"Hi," I said.

"How are you? Has something happened? You sound so serious."

Her slightly husky voice was more obvious on the phone, where there was nothing to distract my attention. It made her sound incredibly sexy.

"I don't know . . ." I said.

There was so much that created doubt as far as she was concerned. Wasn't I just the first best person to come along? We had seen each other on the *bus*, for God's sake. And she hadn't offered me any resistance at all, she had just got into bed, ready for anything.

"Tell me now," she said.

What was I doing? Should I end it over the phone? That was cowardly, it had to be done face-to-face.

"No, there's nothing," I said. "It's just . . . well, I'm not in the best frame of mind right now. But it's nothing serious. A bit down, that's all."

"Why? Has something happened? Are you homesick?"

"Maybe a little," I said. "I don't know. It'll be fine. Tomorrow it'll be gone."

"Oh, I wish I could be there to comfort you," she said. "I miss you!"

"I miss you, too," I said.

"Can we meet tomorrow?"

If she was being picked up at twelve, like the last time, it would be almost impossible to end the relationship. Because it would have to be done right away, you couldn't stay together with someone for four hours, as before, perhaps end up in bed together again, and then go your separate ways. If I did it at once, what would she do in the meantime, before her lift arrived?

"That won't work," I said. "I'm busy then. What about Sunday?"

"I have to go to Finnsnes again."

"Come here first! You can catch the bus from Håfjord. That would work."

"Maybe. Yes, I can do that."

"Good!" I said. "See you then."

"See you then. Take care!"

"Take care, Irene."

The next morning I was stopped by a group of boys standing outside the shop, they asked how I was getting on, fine, I said, did I want to go to a party later that day, they asked, where, I said, it's no big deal, they said, we'll just be sitting around drinking up at Edvald's, come up if you feel like it, no need to bring any booze, we've got enough.

Leaving them and walking up to my flat, I thought about how open people were here, inviting me to all sorts of events although I was not one of them, and I pondered why. What did they want from a Kristiansander with a black coat, a beret, and progressive musical tastes, why take him in tow in the evening? At home going out demanded planning, lots of obstacles had to be overcome, you didn't just turn up at someone's house or sit down at a table in a bar with someone you vaguely knew. Everyone had their own circle, and if you didn't, you were on the margins. Here there may have been similar circles, but if so they were open. In the few weeks I had lived here the most striking discovery was that everyone was accepted. Not necessarily liked, but always accepted. They didn't have to wave to me and invite me out, but they did, and not just a few people but everyone.

Perhaps the answer was they had to, it was as simple as that. There were so few of them that they couldn't afford to leave anyone out. Or else it was their attitude to life that was different, rawer, more casual. If you lived your life on a boat deck, if you did hard physical work every day and drank as soon as you were on shore, there was no reason to bother with petty clockwork-like social etiquette and distinctions. A more natural course of action was to proffer the hand of friendship, say join us, have a drink, have you heard about the time . . . ?

Vivian, Live, and Andrea came racing down the hill on their bikes. They waved and shouted to me as they passed, their hair flapping and their eyes squinting to meet the oncoming wind. I was smiling to myself long after they had passed. They were so funny, the way the immense seriousness they possessed was shattered internally by their equally immense childish glee.

I worked for a few hours on a short story about some boys who nailed a cat to a tree, then I heated a frozen meal in the microwave for dinner, lay down on the sofa, and read *Doctor Faustus* until it began to grow dark outside and I had to get ready to go out.

I hadn't read Thomas Mann before. I liked the elaborate, old-fashioned, formal style, and the scenes at the beginning when the protagonists are children and the father of one of them, Adrian, shows them experiments with dead material, which he brings to life, were fantastic, there was something eerie about them that at first forced itself to the front of your consciousness and then seemed to sink to the bottom. I was reminded of the open heart I had once seen on TV as a child, how it had throbbed in all that blood, like a small, blind animal. It was alive and belonged to a different category from Adrian's father's experiments, but the blindness was the same and also the way it was subject to laws, moving according to them, not independently.

I was unable to grasp the part about music and musical theory, but I was used to that in this kind of novel, there were always great expanses I just skimmed without understanding, more or less like the French dialogue that could suddenly crop up in some books.

I showered, changed, put a bottle of vodka in a bag, and walked up to Edvald's house, he was a fisherman, older than the others, around thirty-five, single, liked drinking, and I stayed there until five in the morning, when I strolled back through the village with a head as empty and desolate as an unfrequented tunnel. On waking up at two the next day, I remembered nothing apart from standing on the quay watching the seabirds bobbing on the water, wondering if they were asleep, and pissing against the shop wall. Everything else was gone. All the details and individual moments were lost. I had drunk a whole bottle of spirits, that was what you did here, and I was still drunk when I woke up. Writing was out of the question. Instead I lay in bed reading, but that didn't go very well either, my brain seemed to be soaking in a kind of yellow liquid, which I watched. If I stopped reading, the feeling went away, it was as though it were me in the liquid.

At a few minutes to five there was a ring at the door. I had been asleep and jumped off the bed, it was Irene.

I opened the door.

"Hi!" she said with a smile. There was a bag on the ground beside her. I took two big steps back so that she couldn't hug me.

"Hi," I said. "Do you want to come in?"

Her eyes questioned me.

"What is it, Karl Ove? *Is* there something up?"

"Yes, actually there is," I said. "We have to talk."

She stared at me.

"I haven't told you," I said. "But I was in a relationship before I came here. I received a letter from her after a few days. She broke it off with me. I haven't really gotten over that yet, actually. And now it's begun to get serious with us . . . But I don't have the mental space, it's too early, do you understand? I like you so much, but . . ."

"Are you finishing this?" she said. "Before it's even begun?"

I nodded. "I think so."

"What a shame," she said. "Just when I was starting to like you so much."

"Yes, I'm sorry. But it won't work. It doesn't feel right."

"Then maybe it's better we drop it," she said. "I wish you all the best for your life."

She came over and hugged me. Then she grabbed her bag, turned, and went to go.

"Are you going?" I said.

She turned her head.

"Well, we can't sit here, can we? What's the point of that?"

"But the bus won't be here for ages yet, will it?"

"I'll walk," she said. "I can get on the bus whenever it turns up."

Watching her walk down the hill, with the bag in her hand, toward the road that ran alongside the fjord, I was full of regret. An enormous opportunity had slipped away. At the same time I was relieved that it had been so painless. Now it was over. Now there was nothing to think about.

The days became shorter, and they became shorter quickly, as though they were racing toward the darkness. The first snow arrived in mid-October, went after a few days, but the next time it fell, at the beginning of November, it came with a vengeance, day after day it tumbled down, and soon everything was packed in thick white cushions of snow, apart from the sea, which with its dark, clean surface and terrible depths lay nearby like an alien and menacing presence, like a murderer who has moved into a neighboring house and whose unheeded knife glints on the kitchen table.

The snow and the darkness changed the area beyond all recognition. When I first came, the sky had been high and luminous, the sea vast, and the countryside open, nothing seemed to hold together the village with its random huddle of houses, it barely existed in its own right. Nothing stopped there, that was the feeling. Then came the snow and the darkness. The sky fell, it lay like a lid over the rooftops. The sea disappeared, its blackness merged with the blackness of the sky, no horizon was visible any longer. Even the mountains disappeared and with them the sensation of finding yourself in wide-open country. What remained were the houses, which were lit day and night, always surrounded by darkness, and now the houses and the lights were the focal point to which everything gravitated.

An avalanche blocked the road, a ferry service was started, and the fact that you were only able to leave twice a day increased the feeling that this village was the only village, these people the only people. I was still getting lots of letters, and spent a lot of time answering them, but the life they represented was no longer the one that counted, the one that did was this: up in the morning, out into the snow, up the hill to school and into class. Stay there all day, in a low-roofed, illuminated bunker, weighted down by the darkness, go home, go shopping, have dinner, and then in the evening train in the gym with the youngest fishermen, watch TV at school, swim in the pool or sit at home reading or writing until it was so late that I could go to bed and sleep off the dead hours before the next day started.

On weekends I drank. Someone always came over and asked if I wanted to go to Finnsnes or a village a few hours away, if the road was open. When it was closed it was up to someone's place or down to someone's, there were always people sitting around drinking and they always wanted company. I didn't say no, I joined in, and a bottle of spirits over the evening was no longer the exception but the rule, so I was invariably wandering around doing things which I had forgotten by the next day. Once, I fell out of the band bus, started walking away from the village instead of toward it, no one said anything until I had gone a hundred meters wearing only a shirt and a thin jacket, shivering and trembling, and then I heard their shouts, over here you idiot, over here! At another party I danced with a substitute teacher from Husøya, her name was Anne, she came from somewhere in Østland and was pretty in that cold blond way I was so attracted by, we stood kissing forever in a corner of the corridor where the coatroom was, I called her a few days later, invited her to dinner at my place with her girlfriend and Tor Einar and Nils Erik, I tried to kiss her then but she lowered her head, she had a boyfriend, she said, she had someone else, what happened at the party should never have happened, I wasn't her type at all, she had no explanation except that she had been drunk. And perhaps that it had been dark? I said, trying to make a joke out of it, but she didn't laugh, she wasn't the sort. Cold and sincere, that was Anne.

At other weekends people came home from schools or universities across Norway, and just the fact that they had different faces was a liberation. I traipsed after one of them like a dog, her name was Tone, she was Frank's sister and the daughter of the teacher who couldn't stand me, but I didn't care about that, I was drunk and had been watching her all evening.

Now she was about to leave, and I decided to follow her.

Snowflakes were whirling through the darkness. She walked fifty meters down the road with her head lowered, beneath the light of the street lamps. I wrapped my scarf around my mouth and set off. She went into her parents' house, banged the snow off her boots, then closed the door behind her.

I stood outside for a few minutes. I thought she would be happy to see me because she had wanted to sleep with me all evening.

The kitchen window was dark, the living-room window, too. But light streamed out from the narrow window at the end of the house.

I opened the door and went in. Didn't bother to remove my shoes, glanced around the living room, it was dark and empty, walked down the hall toward the open door at the end.

She was standing in the bathroom brushing her teeth in front of the mirror. Her mouth was full of foam.

"Hi," I said.

She must have heard me, yet didn't appear the slightest bit frightened when she turned toward me.

"Get out," she said.

I sat down on a chair by the wall and stared intensely at her. First at her face, then at her breasts under the green jumper.

She shook her head.

"You're wasting your time. You haven't got a hope with me," she said almost incomprehensibly as everyone does when cleaning their teeth and talking at the same time.

"Do you want me to go?" I said.

She nodded.

"Fine," I said, got up and went out. The wind formed a wall in front of the door filled with small, frozen-hard particles of snow. What a shame, I thought, looking up at the immense darkness above us. She is so classy. Yes, unbelievably classy! After wandering back and forth in the snow-blown road under the light from the street lamps, which with the snow and the darkness as background had a greenish glare and cast an underwater glow over the surroundings, I found my way back to the party, which was no longer a party but a table littered with glasses and bottles, empty cigarette packets and ashtrays in an otherwise empty room. All sense of time in me must have stopped – had I really been away that long? – and then my sense of space went too because the next thing I remember is waking up in my bed at home.

Actually *doing* things, not denying myself anything when I was drunk, in that intoxicating state of total freedom, had in the course of these months gradually begun to take its toll. At gymnas I was either hungover or not, there were no other consequences. If I felt any pangs of conscience at all, they were pinpricks, nothing a hearty breakfast and a walk to town couldn't cure. Up here in the north, however, it was different. Perhaps the gulf between the person I usually was and the one I became when I drank was too great. Perhaps it was impossible for a man to have such a wide gulf inside himself. For what happened was that the person I usually was began to draw in the person I became when I was drinking, the two halves slowly but surely became sewn together, and the thread that joined them was shame.

Oh hell, did I do *that*? the cries resounded inside me the next day as I lay in the darkness. Oh no, shit, did I say *that*? And *that*? And *that*?

I lay there, rigid with fear, as though someone were throwing bucket after bucket of my own excrement over me.

Look what an idiot he is. Look what a stupid fool he is.

But I got up, started a new day, and I always got through it.

The worst was probably the notion that others *saw* me, that I put on a show for them, and that the side of me I displayed then was reflected in the way they looked at me every day.

I pretended I was a young teacher who took the best possible care of his children, whom they watched on his way to and from the post office or the shop, while in reality I was a babbling idiot who sat drooling over all sorts of girls at night, who would cut off both his hands for one of them to take him home, but none wanted to, after all he was a babbling, drooling idiot.

At school too I occasionally felt like that, but not with the pupils, I had the situation fully under control there, nor with Nils Erik and Tor Einar, they of course knew what was what.

Yes, I had the situation under control, yet that didn't prevent me from feeling the pain and torment there too, opposite my pupils, sitting at my desk in the minutes before the new week officially started, with the disgraceful behavior of the weekend still fresh in my mind.

They had taken off their padded jackets, and were sitting there in their Icelandic sweaters, their skin still red from the cold, squirming restlessly on their chairs, wanting to go home and back to bed while the presence of the others drew them in the opposite direction, for they were exchanging glances, whispering little comments, sniggering, breathing, living.

The light glared from the ceiling, and against the deep darkness that always hovered above us the windows reflected back the other end of the whole classroom. There sat Kai Roald, there sat Vivian, there sat Hildegunn, there sat Live, there sat Andrea. Faded blue jeans, white boots, a white sweater with a high neck. And there I was, behind the desk, in a black shirt, black jeans, trembling inside with exhaustion. Even the slightest little transgression seemed monstruous to me, all I wanted and needed was security.

I opened the book at the chapter we were going to read. The room was full of the buzz of voices from other classes. My own pupils were sleepy, not interested.

"All right, take your books out! There's a limit to sleepiness!"

Andrea smiled as she bent forward and took the book from her satchel. It was bound in brown paper and covered with the names of pop stars and film stars in felt-tip pen. Kai Roald groaned, but when I met his eyes he smiled. Hildegunn already had her book ready of course. Live turned to the window. I looked in the same direction. A figure was on its way up the hill, though more like a ghost, for it was impossible to distinguish a body from the shadowy contours coming toward us, enveloped in swirling snow.

"Live! Take out your book!"

"OK, OK. What subject do we have now?"

"Are you serious? Don't you know?"

"No-oo!"

"Six months you've been here for the first lesson on Monday morning. We always have the same subject. And that is . . . ?"

Her eyes stared at me nervously.

"You don't remember?" I said.

Neither did I. Panic rose in me like water in a blocked toilet.

She shook her head.

"Does anyone know?"

Everyone looked at me. Did they understand?

No.

There. Kai Roald opened his mouth. "Christianity," he said.

"Oh yes, Christianity!" she said. "Of course. I knew that. I just went all blank for a moment."

"You're always all blank," Kai Roald said.

She looked daggers at him.

"And you aren't?" I said.

He laughed. "You're right, I guess I am."

"I've gone blank too for the moment," I said. "But it's no good. We have to get through the syllabus. And we can only do that by working hard."

"That's what you always say," Vivian said.

"But it's true. Do you think I stand here talking about Martin Luther for my sake? I know enough about him. But you don't know anything. You're a bunch of ignoramuses. But on the other hand all thirteen-year-olds are, so it's not your fault. By the way is there anyone who knows what an ignoramus is?"

Complete silence.

"Has it got something to do with ignorant?" Andrea said. A faint blush rose up her cheeks as she watched her hand doodling in her book.

"Yes," I said. "To ignore is to fail to notice or to show no interest. An ignorant person is someone who shows no interest in anything. And if you aren't interested in anything, you don't know anything about it either."

"Then I'm ignorant," Kai Roald said.

"No, you're not. You know lots of things."

"Like what?"

"You know a lot about cars, don't you? More than me anyway! And you know a lot about fishing. I know nothing about that."

"Why don't you have a driver's license, by the way? You're eighteen after all," Vivian said.

I shrugged. "I can manage fine without one."

"But you have to get a ride whenever you want to go anywhere!" Vivian said.

"I get around, don't I?" I said. "But that's enough now. Let's get on with our work."

I stood up.

"What do you know about Martin Luther?"

"Nothing," Hildegunn said.

"Nothing?" I said. "Absolutely nothing?"

"Yes," said Live.

"Was he Norwegian?" I said.

"No," said Hildegunn.

"What nationality was he then?"

Hildegunn shrugged. "Wasn't he German?"

"Is he alive now?"

"Of course not!"

"When did he live? When your parents were small? The sixties?" I said.

"He lived in the olden days," Vivian said.

"In the fifteen hundreds," Hildegunn said.

"What did he do? Was he a plumber? Fisherman? Driver?"

"No," Kai Roald said, and giggled.

"He was a priest," Andrea said in the casual way that was intended to show that this was one of many things she knew.

"You know *a lot*," I said. "Martin Luther was a priest who lived in Germany in the sixteenth century. Now why don't you find out ten things about Martin Luther and write them down. Then we'll go through them at the end of class."

"How will we find them out?" Vivian asked.

"Isn't it your job to tell us actually?" Hildegunn said. "Isn't that what you get paid for?"

"I get paid for teaching you," I said. "And there won't always be a teacher in front of you telling you what you need to know. So what do you do? You have to learn where you can find things out. Don't you? Look them up in a book. Find an encyclopedia. I don't mind what you do as long as you find out ten things. Off you go!"

With sighs and groans and grimaces they got up and made for the school's modest library, each armed with a pencil and a notebook. I sat down behind my desk and looked up at the clock on the wall. Half an hour left. Once this was over, there were five classes left. And Monday was crossed off. Then there were Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday left.

This weekend I would definitely have to write. No trip to Finnsnes during the day, no party in the evening, just sit in front of the typewriter from the moment I got up to the moment I went to bed.

I had five short stories now, apart from the two stories based on dreams. All of them had the same protagonist, Gabriel, and the same cast of characters. The action took place in Tybakken. What was strange was how close the place was to me. Sitting in front of the typewriter was like opening a door to it. The scene rose inside me in its entirety and repressed everything around me. There was the road outside the house, there was the tall spruce with the stream running past, there was the slope down to Ubekilen, the stone wall, the rocky outcrop, the boathouse, the crooked rickety pontoon, the island with all the seagulls. If anyone rang my doorbell now, and they did all the time, fourth graders, seventh graders, the tall ninth grader who for some reason gravitated toward me, some of the young fishermen, I would jump out of my skin. It didn't feel as though my childhood surroundings were intruding on the present but vice versa: I was really back in my childhood, and it was the present that was intruding. If I was interrupted, a whole hour or more could pass before Tybakken would rise again.

That was what I longed for. When the trees were trees, not "trees," cars not "cars," when Dad was Dad, not "Dad."

I got up and took a few steps into the common area so that I could see what they were doing. Everyone was sitting around the table in the library, apart from Andrea and Hildegunn, who were heading for their chairs.

"Did you find anything?" I said as they walked past.

"Of course," Hildegunn said. "We've finished. What should we do now?"

"Sit down and wait."

In the classroom beyond, separated from the library by a long stack of bookshelves, sat the third and fourth graders bent over their desks, some with their hands in the air, while Torill went around helping them. In the other corner of the room sat the first graders, on cushions, around Hege, she was reading from a book, they were staring ahead, their eyes dreamy, their faces sleepy. She caught my gaze, looked up without a pause in her reading, and smiled at me. I rolled my eyes, turned to my classroom, and met Andrea's look. She had been watching me. Now she looked down.

"What did you find out then?" I said.

"Do you want to hear now?" Hildegunn said.

"No," I said. "Not really. We'll wait until the others have finished."

"Then why did you ask?" said Andrea.

"Reflex action," I said.

Across the carpet came Kai Roald and Vivian. After they had sat down I walked over to the library corner, where Live was still busy writing.

"How's it going?" I said.

"I've got five," she said. "No, six."

"That's good," I said. "That'll do. You can write down the last four as we go through them."

She picked up her bits and pieces with that serious expression she put on when somebody told her to do something. But it was unable to conceal her great inner insecurity, at least not from me. What her peers saw when they looked at her was not easy to say.

We spent the last twenty minutes of the lesson going through their points. I talked and expanded while they watched me with vacant eyes. What good Martin Luther would ever do them I had no idea. For them it was probably more about being here and writing in their notebooks with their pencils. Sitting in their seats and listening to someone talking about something.

The bell rang. They asked if they could stay indoors during the break, the weather was so bad, I said absolutely not, off you go, waited while they put on their jackets and hats, went into the staff room, where everyone was busy with their own preoccupations, and sat down with a cup of coffee, which was already bitter after an hour in the machine.

Nils Erik, who was reading the local paper, glanced across at me.

"Coming up to the pool later today?" he said.

"OK," I said. "Drop by my place."

In front of us, Torill opened the fridge door, leaned forward, and took out a yogurt. She removed the lid and licked it before throwing it in the bin under the sink, found a spoon in the drawer, and started to eat. She looked at us and smiled with a streak of pink yogurt on her lower lip.

"I get so hungry at this time," she said.

"You don't have to apologize," I said. "We snack too."

Beside me Nils Erik folded the newspaper, got up, and went to the bathroom. I drank a mouthful of coffee and turned to Jane, who came out of the photocopy room at that moment with a pile of papers in her hand. The corners of her mouth drooped as always, her eyes were bored and introspective, leaving you with no real desire to find out what went on inside her.

"Did you make the coffee, Jane?" I said.

She scrutinized me. "Yes, I'm on kitchen duty today. Why?"

"Nothing," I said. "Except that this is the worst coffee I've ever tasted."

She grinned.

"You've been spoiled then," she said. "But I can put a fresh pot on if you like."

"Not at all. I was only joking! It's good enough for me."

She went to her desk, and I got up and stood by the window. A lamppost was encircled by light, thick with tiny white snowflakes whirring around like a swarm of insects. Some children were fighting in the snow below, four of them on top of one another in a drift, and my hand twitched when I saw them, so strong was my impulse to knock the top ones off, for I couldn't imagine anything more claustrophobic than lying underneath them, face down in the snow.

I stepped to the side and scanned the playground.

Where was the teacher?

Oh, when would I get it into my head? This was my playground duty!

I hurried toward the line of hooks in the vestibule.

"Three minutes left of the break," Sture said. "No point going out now. You can catch up after school."

He smirked at his own joke. I looked at him without smiling, pulled my hat down over my head, grabbed my gloves. Even though he was right that there was no point going out now, I had another reason: the impression of regret and energy I would leave behind me as I jogged out and came into the view of those standing behind the window. The last thing I wanted to give was an impression of slackness. The last thing I wanted was for people to think I was a shirker.

Out of the wet-weather shelter came a small, plump figure. I dashed over to the boys who had been wrestling in the snow and were now brushing it off their jeans. The denim material was almost black from where the snow had melted.

"Karl Ove!" he said from behind me, and tugged at my jacket.

He must have run after me.

I turned. "What's up, Jo?" I said.

He smiled.

"Can I throw a snowball at you?"

Last week I had given them permission to throw snowballs at me. It had been a big mistake because they thought it was so much fun, especially when they hit my thighs with a couple of stingers, that they refused to stop when I asked them to. They had reached a kind of amnesty, what had not been allowed was suddenly allowed, and they had a sense of how difficult it would be to punish them if all of a sudden it wasn't allowed any longer.

"No, not today," I said. "Besides, the bell's about to ring."

The four boys scowled up at me from under dark woolen hats pulled down over their faces.

"Is everything all right out here?" I said.

"Of course," Reidar said. "Why wouldn't everything be all right?"

"None of that," I said. "You should show respect for adults."

"You're not an adult," he said. "You don't even have a driver's license!"

"No, that's true," I said. "But at least I know my times tables. That's more than you can say. And I'm big enough to paddle your bottom three times a day if I have to."

"My dad would beat you up if you did," he said.

"Karl Ove, come on," Jo said, pulling at my jacket again.

"I've got a dad too, you know," I said. "He's much stronger and taller than me. And on top of that, he's got a driver's license."

I looked down at Jo. "Where do you want to go?"

"There's something I want to show you. It's something I've made."

"What is it?"

"It's a secret. No one else must know."

I looked across. The girls in the seventh grade were standing by the wall of the wet-weather shelter. Behind, on the fringes of the soccer field, a group of children were chasing after each other in the dark.

"The bell's about to ring, you know," I told him.

He took my hand. Didn't he understand how this looked to his classmates?

"It'll be quick," he said.

He'd hardly uttered the words before the bell rang.

"Next break then," he said. "Will you come with me?"

"OK," I said. "Now get going."

The kids on the soccer field had either not heard the bell or were ignoring it. I walked over to the field. Cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted that the bell had rung. They stopped and looked at me. The snow covering the field drew it into the surrounding terrain, it was a flat surface in the middle of a slope which, farther up, became a mountain, and in all this whiteness, which the sky's all-pervasive darkness muted to a blue, the pupils resembled tiny animals, rodents of some kind perhaps, it seemed to me, romping around outside the entrances to their ingenious networks of passageways and tunnels in the snow.

I waved to them. They set off at a lope toward me.

"Didn't you hear the bell?" I said.

They shook their heads.

"Didn't you think it was time for the bell to ring?"

They shook their heads again.

"Hurry up now," I said. "You're very late."

They ran past me. As I rounded the corner of the wet-weather shelter, the door slammed after the last straggler. I kicked the snow off my shoes against the wall and followed. Opened the door to the staff room, hung my coat and hat on the hook, and went for my books for the class. Behind me the toilet door opened. I turned around. It was Nils Erik.

"Have you been in there all this time?" I said.

"What kind of question is that?" he said.

"I was just surprised," I said, scanning the book spines. "You were in there a long time. I wasn't making any insinuations."

I looked at him and smiled. Picked out a natural science booklet.

"That's good to hear," he said. "Insinuations are such crap. No, it was Torill. She's so sexy it's unbelievable. And when she bent forward . . . I just had to go in and relieve the emergency that had arisen."

"Emergency?" I said.

"Yes," he laughed. "You know. Man sees woman. Man is attracted. Man runs to the john and whacks off."

"Oh, that emergency," I said, smiled, and went to the class.

In the next break Jo ran over to me the second I stepped into the playground.

"Come with me now!" he said, taking my hand and dragging me off.

"Take it easy," I said. "What are you going to show me?"

"Something I've made with Endre," he said.

"Where's Endre?"

"I think he's over there."

Endre was in the third grade, Jo was in the fourth. When they were together they usually kept away from the others.

"There," he said, pointing to a large snowdrift behind the building, out of sight of the rest of the school. "We've made a snow cave. It's really big. Do you want to have a look inside?"

Endre saw us coming, crawled in the entrance, and disappeared from sight.

"That's fantastic," I said, and stopped. "I think it's probably too small for me. But you go in."

He smiled up at me. Then he lay down on his stomach and wriggled in. I took a few steps back and looked across at the other children. Two fourth-grade boys came around the corner and headed toward us. Jo stuck his head out of the cave.

"There's room for you too, Karl Ove. It's really big."

"I have to keep an eye on everyone, you know," I said.

He spotted the two boys.

"This is our snow cave," he said, looking at me. "We made it."

"You sure did," I said.

"Have you ever made a cave?" Reidar shouted.

"It's ours," Jo said. "You can't come in."

They stopped by the entrance.

"Let's have a look," Stig said, trying to crawl past Jo.

"It's ours," Jo said, looking to me again. "Isn't it, Karl Ove?"

"You made it," I said. "But you can't refuse to let others in. You'd have to stand guard day and night if you did."

"But it's ours!" he said.

"It's on school premises," I said. "You can't stop anyone going in."

Reidar smiled and pushed past Jo. Soon the cave was full of kids. They immediately started planning how they could make it bigger and began to dig a tunnel from the end. Jo tried to take charge, but they ignored him, he had to find his place, which was and would always be at the bottom of the pecking order. I turned and went. I did have a bit of a bad conscience, Jo was as unhappy now as he had been happy a few minutes before, but there was nothing I could do about it, he would have to work out the social game for himself. He would have to learn he would get nowhere by whining or making up stories.

"Are you hanging around here again?" I said to the gum-chewing seventh-grade girls standing inside the wet-weather shelter.

"It's snowing and windy," Vivian said. "You don't really think that we should have to stand outside in this weather, do you?"

"You don't have to stand, do you?" I said. "You could run around like the other kids."

"We're not kids," Andrea said. "And it's not fair. The eighth and ninth graders can stay indoors."

"Only kids say something is unfair," I said. "Besides, the eighth and ninth graders have a double slot, so they're in class now."

"That's what we want. Working indoors is better than being out in this weather," Andrea said, and looked up at me. Her cheeks had reddened with the cold. Her eyes were narrow and beautiful.

I laughed.

"So all of a sudden you want to work, do you? That's a new tune," I said.

"You just laugh at us," Vivian said. "You don't have any respect for us at all."

"I treat you how you deserve to be treated," I said, eyeing the clock on the wall between the entrance to the main school building and the large wing where the swimming pool and gymnasium were. Four minutes left of the break.

I went to the other side to see how the fourth graders were doing. No sooner had I rounded the corner than I saw Jo and Endre trudging along, heads bowed into the wind, feet stamping on the snow.

"How's the cave?" I said.

"It's ruined!" Jo said. "Reidar put his head through the roof. The whole damned cave collapsed."

His eyes were moist.

"Don't curse," I said.

"Sorry," he said.

"It can happen," I said. "I'm sure you didn't mean to."

"But it was *our* cave! *We* built it! And now it's ruined."

"Build one with them next time," I said. "Then they won't ruin it."

"We don't want to," he said. "Come on, Endre."

They walked past me.

"I can help you make a new one, if you want," I said. "In the next break."

"Can you?"

"We can get started at least. But the others might join in."

"Yes, but then *you're* there," he said. "They won't dare smash it up."

It had been a stupid offer to make, I thought as I went back into the staff room a few minutes later. Now I would have to dig in the snow with the ten-year-olds for the rest of the breaks. On the other hand, Jo's face had lit up, I remembered, and I closed the toilet door behind me, unzipped, and began to pee. I aimed the jet at the porcelain so that the teachers who were still in the toilet wouldn't hear the splashing sound. While I washed my hands I stared at my reflection in the mirror. The singular feeling that arose when you looked at your own eyes, which so purely and unambiguously expressed your inner state, of being both inside and outside, filled me to the hilt for a few intense seconds, but was forgotten the moment I left the room, in the same way that a towel on a hook or a bar of soap in the small hollow in the sink also were, all these trivialities that have no existence beyond the moment, but hang or lie undisturbed in dark, empty rooms until the door is opened the next time and another person grasps the soap, dries his hands on the towel, and examines his soul in the mirror.

I was in the living room eating when Nils Erik rang at the door. Snow from the drift beside the porch swirled in the air around him. The gusting wind hung like an invisible cupola above the village.

"I'm eating," I said. "But I'll be done soon. Come in."

"But you won't want to go swimming after eating," he said.

"I'm eating fish," I said. "They're used to swimming."

"That's true," he said.

"Do you want some? Fish roe and potatoes?"

He shook his head, untied his boots, and came into the living room.

"Well?" he said. "How's it going?"

I shrugged, swallowed, and took a long drink of water.

"How's what going?" I said.

"Everything," he said. "Writing, for example."

"It's going fine."

"Teaching?"

"Fine."

"Sex life?"

"Hm . . . what shall I say? Not very good. What about you?"

"Well, you saw for yourself today," he said. "That's about all there is."

"Oh well," I said, scraping up the last roe, butter, and some crumbly potato with the knife, offloading it onto the fork and lifting it to my mouth. My lips became greasy with the fat.

"And my prospects in that direction are not particularly rosy either," he continued. "All the girls over sixteen have moved out. All that's left are schoolgirls and their mothers. The age ranges in between have been wiped out."

"Completely wiped out," I said, got up, put the cutlery on the plate, took them in one hand and the glass in the other and went to the kitchen. "But you make it sound as though they've been hunted to destruction or something."

"They have been! If they'd stayed here, we could have hunted them. But where they are, there are others chasing after them."

I put the plate and glass on the counter and went into the bedroom to get my swimming gear.

"Now I finally understand what's meant by the term 'happy hunting grounds,'" I said. "I've never understood what was supposed to be so fantastic about it. Running around in the forest until eternity. But obviously it was meant in a figurative sense."

"I don't know how fantastic it is," Nils Erik said in a loud voice so that I could hear him. "It's a lot of work and there's little to show for it at the end. At least for me. Much, much better to be in a relationship."

I put my trunks and a towel into a plastic bag, considered whether I needed anything else, no, that should do it.

"When was the last time you were in a relationship?" I said.

"Three years ago," he said, and moved toward the door when he saw me emerge with the bag in my hand.

"What about one of the other temporary teachers?" I said. He was bending down and tying his laces, and straightened up a touch redder in the face.

"If they'd be up for it, fine by me," he said.

We walked up the steep hill in silence, walking was as much as we could manage in the gale. Snow stung against the skin I hadn't covered. When we closed the school door behind us it was like leaving the top deck of a large ship and going inside. Nils Erik switched on the light, we bounded down the stairs in long strides, sat on opposite sides of the dressing room, and changed. Although the wind made the walls creak and the ventilation howl, it still seemed quiet indoors. Perhaps because of the lack of movement? All the rooms were empty, the pool was empty and smooth and still.

The smell of chlorine cast a spell over me. Childhood memories of when we used to go swimming every week in Stintahallen came flooding back: the conical bags of candy we bought at the little shop, the taste of the boiled sweets shaped like nuts and bolts, green and black, licorice and mint. The light displays around the pool, which were supposed to represent tropical waterfalls. The white bathing cap with the Norwegian flag on the side, the dark blue goggles.

I pulled on my trunks and went into the small swimming hall, the tiles were cold and rough on the soles of my feet, the snow eddied round in the light of the lamp outside, behind it the great black void.

The surface of the water was dark with a faint shimmer of blue from the bottom of the pool and as shiny as a mirror. Almost a shame to break it, I thought. I definitely wasn't going to dive in. No, instead I would climb down the metal ladder and try to make as few ripples as possible. All in vain, for along came Nils Erik: he ran to the edge and threw himself into the water with a splash. Swam underwater to the far side, where he broke the surface with a snort and a toss of the head.

"Wonderful!" he shouted. "What's up with you, you wimp?"

"Me, nothing!" I shouted back.

"You're getting into the water like an old woman!"

Suddenly I remembered how I had once tricked Dag Lothar. I had got into the pool a few minutes before him, turned my bathing cap inside out so that it was all white, pulled it away from my head so that it was wrinkled and looked like the caps old ladies wore, and started to swim in a studiously slow style with my head as far out of the water as I could manage. This mimicking of an old lady swimming was so good that Dag Lothar didn't see me, even though there were only four of us in the big pool. He glanced at me, categorized me wrongly, and thus I didn't exist. He called my name and when he received no answer went back into the changing room.

Chest first, I moved slowly out into the water, ducked my head beneath the surface and took a couple of powerful strokes that were almost enough for me to glide to the far edge. Nils Erik was plowing along on the other side, doing free-style. I swam as fast as I could for a few lengths, then stopped at the end by the window and gazed out into the snowstorm.

I turned, rested my elbows on the edge, and watched the white foam spraying up around Nils Erik's thrashing arms and legs, and was reminded of what Geir's father had once said, that you should lie as if on cotton when you swim the crawl, and behind Nils Erik I saw the open door to the empty rooms beyond.

Shit, I had forgotten. The sauna.

I dragged myself out of the water, went to the changing room, and switched on the stove. When I went back I dived in and swam back and forth for perhaps half an hour until we decided to give up.

We sat on the top bench in the sauna. I poured water on the stones in the stove, a wave of hot steam met my skin and drifted farther into the small, cube-shaped room.

"This is the biggest fringe benefit we get with the job," Nils Erik said, stroking the wet hair at the back of his head.

"It's also the only one," I said.

"Free coffee," he said. "And newspapers. And cake at the farewell party."

"Hurrah," I said.

There was a pause. He moved down to a lower bench.

"Have you had lots of other jobs?" I said at length, leaning back against the wall. The heat was making my head heavy, as though it was slowly being filled with lead or something similar.

"No. Just the health service. Oh, and the parks a couple of summers ago. And you?"

"Gardening, floor factory, newspaper, nuthouse. And radio. But it wasn't paid, so I suppose that doesn't count."

"No," he said lethargically. I looked at him. He had closed his eyes and was leaning back with his elbows on the step where I was sitting. There was an energy and vivacity about his personality that seemed to conflict with something else, an old-man-ish quality that was hard to define because it didn't manifest itself in anything specific, it was more an aura he had, I only noticed it in a negative way, when for example I was taken aback that he had heard of the Jesus and Mary Chain and liked them, because why in the world would he not have heard of them?

He sat up straight and turned to me.

"Karl Ove," he said. "Just had a thought. You know Hilda's cottage?"

"Hilda's cottage? What's that?"

"The yellow house on the bend. It used to belong to Hilda, Eva's mother-in-law. She died a few years ago, and now the house is empty. I've had a chat with them, and they'd be happy to rent it out. After all, it'll fall into disrepair faster if no one's living there. So they don't want much rent. Five hundred a month, that's all."

"And?" I said.

"Living in a whole house on my own is no good. I wondered perhaps if we could rent it? We'd save loads of money on accommodation, and food would be cheaper if there were two of us. What do you think?"

"Ye-es," I said. "Why not?"

"We can have a room each and share the rest."

"But everyone will think we're a couple of gay guys," I said. "Two young teachers have found each other, they'll say."

He laughed. "And here we are in the sauna all alone . . ."

"So the rumors have already started?"

"No, are you out of your mind? You've shown an unequivocal interest in the opposite sex up here. No one is in any doubt about your preferences. Well, are you in or out?"

"Yes. I mean no. I have to write and for that I need to be alone."

"There's a room next to the sitting room. You can have that. It's perfect."

"OK, why not then," I said.

After we had gotten dressed and were on our way upstairs, I asked him about something that had been occupying my mind for a long time but that my nakedness had prevented me from articulating.

"I've got a little problem in the area we touched on the other day," I said.

"What was that?" he said.

"About sex," I said.

"Come on. Out with it!" he said.

"It's not easy to talk about," I said. "But the thing is . . . well, I come too quickly. Put bluntly. That's the long and short of it."

"Ah, a classic," he said. "And?"

"No, there's nothing else. I was just wondering if you had any tips. When it happens it doesn't feel great, but I'm sure you understand."

"How quickly are we talking about here? A minute? Three minutes? Five?"

"Hm, it varies," I said, inserting the key into the lock of the large glass door and pushing it open. My skin was so hot after the sauna that the cold wind didn't bite, I watched it sweep between the buildings but barely noticed it. "Maybe three or four?"

"That's not bad, you know, Karl Ove," he said, winding his scarf around his neck, pulling his hat well down over his ears. "Four minutes, that's a pretty long time."

"How do you manage in this area?"

"Me? The opposite. I can hump away till eternity and nothing happens. In fact, that's a problem too. I can be at it for half an hour without getting near an orgasm. Sometimes I just have to give up."

We set off down the road.

"And when you beat the meat?" he said. "Is it the same?"

My cheeks went red, but he couldn't see that in the dark. He wasn't expecting a lie, so I was on safe ground.

"About the same," I said.

"Mhm," he said. "I've got problems there too. Well, you may have realized that today. I can keep at it forever."

"Do you think it's physiological?" I said. "Or is it a mental thing? I wish I could swap. The opposite problem would be a thousand times better."

"No idea," he said. "Probably physiological. I've always been like this anyway. Ever since the first time. So I don't know anything else. But I've heard it's supposed to help if you pinch the tip. Hard. Or pull at the scrotum. Then just keep pumping."

"I'll try that next time," I said, and smiled into the darkness.

"Yes, should an opportunity ever present itself," he said.

"At Christmas, for example? All the young women from the district will be back then."

"Do you reckon they'll be coming back here to get laid? I doubt it. I think they're getting it where they are now and they come back here for some R & R, ready to go again in January."

"Yes, you're probably right," I said, and came to a halt, we had reached the road to my flat. "If everything goes through with the house, when do we move in?"

"We have to give notice first and all that. After Christmas? If we shorten our holiday by a couple of days, we could do it then."

"Sounds good," I said. "See you!"

I raised my hand and waved, opened the door, and went in. Ate eight slices of bread and drank half a liter of milk, lay down on the sofa, and read the first pages of a new book I'd bought: *The Great Fairy Tale* by Jan Kjærstad. I had read *Mirrors* and *Homo Falsus* by him before and had just borrowed *The Earth Turns Quietly* from the library in Finnsnes. But this one was new, it had just been published, and the first thing I did when I held it in my hand was smell the fresh paper. Then I flipped backward and forward. Every chapter started with a big O. Some of the chapters were set in several columns – one column looked like notes and popped up here and there alongside another, which was the main story. Some chapters were letters. Some were printed in bold type, some in italics, some in normal font. Something called Hazar and something called Enigma cropped up at regular intervals. And definitions of k – that had to stand for *kjærlighet*, love.

I started reading the first page.

> *She was very young. Neck as fresh as dew. They stood a meter apart, in their own worlds. He had felt the tension, even with his back to her, he turned and stole a glance. An enormous kick. Made a few feints with his leg. She noticed, smiled. Sparks between kohl and mascara. She thrust her right shoulder in his direction, twice, a different beat, bit her lower lip, lowered her gaze. The percussion and bass set off a funky groove in his sensory receptors. Contrary to nature to stand*

> *still. He took a few steps on the carpet, toward her, away from her, inviting, teasing. She mimicked his steps, same rhythm, tiger wrinkles by her nose. Black curly hair, kerchief wound around her forehead, brazen makeup. What was she listening to? Cramps? Split Beaver? ViViVox? Kimono jacket with leaf pattern, baggy silk trousers, sandals with toe strap. Breathtaking. And around her: the covers' flickering kaleidoscope of figures, forms, and fancy calligraphy.*

I read it over and over again. The style was so alien, and yet so cool with the short incomplete sentences, all the alliteration and the sprinkling of English words. And the foreign words. Kimono – that was Japanese. Tiger wrinkles – that was Indian and animalistic. Kohl – that sounded German, was it? Within the space of a few lines a whole world was opened up to me. And it was a different world, it had something futuristic about it, which attracted me. But I couldn't write like that, even if I wanted to, it would be impossible. When I read *Vinduet*, which Kjærstad edited, I knew as good as none of the names and the featured titles and only a few of the terms used. *About Burning the Aeneid*, one article was called, for some reason it rumbled around in my head, cropping up here, there, and everywhere, although I had no idea what an Aeneid was. All this was postmodernism, Kjærstad was the greatest Norwegian postmodernist writer, and although I liked it, or the whole world that I suspected lay behind what stood in the text, I didn't know what it was or where it actually existed. Toe strap, *tårem* in Norwegian, was there some echo there with *harem* and the Orient? Kjærstad's books were full of the Orient, a *Thousand and One Nights* atmosphere, narratives within narratives, and I imagined part of what he was doing was drawing that world into ours, along with a host of other worlds. What it meant, I had no idea, but intuitively I liked it, in the same way that intuitively I disliked Milan Kundera. Kundera was also a postmodernist writer, but he completely lacked this embracing of other worlds, with him the world was always the same, it was Prague and Czechoslovakia and the Soviets, who had either invaded or were on the verge of doing so, and that was fine, but he kept withdrawing his characters from the plot, intervening and going on about something or other while the characters stood still, sort of waiting, by the window or wherever it was they happened to be, until he had finished his explanation and they could move forward. Then you saw that the plot was only "a plot" and that the characters were only "characters," something he had invented, you knew they didn't exist, and so why should you read about them? Kundera's polar opposite was Hamsun, no one went as far into his characters' worlds as he did, and that was what I preferred, at least in a comparison of these two, the physicality and the realism of *Hunger*, for example. There the world had weight, there even the thoughts were captured, while with Kundera the thoughts elevated themselves above the world and did as they liked with it. Another difference I had noticed was that European novels often had only one plot, everything followed one track, while South American novels had a multiplicity of tracks and sidetracks, indeed, compared with European novels, they almost exploded with plots. One of my favorites was *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by García Márquez, but I also loved *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Kjærstad had a little of the same, but in a European way, and there was also something of Kundera in him. I thought so anyway.

What about my own writing?

Writing in a postmodernist style like Kjærstad was way beyond my reach, I couldn't do it even if I wanted to, I didn't have it in me. I had only one world, so that was the one I had to write about. At least for the time being. But I tried to include the exuberance that García Márquez possessed. The multiplicity of stories too. And Hamsun's being present in the moment.

I read on. I had seen in the reviews that in this novel Oslo was situated somewhere in the southern hemisphere. That was a fantastic idea, it meant Oslo became everything it wasn't in reality. But the way this world was evoked was more important. There was something Márquezian about the exuberance and the density and the multiplicity in this passage.

I laid aside the book and went to the desk, sat down and started to flip through the little pile of texts I had written. It was so thin! So unbelievably thin! I only included the bare essentials – the forest, the road, the house – I let everything else go. But what if I let all the rest explode?

I took a fresh piece of paper and wound it into the typewriter, glanced at my reflection in the window as the typewriter carriage buzzed into position.

Where was there a subject with more breadth and depth and an abundance of detail?

I imagined the road outside the house in Tybakken.

> *I went onto the road. It was black and beside it the green spruce trees swayed in the wind. A car drove past. It was a BMW. On the pavement Erling and Harald stood by their bikes. Erling had an Apache, Harald a DBS. Behind them the hill was lined with houses. In the gardens there were chairs and tables, kennels, barbecues, tricycles, small plastic pools, hoses, and an abandoned rake. In the sky above, a plane flew past, so far up that only the white vapor trail was visible.*

I tore the sheet out of the roller, crumpled it up, and threw it on the floor. Inserted another. Stared straight ahead for a while. Two years ago I had visited Yngve and Mom in Bergen. The fish market there had swarmed with life: people, stalls, fishermen, and crabs, cars and boats, flags and pennants, birds and water and mountains and houses. That would be a perfect place to get the density!

I started writing again.

> *The fish were lined up side by side on a bed of ice. They glistened in the sunlight. Women with money to spend and bulging bags walked back and forth between the stalls. A little boy was holding a balloon in one hand and clasping the stroller his mother was pushing with the other. Suddenly he let go and ran over to the tank full of cod. "Look, Mom," he shouted. An old man in a black suit and hat was staggering along, supporting himself on a stick. A fat woman in a coat was examining some mackerel. A sparkling jewel hung from her neck. The two assistants had fish blood smeared over their white aprons. One was laughing at something the other had said. On the road behind them cars raced by. A girl with dark shoulder-length hair, a white T-shirt, her breasts visible beneath,*

and a blue Levi's 501-clad bottom stood gazing across the harbor. I glanced at her as I hurried past. She looked at me and smiled. I thought how wonderful it would be to fuck her.

I leaned back, took out my watch, it was already a few minutes to nine. I was content, that was a good start, he could meet her again later, anything could happen then. I switched off the typewriter, put a pan of water on the stove, sprinkled some tea leaves into the bottom of the teapot, and suddenly realized that this was the first time I had written without any music in the background. While waiting for the water to boil, I reread the passage. The sentences should be broken up a bit and made more abrupt. There should be something about the various smells and the sounds. Maybe even more detail. And some alliteration.

I switched on the typewriter again, took out the sheet, and inserted another.

The fish were lined up side by side on a bed of ice, everything glinted and glistened in the sunlight. The air smelled of salt, exhaust fumes, and perfume. Voluminous women with bulging bags and money to spend walked back and forth between the respective stalls, pointing authoritatively at what they wanted. Prawns, crabs, lobsters, mackerel, pollock, cod, haddock, eels, and plaice. The sounds of mumbling and laughing filled the air. Some children were shouting. A bus let out a deep sigh as it stopped at the bus stop across the street. The pennants along the quay were flapping in the wind. Flap! Flap! Flap! A little boy, pallid and puny, was holding a Winnie-the-Pooh balloon in one hand and clutching the stroller his mother was pushing with the other.

The steam from the boiling pan wafted in through the door. I switched off the typewriter again, poured the water over the tea leaves, took the teapot with a cup, a carton of milk, and a bowl of sugar into the sitting room, sat down, rolled a cigarette, and with it hanging from my lips continued to read *The Great Fairy Tale*, this time without an eye for the detail or a thought about the style, within a few minutes I was totally absorbed. So when the doorbell shrieked through the flat a little later there was something brutal about the way it jerked me back into reality.

It was Hege.

"Hi," she said, pulling the scarf down from her mouth. "You haven't gone to bed?"

"Gone to bed? No. It's only half past nine."

"It's ten actually," she said. "Can I come in?"

"Of course, sorry," I said. "Has something happened or what?"

She came into the hall, unwound the huge scarf, unzipped her down jacket.

"No, but that's the problem. Nothing is happening. Vidar's at sea and I was hanging around getting bored. And then I thought you were probably up."

"Good timing," I said. "I've even got some tea going."

We went into the living room, she sat down on the sofa, picked up the book and looked at the title.

"It's Kjærstad's latest," I said. "Have you read it?"

"Me? No. You're talking to an illiterate. Am I going to get some tea or was that just polite conversation?"

I got a cup, placed it in front of her, and sat down in the chair on the opposite side of the table. She tucked her legs beneath her and poured.

She was thin, long-limbed, with an almost boyish body. Her facial features were pronounced, long nose, full lips, hair big and curly. There was a hardness about her, but in her eyes, which were vivacious and sparkling, often something else would appear, something softer and warmer. She was sharp, had a ready answer for everything, and treated the fishermen around her with a characteristic unflinching aloofness.

I liked her a lot, but I wasn't attracted to her at all, and that was what I realized allowed us to be friends. If I had been attracted to her I would have been sitting there paralyzed, thinking about what I should say and the impression I was making. Since I wasn't, I could be who I was, without a further thought, just chat away. The same applied to her. And as was so often the case when I talked to girls I liked but wasn't attracted to, the conversations tended toward emotional, intimate matters.

"Anything new?" she said.

I shook my head.

"Not really. Oh yes, Nils Erik has suggested we move into the yellow house on the bend."

"And what did you say?"

"I thought it was a good idea. So we're going to move after Christmas."

"I can't imagine two more different men than you and Nils Erik," she said.

"I'm a man now all of a sudden?"

She looked at me and laughed. "Aren't you?"

"I don't feel like one."

"What do you feel like then?"

"A boy. An eighteen-year-old."

"Yes, I can understand that. You aren't a man like the others here in the village."

"What do you mean?"

"Have you ever had a look at your arms? They're as thin as mine! You can't say you're broad-shouldered either."

"So?" I said. "I'm not a fisherman."

"Oh, moody now, huh?"

"No."

"No," she said with the same intonation and laughed. "You're right though. All you have to do is sit still and write for the rest of your life. You don't need big muscles to do that."

"No, you don't," I said.

"Come on, Karl Ove," she said. "You don't take yourself that seriously, do you?"

"It's got nothing to do with how seriously I take myself," I said. "What you say is true. I'm very different from Vidar, for example. But that doesn't mean you can walk all over me."

"Oooh, I obviously touched a sore spot there!"

"Give it up now."

"Oh dear!"

"Do you want me to throw you out?"

I raised my cup in a threatening manner.

She laughed again.

I leaned back, took my tobacco pouch, and started to roll a cigarette.

"I know you want men to be men," I said. "In fact, you've said that many times. The strong silent type. But what does Vidar do to get on your nerves? What do you usually complain about? He never says anything, he never talks about himself or the two of you, there isn't a scrap of romanticism in him."

She eyed me. "Is there anything more romantic than being fucked hard by a strong man?"

I could feel my cheeks glowing, made a grab for the lighter and lit the rollie.

Then I laughed.

"Actually, I don't know anything about that. I can't even imagine what it's like."

"Have you never fucked a girl hard?"

I sensed she was watching me and our eyes met.

"Yes, yes, of course," I said, averting my gaze. "I was thinking the other way round. Of your role in all of this."

I got up and went over to my record collection.

"Any requests?" I said, turning to her.

"You choose," she said. "I have to go soon anyway."

I put on the latest deLillos record: *Før var det morsomt med sne*.

"The biggest argument in favor of moving is that I won't have to listen to the two upstairs any longer," I said, and pointed to the ceiling.

"Torill and Georg?"

I nodded.

"The walls are incredibly thin here. Especially between bedrooms. And there's lots of romanticism, to use your definition of the term."

"How nice for Torill."

"And him by the sound of it."

I sat down again. "You don't like Torill much, do you?" I said.

"No, I can't say I do."

A false smile slid across her mouth, she raised her face and chirruped some words. "She's so good and sincere it hurts to watch and at the same time she offers herself to everyone who wants to look."

"Offers herself?"

"Yes, you don't think she walks around like that when she's on her own, do you?"

She pushed out her bosom, wiggled her hips on the sofa, and coquettishly stroked her hair from her forehead.

I smiled.

"It had never struck me," I said. "But now that you say that I believe it has struck Nils Erik. And pretty hard. He hurried into the john immediately after she had bent forward in front of the fridge today."

"You see. She knows what she's doing. And you?"

"Torill?" I said with a snort. "She's twelve years older than me."

"Yes, of course, but do you like her?"

"I don't dislike her. She's pleasant enough."

There was a pause. The windows reflected the light from the lamps and between them the vague outlines of the furniture in a room that seemed to be underwater.

"Do you have any plans for this Friday?" Hege said.

"No," I said. "Not as far as I know."

"I was thinking of inviting some of the temps over. Making a pizza and drinking some beer. Are you up for it?"

"Of course."

She got up.

"Time to wend my way home. Sleep tight, you writer wuss."

"If you're not careful, I'll start calling you names," I said.

"I'm a woman, you know. That's not done. For you I'm Frøken or Hege. And you're overwatering your flowers. You're drowning them."

"Is that what's wrong? I thought it was imperative they shouldn't get too dry."

"No, it's almost always the opposite. Poor flowers. They've ended up with a murderer. The worst kind, in fact, one who doesn't know he's a murderer."

"Well, actually I am sorry when they die," I said.

"What about fish?" she said.

"What about them?"

"Are you sorry when they die too?"

"Yes, I am. I hate it when they're pulled up from the sea, wriggling and squirming, and I have to kill them."

She laughed.

"I don't think I've ever heard that said here before. I can't imagine it. It must be the very first time."

"There's one fisherman who's been seasick all his life," I said. "That's almost the same."

"No, it isn't," she said. "But now I do have to go."

I followed her into the hall.

"OK, Frøken, I wish you goodnight," I said. I stood waiting in silence while she put on her outdoor gear. Smiled when she had finished. Only her nose was protruding from between her scarf and hat. She said good-bye and went out into the darkness.

The next morning I had the third and fourth graders for the first two lessons. I got up ten minutes before the bell was due to ring, threw on my clothes, and dashed up the hill under a sky that was as black and wild as it had been when Hege left ten hours earlier.

When the children ambled across the floor in their stockinged feet, wearing their sweaters, with their hair rumpled after removing their woolen hats, eyes narrow, I saw them as they were, tiny and vulnerable. It was barely comprehensible that I could on occasion get so irritated and angry with some of them. But there was something in them that rose and sank during the day, a vortex of shouting and screaming, pestering and fighting, games and excitement, which meant that I no longer saw them as small people, only whatever was coursing through their veins.

Sitting in his chair, Jo raised his hand.

"What is it, Jo?" I said.

He smiled. "What are we going to do in the first lesson?"

"You'll have to wait and see," I said.

"Are you going to read to us at the end of the second lesson, like you usually do?"

"All things come to those who wait. Have you heard that saying?"

He nodded.

"Well, there you have it."

The door at the end of the building kept opening and shutting as pupils trickled in. Every time it did, I automatically looked up and across. To the right of the door was the part of the block my class used. Nils Erik was teaching them, he sat behind the desk staring into the air waiting for them to quiet down.

In came Reidar and Andrea. They were brother and sister, they walked to school together, arrived late together, what was so touching about that?

Reidar set off at a run across the floor, must have remembered they weren't allowed to run, then stopped with a jolt and looked at me, and walked quickly to his place. From the other side Andrea watched us. I met her stare. She immediately turned her head away, to where the seventh grade was, and she joined them a moment later.

This little interlude ought to have been perfectly natural, but it wasn't, there was a woodenness about Andrea's movements, as though she was forcing herself to perform them.

"Hi, Karl Ove," Reidar said with a smile. He used my name as a kind of buffer, to make a reprimand for lateness harder because of the friendly interaction. He was a crafty little devil.

"Hi, Reidar," I said. "Sit down. You've held up the whole class now."

Andrea was in love with me.

Of course.

That explained her behavior. All the looks, all the evasiveness, all the blushes.

A warm feeling spread through me. I got up and went to the board.

"What does it mean to have a profession?" I said. "What is a profession?"

Poor little girl.

"A job," Reidar said.

"Put your hand up if you know," I said.

He put up his hand. Fortunately some others did too. I pointed to Lovisa.

"It means having a job," she said.

"That's what I said!" Reidar said.

"Could you give me some examples of professions, Lovisa?" I said.

She nodded. "Fisherman."

"Good," I said, and wrote it down. "Any others?"

"Working in the fish hall?"

"Yes! Any more professions? Hands up!"

Suggestions poured in. Bus driver, truck driver, shop assistant, ship's captain, cleaner, policeman, fireman. Of course "teacher" never occurred to them, even though one was standing right in front of them. For them it wasn't a real job. Chatting with children day in, day out.

"What about me?" I said eventually. "Don't I have a profession?"

"You're a teacher! Teacher! Teacher! Teacher!" they called out.

"And if you're sick?"

"Nurse! Doctor! Ambulance driver!"

When the board was full I asked them to write down the job they would like to have, say why, describe what it involved, and draw a picture. While they were doing that I walked around monitoring, talking to them individually and standing by the window with my hands on my hips staring into the darkness. The thought that she was in love with me was touching, both heartening and sad.

I went up to the desk, we began to go through what they had written and we covered a little more than half before the bell rang. In the following lesson we continued where we had left off, changed to reading from the textbook, they answered the questions in it, and then in the last twenty minutes I read an excerpt from *One Thousand and One Nights*. When I took out the book and started reading they left their chairs and sat in a semicircle on the carpet in front of me, they always did that, it must have been what they were used to from the first or second grade, and I liked it, I felt as if I was giving them something warm and secure. Or rather that they turned a normal situation into something warm and secure. Blank-eyed, they sat listening to the oriental tales, somehow turned in on themselves, as though they were sitting before the fount of their soul, in the midst of the desert of their minds, and saw all the camels, all the silk, all the flying carpets, all the spirits and robbers, mosques and bazaars, all the burning love and sudden death, the billowing mirages across the empty blue sky of consciousness. To them it made no difference that a world more different from theirs, from where they sat on the edge of the world in complete darkness and freezing temperatures, could hardly be imagined; the story took place in their minds, where everything was possible, where everything was permitted.

In the lesson afterward I had the fifth, sixth, and seventh graders for Norwegian.

"OK, let's get cracking," I said as I entered. "Sit down and take out your books!"

"Are you in a bad mood today?" Hildegunn said.

"Don't you try any red herrings," I said. "Come on, books out. We're going to do a bit of group work today. By which I mean you're going to work in pairs. Hildegunn and Andrea, put your desks together. Jørn and Live. Kai Roald and Vivian. Come on. Do you always have to dillydally?"

They placed their desks together in the way I had explained. Apart from Kai Roald. He sat with his elbows on his desk and his cheeks in his hands.

"You too, Kai Roald," I said. "Move your desk next to Vivian's. You'll be working together."

He looked up at me and shook his head. Stared into space again.

"There's no choice," I said. "You have to. Come on now."

"I'm not doing it," he said.

I went over to him.

"Didn't you hear what I said? Come on now, move your desk over."

"I don't want to," he said. "I'm not doing it."

"Why not?" I said.

The others, who had finished their maneuvers, sat watching us.

"I don't want to," he said.

"Shall I do it for you?" I said.

He shook his head. "Didn't you hear what I said? I'm not doing it."

"But you HAVE TO," I said.

He shook his head.

I grabbed the desk on both sides and lifted it. He pressed his forearms down on the top with all his might. I pulled harder, he grabbed it with his hands and held on, red-faced now. My heart was beating faster.

"Now you do as I say!" I said.

"No!" he said.

I snatched at the desk and took it from his grasp, carried it over to Vivian and put it down. He didn't move from his chair.

"I'm not budging," he said.

I held his arm, he wrenched it away.

"Now you go and sit over there!" I said in a loud voice. "Do you want me to carry you? Is that what you want?"

From the corner of my eye I sensed Hege watching us from the other side of the room.

He didn't answer.

I went behind him and grabbed the seat of his chair, intending to lift it with him in it. He stood up, went behind his desk and grasped it with both hands, presumably to move it back.

"Put the desk down!" I said.

His face was scarlet, his eyes rigid and inaccessible. When he started moving the desk I seized it and tore it out of his hands.

"You horse prick!" he shouted.

I put down the desk. Anger throbbed in my veins. My eyes were white with fury.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down, but it didn't help, my entire body was shaking.

"You can go home," I said. "I don't want to see you here any more today."

"What?" he said.

"Go," I said.

He suddenly fought back tears and looked down. "But I haven't done anything," he said.

"Go," I said. "I don't want to see you. Come on. Out. Out."

He lifted his head, sent me a wild, defiant glare, slowly turned and left.

"All right, let's get going," I said with as much composure as I could muster. "Open the exercise book to page forty-six."

They did as I said. Outside the windows Kai Roald walked past, swinging his arms, apparently unconcerned, staring ahead. I explained to them what they had to do. Glanced out the window, he was walking beneath the light from the last lamp on the school premises, neck bent, head down. But I had behaved correctly, no one should be allowed to call a teacher a horse prick and go unpunished.

I sat down behind the desk. For the rest of the class I was completely out of myself, concerned only that the pupils shouldn't notice anything.

In the staff room Hege came over and asked what the scuffle had been about. I shrugged and said I'd had a difference of opinion with Kai Roald and he had called me a horse prick.

"So I sent him home for the rest of the day. Unbelievable . . ."

"Things are different up here, you know," she said. "Swearing's nowhere near as serious."

"It is for me," I said. "And I'm the homeroom teacher."

"Yeah, yeah," she said.

I went over and got a cup of coffee, sat down on my chair, leafed through a book. Then, in a flash, it came to me.

He didn't want to sit next to Vivian because he was in love with her.

This sudden insight made me flush with embarrassment. Oh, what an idiot I had been! How stupid could you be? Sending a pupil home was serious, he would have to explain himself, and his parents wouldn't believe it was the teacher's fault. But it was.

I liked Kai Roald.

So he was in love, that was all!

But it was too late, I couldn't undo anything now.

I went back into the staff room, picked up the newspaper from the table, sat down, and started reading. At the end of the small vestibule the door opened. It was Richard. He spotted me.

"Karl Ove," he said, and beckoned. "Can I have a word with you? Why don't we go to my office?" he said.

I followed him in silence. He closed the door behind us and turned to me.

"Kai Roald's mother just called," he said. "She said he'd been sent home. What happened?"

"He refused to do what I asked him to do," I said. "We had a little altercation. He called me a horse prick, and so I told him to leave. That's where I draw the line."

Richard studied me for a while. Then he lowered himself onto the chair behind his broad desk.

"Sending someone home is a serious measure," he said. "It's the most severe punishment we have. A lot has to happen before we do that. But you know that. Kai Roald is a fine fellow. Do we agree on that?"

"Yes, no question. But that isn't what this is about."

"Hang on a moment. This is Northern Norway. It's a bit rougher up here than down south. We don't take swearing seriously, for example. Calling you what he called you isn't good, but nor is it as serious a crime as you seem to believe. The boy's got a temper. Surely he's allowed to have that?"

"I will not put up with being called a horse prick by a pupil. Regardless of where in the world it happens," I said.

"No, no, of course not," he said. "I appreciate that. But there are always

ways of resolving conflict. There has to be a bit of give and take. Sending a pupil home is absolutely the last resort. I have a feeling that your disagreement hadn't really got that far. Am I right?"

I didn't answer.

"You haven't been a teacher for long, Karl Ove," he said. "And even the most experienced of us make the wrong calls on a regular basis. But next time, if you can't resolve a situation yourself, come and get me. Or bring the pupil to see me."

In your dreams.

"I'll consider that if it happens again," I said.

"It will happen again," he said. "You'll have to sort this one out anyway. You'd better ring Kai Roald's mother and explain why he was sent home."

"Isn't it enough if I give him a message tomorrow?" I said.

"She rang here and was very worried. So I think it would be best if you spoke to her."

"OK," I said. "Then I will."

He held out an open palm to indicate the gray telephone on his desk. "You can use this one."

"But the bell's about to ring," I said. "I'll do it in the next break."

"I'll take your lesson for the first few minutes. Who do you have?"

"Fifth, sixth, and seventh graders."

He nodded, got up, and stood beside his desk.

Was he going to stand there while I made the call? Was he going to listen to the conversation? Was he a total control freak?

I looked up the number in the phone book, found it, and glanced at Richard, who didn't bat an eyelid.

What a sack of shit he was.

I dialed the number.

"Hello," said a woman's voice.

"Oh, hello, this is Karl Ove Knausgaard, Kai Roald's homeroom teacher."

"Oh, hi," she said.

"Kai Roald and I had a disagreement this morning. He refused to do what

I asked him to do and then he called me – well, he swore at me to my face. So I sent him home."

"I see," she said. "Kai Roald can sometimes be a bit unruly."

"Yes, he can," I said. "But he's a good kid. It wasn't that serious and there won't be any consequences for him. He had to be taught a lesson though. Tomorrow everything will be back to normal. Is that all right?"

"Yes. Thank you for your call."

"No problem. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

The moment I put down the phone the bell rang. Richard nodded to me, I left his office without a word and went straight to the teaching block, where I would have math with the fifth, sixth, and seventh graders. This was my weakest subject, I had nothing to say about it, there was nothing there that I could develop or make interesting, they did the problems in their exercise books and every now and then we went through new material on the board. They knew this and seemed to try even harder at the beginning of class to distract me.

"Who were you calling?" Vivian said after they had sat down.

"How do you know I called anyone?" I said.

"We saw you through the window," Andrea said. "You used the head teacher's phone."

"Did you call Kai Roald's parents?" Hildegunn said.

"Is he coming back today?" Vivian said.

"It's none of your business who I call, as you know," I said. "The fact is if you don't quiet down soon, I'll phone *your* parents."

"But they're at work," Vivian said.

"Vivian!" I said.

"Yes?" she said.

"That's enough now. Come on, get to work! That means you too, Jørn."

Andrea had stretched her legs out under the desk and was rubbing her feet against each other while reading through the passage in the book with a pencil in her hand. Live was looking around as she always did when she was stuck and didn't want to show it. I watched Jørn doing the mental calculations at breakneck speed with his tongue sticking out of the corner of his mouth. Then I met Live's gaze and she raised her hand.

I leaned over her desk.

"I can't do this one," she said.

She pointed to a problem with her pencil. Her eyes darted back and forth behind her glasses. I explained it to her, she sighed and groaned, which was her way of playing down her ignorance in front of friends.

"Are you with me?" I said.

"Yes, I am," she said, and waved me away.

"Teacher." Vivian giggled. "Teacher, I can't do this one, teacher!"

When I leaned over her it was as if she was completely at sea. Her face was blank and expressionless, her eyes were blank and expressionless. The receptivity I sensed in her was a little eerie.

"Why have you gotten stuck on this one?" I said. "You've cracked fifteen of them in exactly the same way before!"

She rolled her shoulders.

"Give it another try," I said. "Look at the other ones. If you still can't do it, I'll come and help. OK?"

"OK, teacher," she said, glancing around with a giggle.

As I straightened up, I looked straight into Andrea's eyes.

There was a longing in them, and my cheeks burned.

"Everything OK?" I said.

"Not really," she said. "I need some help."

My heart beat faster as I stopped beside her. Oh, it was ridiculous, but the awareness that she might be in love with me made it suddenly impossible to behave normally.

I leaned over and she seemed to shrink back. Her breathing changed. Her eyes were locked on to the book. I could smell the fragrance of her shampoo, I studiously avoided any form of contact, placed my finger on the first number she had written. She stroked her hair to the side, rested one elbow on the table. It was as if everything we did had become conscious: every detail became visible, it was no longer unthinking and natural but considered and artificial.

"There's the slip," I said. "Can you see it?"

She blushed, said yes in a soft voice, pointed to the next problem, what about this one, said yes again after a few seconds in a soft, low voice, and her breathing was shaky.

I stood up and walked on, surveyed the whole class and the whole teaching area, but I had not been left unmoved, the tiny moment lived on, and to release myself from it I collected all the books on the desk, piled them high with a bang, and addressed the whole class. The moment had to be destroyed by a new, a greater moment. And I had to make the class a place for everyone, a unit, a class that would learn.

"It looks as if some of you are having the same problem," I said. "Let's go through it on the board. Fifth and sixth graders, close your ears."

Once it was done, the lesson proceeded as before. Even before I realized that Andrea had feelings for me, I had been careful to keep my distance from them. I never put my arm around them, indeed I never touched them at all, and if the conversation or jokes went too far, into vaguely sexual areas, I always stopped them. The other teachers didn't need to do this, for them distance was a fact of life that nothing could break. For me it was something I had to create.

In the afternoon, I called Dad. His voice was somber and cold and sober. He asked me how things were, I said fine but I was looking forward to Christmas vacation.

"Are you going to celebrate Christmas with your mother?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"We thought you would. Fredrik isn't coming either. So we're off down south again this year. You've got a sister here, Karl Ove. Don't forget that."

Did he really think I would fall for that? If I had said I wanted to celebrate

Christmas with them, they would have come up with a thousand and one excuses. He didn't want me there. So why pretend that we were letting him down?

"But I could maybe come up during the winter break," I said. "Is that convenient? You won't be heading for the sun?"

"We haven't planned that far ahead," he said. "We'll have to see when the time comes."

"I could catch the express boat or something," I said.

"Yes, that's a possibility. Have you heard from Yngve recently?"

"No, it's been a while ago now," I said. "I think he's very busy."

Throughout the short telephone conversation it was as if he was trying to find a way out. We hung up after about two minutes. I was glad it was like this. Whenever it happened I became aware that he wasn't someone I needed.

Wasn't it like this with everyone?

Walking downhill, with the snow arrowing in off the black sea, I wondered whether there was anyone I needed. Whether there was anyone I couldn't manage without.

If so, it had to be Mom and Yngve.

But they weren't indispensable either, were they?

I tried to imagine what it would have been like if they didn't exist.

Roughly like now, minus the phone calls and the get-togethers at Christmas and over the summer.

Weren't they indispensable?

But when I made my breakthrough as a writer, Mom would have to be there.

I kicked away the snow in front of the door and went in. And maybe if I had children?

But I wasn't going to. It was unthinkable.

And, the way things were going, unfeasible anyway.

I smiled to myself as I removed my jacket. Then I was depressed. Everything connected with it lay like a shadow over my life. I couldn't do it. I'd tried, I'd failed, it didn't work.

Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck, shit.

I threw myself onto the sofa and closed my eyes. How unpleasant it was, it was as though someone could appear outside at any moment and look in at me, indeed as if someone was standing there right now.

On Friday evening all the temporary teachers went to Hege's, ate pizza, and drank beer. Hege was the driving force and the center of attention, as high-spirited as she was fast-talking, telling one story after the other. Nils Erik liked her and tried to impress her with his imitations and caricatures. I didn't get a glance, and that was strange as she had been at my place quite a bit over the past few weeks talking on and on about matters that were close to her hard heart.

After the food had been cleared from the table, she got a bottle of vodka from the freezer. The cold shiny drink elevated me into a cold happy world while Hege gradually began to lose control of her facial muscles and physical coordination. When she stood up to go to the toilet she hurried over to the wall, supported herself on it, swayed and focused on the hall, laughed and set off again across the large open living-room floor, with more luck this time, for apart from the exaggeratedly straight line and a couple of staggers she reached the toilet door without further mishap. Half an hour later she was dozing off in a chair. I stroked her cheek, she opened her eyes and looked at me, I said she should go for a walk with me, the cold air would do her good. She nodded, I helped her to her feet and half carried her downstairs, she grinned, put her arms into the sleeves of the jacket I held out for her, pulled her hat over her head, and slowly wound her scarf around her neck.

Outside, it was dark and still. The temperature had taken a nosedive over the past few hours, and the cloud cover that had hung over the area like a tarpaulin all week was now drawn to one side: the stars twinkled above us. I hooked her arm in mine and we began to walk. She stared straight ahead as we walked, her eyes were glazed and vacant, now and then she burst into laughter for no reason. We went down to the chapel and back, on to the school and back. Just above the mountain to the west a wave of green rippled across the sky, leaving a yellow and green veil after it was gone.

"Look at the Northern Lights," I said. "Did you see them?"

"The Northern Lights, yes," she said.

We walked down to the chapel once again. Our shoes creaked in the dry snow. The mountains across the fjord stood silent and wild, a touch lighter than the night around them because of the snow. The cold lay around my face like a mask.

"Are you feeling better?" I said as we turned again.

"M-hm," she said.

If this didn't clear her head, nothing would.

"Shall we go in then?" I said by her driveway. She looked up at me and smiled what I interpreted as a devilish smile. Then she wrapped her arms around my neck, pulled me in, and kissed me.

I didn't want to offend her, and let her continue for a moment, then straightened up and freed myself.

"We can't do this," I said.

"No," she said, and laughed.

"Shall we go back to the others?" I said.

"Yes, let's."

The clarity of mind she had gained dissolved quickly once she was back in the warm, soon she repaired to her bedroom, where she stayed for so long that we, without our hostess, cleared the bottles and glasses from the table, glanced in to see her, she was lying on her back in a large double bed, fully clothed and snoring, and then we all went our separate ways.

I wrote for the rest of the weekend. On Sunday afternoon Hildegunn, Vivian, Andrea, and Live came by, they were bored as usual, I chatted with them for half an hour, avoided looking at Andrea, didn't look at her, apart from once, and it was as though my eyes were magnets and hers were made of iron because a quarter of a second later she glanced toward me and blushed.

No, no, no, little Andrea.

But she wasn't little, her hips were a woman's, her breasts as big as apples, and it wasn't just a child's happiness that shone in her green eyes.

I said they had to go, I had other things to do than entertain kids all evening, they snorted and groaned and left, Andrea last, she leaned forward and pulled on her high boots, flashed me a look before leaving to join the others, who were already outside waiting, surrounded by driving snow, motionless for an instant. Then life flooded back into them, and they walked down the hill laughing while I slammed the door and turned the key.

On my own at last.

I turned the music up as loud as I could without speaker distortion, and sat down to try to finish the short story I'd started the day before.

It was about some seventeen-year-olds who were on their way home from a party and saw a car that had been driven into a cliff. They were drunk, it was early one Sunday morning, the road they were on was empty, thick wet mist hung over the countryside. They came around a bend and saw the car, the front was smashed in, the windshield shattered. At first they thought it had happened a long time ago, that it was just an old wreck lying there, but then they spotted someone in the car, a man, he was sitting in the driver's seat, which had been shunted back, his face was covered in blood, and they realized the accident must have only just happened, perhaps no more than ten or fifteen minutes before. Are you all right? they said to him, he stared at them and slowly opened his mouth, but not a sound emerged. What shall we do? they said, looking at one another. There was something dreamlike about the whole scenario because the surroundings were so quiet and the mist so thick and because they were so drunk. We have to call for an ambulance, Gabriel said. But where from? The nearest house was on an estate a kilometer away. They decided that one of them should run there and call, and that the other two should stay by the wrecked car and keep an eye on it.

Moving the man was out of the question, he was trapped and probably also had internal injuries.

That was as far as I'd gotten. What would happen next I had no idea, other than that the man would die while they were standing there watching. Perhaps he would say something, anything from a different context, incomprehensible to them yet still clear. I also toyed with the idea of the man coming from a place where another story was being enacted. He had locked his father in a room, for example, where he had subjected him to brutal treatment, a secret that he was now taking with him to the grave. Or this was all there was, a car accident early in the morning, a man who died.

Immersed totally in this image – the gleaming asphalt, the motionless spruce trees, the glass splinters and the contorted metal, the smell of burned rubber and the rain-wet forest, perhaps the pillars of a bridge just visible thanks to flashing red lights deep in the mist – I jumped up from my chair like a lunatic when someone knocked on the window in front of me.

It was Hege.

My heart seemed to stampede, for even when I saw that it was her and realized that she must have been ringing the bell for some time without any success, my chest was still pounding. She laughed, I smiled and pointed to the door, she nodded, I went to it and opened up.

"Hi," she said. "I didn't realize you were so jumpy!"

"I was writing," I said. "My head was somewhere else entirely. Would you like to come in?"

She shook her head.

"I told Vidar I was going down to the kiosk. So I thought I'd pop by and apologize for Friday."

"There's nothing to apologize for," I said.

"Maybe not," she said. "But I'm doing it anyway. Sorry."

"Apology accepted."

"Don't you go getting any ideas, by the way," she said. "I'm always like that when I'm drunk. Completely lose control of my emotions and launch myself at the first person I see. It doesn't mean anything. You do understand, don't you?"

I nodded.

"I'm the same," I said.

She smiled.

"Good! So everything's back to how it was. See you on Monday!"

"Yes," I said. "Bye."

"Bye," she said, and walked back to the road.

I closed the door and noticed that I was angry, it would take me at least an hour to get back into the text, and it was already eight o'clock. Might as well go up to the school and watch *Sportsrevyen*, I thought, standing by my desk and staring at the last sentences I had written.

No. If this was going to be any good, I had to invest everything I had into it.

I continued writing.

Then there was someone at the door again.

I switched off the music and went to answer it.

It was three of the young fishermen. None of them was on the soccer team, two of them I had barely exchanged a word with, despite being at the same table three or four times. The third was Henning. He was a year older than me, had been to gymnas and set great store on showing himself to be different in minor details, like the pointed shoes he wore, his black Levi's, the music he played on his car stereo, which had more in common with what I liked than anything anyone else here listened to.

"Can we come in?" he said.

"Course," I said, and stepped aside. They hung up their jackets, with snow on the shoulders, kicked off their shoes, dark from the slush, went into the sitting room and sat down.

The wind had picked up. Down by the sea, waves were hurling themselves at the shore like furious beasts. The wash that was always present had a darker undertone when there was a storm, a kind of boom or a muted rumble.

They each put a bottle of Absolut on the table.

"I don't have any mixers, I'm afraid," I said.

"We stick them in the freezer and drink it neat," Henning said. "That's what the Russians do. That's how it's supposed to be drunk. If you add a bit of pepper, it tastes great."

"OK," I said, and went for some glasses. After they had filled theirs, and also mine, to the brim, I put on one of the two U2 mini LPs I had, which not many people had heard. Henning, who liked U2, actually asked me what the music was, and I was able to bask in the sun for a while.

The music evoked at once the atmospheres of my ninth grade and the first at gymnas. The enormous, bare, beautiful but also lonely space for music that I had loved, and now discovered that I still loved, as well as everything else around it, everything that had been going on in my life then, condensed into this unbelievably vibrant concentrated moment that only feelings can produce. A year relived in a second.

"Just fantastic!" I said.

"*Skål*," said Kåre.

"*Skål*," said Johnny.

"*Skål*," said Henning.

"*Skål*," I said, and drained my glass with a shiver. Turned up the music. With the darkness so dense outside and the lights so bright inside, it was as if you were being transported. In a shuttle of some kind. Way out into space.

And it was true too. We *were* hovering out in space. I had always known that, but it was only when I came here that I understood. Darkness did something to your perception of the world. The Northern Lights, this cold burning in the sky. And the isolation.

I cursed myself for not having been able to keep my eyes off Andrea. Whatever I do I must not encourage her feelings.

I must not look at her again.

Or at least only in a teaching context.

I didn't need it. Liking her had nothing to do with it, I liked lots of the others as well. Fourth graders as much as seventh graders. The exception was Vivian's sister Liv, but for Christ's sake she was sixteen, only two years younger than me, no one could object to my looking at *her*.

"Did you get back today?" I said, looking at Henning.

He nodded.

"Did you catch anything?"

He shook his head.

"Black sea."

They didn't leave until five. By then I had drunk almost a whole bottle of vodka. I had enough presence of mind to set the alarm clock, but when it rang at a quarter past eight I must have been dead to the world because it was still beeping in its devilish way when I was brought to by other sounds that had merged with it, namely, someone ringing the doorbell and knocking on the door.

I tumbled out of bed, threw some cold water over my face, and opened up.

It was Richard.

"You're awake, are you?" he said. "Come on then. Your class is waiting. It's a quarter past nine."

"I'm sick," I said. "I'll have to stay at home today."

"Nonsense," he said. "Come on. Have a shower and get your clothes on. I'll be waiting here."

I looked at him. I was still drunk, my brain was in a corridor with glass walls. I saw Richard from far off although he was a meter from me.

"What are you waiting for?" he said.

"I'm sick," I said.

"You've got one chance," he said. "I suggest you take it."

I met his eyes. Then I backed away and went into the bathroom, turned on the shower, and stood under it for a few seconds. I was furious. I was an employee, a teacher, and if one of the others didn't appear for work one day and said they were ill, Richard wouldn't dream of going to get them. Not a chance. The fact that he was right – after all I wasn't sick – was irrelevant. I was an adult, not a child, a teacher, not a student; if I said I wasn't well, I wasn't well.

I turned off the shower, dried myself, rolled deodorant under my arms, got dressed in the bedroom, put on a coat, shoes, and a scarf in the hall, and opened the door again.

"Good," he said. "Let's head up then."

He had humiliated me, but there was nothing I could do about it. Right and power were on his side.

I had always liked darkness. When I was small I was afraid of it if I was alone, but when I was with others I loved it and the change to the world it brought. Running around in the forest or between houses was different in the darkness, the world was enchanted, and we, we were breathless adventurers with blinking eyes and pounding hearts.

When I was older there was little I liked better than to stay up at night, the silence and the darkness had an allure, they carried a promise of something immense. And autumn was my favorite season, wandering along the road by the river in the dark and the rain, not much could beat that.

But this darkness was different. This darkness rendered everything lifeless. It was static, it was the same whether you were awake or asleep, and it became harder and harder to motivate yourself to get up in the morning. I succeeded, and five minutes later I was standing in front of my desk again, but what happened there was also rendered lifeless. It felt as though I was getting nothing back from what I was doing. However much effort I put in, nothing came back. Everything vanished, everything dissolved into the great darkness in which we lived. I might as well say this as that, do this as that, nothing made any difference.

At the same time there was the weight of being under constant observation, of everyone always knowing who I was, by never being allowed to have any peace. Especially at school, where Richard hovered over me like some damn bird of prey, ready to pounce on me the second I did something he didn't like.

All the drinking reinforced my unease, and since nothing of what I did gave me anything back, I became more and more worn down, it was as though I was being drained, I became emptier and emptier, and soon I would be walking around like a shadow, a ghost, as empty and dark as the sky and the sea around me.

I would drink several times in the middle of the week after the day Richard came to get me, but I always managed to stagger out of bed and get myself to school punctually. The next occasion he had reason to find fault with me was different. I had been to a party in Tromsø over the weekend, Jøgge was on leave and wanted to meet me, and on Sunday evening I missed the boat to Finnsnes, had to stay overnight in Tromsø, and then when I finally returned to the village it was too late in the morning for it to be worth going to school.

The next day Richard called me into his office. He said he had confidence in me, I was an important part of the school, but things had to function smoothly, things had to function smoothly every day, and if I didn't turn up for work this created big problems for everyone. Also for the pupils. It was my responsibility, no one else's, and this must not happen again under any circumstances.

As I stood there, with pupils running in all directions outside the window and him sitting behind his desk and telling me this in a loud, harsh voice, I was raging inside. But his voice paralyzed my fury, it could not find a vent, except in the old despised way that it used to, as tears.

He humiliated me, although he was right, it was my responsibility, I couldn't skip work the way I had ditched classes in gymnas.

All my strength had ebbed away, and all my resolve.

I closed the door behind me, washed my face in the staff bathroom, sat down on the sofa without even the energy to pour myself a cup of coffee.

Torill was sitting at the table making some Christmas decorations. She noticed me looking at her.

"Just have to make sure I can do this before I ask the kids to do it," she said.

"Don't they teach you that kind of thing at training college?" I said.

"That wasn't the main priority, no. Pedagogics and that kind of useless stuff was more the style," she said with a grin.

I sat up.

I could just stop teaching.

Who said I couldn't?

Who said so?

Everyone said so, but who said I had to listen to them?

No one could stop me handing in my notice, could they? I didn't even need to hand it in, all I had to do was stay down south after Christmas, just not return. I would be putting the school in a predicament, but who said I couldn't do that?

The teacher my class had had the year before turned up drunk for classes, was always taking days off, and finally had just taken off and never returned.

Oh, how they had moaned and groaned about him in the months I had been up here.

I got up, the bell rang the next moment, so deeply were the routines ingrained in my body. But the thought of stopping glowed in me. I wanted to be free, and freedom existed everywhere but here.

After the last lesson that day I called Mom. Caught her as she was about to leave work.

"Hi, Mom," I said. "Do you have time for a little talk?"

"Yes, of course. Has something happened?"

"No. Nothing has changed here, but the job's beginning to weigh me down. I can only get out of bed in the morning with the greatest of difficulty. And it struck me today that I could just hand in my notice. I'm really not enjoying it at all. I haven't been trained for this either. So I wondered about studying after Christmas instead. Doing the foundation year."

"I can understand you being frustrated and that it's tough going," she said. "But I think you should sleep on it before you decide. Christmas is around the corner, and you'll be able to unwind and relax lying on the sofa here if you like. I think everything will look different then, when you go back up."

"But that's exactly what I don't want!"

"Work goes through patches. There was a time when you thought it was a lot of fun. It's quite normal for you to have a down period now. I'm not saying you shouldn't quit. That's up to you to decide. But you don't need to make up your mind right now, that's all I'm saying."

"I don't think you understand what I'm telling you. It won't get any better. It's just a huge drag. And for what?"

"Life is a drag at times," she said.

"That's what you always say. Your life may be a drag, but does mine have to be?"

"I was only trying to give you some advice. In my opinion, it's good advice."

"OK," I said. "The odds are I'll give up the job, but you're right, I don't need to make a decision now."

Usually I took care to make sure the staff room was empty when I phoned, or that only Nils Erik was there, but this time I had been so upset and desperate that I hadn't given it a thought. When I opened the door to leave, Richard was in the kitchen.

"Hi, Karl Ove," he said. "I'm just doing the washing up. Are you on your way home?"

"Yes," I said, turned and left.

Had he heard? Had he been standing there and listening *too*?

I couldn't believe it.

But then came the last day of school before the break, report cards were handed out, coffee was drunk, and cakes were eaten, in an hour I would be getting on the bus to Finnsnes and setting off on the long journey down to Mom in Førde, where we would stay for a few days before going to Sørbøvåg for Christmas Eve. Richard stopped in front of me.

"You should know that I consider you've done a fantastic job here this term. You've been an invaluable member of staff. And you managed the occasional difficulty with grace. Now you have to promise me you'll be back after the Christmas holidays!"

He smiled to soften the impact, to make it seem like a pleasantry.

"Why would you think I wasn't coming back?" I said.

"You *must* come back, you know," he said. "It's not easy up here in the north, but it is still extraordinary. We need you here."

This was unadulterated flattery, as transparent as glass, but that didn't stop me puffing out my chest with pride. Because he was right. I *had* done a good job.

"Of course I'll be back," I said. "Merry Christmas! See you in 1988!"

The next day, in the evening, Mom was waiting on the quay as the *hurtigrute* boat from Bergen docked in Lavik. It was half past eight, pitch black, the crew lowered the gangplank while the roaring propellers churned up the sea. The light from the lamp above the tiny waiting room glimmered in the film of water that lay over the asphalt. I stepped ashore, leaned forward and gave Mom a hug, we walked together to the car. Around us doors were being opened and closed, engines started and the express boat was already speeding off down the fjord. The weather was mild, the countryside snowless, the car windshield dotted with small raindrops that were intermittently swept away by the wipers. The cones of light from the headlights roamed like two frightened animals in front of us. Trees, houses, gas stations, rivers, mountains, fjords, whole forests appeared in them. I leaned back in my seat staring. I'd had no idea that I had missed trees until I was back there and saw them.

Mom had made a casserole before she left, we ate it, chatted for an hour, then she went to bed. I stayed up to write but didn't get much done beyond a couple of lines. She had rented a furnished flat, and I felt like a stranger there.

The next day we drove to town to do our final Christmas shopping. The sky was overcast, but the clouds hiding the sun were thin and straggly, my back was cold as I opened the door, stepped out of the building, and for the first time in several months saw the burning globe hanging behind the clouds. Even if the colors of our surroundings were reduced to a minimum in which only the pale yellow of the grass and the wan green of the hedges stood out from the gray, to me they seemed to glow. There was no sharpness, there were no marked contrasts, no steep mountain peaks, there was no endless sea. Only lawns, hedges, housing blocks, and behind them gentle friendly mountains, all muted by moisture and gray winter light.

In the evening, Yngve came. It was his birthday, he was twenty-three, after dinner we ate cake, drank coffee, and had a glass of brandy. I gave him a record, Mom gave him a book. After Mom had gone to bed, we sat up and had a couple more glasses of brandy. I asked him to read the latest short story I had written. I stood outside on the veranda in the drizzle gazing into the distance, I was overjoyed to be home, although the few signs of Mom and her life that existed in the flat didn't make the alienness any more homey, as one might imagine, more the contrary, they made the homeyness more alien. Seeing her things there was like seeing them in a museum. But then home was no longer a place. It was Mom and Yngve. *They* were my home.

I craned my neck and looked into the living room. He was still reading.

Was that the last page?

It looked like it.

I forced myself to wait a little longer.

Then I pushed up the long handle and slid open the glass door. Closed it behind me, sat down on the sofa across the table from him. He had placed the sheets of paper in a pile. He was busy rolling a cigarette, oblivious of my presence.

"Well?" I said.

He smiled. "Well, it's good."

"Sure?"

"Ye-es. It's similar to the other ones I've read."

"Good," I said. "I've done six now. If I can speed up, I could have fifteen ready by the time I finish at the school."

"What are you going to do then?" Yngve asked, putting the somewhat crooked rollie between his lips and lighting up.

"Send it to a publishing house, of course," I said. "What do you think?"

He looked at me.

"You don't think anyone's going to publish it, do you? In all seriousness? Do you think they will?"

Chilled to the depths of my soul, I met his gaze. All the blood had drained from my face.

He smiled. "You did, didn't you," he said.

My eyes glazed over and I had to turn away.

"You can send them anyway," he said. "And see what they say. They might go for them, you never know."

"But you said you liked them," I protested, getting up. "Didn't you mean what you said?"

"Yes, I did. But everything is relative. I read it as a story written by my nineteen-year-old brother. And it is good. But I don't think it's good enough to be published."

"OK," I said, going back out onto the veranda. I watched him go back to reading the Fløgstad book Mom had given him. The brandy glass resting in his hand. As though what he had said had no special significance.

To hell with him.

What did he know, really? Why should I listen to *him*? Kjartan liked it, he was a writer. Or did he also say that based on who I was, his nineteen-year-old nephew, I wrote well considering who I was?

Mom had said she considered me a writer after reading it. You're a writer, she had said. As though that surprised her, as though she hadn't known, and she couldn't have put that on. She meant it.

But for Christ's sake I was her son.

You don't think anyone's going to publish it do you? In all seriousness?

I'll damn well show him. I'll damn well show the whole fucking world who I am and what I am made of. I'll crush every single one of them. I'll render every single one of them speechless. I will. I will. I damn well will.

I'll be so big no one is even close. No one. No. One. Never. Not a chance. I will be the greatest ever. The fucking idiots. I'll damn well crush every single one of them.

I *had* to be big. I *had* to be.

If not, I might as well end it all.

The sight of the pallid winter sun in the damp, muted countryside continued to keep me enchanted throughout Christmas, it was as though I hadn't seen the sun before it was gone again, what energy it brought, how rich the play of light on nature when its rays were filtered through the clouds or the mist or just flooded down from a blue sky, and all the endless nuances that appeared when nature reflected the light back.

Nothing had changed in Sørbøvåg. Grandma's state hadn't noticeably worsened, Grandpa hadn't noticeably aged, and the fervor in Kjartan's eyes wasn't noticeably diminished. Since last Christmas he had passed a philosophy exam in Førde, and now it was his lecturer's name, rather than Heidegger's and Nietzsche's, that was mentioned, at least they were not referred to as often as before, in that casual, confidential way of his. I might have imagined we could talk about literature, but apart from him showing me some poems, hardly a word of which I understood, nothing came of this. He had also acquired an astronomical telescope, it stood there on the living-room floor, beside the ceiling-high window, from where he studied the universe at night. He had also developed an interest in ancient Egypt, ensconced in his old leather chair reading about that mysterious culture, which was so far removed from ours it seemed almost nonhuman to me, as if they actually had been gods. But then I knew nothing about it, and just flipped through his books when he wasn't there and examined the pictures.

On December 28 I went down to Kristiansand, celebrated New Year's Eve there, Espen had hired a room with some others at the Hotel Caledonien, which had just reopened after the fire, it was heaving with people, everyone was smoking and drinking, and it wasn't long before two firemen came dashing along the corridor in full uniform. I laughed myself silly when I saw them. I had been on my way up to the rooftop with some others, I sat on the edge and dangled my feet over, with the town beneath me and the sky lit up with fireworks. We talked about a crowd of us going to the Roskilde Music Festival in the summer, and with Lars I semiplanned a hitchhiking trip down to Greece afterward. I managed to include a visit to Grandma and Grandad as well, nothing had changed there either, with them, the house, everything inside and its smells. It was me who had changed, it was my life that was on a wild trajectory.

On the third of January I caught the plane up to Tromsø, shortly after halfway we flew into a tunnel of darkness, and I knew it wouldn't end, this was how it would be, pitch black all day for some weeks yet. Then everything would slowly change, soon the darkness would be gone and the light would fill every hour of the day. This was just as wild, I thought, smoking in the narrow seat.

But first came the darkness. Dense and heavy, it lay over the village when I arrived by bus the next morning, not open, as it could be when the sky was cloud-free and the stars were shining out in space, but dense and heavy like at the bottom of an abandoned well.

I unlocked the door to my flat, went in, unhitched my rucksack, and switched on the light. It was like coming home.

There was my *Betty Blue* poster, there was the Liverpool FC poster, there was the new landscape poster I had bought in Finnsnes on one of my first days here.

I turned the coffee machine on, crouched down by my record collection and began flicking through it. After that I surveyed the tiny library of books I had bought. It all filled me with pleasure.

I went into the kitchen and poured some coffee into a cup. Through the window I saw a little group of kids coming up the hill. In case they were coming to see me I put on Mozart's Requiem, one of the two classical LPs I possessed, and turned the volume up to full.

There was a ring at the door.

Andrea, Vivian, Live, Stian, and Ivar, the tall ninth-grade boy, stood outside.

"Happy new year," I said. "Come in."

From the hall, where they were hanging up their coats, I heard Vivian say: *He likes opera!*

I smiled to myself, standing with a steaming cup of coffee in my hand as they came in. Stian had been here only once before, right at the start, with Ivar, he had gone through my record collection and asked whether I had any heavy metal. In the few lessons I had with him at school I ignored him as far as I was able, trying not to rise to all the provocation he dished out. I placed no demands on him, he had made up his mind anyway. Tor Einar had them much more than me and had made a stand against them, which didn't go too well, once he had returned to the staff room trembling all over, two of them, Stian and Ivar, had knocked him to the ground, Ivar had gotten him in a stranglehold. They were sent home for a few days because of the incident, but the school was so small, the place so transparent that what would have been a serious matter elsewhere wasn't so serious here. We were expected to deal with the likes of Stian and Ivar. When they went fishing or hung out with some of the younger men, they were young kids, pests no one bothered about. So Tor Einar could hardly say they had held him by the throat. Not if he wanted to elicit any sympathy or understanding at any rate.

Stian sat down brazenly on the sofa with his legs wide apart. He was the only one not to have taken off his coat. The three girls hung on his lips, I could see, as though ready to obey his every command. If he spoke, they watched him with rapt reverence. If he addressed one of them directly, they cast down their eyes and squirmed uncomfortably on the sofa.

"Get anything nice for Christmas?" I asked.

Vivian giggled.

I went over and sat in the chair opposite them.

"What about you, Stian?" I said. "Did you get anything good?"

He blew out his cheeks.

"I went fishin' over Christmas. Didn't do too bad. Gonna buy a moped as soon as the snow's gone."

"He'll be sixteen in March," Andrea said.

Why did she say that?

"Then you're only three years younger than me," I said. "It won't be long before you can have my job. That's what you have in mind, isn't it, to become a teacher?"

He blew out his cheeks again, but a tiny smile crept into the corners of his mouth.

"No, no," he said. "The only book I'm going to open after I've left school will be a bankbook."

They laughed.

"What about you, Ivar?" I said.

"Goin' fishin'."

He was only sixteen but already the tallest person in the village. His height was so conspicuous that he probably never thought about anything else. Seeing him beside the three seventh-grade girls was painful, anything that was small and delicate caused him difficulty: letters, numbers, conversation, ball games, girls. In most ways he was a child, he burst into loud guffaws at the most basic, the most stupid things, blushed to the roots when he was corrected, and only really felt at ease with Stian, who controlled him as you would a dog. He had lost his father when he was small, and on the few occasions he had come to talk to me that had been the topic. It had all happened in the 1970s, a fishing boat sank without trace, the whole of Norway talked about it for some days, but then it faded into oblivion except for Ivar, his mother, and the rest of the family. Barely a year after the accident they had moved up to Håfjord, where his mother had relatives. That was his story, his fate, the father who died when he was small.

"What about you?" I said, looking at the three girls.

They shrugged. Usually they had a certain confidence when they were here, I teased them, they laughed and talked back, had a good time being cheeky. But now they were more reserved. They didn't want to give anything away in front of Stian, this was a different game, the stakes were higher.

"Vivian's got a boyfriend," Live announced.

Vivian gave her a dirty look. Punched her hard on the shoulder.

"Ow!" Live exclaimed.

"Have you?" I said.

"Yes," Live said, rubbing her shoulder. "She's going out with Steve."

"Steve?" I said. "Who's he?"

"A guy who moved here at Christmas," Stian said. "He's from Finnsnes and is going to start fishing this spring. He's completely useless, they say."

"He is not," Vivian said. She blushed.

"He's twenty," Live said.

"Twenty?" I said. "Really? You're thirteen, aren't you?"

"Yes!" Vivian said. "And?"

"They're crazy up north," I said, and laughed.

I got to my feet.

"I'm afraid you'll have to hop it now. I've just come in the door. I have to unpack and so on. Prepare some lessons. I've got such a terrible class, you know. They don't know anything."

"Ha ha," Andrea said, levered herself off the sofa, walked toward the hall, where she had hung her white jacket. The others followed, for a few seconds everything was jackets and arms, hats and gloves, and then they went out into the darkness, laughing and poking each other. I unpacked my clothes, ate some supper, read in bed for a couple of hours before switching off the light and going to sleep. Once I was woken by sounds from the room above, it was Torill and her husband, the floor shook, she shouted and screamed, he groaned, I took the duvet with me to the sofa and slept there for the rest of the night.

Nils Erik and I moved into the house the following weekend. Apart from the bedrooms and the little room leading off the sitting room, where I would do my writing, we shared everything. We took turns cooking and doing the dishes. There was hardly an evening when we didn't have visitors, either pupils or the other teachers, especially Tor Einar, he dropped by almost every day, but Hege also came a lot. On weekends Nils Erik went on walks, he always asked me if I wanted to join him, I always said no, nature was not the place for me, besides, more often than not there was a party somewhere, and if I didn't go I stayed home writing, no more short stories but a novel called *Vann over/Vann under – Water Above/Water Below*. I'd gotten the title from a song Yngve and his friend from Arendal, Øyvind, had written. The novel was about a young man, Gabriel, who went to gymnas in Kristiansand, and would consist of a mysterious frame narrative with short, report-like sequences and a present-tense plotline about drinking and girls, punctuated at regular intervals by little episodes from his childhood. It all culminated in him being bound up at a party in a cabin in Agder Province, having a nervous breakdown, and being admitted to a psychiatric clinic, where the circle was closed, since this is where the short objective reports that had introduced every chapter stemmed from.

To ensure I had more time to write, I completely altered my daily routine, it made no difference when you slept and when you were awake, morning and evening, night and day, in practice everything was the same. I started getting up at eleven at night, I worked through until eight in the morning, had a shower, went to school, and took a nap after I finished at around three in the afternoon.

If I couldn't write, I would sometimes put on my coat and go out, wander around the silent village, listen to the roar of the waves beating against the shore, gaze up at the mountainsides, which at first, because of the snow, seemed to be floating in the darkness and then became totally swallowed up by it. Sometimes I went to school. It might have been three or four in the morning, I saw my reflection in the windows I passed, my vacant expression, my vacant eyes. Occasionally I stayed there, read a book on the sofa in the staff room or watched a film on the TV, or simply slept for a few hours, until the sound of a door being opened suddenly woke me, and Richard came in, he was usually the first to appear in the morning. This was all that was needed for a feeling of chaos to come over me, a feeling of not having anything under control, of finding myself on the edge of . . . well, of what?

I did my job. Did it make any difference that I worked at the end of my day rather than the beginning?

But there was something about the darkness. There was something about this small, enclosed place. There was something about seeing the same faces every day. My class. My colleagues. The assistant at the shop. The occasional mother, the occasional father. Now and then the young fishermen. But always the same people, always the same atmosphere. The snow, the darkness, the harsh light inside the school.

One night I was out walking, on my way to the school, when a bulldozer drove up behind me. It had a snowplow mounted on the front, the snow flew alongside into mounds by the road, an orange light flashed from the roof, thick black smoke belched from an exhaust pipe at the front. The man driving didn't look at me as he passed. Some way up the hill he stopped, with the engine still running. As I came alongside he set off again. He drove at the same speed as I walked. I watched him, he was staring straight ahead, and I shivered with unease, the vibrating, roaring, scraping, flashing vehicle shook my soul. I walked faster. He drove faster. I turned right, he turned right. I turned around, he drove straight on, and I'll be damned if he didn't turn around as well, and as I reached the hill leading to the school he was right behind me again. I set off at a run, this was scary, because around us everything was lifeless and black, the village was asleep, it was just us two outside, me and some mad snowplow man chasing me. I ran, but I was no match for him, he accelerated and followed me right into the school playground. I unlocked the door, my heart pounding in my chest, would he follow me in here too?

From the staff room I watched him steadily and methodically clearing the playground of snow, it took him perhaps a quarter of an hour, before he turned and drove back down to the village.

On my way home from school the following afternoon I caught a glimpse of Vivian's twenty-year-old boyfriend. She was in his car, so overcome by her triumph that she didn't know where to look as they drove past and our eyes met. He was a puny-looking blond-haired guy who – I could see when I met them by the shop shortly afterward – laughed a lot. He had been unemployed and had moved here when he was offered a job as a crewman on one of the boats. Nothing of the Vivian we saw in the lessons, her childish questions, the teasing and giggling, was on show here, it had to be stowed away, and it was strange to see, she had sat in the front seat of the car like royalty, with a hard-won stateliness that threatened to crack at any moment, held together only by the fragile bonds of vanity, such that the child she also was could reappear at any moment or even take total control. One giggle, one gesture, one blush, and it was over. Her boyfriend was not the world's brightest, to put it mildly, so in this way they were well matched. In class her behavior changed, she became more self-important, she no longer liked all the childishness the others exhibited. But she was easily led, it didn't take many comments before she lost the stateliness she'd worn like a cloak only a few minutes earlier. That didn't mean that she was really unchanged, really untouched by what was going on around her, only that everything in her was still fluid. She might refuse to laugh at my jokes and say I was stupid, then burst into laughter anyway, and after that she might look at me with a different nuance in her eyes, and this nuance, which was quite new and also present in Andrea's eyes, although not so clearly, I had to protect myself against, for what it did, insidiously, was to draw me closer to them. Through this look the distance between me and them narrowed, and it wasn't because I had approached them, quite the contrary, I saw that in this look, which was completely open, half knowing, half unknowing.

Or was I imagining all of this? For when I had seen them in other contexts, such as in Torill's or Nils Erik's lessons, or in the shop with their mothers, it was as if this side of them had never existed. They toed the line, and if they didn't, they tried to rebel with defiance, sulks, or protests, and not, as they occasionally did in my classes, with charged looks.

This wasn't something I spent tracts of time mulling over, more impressions that blew through me, tiny gusts of pleasure and fear while I was writing during the January and February nights. Nor did I have any concrete basis for these impressions, nothing had been said or done, it was all about moods and feelings triggered by something as intangible as a gaze or a certain way of moving.

As I plodded through the village on my way to the first class, my feelings were ambivalent – I liked being at school yet I didn't. Now and then I felt a slight flutter in my chest at the thought that I would be seeing her again the following day.

No one knew, and I hardly knew myself.

One Friday at the beginning of February, all these small impressions, which in themselves were insignificant and vague, and as such unexacting, were suddenly intensified. I had as usual got up late in the evening, written through the night, and as the clock passed five in the morning I'd had enough and went out into the darkness. Through the still sleeping village, up to the school, where after a stroll through the teaching block I sat down on the sofa with a book until tiredness overcame me and I leaned back with eyes closed and the book resting on my chest.

The door opened. I sat up with a start, ran a hand through my hair while staring straight into Richard's eyes with what must have been a guilty expression on my face.

"Have you spent the night here?" he said.

"No," I said. "I came here early to do some preparation. And then I dozed off."

He scrutinized me carefully.

"I'll make some extra strong coffee," he said at length. "That'll wake you up."

"Make it strong enough for a horseshoe to stand upright in," I said, and got to my feet.

"What?" he said. "Who said that?"

"Lucky Luke, I think."

He laughed and poured water into the machine while I sat down at my desk. It had been several months since I'd prepared a lesson in any other way than with a quick glance at a textbook shortly before I walked into the class. I had ditched most of my alternative teaching methods, now the majority of my lessons consisted of going through whatever topic had to be dealt with, after which I gave them some exercises. The aim was to get through the syllabus in all subjects. Whether they absorbed everything or not no longer bothered me. The main thing was the framework this approach gave and, with it, the distance.

"Coffee's ready if you want any," Richard said, heading for the hall with a cup in his hand, probably on the way to his office.

"Thank you very much," I said.

When the bell rang half an hour later, I was standing by the window in the classroom watching the pupils coming up the hill. Tiredness lay in me like stagnant water. We had math for the first two lessons, incomparably the most boring subject. It was February, incomparably the most boring month.

"Open your books and get started," I said after they had trickled into the room and found their places. For math we were joined by the fifth and sixth graders, so there were eight pupils in all.

"Same as always then. You work on the problems, and if you run into any problems, I'll come and help. Then we'll go through the new material on the board at the beginning of the next lesson."

No one objected, they slipped acquiescently from the state they arrived in at school to the state the solving of the math problems demanded. Live put her hand up before she had even glanced at the book.

I went over to her and leaned forward.

"Try on your own first," I said. "Have a shot."

"But I can't do this, I know. It's so difficult."

"Maybe it'll be easy. You don't know until you've tried. Give it ten minutes, then I'll come back and see how you're doing. OK?"

"OK," she said.

Jørn, the sharp little sixth grader, waved me over.

"I did some of the exercises at home," he said when I was by his desk. "But then I got stuck. Can you help me?"

"Possibly," I said. "I'm not that great at math myself."

He looked up at me and smiled. He thought I was joking, but I wasn't; after the syllabus for the seventh grade I started having problems. I could even get into difficulties before then too, suddenly forgetting how to divide two big numbers, and I had to wriggle my way out by asking pupils how to do it. Not that I didn't know of course, it was just that I couldn't remember.

"But this one doesn't look too bad," I said.

He followed carefully while I explained it to him. Then he took over, I left him and went to the window.

He was a determined character, but his attitude to school was either-or, on or off. Math he liked, so there was no problem. In some subjects though he switched off completely.

Live put up her hand again.

"I can't do it," she said. "And I mean it."

I showed her. She nodded, but her eyes were vacant.

"Can you do the rest yourself now?" I said.

She nodded.

I felt sorry for her, almost every lesson held a humiliation of some kind, but what could I do?

I sat down behind my desk, scanned the class and looked up at the clock, which had barely moved. After a while Andrea put up her hand. I met her eyes, smiled, and stood up.

"Karl Ove's in love with Andrea!" Jørn said loud enough for everyone to hear.

I gave a start. Red-faced, I pretended I hadn't heard, leaned over her desk, and tried to concentrate on the little math problem.

"Karl Ove's in love with Andrea!" Jørn repeated.

Some of the pupils giggled.

I straightened up and eyed him. "Do you know what that's called?" I said.

"What what's called?" he said with a grin.

"When you say that other people feel what you feel? It's called transference. For example, if you, a sixth grader, were in love with one of the girls in the seventh grade. Instead of admitting it, you say your teacher is."

"I'm not in love with *anyone*," he said.

"Me either," I said. "So shall we do some problem-solving now?"

I leaned forward again. Andrea whisked her hair away from her forehead with one hand.

"Don't take any notice of him," she whispered.

I ignored her remark, stared at the column of figures she had written and pointed to where she had slipped up.

"There," I said. "That's wrong. Can you see?"

"Yes," she said. "But what's it supposed to be?"

"I can't tell you that!" I said. "You have to do the problem. Try again. I'll be at my desk if you can't do it."

"OK," she said, looked up at me, and gave a fleeting smile.

My insides trembled.

Was I in love with Andrea?

Was I *in love*?

No, no, no.

But I was drawn to her in my thoughts. I was.

When I was at the school during the night, when I stood by the dark, motionless water in the swimming pool, I imagined she was in the changing room, alone, and that soon I would go in. She covered herself, looked up, I knelt down in front of her, she looked at me, at first with apprehension, then tenderness and openness.

I imagined this and at the same time thought the opposite, that she wasn't in the changing room, how could I think like that, no one must find out how my mind worked.

My insides trembled, but no one knew because my movements were controlled, what I said was thought through, nothing of what others saw could betray my inner thoughts.

I hardly knew I had these thoughts, they lived in a kind of no-man's-land, and when they came, in an explosion, I didn't hold on to them, I let them fall back to where they'd come from, and so it was as though they didn't exist.

But what Jørn had said, that changed everything, because that came from the outside.

Everything that came from the outside was dangerous.

There was something almost morbid about writing alone at night while everyone else was asleep and then teaching the children with the dregs of my strength, and I was becoming more and more worn down, so at the end of February, I switched back as the tiny pulse of light in the middle of the day slowly began to widen. It was as if the world was returning. And living together with Nils Erik was good: when the pupils came visiting, from the fourth graders to the seventh graders, the meetings weren't so charged – if I didn't play such a dominant role, it didn't make much difference. It was different with Hege, she invariably came when Nils Erik was out, how she knew I had no idea, nor why she did it. But she liked talking to me, and I liked talking to her, we could sit for hours in the evening despite our being so different.

The writing on the other hand was going badly, I had reached a point where I kept repeating myself, all of a sudden I was unsure why I was writing at all.

Aschehoug Publishing House had put an advert in *Dagbladet*, announcing a short-story competition, my enthusiasm was rekindled and I sent in two of my best stories: the one about the garbage dump and the one about the funeral pyres on the plain.

Various community centers on the island took turns organizing parties, and at the beginning of March it was Håfjord's turn. We had pre-drinks in our house, almost all the temporary teachers were there, and after only a few drinks I was floating on air, they made me so happy, these people, and I told them so too, on the way up to the community center, swinging the bag with the bottle of vodka and the extra pouch of tobacco.

What was special about these parties was that they weren't restricted to or arranged for particular age groups – desperate twenty-year-olds here, resigned forty-year-olds there – no, *everyone* came to these community center parties. Seventy-year-olds sat at the same table as teenagers, fish-processing workers at the same table as school inspectors, and the fact that they had known one another all their lives did not prevent them from letting their hair down, normal social relationships were set aside, you could see a thirteen-year-old necking with a twenty-year-old, a juiced-up old lady dancing and shaking her dress cancan style while grinning a toothless grin. I loved it, couldn't help myself, there was a freedom in this I had never encountered anywhere else. Yet you could only love it if you were there, part of the untrammeled euphoria, for with even the tiniest hint of criticism or good taste everything would collapse and become a wild parody or perhaps even a travesty of the human condition. The young men who lit their coffee so it burned with a low blue flame, the very elderly women who looked at you with mischievous, flirty eyes, the bald men dressed in formal suits and ties who one minute were making passes at fifteen-year-olds and the next were hunched over a ditch beneath the glittering community center spewing, women staggering and men crying, all wrapped up as it were, packaged in a long stream of badly performed 1960s and '70s hits by bands that no one but people up here cared about any longer, and a cloud of smoke that was so dense that if you hadn't known better, you might have assumed came from a blaze in the cellar.

For me this was alien and exotic. I had grown up where almost no one drank or at least was ever visibly the worse for wear. There was a neighbor who drank himself silly once or twice every six months, this was a sensation and caused quite a stir. There was an old alcoholic who cycled to the shop every day to buy his brown bottles of beer. And that was it. Mom and Dad never drank, apart from a couple of bottles of beer or a glass of red wine with their food. Grandma and Grandpa in Sørbøvåg didn't drink, Grandma and Grandad in Kristiansand didn't drink, none of my uncles and aunts drank, and if they did, never in front of me. It was only two and a half years ago that I had seen my father drunk for the first time.

Why didn't they drink? Why didn't everyone drink? Alcohol makes everything big, it is a wind blowing through your consciousness, it is crashing waves and swaying forests, and the light it transmits gilds everything you see, even the ugliest and most revolting person becomes attractive in some way, it is as if all objections and all judgments are cast aside in a wide sweep of the hand, in an act of supreme generosity, here everything, and I do mean everything, is beautiful.

Why say no to this?

I plunged into the party on this March evening, I was in my element, I even went over to Richard, who was sitting in a late '70s suit a size too small for him, with his wife, to say how much I liked him, he had kept a tight rein on me, he was right to do so, and everything had gone well, hadn't it? It was going well, wasn't it?

Yes, I was doing fine.

He didn't like me, but he couldn't say that, all he could do was force a goatish smile. I was in the ascendancy, I was the shining star, he was just the head teacher at a small school, of course I could spare a moment for a little chat with him.

I saw Vivian and Andrea's mothers, they were friends and were sitting at a table smoking, I sat down beside them wanting to have a chat about their daughters, they had such fantastic girls, they were so lively and pretty and would do well in life, I was sure of that.

I had never spoken to them before, apart from at parents' evenings, but those had been formal occasions, I had discussed the girls' behavior and performance in various subjects then, they had listened carefully to what I said and asked a few questions, no doubt prepared, before disappearing into the darkness, on their way home to their children, who had been nervously waiting to hear what the meeting might bring, or reveal. Now the situation was different, we each had a glass in front of us, people were staggering past on all sides, the music was loud, the air close and warm, I was drunk and so eager to say something nice that I was leaning over the table towards them with a huge smile on my face. They said their children talked so much about me, there was no end to it, in fact it was almost as though they were in love with me! They laughed, I said yes, that can be difficult, a teacher who is only eighteen years old, nevertheless they are incredibly nice girls!

For a moment I wondered whether to ask one of them to dance, but rejected the idea, they were at least thirty-five, so even though they had a twinkle in their eyes when I appeared, I got up and wandered around the room, sat down first here and then there, went outside and saw Håfjord gleaming beneath me, the black sea straight ahead, and when I went back in

I searched for Nils Erik to tell him what a good friend he was and how much I liked sharing the house with him.

Having done that, I went outside again, I wanted to take in the view one more time. At the bottom of the hill were my girls, I went down, Vivian was with Steve, Andrea with Hildegunn, I asked them if they were having a good time, they were, and they laughed at me, perhaps because I was drunk, who knows, but it made no difference, I moved on, into the thick, smoke-filled atmosphere, bounded up the steps in two strides, plowed my way into the room, and there in front of me, like a revelation, stood a girl.

I stopped in my tracks.

Everything in me stopped. She was beautiful, but there were many who were, that wasn't the point, it was the eyes she looked at me with, they were dark and brimful with a life I wanted to share. I had never seen her before. But she was from here. She came from the village, I could see that the moment I clapped my eyes on her, for she was wearing a soccer uniform, the whole deal, shirt, shorts, socks and cleats, everyone who was working there tonight was, the event had been organized by the soccer team, and would anyone not from the area volunteer to work at a party for Håfjord Soccer Club?

She was holding a tray of empty glasses.

Seeing her, so beautiful and so shapely, in football garb and cleats, made my senses reel. I glanced at her bare thighs and calves, and I knew I was doing it, so to disguise this fact I looked slightly to one side, and then the other, as though I was inspecting this clubhouse and everything in it very thoroughly.

"Hi," she said with a smile.

"Hi," I said. "Who are you? I've never seen you before, I'm sure of that, you're so beautiful I would have remembered if I had."

"My name's Ine."

"You live here, but you never go out, is that right?"

"No," she laughed. "I live in Finnsnes, but this is where I come from."

"I live here," I said.

"I know," she said. "You work with my sister."

"Do I? Who's that?"

"Hege."

"Are you Hege's sister? Why didn't she say she had such a pretty sister? Because you are younger than her, aren't you?"

"Yes. Yes, why didn't she tell you? Perhaps she wants to protect me?"

"From me? I'm the most harmless person out here."

"Yes, I'm sure you are. But I have to go in with this. I'm working here tonight, as you can see."

"Yes," I said. "But can we meet again? When you finish? There must be some get-together afterward somewhere. Why don't you come along? Then we can talk a bit more."

"Well, we'll have to see," she said, turned and made for the little room beside the stage, where the kitchen was.

After that, the party was over as far as I was concerned. Nothing going on there interested me anymore. All I had in my head was the beautiful waitress in her soccer uniform, and I spent the rest of the evening looking longingly at her.

Hege's sister!

She told me everything, why hadn't she told me about her?

I searched for Nils Erik and said we should organize some drinks at home. He hesitated, he was already exhausted, but I was determined, we were going to do this. As long as he didn't have to join in, it was fine with him, he said. You have to stay up for a while, I said. And you don't need to invite anyone else. What are you up to? he said. Have you got your beady eye on someone? You bet, I said, filling my glass to keep myself on the boil while doing what I could to kill time. I caught fleeting glimpses of her as she went in and out of the kitchen, for a while she served in the snack bar as well, but I didn't go over, although I would have loved to buy a hot dog from her, just to watch her squeezing the ketchup and mustard from the plastic bottles over the sausage, but I didn't want to waste the little time I had on anything that wasn't to do with my plan for her and me at our place. I didn't want to be a nuisance or force myself on her. When she smiled at me I said there would be drinks at our place afterward, we were staying in the yellow house on the bend and it would be an enormous boost for everyone there if she came along.

"We'll see," she said again, but not without a smile, not without a glint in her dark eyes.

Oh, dear God, please let her say yes! Please let her come along!

The band started up again. Eric Clapton's "Cocaine."

I applauded when they had finished, couldn't take much more, staggered out into the cold, saw Tor Einar chatting with two girls in the ninth grade with a big smile on his face, a couple farther away making out in a car, the school at the other end of the soccer field looking like an embankment in the darkness, lit a cigarette, drained the vodka, turned and glimpsed Hege on her way over. My intuition told me I shouldn't say anything about Ine to her, otherwise she would be sure to come along too and the situation would be impossible.

"How are you?" she said.

"Can't complain," I said.

"So you've been talking to my sister?"

"Yes, you kept her well hidden. I didn't even know you had a sister."

"We're only half sisters. Same dad, but we didn't grow up together. She lives her own life."

"Does she live in Finnsnes?"

"Yes. She opted for the motor mechanics course. She likes motorbikes. And motorbike riders!"

"Oh."

Vidar appeared in the doorway. His eyes scoured the people standing outside. And stopped at us. Held us in his gaze, then he came in our direction. He was drunk, I could see that by the way he was concentrating on walking properly and in a straight line. Broad and powerfully built, his shirt open at the chest, a gold chain visible, he stopped in front of us.

"So this is where you are," he said.

She didn't answer.

He looked at me. "We don't see much of you anymore. You should drop in. Or perhaps that's what you do when I'm away?"

"It has happened," I said. "We had a little get-together there for the teachers a couple of weeks ago, for instance. But mostly I stay at home and work in the evenings."

"What do you think about Håfjord actually?"

"It's great here," I said.

"Are you happy?"

"Yes, I am."

"Good," he said. "It's important that teachers are happy."

"Shall we go in?" Hege said. "It's beginning to get cold."

"I'll stay here for a bit," I said. "Have to clear my head."

They went in side by side, next to him she was extremely slight. But she was tough, I thought, and looked out over the village again, it was so quiet and peaceful compared to the hubbub of vying personalities and wills in the clubhouse behind me.

Some time after the band stopped playing, the music was also switched off, and as people began to drift away the lights came on, harsh and quivering, and the magic veil in which the darkness had wrapped everything was torn aside. The dance floor, which moments before had been the scene for the sweetest and hottest dreams, was now bare and empty and covered with dirt and gravel from all the boots that had stomped around on it during the course of the evening. The space beneath the ceiling, which as if underwater had pulsated in hues of red, green, and blue except when it had sparkled like a starry sky, was empty apart from a light rig with some light cannons and an idiotic cheap shiny disco ball hanging from the middle. The tables, where people had been sitting and enjoying themselves in what resembled a wall of human warmth, were strewn around, beneath them a sea of empty bottles and scrunched-up cigarette packets, here and there shards of broken glass, and the odd trail of toilet paper someone had unwittingly brought with them. The tabletops were stained with all sorts of sticky mess and covered with small burn marks from forgotten cigarettes, there were overflowing ashtrays, piles of cups and glasses, empty bottles of all descriptions, cheap Thermos flasks with long rivulets of coffee under the spouts. The faces of those who had not yet gone home were tired and lifeless, bone structures covered with skin, white and creased, eyes two lumps of jelly, bodies either rippling with fat and folds of skin or so bony and lean that your thoughts were led to the skeletons beneath, which would soon be lying picked nice and clean under the ground in some windblown graveyard with saline soil somewhere by the sea.

No, under the lights this room was nothing special. But then in came six girls wearing soccer uniforms to clean up, they scurried around with their trays and cloths and it was as though life had come to chase away death. I would have loved to stand watching them, but now it was important to give the right impression, not to be a pest and stare and harass, so I went for a walk outside, chatted to people and tried to plan the next phase of the evening, that is, to discover where people were going to drink in case she didn't want to join me.

A quarter of an hour later the crowd outside the community center had thinned and I ventured in. With another girl she was carrying a table across the floor to the corner below the stage. After they had put it down she ran one hand across her forehead, rested the other on her hip, and looked across at me.

"After all this hard work you deserve a break," I said. "I know a house with a great location by the water. You can relax and recover there."

"And no one will come and bother me?" she said.

"No," I said with a smile.

She held her index finger against her cheek, supported her chin on her thumb and regarded me with raised eyebrows. God, she was so attractive.

Five seconds passed. Ten.

"OK," she said. "I'll come with you. We've finished here anyway. I just need to change first."

"I'll wait outside," I said, and turned so that she couldn't see I was smiling so much my mouth was in danger of splitting open.

A few minutes later she came down the steps zipping up her dark blue down jacket and straightening her white woolen hat in a way that was making my heart thump as I waited in the darkness.

She stopped in front of me and put on her gloves, also white, and shifted the bag she was carrying from one hand to the other.

"Shall we go then?" she said, as though we had known each other for years.

I nodded.

All the light-headedness vanished as we set off down the hill. Now it was just her and me. And oh, how aware I was of her movements and facial expressions as we walked down the snow-covered road.

She was tall, slim, her nose was small like a child's, her hips were beautifully rounded, her feet small, yet there was nothing of that dainty grace about her, she wasn't someone you wanted to protect, someone you wanted to take care of, and her strength, which was also a coldness, was what perhaps I found most irresistible about her.

When her eyes didn't flash with life they were dark and calm.

This had been my initiative, she had waited for me, I had set this in motion.

We had already reached my old flat.

"Where do you stay when you come here?" I asked.

"At Mom's," she said, pointing down to the right. "She lives down there."

"Did you go to school here?"

"No, I grew up in Finnsnes."

"And now you're at the tech?"

"Have you been talking to Hege?" she said, looking at me.

"No, no," I said. "It was a wild guess."

Then there was silence. I was uneasy and tried to think of something else so that she wouldn't notice my nerves. If dogs can smell fear, girls can smell nervousness, that was my experience.

From a distance I could see lights in the sitting room. When we went in Nils Erik, Tor Einar and Henning were there. They were playing Nick Cave and drinking what looked like red wine. We sat down on the sofa. It felt as if the party was over, there was no energy in the room, only lifeless eyes and some sipping of wine. Tor Einar tried a couple of times to whip up some atmosphere, but no one was biting, his laughter was met with polite smiles and weary looks.

"Would you like something to drink?" I asked Ine. "A glass of red wine? Some vodka?"

"Do you have any beer?"

"No."

"A little vodka then."

I went into the kitchen, which was freezing cold as usual, and took two glasses from the cupboard, poured a dash of vodka in each and mixed it with 7UP as I wondered what to do. Perhaps best to wait? They would soon go, and then we would be alone. But if they didn't, if this dragged on for another half an hour, there would be a good chance she would leave. There was nothing of interest for her here. Could I simply suggest we go up to my bedroom?

No, no, that was the last thing I should do. Then they would be sitting underneath us listening to every movement upstairs, she would know that and refuse, that wouldn't work.

But I had to get her on her own.

Could we go into my study?

With a glass in each hand I went into the sitting room. Put one on the table by Ine, who looked up at me and gave a weak smile.

"This music is depressing me," I said. "Can I put something else on?"

"Be my guest," Nils Erik said.

What might she like?

Or should I choose a record I liked, one which might give her a sense of who I was? Hüsker Dü, for example? Or *Psychocandy* by the Jesus and Mary Chain?

"Any requests?" I said, crouching by the LPs.

No one answered.

The Smiths maybe?

No, that was too whiny. And something told me she hated whining.

Something hard and masculine. But what?

Did I really not have anything? Was all the music I had feminine and whiny?

It would have to be Led Zeppelin.

As the stylus crackled on the first groove I stood up. It was important to keep on the move because if I sat down, the inertia in the room would make everything I did from then on conspicuous.

"*Skål!*" I said, reaching out my glass and clinking it against the others, Ine's last.

"Come with me," I said. "I'm going to show you something."

"Oh, what?" she said.

"It's in there," I said, motioning toward the other end of the sitting room. "It's something I talked about before. Come on!"

She got up, we crossed the floor, I closed the door behind us and there we were, each holding a glass and standing between the towers of books and piles of paper and cardboard boxes.

She looked around. I sat down on the chair.

"What were you going to show me?" she said.

"Nothing," I said. "It was just so boring in there. Come and sit over here."

I held her hand, she sat down on my lap. Then she took the initiative, picked up my hand and studied it. Ran her thumb over my palm.

"Wow, they're so soft," she said. "You've never done any manual work in your life, have you?"

"Not a lot," I said.

"Never used a spade? Or a wrench?"

"No."

She shook her head.

"That's not good," she said. "And you bite your nails, I can see. Are you the nervous type?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"And why was I to go home with you, did you say?"

I sat there with a hard-on, not knowing what to say.

She leaned forward and opened her mouth. We kissed. I stroked her back, then I held her tight and pulled her to me, hard, she was so *lovely*, and she moved her head away.

She stroked my cheek.

"You're nice," she said.

Her dark eyes lit up as she smiled.

We kissed again.

Then she got up.

"I have to go," she said.

"No. You can't," I said. "Not now."

"Yes, I can. But I'm here tomorrow too. Come by if you like. I'll be at Mom's."

She opened the door, I accompanied her to the hall, she put on her jacket and went out, turned briefly and said good-bye, disappeared down the road.

Leaving her bag behind.

The next day, well, what was on my mind the next day?

Ine.

A miracle had taken place. In my room, last night, a miracle.

Ine, Ine, Ine.

But I put off the visit. The night before I had been drunk, everything took its own course. Now I was sober and could lose everything.

It was three o'clock before I dared venture out and set off on the long road there.

Her mother, an elderly woman with white hair, opened the door.

"Is Ine at home?" I asked.

"Yes, she is," she said. "She's in the living room. Come in."

Ine in the living room, that was quite different from Ine at a party. She was wearing gray jogging pants and a white T-shirt with a picture of a motorbike on it. Her hair was pinned up. She smiled when she saw me, jumped to her feet, and asked if I wanted some coffee.

"Yes, please."

She found a cup and placed a white Thermos on the table next to me.

I grabbed it and tried to unscrew the top. But my palms were too sweaty. My hand slipped around without gaining any purchase. When I applied all my strength it budged a little, but by then I had used all my strength and had none left to turn it.

She watched me.

I blushed.

"Shall I give you a hand?" she said.

I nodded.

"My hands are so slippery," I said.

She came over and unscrewed the top with ease.

"There you go," she said, and sat back down.

I poured the coffee, took a sip.

So far I hadn't said a word.

"When are you going back? Tonight?"

She nodded. Her mother came in behind me.

"You work with Hege, don't you?" her mother said.

"Yes."

"Hege really likes you," Ine said. "She talks about you a lot anyway."

"Is that right?" I said.

"Yeah," she said.

What was this? What was I doing here? Were we going to make *small talk*? How wrong was that? Wrong, wrong, wrong!

"Where do you live in Finnsnes?" I said.

"Right behind the bank."

"Renting somewhere?"

She nodded.

"Do you like Håfjord?" her mother asked.

"Yes, I like it a lot," I said. "I'm having a great time here."

"Yes, it's a fine little place," her mother said.

"Mom!" Ine said. "You're boring him."

Her mother smiled and got up.

"OK, OK," she said. "I'll leave you two in peace."

She left the room. Ine drummed her fingers on the table.

"Can I meet you again?" I said.

"You're meeting me now," she said.

"That's true," I said. "But I meant in a different way. We could have dinner together or something like that. What do you think?"

"Maybe," she said.

She looked beautiful sitting there. A red-faced sweaty boy was the last thing she needed in her life.

"Actually I dropped by on my way to the school," I said. "I've got to do some work and prepare for tomorrow."

I got up.

She got up.

I went into the hall, she followed and watched me put on my coat.

"Bye then," she said.

"Bye," I said, and hurried up the hill toward the school, where I had nothing to do, but I unlocked the door anyway, in case she was watching me from her house. I was fairly sure she had forgotten I existed the moment she closed the door behind me, nevertheless, I didn't want to be caught out telling such a cowardly lie, and now that I was at the school I might just as well watch some TV, it was Sunday, there were always sports on then.

Ine, Ine, Ine, all the girls tittered when I went into the classroom for the first lesson the following day.

So everyone knew.

I ignored them but thought of nothing else.

Ine, Ine, Ine.

At night I lay awake musing on my next move. She had left her bag at my place, she would have to come and get it, wouldn't she? Or should I take it to Finnsnes?

I had already put the nightmare visit to her house behind me, I hadn't even been able to open the Thermos, so what could I expect of another visit? That she would she throw herself into my arms?

I would have to meet her when I was drunk, that was my only chance.

Ine, Ine, Ine.

The brief memory of her burned inside me, I had never experienced anything similar, it was so unassailable, it was the focal point of everything, suddenly she was all that counted.

I walked back and forth between the house and the school during the day, went for long runs in the evenings to sweat out any thoughts of her, and then the following Sunday she appeared.

There was a knock at the door, I opened up, there she stood.

Beautiful Ine.

"I left a bag here, I believe. Just came by to pick it up."

"Is it this one?" I said, holding it up.

"Yes," she said. "Thank you."

She turned to go.

"Wouldn't you like to come in for a while?" I said.

She shook her head, but not from side to side, the movement seemed to stop halfway, and I loved it.

"I have to go back to Finnsnes," she said, starting to walk up the little slope to the road. It was slippery, she took small steps.

"Did you come all this way just to get the bag?" I said.

"No. I've been here all weekend," she said. She had reached the top now and was striding out.

I knew nothing about her except that she was sixteen, liked motorbikes, and went to a technical school.

Not much to base a relationship on.

But she was a miracle of nature, and she was tough.

Her breasts were big, her legs long.

What more could I want?

Nothing, that covered everything.

So what should I do?

Nothing, I meant nothing to her, that had taken her under five minutes to figure out.

I told Hege everything. We sat nursing cups of tea.

"Ine's no good for you," she said. "You have no idea. So you'll just have to forget it."

"I can't," I said.

She looked at me. "You're not *in love* with my little sister, are you?"

"Yes, I am. That's exactly what I am."

She sipped her tea, stroked a long strand of hair away from her eyes.

"Oh, Karl Ove, you are something," she said.

"It's a terrible cliché, but I can't stop thinking about her."

"You'll never make it with her. It just won't work. In fact, it's inconceivable."

"Saying that is not helpful," I said. "I have got to try."

"OK," she said. "Let's go to Finnsnes, go to the disco, miss the bus home, and crash at her place."

"Why can't she come with us to the disco?"

"She doesn't like discos."

It was a plan, and we followed it to the letter.

On Friday night we stood outside a house behind a bank, not far from a disco, Hege rang the bell and Ine came down.

If she was angry that her sister had tricked her, she didn't show it.

They hugged, I looked down and tried to be as unassuming as possible, followed them up the stairs, sat down on a chair rather than the sofa so that she wouldn't feel compelled to sit next to me.

She was just as casually dressed this time as last. Shiny tracksuit bottoms tight around her thighs and a plain white T-shirt.

She made some tea and they did the talking, I sat listening and offering the occasional comment.

The place consisted of a single room with a little kitchenette at one end. The room was quite big, though by no means immense, and while I sat there I kept wondering what Hege had imagined. How could anything possibly happen here?

Ine made up a bed on a mattress on the floor, it was positioned right next to the door and that was where I was to sleep. Hege would be sharing the double bed with her.

Oh well.

The light was switched off, the two of them whispered for a while, then all went quiet.

I lay on my back staring at the ceiling.

How strange my life had become.

As if in a dream a figure rose from the bed. It was Ine, she came over and slipped in beside me.

Jesus, she was naked.

She snuggled up to me, breathing hard.

We kissed, I caressed her whole body, her wonderfully large dark breasts, oh, I devoured them, and I felt her smooth hair against my thigh, and she was breathing heavily and I was breathing heavily, was it going to happen now, I caught myself thinking, with this stupendous motorbike girl?

She rubbed herself against me, and I came.

I twisted away and pressed myself against the mattress.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

"Did you come?" she said.

"Mhm," I said.

She got up, crept back into bed, and slid back into the dream from which she had so enticingly risen only a few minutes earlier.

And thet was thet, as Fleksnes used to say.

For the next few days my love grappled with the remainder of my pride. I *couldn't* go to see her again. I *couldn't* ring, *couldn't* write a letter, *couldn't* look her in the eyes again.

She was still all I thought about, but the incident at her place had been so definitive and so humiliating that not even the most enamored thoughts could withstand the pressure and slowly but surely they disappeared from my system.

Then it was just school again. School and writing and drinking.

But the days lengthened, the snow melted, spring was on its way. One day there was an envelope marked H. Aschehoug & Co. in my mailbox. I took it with me outside with the other letters, lit a cigarette, gazed at the jagged white mountains across the fjord gilded by the sun, which with every day that passed came closer to the village with its retinue of rays. The sight was invigorating, there was in fact a light that burned for us out in space.

A car drove past. I didn't see who it was but waved all the same. Some gulls screeched over by the fish-processing factory, I glanced across, they were circling in the air above the quay. The waves lapped against the stones on the shore. I opened the envelope. There were my two short stories. So they had been rejected. There was a letter attached, I read it. No contributions had been selected, it said. The general standard had been too poor, the anthology would not be published.

So at least I hadn't been rejected!

I walked up to the road and ambled toward our yellow house. Tor Einar's old blue Peugeot was parked outside. Tor Einar was chatting with Nils Erik in the sitting room, along with his cousin, Even, a boy in the eighth class, it was Saturday, we were going to Finnsnes. As I turned on to the little path down to the door, they came out.

"Are you ready?" he said.

"Yes," I answered. "Are we going now?"

"That was the idea."

I went back up, opened the passenger door, and got in. On the rear seat Even leaned forward and spread his arms across the front seats. He had kind blue eyes, dark hair, a small wispy moustache above his upper lip. His voice rose and sank in ways even he could not predict. Tor Einar started the car and drove slowly through the village, waving to the right and left to people on their way to or from the shop. I set about opening the pile of letters I had taken from the mailbox. The original twenty people I corresponded with had shrunk to twelve, still enough to ensure the mailbox was seldom empty. One of the letters was from Anne. She had worked as a technician on the radio programs I had done in Kristiansand. She lived in Molde now, went to the university there or whatever it was, I wasn't very interested, she *was* though, the letters I received were rarely less than twenty pages.

I opened it and took out the thick wad of paper. A small brownish lump came with it and fell onto my thigh.

"What was that?" Even said.

Christ! It was hashish.

"What was what?" I said, placing my hand over it.

"What fell out. What did you get?"

"Oh that?" I said. "It was nothing. A friend of mine's studying horticulture. She's interested in trees. So she's sent me a piece of bark from a rare specimen."

"Can I see?" he said.

I stared ahead at the tunnel opening a few meters in front of us. What would he do if he knew what it was? Tell someone? There would be a hell of a fuss then. DRUGS SEIZED ON HÅFJORD TEACHER. They drank like fiends, but they didn't have anything to do with hashish, marijuana, amphetamines, or that sort of thing.

"Let me see then!" he said.

"There's nothing to see," I said. "Just a rare specimen of bark."

"Why did she send it to you then?"

I shrugged. "We had a relationship."

Tor Einar glanced at me. "Tell us about it," he said.

"Nothing to tell," I said, putting the lump in my pocket with one hand while grabbing the handle above the door with the other. Not that it was necessary, Tor Einar was driving carefully as always. He and Nils Erik had to be the only drivers in the village who kept to the speed limits.

"Am I going to see it or not?" Even said.

Strange how persistent he was.

I turned. "Give me a break," I said. "I've put it in my pocket now. It's just a bit of bark."

"But it was rare," he said.

"Are you interested in *bark*?" I said.

"No," he said, and laughed.

"Well, there you are. Now I want some peace and quiet to read if that's all right with you," I said, skimming through Anne's pages.

When we returned a few hours later Tor Einar and Nils Erik were going to go skiing. They asked me if I wanted to join them, as usual I said no, I was going to write. The moment they were out the door I took out the lump of hashish, warmed it up, mixed it with tobacco and rolled a joint. I drew the curtains, locked the door, sat down on the sofa and smoked it.

On the wall next to my *Betty Blue* poster Nils Erik had hung one of Charlie Chaplin. Sitting there, I imagined I was him and then I mimicked his walk. With my feet at a quarter to three and a stick happily whirring around in one hand I walked back and forth across the floor. It was a perfect imitation and I didn't want to stop, I waddled up the stairs into my bedroom, which was bare except for a pile of clothes and a mattress against the wall, down again, did a circuit of the kitchen, back into the sitting room. I laughed several times, not because it was funny but because it felt so good. I was the tramp, I swung my stick and staggered around taking tiny footsteps, sometimes I lifted my hat and made a little pirouette to greet everyone. I could do no wrong. And my insides were lubricated to perfection, every movement rippled through my body, soon I was lying on the sofa and lifting first one shoulder, then the other, tensing my calf muscles, knees, abs, biceps, and it was as if I were both floating in the sea and the waves therein.

I woke up to someone knocking on the door. Outside, it was pitch black. I looked at my watch. It was half past five. I sat up, rubbed my hands over my face several times. There was another knock. The smell of hashish still hung in the air. I considered not answering, but when the third bout of knocking started I thought the person knocking must be sure I was here, I let some air in through a window, closed the sitting-room door behind me, went to the hall and opened up.

A man in his forties was standing outside. He was the father of one of my pupils although offhand I couldn't say which. I had a faint rushing sound in my ears.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Jo's father. I wanted to have a little talk with you. It's nothing serious, but I'd like to speak about Jo. It's been on my mind for a while to drop by, but it hasn't been convenient until now. Is this a good time for you? I know this is not exactly school hours but . . ." He laughed.

"No problem at all," I said. "Come in. Would you like some coffee?"

"Please, if it's on. But don't make any especially for me."

He walked past me into the kitchen.

"I was just about to make some," I said. "I've been having a nap. It's been a long week."

He sat down at the kitchen table. Hadn't taken off either his jacket or his boots. I filled the coffee pot with water.

It was always women who took care of everything to do with children and school. They were the ones who went to parents' evenings, they were the ones who signed the slips children took home, they were the ones who did volunteer work and made sure school trips and such things were paid for.

I switched on the stove and sat down opposite him at the table.

"Yes, our Jo," he said. "He's not happy at school at the moment."

"Oh?" I said.

"No, he isn't. He says he doesn't want to go to school anymore, he wants to stay at home. Sometimes he cries. If I ask him why, he won't tell me. Or else he says it's nothing. But we can see there's something wrong. He really doesn't want to go. Well, he is . . . he always got along fine before, when he was younger. He liked school then. But now . . . no . . ."

He looked at me.

"I've come to you . . . I know you aren't his homeroom teacher . . . perhaps it would have made more sense to go and see her . . . but he talks very warmly about you. He likes you so much. It's Karl Ove said this and Karl Ove did that all the time. And so I thought I could talk to you about this. After all you know him."

I was so upset when he said that, I hadn't been so touched for many years. The trust he showed in me I had already betrayed. Not through anything I had done, but through what I had thought. Now, with him sitting opposite me, his face grave and tormented, it was obvious he loved his son, that for him Jo was unique and precious. I realized that what for me had been a minor matter, a maladjusted boy who cried over nothing, for him was major, it filled his life, indeed it *was* his life, everything he had.

My guilt burned in me like a forest fire.

I would have to make amends. I would have to make amends now, to the father, who fortunately, oh how fortunately, had no idea what I had been thinking. And then I would have to make amends to Jo. As soon as I saw him I would do that.

"Well," I said. "He's a fine boy."

"Have you noticed anything at school? Have there been any incidents?"

"No, nothing specific. But I've noticed he doesn't fit in. And that sometimes the others don't want him along, or they make fun of him. Nothing serious though, if you know what I mean. That is, no violence or systematic bullying. I haven't seen anything like that. I don't think it happens either."

"No," he said, rubbing his chin as he looked at me.

"But he's a . . . well, chubby kid. Other kids tell him that. And maybe he's not as good at ball games as some of the others. So he avoids them. And that means he's sometimes left to his own devices. He goes around on his own."

"Yes."

"I don't know what we should do," I said. "But it's a small school. We're not talking about a lot of pupils. Everything's quite open. Everyone knows everyone else inside out. So if he was being bullied it would be easy to do something about it. I mean, these are not children we don't know, big gangs or anything like that. This is Stig, Reidar, Endre. Do you understand what I'm trying to say? It shouldn't be impossible to talk to them about it."

"No," he said.

Oh, he did trust me, he was thinking through what I had said, and it hurt, it hurt him, he was a father in his forties, I was a boy of eighteen, so should he listen to me?

"It's all fine in the classroom," I went on. "There may be a comment now and then, but there is about everyone, more or less, and if anything more serious crops up, of course it's dealt with at once, so what we're really talking about is the breaks. Maybe we can try to set up some activities he likes and can do, and get others to join in? I can talk to Hege about it, and then we can draw up a little plan. It might be as simple as talking to the other boys and explaining the situation to them. I don't think they know how he feels."

"I think they do," he said. "I think they know all too well. They never come back to play with him anymore, and they exclude him from their games."

"OK," I said. "But I don't have the impression there's anything malicious in it or that it means much to them. It's more that it's just happened that way."

"Won't it get worse if you talk to them about it?"

"It's a risk we have to take. It has to be handled sensitively. And they're good kids, all of them. I think it'll be fine."

"Do you think so?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I'll have a word with Hege on Monday. Then we'll put together a plan of action."

He got up. "Then I won't take up any more of your time."

"It's not a problem," I said.

"Thank you very much!" he said, and shook my hand.

"Everything will be fine," I said.

After he had gone I flopped down on the sofa. The sitting room was freezing cold, the window was still open. Noises filtered in from outside and filled the room, which in the atmospheric conditions became distorted, everything seemed to be close. It sounded as if the waves on the shore were beating against the house wall. Footsteps on the road, the crunch of the snow, seemed to come from out of thin air, as though a ghost were walking past, on its way to the sea. A car passed, the drone of the engine rebounded off the wall I was lying next to. Someone laughed somewhere, how eerie, I thought, the devils are out tonight. The state of disquiet Jo's father had produced in me, the chasm between his trust and my betrayal, was like an ache in my chest. I got up, put on a record, the one I had been playing most of that year, Lloyd Cole and the Commotions' latest, which I sensed would always remind me of the moods up here, lit a cigarette, closed the window, pressed my forehead against the chilly glass. After a while I went into the little study adjoining the sitting room, full of piles of books and papers, switched on the light, and sat down at the desk.

The second I laid eyes on the sheet in the typewriter I saw someone had written something on it. I went cold. The first half of the page was mine, and then came five lines that weren't. I read them.

> *Gabriel stuck his fingers up her wet cunt. Oh my God, Lisa groaned. Gabriel took his fingers out and smelled them. Cunt, he thought. Lisa was squirming underneath him. Gabriel knocked back a slug of vodka. Then he grinned and unzipped his fly and stuffed his hard dick up her wrinkly cunt. She screamed with delight. Gabriel, that's my boy!*

Shaken to the core, close to tears, I sat there staring at the five lines. It was a well-observed parody of the way I wrote. A good imitation. I knew who had done it, it was Tor Einar, and I recognized the spirit in which it had been done, the spirit of the good-natured joke, he'd "had a good laugh" while he was doing it, read it aloud to Nils Erik, who had laughed his Østland laugh.

It wasn't meant nastily, but I couldn't forgive them for this. I wanted nothing more to do with them, didn't want to speak to them beyond what was absolutely necessary: work and practical arrangements.

I tore the sheet out of the typewriter, crumpled it up and threw it on the floor. Then I got dressed and went out into the night. No point going to the village, along the illuminated road, I would be seen and might have to talk to people. Instead I followed the dead-end road after the bend, it ran along the gentle mountainside, it was dotted with houses. At the end there was a huge pile of snow. Behind it there was nothing, just snow, low trees, and a rock face that after about fifty meters rose sharply in the darkness. The snow reached to above my knees, it was futile going any farther, so I turned and waded through the snow down to the sea, stood gazing at the black water and the waves that rolled into the shore again and again, without much power, they were more like thoughtless little slaps.

Fuck.

It wasn't just a text he had tampered with, that wouldn't have offended me in the slightest, it was something else, much more than that, there was a soul in it, my soul. And when he tampered with that, I could feel it. It looked different from the outside than from the inside, and it was perhaps that which lay at the heart of my despair. What I wrote was worthless. So that meant I was worthless too.

I retraced my steps. At the crossroads I stood not knowing what to do. I could walk five hundred meters along one road, ending up at the school, or five hundred meters along the other, also ending up at the school. There were no other options. The shop was closed, the snack bar was closed, and if anyone was drinking somewhere, I didn't know about it. There was no one I knew well enough to drop in on. The sole exceptions were Nils Erik and Tor Einar, whom I no longer wanted anything to do with, and Hege, whom I didn't feel like visiting now, and nor could I, as her husband, who was always exceptionally open toward me but evidently also had a heart darkened with jealousy, was at home. Sitting at home reading and playing records wasn't an option either, I saw, a light had come on in the sitting room, which meant that Nils Erik was there.

I couldn't stay standing under the lamppost much longer either, someone somewhere would be watching me and wondering what I was doing.

Slowly I moved off. On reaching the house I warily opened the door, carefully removed my coat, and was about to creep upstairs as quietly as I could when the hall door opened and Nils Erik stood looking at me.

"Hi!" he said. "We got *mølje* at Tor Einar's grandmother's. Shame you weren't with us! It's something of a delicacy – cod with liver and roe and onions!"

"I'm going to bed," I said, avoiding his eyes. "Goodnight."

"Already?" he said.

I didn't answer, opened the door to my room, slipped in, and lay on the mattress in the dark, fully clothed. Staring at the ceiling. Heard Nils Erik washing up in the kitchen. He had the radio on. Now and then his humming, which I couldn't hear, but after two months of living in the house with him I knew he was humming, developed slowly into loud, hearty singing. A car with its stereo on full blast drove by. The throb of the drums became fainter and fainter as it went up the hill and followed the road to the other end, then the drums grew louder until they were again pounding outside the wall next to which I was lying.

I looked at my watch. It was a few minutes to eight.

What the hell should I do?

All the roads out of here were closed.

I was stuck.

For an hour I lay there in the darkness without moving. Then I swallowed my pride and went downstairs to the sitting room, where Nils Erik was reading.

"Didn't you have a bottle of red wine?" I said.

"Yes," he said, looking up. "Why?"

"Can I have it?" I said. "I'll buy you a bottle in the week."

"Yes, no problem," he said. "Are you going out or what?"

I shook my head, fetched the bottle, opened it, and went back up to my room. And glimpsed happiness as I started to drink. They had betrayed me, I was despondent, yes, there was black depression inside me, but I was alone and drinking, I was a writer.

They couldn't say that. They were nothing.

I finished off the bottle in ten minutes. My mind befuddled, as though mist had seeped into my skull, I went downstairs, ignored Nils Erik, opened the door to my study, locked it behind me, switched on the typewriter, sat down at the desk, and got started. A few minutes later it was as if my stomach was being torn apart. I launched myself at the door, but of course it was locked, vomit was pressing up my throat, I cast around, a box, a bucket, a corner, anything, found nothing though, my mouth opened and a cascade of purple spew arced and fell into the room.

I collapsed, my stomach churned, another torrent of wine and sausage was expelled, I groaned, my stomach churned again, but now there was nothing left, only the pain as it writhed and twisted and some thick mucus that I coughed up.

Oooh.

I sat on the floor for several minutes enjoying the peace that had descended on my innards. I didn't care that my books and papers were covered with vomit.

There was a knock at the door. The handle went up and down a few times.

"What are you doing in there?" Nils Erik said.

"Nothing much," I said.

"What did you say? Are you ill? Do you need help?"

"Not from you anyway, you idiot."

"What was that?"

"NOTHING! THERE'S NOTHING WRONG!"

"OK, OK."

I could imagine him holding up his palms to the locked door, then going back to the sofa. The stench of puke had filled the room, and for a moment I speculated on why the smell of your inner juices should be repugnant while that of your excrement was not. Could it have something to do with some kind of Neanderthal custom, shitting in the forest to mark your territory, whereas vomit had no such function to fulfill, it was no more than a reflex action to dispose of tainted food and therefore had to stink?

I staggered to my feet, opened the window and fastened it with the clasp. I couldn't bring myself to clean up the vomit, that would have to wait until the following day, I thought, unlocked the door and went to the hall without so much as a glance at Nils Erik, up the stairs and into my room, where I undressed, crept under the duvet, and slept like a log.

I stayed away from them all the next day, and the day after that too, but then I relented, they were going to the school in the evening for a swim, I joined them, not overjoyed, though not furious either. I didn't say much as we swam up and down, and I let them go into the sauna first, left them on their own, before I climbed out of the pool and stood by the door to try to catch what they were saying. I knew they were talking about me, and I knew they were laughing at me. That was obvious, they spent a lot of time together, and they ridiculed what I did and invested so much energy in.

But inside it was silent, so eventually I opened the door and joined them, sat in the corner at the top, supported my back against the wall, looked down at their two white bodies, which glistened with sweat, Nils Erik bent forward, Tor Einar was resting against the bench behind. Nils Erik's face was always in motion, either he was talking, smiling, laughing, or making faces, but now it was completely still, and it appeared wooden, as though he really *was* Pinocchio, a carved stump of wood into which a magician had breathed life.

He must have noticed I was staring at him because he smiled and turned toward me.

"I saw something today that might interest you, Karl Ove. There was an ad in *Dagbladet* for some kind of writing school. In Bergen."

"Oh yeah," I said in as bored a tone as I could manage. Surely he didn't believe I would fall for such an obvious gesture of appeasement?

At school it was decided that I should have the two school-weary disruptive ninth graders, Stian and Ivar, a few times a week. I was to teach them to play an instrument, we borrowed some equipment from the band in the village, Autopilot, so every Tuesday we trudged up to the community center, switched on the amps, and went through the few songs I knew, instrument by instrument. Ivar played bass, he was absolutely hopeless, but I told him to play the same note while watching me, then when I nodded he should change to a sequence he had been practicing. Stian played the drums, he was better but wouldn't listen to instructions, he was too proud for that, while I played the guitar. We could play three songs: "Smoke on the Water," "Paranoid," and "Black Magic Woman." I was used to playing them as instrumentals, I had done that with Jan Vidar, it was second nature to me, a voice on top of this jangling, inept, talentless performance would only sink it further. We stood on the stage and played with the whole of the spacious but empty community center before us. Stian and Ivar did as much posing with their instruments as playing. Toward the end of one lesson a fourth grader opened the door and stood watching us, wide eyed. Stian and Ivar tried to conceal the pride they felt by spitting and pretending this was no big deal for them.

At a planning meeting some days later Eva went berserk. We had been given permission to use equipment belonging to the band her son played in, but we had treated it carelessly, a string had been broken and not replaced, a drumstick had snapped and not been replaced, the band had had enough, she said, and moved without pause on to the next item on the agenda, which was the seventh grade's attitude to work, you couldn't talk to them anymore, they didn't listen to her, they informed her Karl Ove had said something very different, and when she told me to reprimand them I said I would, but I never did, at least not as far as she could see.

I said I didn't have any discipline problems in my lessons, but I would take the matter up with them. She said this was precisely the problem, I would "take it up with them" but I didn't treat the matter seriously, and they noticed. There had never been any problems with the seventh grade before, they had always been hardworking and bright, now they were smart-alecky and lazy.

"Not in my lessons," I said, looking at her.

She was so angry her head was trembling.

Richard intervened, he said both of us were right, but I needed to make it abundantly clear to them that this behavior would not be tolerated and there would be consequences for them if it continued. OK, I said, I'll do that. When the meeting was over and I was in the hall putting on my coat, Eva said Grete was wondering what had happened to the bed linen they had lent me in August, did I perhaps imagine I had been given it in perpetuity?

Oh, for Christ's sake, was she never going to let up?

"Not at all," I said. "It's not gone anywhere. I can return it tomorrow. It's not a problem."

People were so preoccupied with trivialities, they kept searching until they found something and then they went for the jugular instead of keeping sight of the bigger picture, here we all are, humans on one earth, we're only here for the short term, in the midst of all this wondrous creation, grass and trees, badgers and cats, fish and sea, beneath a star-strewn sky, and you get worked up over a broken guitar string? A snapped drumstick? Some silly bed linen that hasn't been returned? Come on, what's the matter with all of you?

The broken drumstick was the height of pettiness for me. So this was what we were going to discuss, not the results I had achieved with Stian and Ivar?

Why choose the little picture when the bigger one existed?

I hated the little picture, and I wasn't much good at dealing with trivialities, I had to confess. The installments on the stereo had been passed on to a debt-recovery firm, and the case of the dinner suit I had rented a year before and had not returned because it was ruined – a rocket had torn the trouser leg to ribbons – had gone to court, I had been ordered to pay for it and in addition there had been a hefty fine for not appearing in court! A fine for not appearing! What did they imagine? That I would hop on a plane to Southern Norway for the sake of a dinner suit?

But that was how it was, everyday life with its endless round of petty demands and obligations, petty conversations and arrangements, surrounded us like a fence. I lived this life, but not when I was drinking, then it was all open spaces and grand gestures, and even though the price was high, the fear afterward great, I always paid, and only a day or two later again I would feel the itch to cast myself out into it, and to hell with what people said.

One night when I had been out drinking at a community center at the other end of the island, Nils Erik was sitting up at home waiting for me.

"You've got an enemy," he said.

"Oh yeah?" I said from the doorway, drunk and weary.

"I went to bed after you left. Then I was woken up by someone sitting on my bed. It was Vidar. He wanted to know where you were. He had a gun in his lap."

"You're joking!" I said. "Don't fuck with me."

"It's true. If I were you, I'd lock the door. And then I'd get hold of Hege and tell her."

"But there's never been anything between us!"

"He doesn't know that. She's here two nights a week, minimum. That's a lot of time to spend with someone."

"But for God's sake I'm not even the slightest bit interested!"

"This is serious. He had a gun. I'm not kidding."

I wasn't frightened until the day after. I could bump into him at any moment, that was how it felt. That night I locked the door. And the following morning the first thing I did was visit Hege to tell her what had happened.

"He lost it," she said. "He won't do it again. Were you scared?"

"Me? No. I wasn't even there. But Nils Erik was."

"It's just nonsense really. He would never have used it, you know. He just wanted to frighten the living shit out of you."

"For what? For talking to you?"

She nodded.

I was already looking forward to describing what had happened in the letters I wrote. It was as crazy as it was flattering; I lived in a place where people broke in brandishing a gun, and I was important enough for it to be me the madman was after.

For the next few days I was nervous, not perhaps of being shot at, it was unpleasant enough imagining that he would probably beat me up if he got half a chance.

Did he really have a gun?

That is what I remember. But could it have been true?

Unlikely things happened in the north, things that only a year earlier would have seemed deeply alien, perhaps even impossible, and only a year later had that same deeply alien, impossible quality although they seemed absolutely normal, a matter of course, when I lived there.

Nils Erik, who had brought back his diving equipment from home at Christmas and in the spring would go down to the harbor wearing a wetsuit, put on a mask, flippers, and an oxygen cylinder, sit on the edge holding a harpoon, and slip down into the transparent water, a shimmering figure who became fainter and fainter until he disappeared, only to reappear ten minutes later with a fish speared on the harpoon, which he cooked for dinner.

Did that happen?

Did he have any diving equipment?

Did he harpoon fish for dinner after school?

I have never been back, but I do sometimes have nightmares about it, really terrible nightmares that consist of me driving into the village again after all these years, nothing else. That is obviously bad enough.

Why?

Did terrible things happen there? Did I do something I shouldn't have done? Something awful? I mean beyond staggering around drunk and out of control at night?

I once wrote a novel that took place there. I wrote it without a second thought. I paid no regard to the relationship between fiction and reality, for a world opened up when I wrote, it meant everything to me for a while, and it consisted partly of descriptions of real buildings and people, for the school in the book is the school as it was when I worked there, and partly of fictional ones, and it was only when the novel had been written and published that I began to wonder how it would be received up there in the north, by those who knew the world I described and who could see what was reality and what wasn't. I used to lie awake at night in fear. The story had not been plucked out of the air. On the contrary, it had been *in* the air. I worked as a teacher for a year in the north, and when occasionally I was able to relish the thought of going to work in the morning, it was because she was there.

She: Andrea.

A gaze, a hand cupping her forehead, a little foot bobbing up and down, a child who was a woman who was a child who I liked to be in the same room with so much.

That was how it was during the months where day was night, and that was how it was when the light unveiled the room in the mornings, at first cold and shimmery, then, slowly and imperceptibly, full of warmth. The snow on the road disappeared, the enormous piles of snow dwindled, patches of shale began to peep through on the soccer field, and from all the roofs and raised surfaces water dripped and gurgled.

It was as though the light rose in the people living there too. Everywhere there was a mood of gaiety and expectation.

In one class, Andrea and Vivian presented me with a diploma. They had chosen me as the school's sexiest teacher.

I hung the diploma on the classroom wall and said that the competition might not have been that fierce.

They laughed.

A few days later, with the sun shining from the middle of the endlessly blue sky, I told them to go outside and write down what they saw. They could go wherever they wanted, write whatever they wanted, the sole conditions I set were that they should write down what they saw and it had to be at least two pages.

Some went down to the shop, others sat against the wall outside the school in the sun. I went behind the school building and smoked a cigarette, gazed across the soccer field, which was now almost completely free of snow, and at the glittering fjord beyond. Made the rounds of the pupils and asked how it was going. They squinted up at me.

"It's going fine," Andrea said.

"Here comes Karl Ove," Vivian said slowly, to show me that this was what she was writing as her pen moved across the page of her notebook. "He's really sexy."

Andrea looked away when she said that.

"That's what Andrea thinks anyway!" Vivian said.

"Don't be so stupid," Andrea said.

Both looked up at me and smiled. They had tied their jackets around their waists and were sitting there in T-shirts with their arms bare.

I was overcome by the same feelings that had filled me in the spring I was in the seventh grade myself. When we ran after girls, held them tight, pulled up their T-shirts and fondled their breasts. The girls had screamed but never loud enough for a teacher to hear.

I was overcome by the same feelings, but everything else was different: I wasn't thirteen, I was eighteen and not their classmate but their teacher.

They couldn't see my feelings. They couldn't know anything about what stirred inside me. I was their young teacher, and I smiled at them.

"I'm going to read out what you've written in the class," I said. "So you might want to choose your material with a little more prudence?"

"Prudence?" Vivian said. "What does that mean?"

"Look it up when you get inside," I said.

"That's just like you," Andrea said. "We always have to look words up. Look it up, look it up! Can't you just tell us?"

"He doesn't know himself," Vivian said.

"Five more minutes," I said. "Then you have to go back inside."

I walked toward the entrance, heard them laughing behind me, I felt such warmth for them, not only for them though, for all the pupils and all the people in the village, in fact, for everyone in the world.

It was that kind of day.

Eleven years later I was sitting in the study of our first flat in Bergen answering e-mails when the phone rang.

"Hello, Karl Ove speaking," I said.

"Hi, this is Vivian."

"Vivian?"

The moment she said her name everything went cold and black inside me.

"Yes. Don't you remember me? You were our teacher."

There wasn't a hint of accusation in her voice. I rubbed my hand, which was clammy, on my thigh.

"Of course I remember you!" I said. "How are things?"

"Wonderful! I'm here with Andrea. We read about you in the paper, and then we saw you were going to give a reading in Tromsø. And so we thought perhaps we could see you."

"Of course," I said. "That would be nice."

"We've read your book. It was great!"

"Do you think so?"

"Yes! Andrea does too."

To avoid going into detail about what was actually in the book, to nip that discussion in the bud, I asked what they were doing now.

"I'm working at the fish-processing factory. No big surprise there. And Andrea's studying in Tromsø."

"Good," I said. "It'll be fun to meet you again. Should we arrange a time and place now?"

She suggested a café close to where I was going to read, some hours before. I said OK, see you then, and we hung up. A few weeks later I opened the café door and saw them sitting at the back of the room, they laughed when they spotted me, said I hadn't changed at all. But you have, I said, and indeed they had, for although their faces were the same, and the way they behaved, they were adults now, and the zone of ambivalence they had lived in then was completely gone. The woman in them held undisputed sway now.

I took off my coat, went over to the counter, and ordered a coffee. I was nervous, they had both read the novel and would probably have recognized themselves in it. I decided to take the bull by the horns. Sat down, lit a cigarette, so you've read the novel, I said. Yes, they both replied, and nodded. It's not you I was writing about, you know, although I'm sure there are similarities, I said. Enormous similarities, Andrea added. But don't worry about it, it's just funny, that's all.

They told me about everything that had happened in the village since I was there, and it was not so little. The biggest sensation was a sex scandal at the school, which had led to a conviction and prison, and the village had been split into two camps. Otherwise lots of the same teachers were still at the school. Vivian often met the people she had known then, as well as the fishermen who had been my age at the time, of course. Andrea lived in Tromsø, where she was a student, and went home during the holidays and for the odd weekend.

I treated them as if they were still thirteen years old, the mold was already set, I couldn't change that, and when I left an hour later it struck me how stupid that was, especially with regard to Andrea.

They went and listened to the reading and subsequent discussion, came over when it was finished and said their good-byes, I left with Tore, whom I had done my reading with, and a couple of others, and drank all evening. Later that night I saw Andrea again, she was standing with a guy in a taxi queue, he was behind her and she stretched her hands back while he kissed her neck and then stroked her breasts. An almost desperate feeling of failure came over me then, I crossed the street, she didn't see me or pretended she hadn't seen me, and I thought, I could be with her now if I had played my cards right. But I was married, and I wasn't playing a game, so I never got further than the thought, which pursued me across the ensuing months and years: I should at least have *tried* to get her out of my mind.

Two weeks after Vidar had sat down on the edge of Nils Erik's bed and asked where I was, I went south for the Easter holiday.

Mom, who was standing on the quay in Lavik when I arrived, seemed tired, she had worked a lot that year and when she wasn't working was looking after her parents in Sørbøvåg.

During the day we chatted, she did all the cooking and I lay on the sofa reading or walked down to the mall in Førde to do the shopping, in the evening we watched TV.

She told me that Jon Olav was also home, I called him, we arranged to meet in Førde the next night. He had grown up in Dale, an hour's drive away, and the disco where we went was full of people he knew.

I drank beer and talked to him, and away from the reservation, which was how I had come to consider Håfjord, everything felt much simpler and easier. I said I was thinking of applying for a writing course at the Skrivekunstakademi in Hordaland. He had never heard of it even though it was in Bergen, the town where he was studying. But it was a new course, this year's intake was the first.

"Who are the teachers?" he said.

"I've never heard of them. I think they're some obscure Vestland writers. Ragnar Hovland, Jon Fosse, and Rolf Sagen. You heard of them?"

Jon Olav shook his head.

"It's sort of too bad that it's such a local affair," I said. "But it's one year and you can get a study loan. So at least I'd be able to write full time."

"In your last letter you were going to Goldsmiths in London," he said.

I nodded. "I'll apply there too. Yngve got me the address, and I've just written off for application forms."

Jon Olav was scanning the back of the disco, which was packed, it was the first day it had been open since the weekend.

"I'll just be a minute," he said.

"I'm not going anywhere," I said.

Oh, the pleasure of being in a place where no one knew me!

Felt the alcohol going to my head. Smoked a few cigarettes, eyed up some of the girls, relaxed completely for a change.

When he came back an hour later I was sitting on the same stool, in the same posture even, elbow on the bar, chin resting on my hand.

"I met some gymnas friends," he said. "We're over there. Come and join us."

I slid off the stool and followed him. He stopped by a table at the other end of the room, near the exit.

"This is my cousin, Karl Ove," he said.

Those sitting round the table looked at me without interest and nodded.

In the midst of them was a girl. She was talking to someone on the opposite side of the table and didn't see me. She laughed and leaned forward with both palms on the table. Her skin was pale, her dark bangs hung over her eyes, but that wasn't what made me stare at her, it was her eyes, they were blue and at first joyous, only to turn serious and gentle the next second.

There was something French about her, I thought, slipping down onto the chair next to Jon Olav. Her features were beautiful, but it was only when she laughed again that a shiver ran through me.

She had an aura around her.

"Do you want a beer?" Jon Olav said. "They're closing soon."

Two minutes earlier I would have been glad they were closing soon, now the thought made me desperate in the same senseless way that I was sad whenever anyone left a drinks party, as though with every person who left I came a step closer to death or some other calamity.

"I'll come with you," I said, and followed him to the bar.

"I can carry two beers," Jon Olav said.

"Who's she?" I said.

"Who?"

"The girl at the table."

Jon Olav turned. Hadn't he even noticed there was a girl sitting at our table?

"Oh her," he said. "That's Ingvild."

"Do you know her well?"

"No, hardly at all. She lives in Kaupanger. But I know her boyfriend. Tord. Sleeping in the chair over there. Can you see him?"

Typical.

As though I could have had a chance if she hadn't been with him.

I was on vacation, at my mother's, leaving in two days, what was I dreaming of? One look at a beautiful stranger, was that supposed to be the future? Me and her, yes?

Why?

She had an aura around her.

I drank half the glass at the bar while Jon Olav was paying, then I ordered another and took both glasses with me to the table.

Four of Jon Olav's friends at the table got up and left immediately afterward. They had come in the same car and were going home, I gathered.

Around the table now were only Jon Olav, someone he was talking to, Ingvild, and me. As well as her boyfriend, that is, but he was asleep and so didn't count.

I took a couple of long swigs.

She was staring over her shoulder.

"Do you want this beer?" I said when she finally turned her eyes back to the table. "It's untouched. I haven't had a sip."

"If anything was likely to make me suspicious it would be a total stranger offering me a beer he's had standing in front of him for a while. But you look harmless enough."

She spoke in the Sogne dialect, and her eyes narrowed when she smiled.

"I am," I said.

"But no thanks. I have to drive."

She motioned toward the guy sleeping at the table.

"I have to drive him home among other things."

"I'm a good driver," I said. "I can give you a few tips if you like."

"Oh please! I'm a terrible driver."

"First of all, it's important to drive fast," I said.

"Oh yeah?"

"There are those who claim it's best to drive slowly, but I think they're mistaken. It's better to drive fast."

"OK, fast. Anything else?"

"Well, let me see . . . Yep, I was driving along the road once. The car in front of me was going slowly. I think it's important to drive fast, so I simply overtook him. It was on a bend, I crossed into the opposite lane, stamped my foot down on the accelerator, and then I was past him."

"Yes?"

"That was all. I just carried on."

"You don't have a license, do you?"

"No. I really admire those who do. Actually it's incredible that I dare talk to you. Usually I would have just sat staring at the table. But I've had a bit to drink and I love talking about driving. The theory, that is. I think a lot about how best to change gear to get the smoothest drive, for example. The whole interaction between clutch and gear and accelerator and brakes. But not everyone likes to talk about it."

I looked at her. "Does your boyfriend have a license?"

"How do you know he's my boyfriend?"

"He who?"

"He on the chair."

"Is *he* your boyfriend?"

She laughed. "Yes, he is. And he has a license."

"That's what I thought," I said. "Was it driving cars that brought you together?"

She shook her head.

"But tonight it seems to be forcing us apart. I could have done with a few beers as well. Especially if he's asleep. He might have had the decency to fall asleep without drinking. Then I could have had one."

She looked at me.

"Are you interested in anything else apart from driving cars?"

"No," I said, and took a swig of beer. "What are you interested in?"

"Politics," she said. "I'm passionately interested in politics."

"What kind? Local politics? Foreign affairs?"

"Just politics. Politics in general."

"Are you flirting with my cousin while your boyfriend is asleep?" Jon Olav said.

"I'm not flirting," she said. "We're talking about politics. And then perhaps we'll end up talking about emotions, if I know me."

"I'm sure you do," I said.

"I have an abysmal emotional life. What about you?"

"It's not great, actually. Yes, if I'm honest. I never usually talk about it. But there's something about you that gives me the courage."

"Ironic girls tend to have that effect. That's my experience. Eventually people get so sick of irony they'll do anything to stop it. Since I started being ironic I've been told quite a few intimate details."

The music in the room was switched off.

Jon Olav turned to me.

"Shall we go?"

"OK," I said, and looked at her as I got up. "Drive home fast!"

"I'll drive like a bat out of hell," she said.

When I woke up the next morning she was on my mind. Jon Olav, who had slept at our place, went home to Dale in the morning. He was the only connection I had with her, and before he left I made him promise to send me her address when he got home, even though something told me he would only do so with a heavy heart, after all she was going out with someone he knew.

It felt completely meaningless going back to Håfjord, but on the other hand there were only three more months until it finished for good and I could spend the entire rest of my life in familiar surroundings, if that was what I wanted.

The letter from Jon Olav lay in my postbox a few days after I returned. She lived in Kaupanger, he wrote, and was in her final year at gymnas in Sogndal.

Kaupanger, I thought, that must be a fantastic place.

I spent more than a week on the letter to her. She knew nothing about me, had no idea what my name was, and had no doubt forgotten me the moment she left the disco that night. So I didn't immediately reveal my identity, I touched on driving a couple of times so that she could, if she remembered, figure out who I was. I didn't give an address; if she wanted to answer the letter she would have to make an effort to get hold of it, and in that way, I thought, I would have a deeper impact on her consciousness.

That same week I prepared my application for the writing course at the *akademi* in Bergen. They wanted twenty pages of prose or poetry and I enclosed the first twenty pages of my novel in the envelope, wrote a short letter of introduction, and sent it off.

Now the mornings were light when I woke and went downstairs for a shower and breakfast, outside the house, gulls were screaming, and if we opened the kitchen window, we could also hear the waves lapping and gurgling over the pebbles beneath. At school the younger children were running around in sweaters and sneakers during the breaks, the older ones sat on the ground leaning back against the wall with their faces to the sun. Everything that had happened in the darkness, when life had closed itself around me and even the tiniest details had become charged with tension and destiny, seemed incredible now, for out in the open, beneath this slow deluge of light, I saw it as it was.

How was it?

It was nothing special. It was how it was.

Oh, I still cast glances at Liv when I had the opportunity and could do so unobserved, and in English classes a shiver could still go through me when I saw Camilla's shapely body sitting there, but the mounds and curves, all the softness and grace they possessed, no longer had a disorientating effect, I was no longer fascinated. I saw, and I liked what I saw, but it wasn't part of me. With Andrea it was different, she was special, but if I was happy when she looked up at me from the corner of her eyes in the way she did, I didn't let it show, no one could see what I felt, not even her.

What was it I felt?

Well, it was nothing. A tenderness, that was all, something light and sparkling that whistled past and was gone, it had no right to exist.

One day a letter from Kaupanger arrived.

I couldn't read it standing in the post office or sitting at home or lying in bed, the conditions had to be perfect, so I put it aside, ate with Nils Erik, had a smoke, drank a cup of coffee, then I took the letter with me to the beach, sat on a rock, and opened it.

A strong smell of salt and decay rose from around me. The air was still and warmed by the sun, but every so often a gust swept in from the fjord taking everything with it, which then had to be painstakingly built up again. The mountaintops on the other side of the fjord were still white, but if I turned and looked toward the village, there was a faint green glimmer on the ground, and although all the low trees and bushes were still leafless, they didn't appear to be dead, as in winter, they stood as though they could sense life was on its way back.

I opened the letter and began to read.

She wrote nothing about herself. Nonetheless she began to take shape within me, I could sense who she was, this is different, I thought. This is quite, quite different.

When I folded the letter and replaced it in the envelope it was as though I was a new person. I walked slowly back to the house. She had an aura around her, and every sentence, no matter how tentative and probing, was testimony to that.

I considered getting on a bus the next morning, catching the boat to Tromsø, flying to Bergen, taking the boat to Sogndal, and then simply standing in front of her and declaring that the two of us belonged together.

I couldn't of course, that would have ruined everything, but that was what I wanted to do.

Instead I sat down and wrote another letter. Any hint of emotion or openness was stifled at birth, this was going to be an eloquent, calculating letter that would press all the buttons I had at my disposal, make her laugh, make her reflect, arouse a desire in her to want to know me.

Writing was, after all, something I could do.

On May 17 I stayed home reading the whole day. There was an expectation that teachers would take part in the Constitution Day procession and the subsequent activities, but it was not compulsory, so when the meager procession passed by on the road outside I was sitting on the sofa and watched it through the window, heard the pathetic flutes and the scattered cheers, lay back and continued reading *The Lord of the Rings*, which I had read only two years before but had already completely forgotten. I couldn't get enough of the battle between light and darkness, good and evil, and when the little man not only resisted the superior powers but also showed himself to be the greatest hero of them all, there were tears in my eyes. Oh, how good it was. I had a shower, put on a white shirt and black trousers, tossed a bottle of vodka into a bag, and walked up to Henning's, where there was a whole gang of people drinking. There was a party on Fugleøya, we drove there a few hours later, one minute I was standing in the parking lot talking, the next I was on the dance floor rubbing up against someone or other, or up on an embankment fighting with Hugo, trying to prove that I wasn't the weakling everyone took me for. He laughed and threw me to the ground, I jumped up and he threw me to the ground again. He was much smaller than me, so it was humiliating, I ran after him and said he wouldn't be able to do it again, but he'd had enough and came over, wrapped his arms around me and threw me to the ground with such force that he knocked the air out of my lungs. And that was how they left me, gasping for air like a fish. I took the nearly empty vodka bottle with me and sat on a little mound beside the parking lot. The light hovered above the countryside. There was something sickly about it, it seemed to me, and I don't remember anything until I was trying to prize open a door surrounded by young fishermen, I must have told them I had some experience in such matters, presumably I had given the impression that a locked door was no problem for me, I could do a bit of everything, had done a bit of everything, but now, trying all the keys I had found in the drawer downstairs, and then a screwdriver and various other tools, it began to dawn on them that we were not going to get into the locked studio in the house Nils Erik and I were renting, and one after the other they trooped back down to the sitting room, which was already bathed in sunlight.

When I woke up I couldn't remember a thing at first. I didn't know where I was or what time of day it was. Fear pumped through me.

The light outside told me nothing, it could equally well have been morning as night.

But nothing had happened, had it?

Oh yes, it had. I had run after Hugo and had been thrown to the ground time after time.

I had tried to kiss Vibeke when we were dancing and she had turned away.

And the girl standing by the entrance, the one with the sassy expression, I had stopped and exchanged a few words with her, and then I'd kissed her.

How old would she have been?

She had told me. She was in the seventh grade.

Oh God, was that possible?

Please be kind to me.

Oh no, oh no.

I was a teacher, for goodness' sake. What if this got out? Teacher kisses thirteen-year-old at party?

God almighty.

I covered my face with my hands. Heard music downstairs, scrambled out of bed, couldn't stay there being tortured by the awfulness of my deeds. No, I had to be active, move on, talk to someone who would say it didn't matter, that kind of thing happened.

But it didn't.

It happened only to me.

Why did I have to kiss her? It had just been a spontaneous move, something I did on impulse, it meant nothing.

Who would believe that?

As I left my bedroom I had to support myself on the wall, I was still drunk. Downstairs, Nils Erik was at the stove frying fish tongues. He turned when I entered the room. He was wearing a plaid shirt and a pair of those green hiking pants with loads of pockets.

"So you're honoring me with your presence?" he said with a smile.

"I'm still drunk," I said.

"I can believe that," he said.

I sat down at the kitchen table, rested my head on my hands.

"Richard was not best pleased today," he said. He slipped the spatula under the fried tongues and transferred them to a plate, filled the pan with more tongues coated in white flour. They hissed.

"What did you tell him?"

"I said you weren't feeling well."

"Which was true."

"Yes, but he was pretty angry."

"I don't give a shit about him. There's only a month left now. What's he going to do? Give me the boot? Besides, I haven't been ill once all damn year. So it's no big deal."

"A few cod tongues?"

I shook my head and got up.

"Think I'll have a bath."

But it was unbearable lying in hot water staring at the ceiling, it didn't fill me with peace, it just gave all my painful thoughts ample room to spread, so I got out after a few minutes, dried myself, put on my tracksuit, which was the only thing clean I could find, and lay down on the sofa with *Felix Krull* instead.

For a few minutes at a time I succeeded in engrossing myself totally in the book. Then the dreadful thoughts returned like an electric shock and everything became distorted. Again I had to force myself back into the confidence trickster's world, where I could stay for several minutes until another shock reopened the sores.

Nils Erik came in and put on a record. It was half past five. He stood for a moment gazing across the fjord, then he sat down with a newspaper. His presence helped, what I had done didn't seem so terrible when there was a friendly person in the room.

I read aloud a passage describing Krull's view of the Jews.

"He wasn't so high-minded, this Thomas Mann," I said. "That's pure anti-Semitism!"

Nils Erik looked at me.

"You don't think it's ironic then?"

"Ironic? No, do you?"

"He's famous for being ironic."

"So he doesn't really mean it. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes."

"I don't think so," I said, because I hated it when Nils Erik thought he knew better than me. Which he often did.

The image of the seventh grader with her tousled hair and sassy expression was clear in my mind's eye again. And my lips closing on hers.

Why had I done it? Oh why, oh why!

"What's up?" Nils Erik said.

"What?" I said.

"You went like this," he said, and raised his head, narrowed his eyes and pinched his lips together hard.

"Nothing in particular," I said. "I was just thinking about something."

But nothing happened. I went to school the next day and no one there said anything about what had happened, everyone behaved as they normally did, even my pupils, who I thought might have heard about it, some of them probably knew her.

But no.

Could it simply pass, just like that?

The only place it existed was in me. And if I let it stay where it was, there was no problem, it would slowly lose its power and in the end vanish, as sooner or later all the other shameful things I had done had vanished.

Toward the end of May a letter from the *akademi* arrived in my postbox, I tore open the envelope and read it standing outside the post office. I had been accepted. I lit a cigarette and started to walk back toward the school, I would call Mom and tell her, she would be pleased. And then I would call Yngve because it meant I would be moving to Bergen that autumn. In a strange way I had expected to be accepted because although I knew what I had written might not have been that good and consequently they ought to have rejected me, it was me, however, who had done the writing and that, I felt, they would not be able to ignore.

May passed, June began, and it was as though everything was dissolving into light. The sun no longer set, it wandered across the sky all day and night, and I had never seen anything like the light it cast over the wild terrain then. The light was reddish and full, it was as if it belonged to the ground and the mountains, it was them that were glowing, as if after a catastrophe. On a couple of nights Nils Erik and I drove along the deserted coastal roads, and we seemed to be on a different planet, so alien was everything. Through sleeping villages, everywhere the reddish gleam and the strange shadows. The people were transformed too, out at night, couples walking, cars driving past, whole flocks of young people rowing out to the islands for picnics.

I received another letter from Ingvild. She said she had rolled up her trousers to her knees and was sitting with her feet in Sogne Fjord as she was writing. I loved Sogne Fjord, the feeling the surface gave of the enormous depth, the immense chains of mountains with the snowy peaks towering above it. All clear and still, green and cool. Ingvild, who was moving in these surroundings and who affected me in so many ways, wrote more about herself this time. But it wasn't much. The tone approached self-irony, she was in defensive mode. Against what? She wrote that she had been an exchange student in the United States for a year, that was why she was still a senior. So we were the same age, I reflected. She was going back there in the summer for a holiday with her host family, they were going to cross the country in a camper van. She would write more from the States. In the autumn she would be going to Bergen to study.

The last day of school came. I wrote HAVE A GOOD SUMMER! on the board, handed out the report cards to my pupils, wished them luck with the rest of their lives, ate cake with the teachers in the staff room, shook everyone's hand and thanked them for the past year. As I walked downhill on my way home I was, as I had expected, neither happy nor relieved because I had been waiting for this day for more than six months, just empty inside.

In the afternoon Tor Einar stopped by. He had brought with him some gull eggs and a crate of Mack beer.

"It's a scandal you haven't eaten seagull eggs before," he said. "There are two dishes which are the *essence* of Northern Norway. *Mølje* and seagull eggs. You can't leave before you have tried them."

Nils Erik had a temperature and was on the sofa, there was no question of him having beer or eggs, so it was left to Tor Einar and me to do them justice.

"Why don't we go down to the beach?" Tor Einar said, eyeing me with that knowing grin of his. "It's such fantastic weather."

"Why not," I said.

I had never quite found the right tone with Tor Einar. We were the same age and had a lot in common, much more than I and Nils Erik had, but it didn't help, it was irrelevant. I always played a role when I was with Tor Einar, which wasn't the case with Nils Erik, and I didn't like myself when I did, when there was a distance between the person I was and what I said, a kind of delay that allowed space for calculations, as if I wanted to say what he preferred to hear rather than what I had to say or talk about.

On the other hand, that is how I was with almost everyone, in fact it had even become like that with Jan Vidar, who was the closest friend I'd had for the past five years.

It wasn't a problem, just a little uncomfortable, and the only consequence was that by and large I tried to avoid being on my own with Tor Einar for any period of time.

Now this wasn't possible. Luckily, though, we had beer with us as we trudged down to the beach, it would only take a couple of bottles before such problems disappeared like chalk beneath a wet sponge.

Under the deep blue sky, beside the water, with the sun playing on it, we both sat down on a rock. Tor Einar opened a beer and passed it to me, opened one for himself, winked and said *skål*.

"Now we're laughing, eh!" he said. "Last day of school, the sun's shining, and we have enough beer for a long night."

"That's right," I said.

Some fishing boats were chugging shoreward, bobbing up and down on the waves in the middle of the fjord, with a trail of gulls behind them.

What a scene.

"How about if we sum things up," said Tor Einar.

"Regarding the school year?" I said, producing a pouch of tobacco.

"Yes," he said. "Has it fulfilled our expectations?"

"I didn't have any, I don't think," I said. "I just came up here and hoped for the best. But you? Are you happy with how things went?"

He hesitated.

"Every year without a girlfriend is a bad year," he said, squinting into the sunlight. Then he turned to me.

"You had a couple of adventures anyway. Ine and Irene? And that temp on Fugleøya, what was her name? Anne?"

"Yes," I said. "But it didn't work out. Actually nothing worked out."

"Didn't you have them?"

"No."

"Not one of them?"

"No."

He stared at me in disbelief. "And there I was going around thinking at least one of us had some luck this year. Then you tell me you didn't either."

I looked at him and smiled, clinked my bottle against his, drank the last drop, opened another.

"Who did you have your eye on?" I said.

"Tone," he said.

That was the girl who had rejected my approach while she was brushing her teeth.

"Yes, she's nice," I said. "I went after her as well, but she wasn't at all interested."

"No, it's not easy," he said. "But I've got a chance. We're going InterRailing together. Well, not just us two, there will be four others, but, Jesus, a month traveling together through Europe, surely there's got to be a chance."

"You're InterRailing?"

He nodded.

"Me too," I said. "Well, it's not InterRailing. I'm going to hitch down through Europe with a friend after the Roskilde Festival."

"Then I'll do my best to avoid you," he said. "I don't want to warm her up just so that you can take over."

"You must have a very high opinion of my qualities as a seducer," I said. "If there's one thing I can't do, it's that."

"My strategy is to be present," he said. "That's the only chance I have. Amble along behind her like a dog, always be there, and then hope she'll cuddle me sooner or later."

I shuddered. "That's a terrifying image."

"You're right, but it's true."

"That's why it's so terrifying. There's a little of the doggie in me as well."

He stuck out his tongue and panted heavily a few times.

"Anyone else you've been trotting along behind this year?" I said.

"Liv," he said, staring straight at me.

"Liv?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "All the girls our own age have left the village. But she's unbelievably pretty. Don't you think?"

"Yes," I said with a smile. "Have you seen her body? Her backside?"

"Oh yes," he said. "She's gorgeous. Camilla isn't bad either."

"No, that's true," I said. "But at least Liv's sixteen. Camilla's only fifteen."

"Who gives that a second thought?" he said.

"You're right there."

We opened another beer. He smiled, his face was bathed in sunlight.

"Her breasts," he said. "Have you seen them?"

"Naturally," I said. "I've hardly looked at anything else in the classes with them."

"She is pretty. But she can't beat Liv."

"No," I said.

I turned and gazed into the distance. A car was coming up the hill from the fish hall, farther along the road a kid was holding a stick and hitting the poles used to demarcate the edge of the road in deep snow. A seagull was sitting on the ridge of our roof surveying the scene.

"And then there's Andrea," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"She's a real beauty too. Have you seen her?"

"Yes."

"Actually, I've thought a lot about her," I said.

"I can imagine," he said.

"What else could we do?" I said. "They were the only ones around!"

We laughed and said *skål*.

"She has such incredible eyes," I said. "And what long legs she has."

"It's true. What about Vivian then?"

"Nothing compared to her sister."

"No, that's true. But she has something. A charm of her own."

"Yes."

"What do you think would happen if anyone heard this conversation?" I said.

He shrugged.

"We'd never get a teaching job again. That's for sure."

He laughed and raised his bottle to me.

"A *skål* for schoolgirls!" he said.

"*Skål*!" I said.

"What about their mothers then?" he said.

"I've never thought about them."

"Haven't you?"

"Have *you*?"

"Oh sure, of course I have."

"I think I might have been a little in love with Andrea," I said.

"I had a soft spot for her too," he said. "But I wasn't in love. Liv, on the other hand. She brightened my days."

"Yes," I said. "But it's good it's all over."

"Yes," he said.

The next day I packed my things, taped up the cardboard boxes again, and carried them to Nils Erik's car. He was going to drive me down to the express boat quay in Finnsnes, where I would have them sent to Bergen. Apart from the new stereo, some records, and quite a few books, my belongings were identical to those that had come up the year before.

Once that was done I fried some sausages and potatoes, which I ate with Nils Erik in the kitchen. This was my last meal in the village. Nils Erik would be staying on for a few more weeks, he was planning to spend the time hiking, and except for my bedroom, which I lightly dusted, he would deal with cleaning the house.

"I'll keep the deposit on the bottles as my reward," he said with a smile. "It'll add up."

"OK," I said. "What do you think, should we get going?"

He nodded, and we got into the car. We slowly drew away, said our goodbyes to east and west, and for every meter we covered, part of the village disappeared for good for me, I didn't look back and I would never, under any circumstances, set foot here again.

The chapel disappeared, the post office disappeared, Andrea's house disappeared, Hege and Vidar's house disappeared, and then the shop was gone, and my old flat, and Sture's house. And there went the community center and the soccer field, and then the school . . .

I leaned back in my seat.

"How absolutely wonderful that it's over," I said as the darkness of the tunnel filled the car. "I'll never take a job again in my life, that's for sure."

"So you *are* a shipowner's son after all?" Nils Erik said.

"Yes," I said.

"Same shipping, new wrapping," he said. "Whack a cassette in, will you?"

After a night in a cheap hotel in Tromsø, I caught a flight for Bergen the next morning, and at three I jumped off the airport bus in Bryggen and headed for the Hotel Orion, where Yngve worked at the receptionist desk. I was wearing black cotton trousers, wide at the thighs, a white shirt, a black suit jacket, black shoes, and a pair of Wayfarer Ray-Bans. Slung over my shoulder was my seaman's kitbag. The sun was shining, the water in Vågen glittered, a gentle wind blew in across the fjord.

I saw myself as a kind of primeval inhabitant going to a city for the first time, because every time a car revved or a bus or a truck thundered past I was jolted, and the sight of all these faces moving back and forth on the sidewalk made me feel insecure. Then I was reminded of something Yngve had once said, that his friend Pål always called them prime evil inhabitants, and once that was in your mind it was impossible to see anything else.

I smiled and gleefully slung the kitbag over my other shoulder.

Yngve was at the reception desk when I entered, wearing the hotel uniform, hunched over a little map on the counter explaining something to an elderly couple in shorts, caps, and fanny packs. He looked up and motioned with his head to the sofa, where I slumped down.

As soon as the Americans had gone, he came over.

"I'll be done in about ten minutes. Then I'll have to get changed and we'll be off. OK?"

"OK," I said.

He had a car now, a little red Japanese number he had leased from the volleyball team he played for, and half an hour later we were heading for his flat in Solheimsviken. It was situated some way up the mountainside, toward the end of a long row of brick-built terraced houses originally designed for shipyard workers.

We sat on the doorstep with cold beers in our hands. From the living room "Teenage Kicks" by the Undertones wafted over, evidently this summer's favorite band.

"So, are you going to Roskilde?" he said.

I nodded. "I think so."

"I might come down there too," he said. "Arvid and Erling are going, and lots of others too, so I'll just have to scrape together some cash . . . the Church are playing, you know?"

"Are they?"

"Yes. I wouldn't want to miss out on the chance to see them."

Cars were parked nose to tail on both sides of the street. People were constantly going in and out of the neighboring houses. The town beneath us was buzzing, an endless stream of cars passing through the streets. In the sky there was the occasional flash of a plane, long white plumes of condensed water hovered in the air long after they had gone. The sun burned in the sky to the west. The roofs down the mountainside shimmered in red and orange, and between them stood trees swaying in the breeze.

After a while we went indoors, Yngve made pasta carbonara for dinner, and then we had another couple of beers on the doorstep. Our conversation flagged, it was as though a little distance had grown between us since we last met, but it didn't matter, it could have been for all sorts of reasons.

In one of the letters he had sent he'd, very discreetly, told me to remember to use a condom. I appreciated his concern, but I had smiled when I saw that, because he would never have been able to say it to my face. It was only possible in a letter, and then en passant. Or if he was drunk.

"Are you still suffering after Kristin?" I said after we had sat down.

"It's one big suffering," he said.

"And you can't get her back? There's no chance of that?"

"Do you think I would be sitting here with you if there were?"

"Maybe not." I smiled.

"It was my fault. I took her for granted. All of a sudden she didn't want to continue, and by then it was too late. Shit, that's the hardest part to deal with, that I *could* have prevented it. But I took it for granted. I didn't value it highly enough."

"But you do now?"

"Now I'm in the privileged position of being able to see what I had, yes."

The sun was no longer shining on the doorstep, and I took off my sunglasses, folded them, and put them in my shirt pocket.

"You shouldn't keep them there," Yngve said. "It doesn't look good."

"You're right," I said, and took them out again.

"And while I'm at it, that studded belt of yours might have had its day."

"It's possible," I said. "But I'll give it a while yet."

There was a silence. We smoked, gazed down at the sunless but warm street.

"Can I ask you something?" I said after a while.

"Of course," he said.

"When did you . . . well, first do it?"

He glanced at me. Then gazed down again.

"When I was eighteen. On the trip to Greece. When I went with Helge, if you remember. On Antiparos Beach. At night. In the moonlight."

"Is that true?"

"Yes, it was late but good. Or, in retrospect, it seems better than it actually was. Why?"

I shrugged.

"Don't tell me you haven't slept with a girl yet? You're not a virgin, are you?"

"No, no, of course not," I said. "You know I'm not."

We fell silent again. The air around us was full of noises. All the windows were open, all the shouting, bikes occasionally whizzing past, cars creeping slowly up the mountainside, the wonderful solid sound of car doors shutting.

It wasn't a lie. Technically speaking, I wasn't a virgin, I had penetrated that girl at the *russ* party – not much, a centimeter or two – but for Christ's sake there had been contact, I had fucked. It wasn't a lie.

"I'll order a taxi," Yngve said, getting up. "We'll swing down to Ola's first. You've really got to meet him."

My possessions arrived a few days later, we picked up the boxes from the *hurtigrute* quay, put them in the cellar, and then I traveled down to Kristiansand, where I mostly stayed in Lars's studio. After Roskilde we were going to hitch down through Europe together, and we planned the journey, first to Brindisi on the southeastern tip of Italy, and then across to Athens, and from there to the Greek Islands. I suggested Antiparos, he agreed. I managed to squeeze in a visit to Grandma and Grandad too, and Gunnar, who'd heard I was in town, invited me to their place on the last evening. I had to meet my cousins, we were a small family, as he put it, it was important to stay in contact. He picked me up from Rundingen, Tove was waiting for us with dinner, we spent the evening talking, his two sons kept crawling all over him, and the fact that they weren't frightened of him – actually they exuded trust, this struck me every time I was there – gladdened my heart. No one said a word about Dad, and that was fine, it seemed to me. I slept in their cellar, and in the morning, after a hurried breakfast, Gunnar drove me to the ferry terminal, where Lars and his girlfriend were waiting for me.

During the crossing to Denmark we were mostly up on deck. The sun was shining, the sea lay like a vast sheet around us, we sat in deck chairs drinking and smoking, got up now and then and drifted around, especially me, I was so restless.

After arriving in Roskilde by train, we lined up, were given our armbands, and went to the campsite. I had borrowed a small, brown, two-man tent from Lars, he would share his girlfriend's.

Once the tents were up, I left Lars and went to look for Bassen. We had arranged to meet at the rendezvous point, we had agreed to check in every hour on the hour, and the first time I went there, he was already waiting.

"Hi," he said, and smiled. "Want to go for a drink?"

He laughed when I told him about Northern Norway. I said nothing about Andrea, I wouldn't ever do that, not to anyone, there was no reason.

We went for a scout around, not many people had come yet, he said he was hungry, I was hungry too, I said, and when we passed the Hells Angels campsite and saw that they were grilling enormous chunks of meat over a fire he stopped and shouted to them.

"Hi! Could we have some of your food? We're starving! A bit of meat for two Norwegians!"

One of them got up and made a move toward us.

"He's going to let us in," Bassen said. "They're much better than their reputation. If you're not aggressive toward them, they aren't aggressive toward you."

"Hi there!" he said when the Hells Angel – who not only had long hair, a hefty handlebar moustache, leather pants, leather jacket, and a bandanna around his forehead but also impenetrable black sunglasses – was only a couple of meters away.

He moved quickly toward us and did not look enormously friendly. But perhaps it was just as Bassen had said, they just *looked* dangerous.

He stopped, then spat at us, turned, and went back.

The glob of phlegm hit Bassen on the chest.

"Jesus Christ," he said as we hurried away, angry and frightened. "He *spat* at us! Why did he do that? All we wanted was something to eat!"

"Oooh, shit," I said. "I think we got off easy there. It seems they *are* dangerous."

Bassen laughed.

"Yes, now we're out in the big wide world, Karl Ove!" he said.

I laughed too. We went for some more to drink and a bite to eat. After an hour I returned to the tent, I had to spend some time with Lars and the others as well, after all I had come with them. They were sitting outside drinking wine with a girl I'd never seen before.

"Say hello to our neighbor," Lars said.

"Hi," she said. "I'm Vilde."

I shook hands. It transpired she came from Kongsvinger and had traveled from Norway to the festival all on her own. Later she was going to visit a friend of hers in Århus, she told me.

She was dark-haired, a bit plump, forward by nature, sometimes obstinate. She was two years older than me, her eyes were brown, not always open, but they revealed sudden flashes of softness.

The bottle of wine made the rounds, when it was empty Vilde went to find another from her tent, knelt down, and opened it. The pressure made her thighs as fat as tree trunks.

"Here," she said, and handed it to me. She smiled.

Half an hour later it too was empty.

Lars and his girlfriend exchanged brief glances.

"Well," Lars said, getting up. "We're going to have a look around."

He grabbed her hand and they were gone.

I trembled, fearing something terrible was about to happen.

What though?

I didn't know, but it ran through my mind that it had been a mistake to come here, I'd had enough and now I couldn't take much more.

"We don't have any more wine," Vilde said. "Feel like coming with me to buy a few more bottles?"

"Sure," I said.

On the way I kept a lookout for Yngve and his friends, but it was hopeless, there were tens of thousands of people here.

"He-llo!" Vilde said. "Contact! Contact!"

"Hm?" I said.

"You're walking with me! Be a little friendly."

"OK," I said. But I couldn't think of a thing to say.

"Are you looking for someone?" she said.

"My brother's here, I think. And his friends."

"Is he as good-looking as you?"

I flushed and looked down at her. She laughed and lightly ran her hand across my shoulder.

"I'm just teasing," she said. "It's so funny to see you go red."

"I didn't go red," I said.

"You definitely aren't as tough as you look!" she said.

We stopped in front of one of the counters, she bought three bottles of wine and then we went back.

Vilde said, "Shall we go to my tent? It's big and we can hang out inside and drink."

"Sure," I said, and a chasm in me opened.

We went into her tent. We sat down, she opened a bottle. We looked at each other. She made a grab for me, I made a grab for her, she lay down, I tore her T-shirt over her head and her breasts flopped out. I undid her trousers and pulled them down over her hips. Oh my God, so much flesh. I bent down and kissed her white thighs, stuck my nose in her black panties and at the same time stretched for her breasts with both hands, and then she said, get your clothes off, come on, hurry, hurry, I want you now, and I jumped up, dragged my T-shirt over my head and pulled down my trousers as I watched her wriggle out of her panties and lie there naked and raise her legs slightly as she parted them, and I could barely breathe, my underpants stuck out like a small tent and I took them off and sank down on her, she put her hand behind my head and I tried to enter her, missed the target, oh no, no, God, please not now, hang on, she said, I'll help you, that's it, yes, oh, there we are, and I was inside her and I managed to thrust twice before everything contracted and I held her tight.

Oh, it was brief, and it was embarrassing.

She stroked my hair a few times.

I lay on my back beside her.

At least it had gone inside.

That was the first time.

I smiled.

"Would you like some wine?"

"Love some," she said.

We each took a swig.

"How many girls have you had?" she said.

I flushed and concealed my embarrassment by raising the bottle to my mouth again.

Then I pretended to count.

"Ten, actually," I said.

"That's a lot," she said.

"And you?" I said.

"Three."

"Three?"

"Yes."

"Am I the third or the fourth?"

"The third. But wouldn't you like to be the fourth too?"

"Yup."

This time it went a little better, perhaps twenty seconds passed before we were lying next to each other again. We drank more wine, I put my arm around her, snuggled up to her well-upholstered body, and that was how we fell asleep. When we woke up it was dark. We did it again, and then again.

We lay talking, laughing, and drinking, and I thought, is it true, is it really true, am I lying beside a naked girl with whom I can do what I want?

We fell asleep, when we woke up we made love again, and then we went for a walk, saw two minutes of a gig, shared a bottle of wine, and then we hurried back to the tent. We stayed there all day. We got drunker and drunker. I couldn't get enough of her ass and her big soft breasts, couldn't fathom what happiness had befallen me. As we kept at it she suddenly lunged to the side and put her hand to her mouth, I knew what was happening and withdrew, she crawled over to the tent opening, pulled down the zip and then, with her backside in and her chest out, she threw up. Groaned and another spasm ran through her, and I saw her big ass before me, suddenly I couldn't resist it, placed my hands on her hams, poked it in, and began to pump away again.

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Karl Ove Knausgaard was born in Norway in 1968. His debut novel *Out of This World* won the Norwegian Critics Prize and his *A Time for Everything* was a finalist for the Nordic Council Prize. *My Struggle: Book One* was a *New Yorker* Book of the Year and *Book Two* was listed among the *Wall Street Journal*'s 2013 Books of the Year. In 2014, *Book Three* was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. *My Struggle* is a *New York Times* Best Seller and has been translated into more than fifteen languages. Knausgaard lives in Sweden with his wife and four children.

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ISBN 978-0-914671-17-6
52700>
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Karl Ove Knausgaard

My Struggle

BOOK FIVE

Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett

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The fifth volume of what has been called "perhaps the most significant literary enterprise of our time" (*The Guardian*) delves deeply into the psychological drama of early adulthood. At nineteen, Karl Ove is the youngest student accepted into a writing academy. He arrives in Bergen full of excitement and conviction, but his confidence is swiftly shattered. He watches his friends and peers, one by one, release their debut books. Socially awkward and disenchanted, he seeks escape in alcohol and steadies himself with literature and music. A great love pulls Karl Ove out of his own darkness, but it isn't long before self-destructive behaviors reemerge and he finds himself drawn back into punishing solitude. *Book Five* is an emotional whirlwind, spinning from heady highs to harrowing lows, whose visceral memories become our own.

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My Struggle

Karl Ove Knausgaard

My Struggle

BOOK FIVE

Translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett

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First Archipelago Books Edition, 2016
first printing

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First published as *Min kamp 5* by Forlaget Oktober.

Archipelago Books
232 3rd Street #A111
Brooklyn, NY 11215
www.archipelagobooks.org

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Knausgård, Karl Ove, 1968-
[Min kamp. 5. English]
My struggle. Book five / Karl Ove Knausgaard ;
translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett.
First Archipelago Books edition.
LCCN 2015049328 | ISBN 9780914671398 (hardback)
LCC PT8951.21.N38 M5713 2016b | DDC 839.823/74--dc23

Distributed by Penguin Random House
www.penguinrandomhouse.com

Cover art: Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*

The publication of *My Struggle Book Five* was made possible with support from Lannan Foundation, the Black Mountain Institute, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency, and NORLA (Norwegian Literature Abroad).

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

My Struggle

Part 1

The fourteen years I lived in Bergen, from 1988 to 2002, are long gone, no traces of them are left, other than as incidents a few people might remember, a flash of recollection here, a flash of recollection there, and of course whatever exists in my own memory of that time. But there is surprisingly little. All that is left of the thousands of days I spent in that small, narrow-streeted, rain-shimmering Vestland town is a few events and lots of sentiments. I kept a diary, which I have since burned. I took some photos, of which twelve remain; they are in a little pile on the floor beside the desk, with all the letters I received during those days. I have flicked through them, read bits and pieces, and this has always depressed me, it was such a terrible time. I knew so little, had such ambitions, and achieved nothing. But what spirits I was in before I went! I had hitchhiked to Florence with Lars that summer, we stayed there for a few days, caught the train down to Brindisi, the weather was so hot it felt as though your head was on fire when you poked it through the open train window. Night in Brindisi, dark sky, white houses, heat as in a dream, big crowds in the parks, young people on mopeds everywhere, shouting and noise. We lined up by the gangway to the big ship going to Piraeus, with lots of others, almost all young and carrying backpacks like us. It was 120 degrees in Rhodes. One day in Athens, the most chaotic place I have ever been, and so insanely hot, then the boat to Paros and Antiparos, where we lay on the beach every day and got drunk every night. One evening we met some Norwegian girls, and while I was in the toilet Lars told them he was a writer and had been accepted to start at the Writing Academy in the autumn. They were discussing this when I returned. Lars just smiled at me. What was he up to? I knew he was prone to telling little fibs, but while I was standing there? I said nothing, decided to give him a wide berth in the future. We went to Athens together, I had run out of money, Lars was still rolling in it, he decided to fly back home the day after. We were sitting in a terrace restaurant, he was eating chicken, his chin glistening with fat, I was drinking a glass of water. The last thing I wanted to do was ask him for money, the only way I could get any out of him was if he asked me whether I wanted to borrow some. But he didn't, so I went hungry. The next day he left for the airport, and I took a bus to the suburbs, got off near a motorway on-ramp and started hitchhiking. After no more than a few minutes a police car stopped, the officers couldn't speak a word of English, but I got the message that hitchhiking wasn't allowed there, so I caught a bus back to the city center, and with the last of my money bought a train ticket to Vienna, a loaf of bread, a big bottle of Coke, and a carton of cigarettes.

I thought the trip would take a few hours and was shocked to learn it would be more like two full days. In the compartment were a Swedish boy of my age and two English girls who turned out to be a couple of years older. We were well into Yugoslavia before they figured out that I had no money, nor any food, and they offered to share theirs with me. The countryside outside the window was so beautiful it hurt. Valleys and rivers, farms and villages, people dressed in ways I associated with the nineteenth century and obviously worked the land the way they did then, with horses and hay carts, scythes and plows. Part of the train was Russian, I walked through the carriages in the evening, spellbound by the foreign letters, the foreign smells, the foreign interior, the foreign faces. When we arrived in Vienna one of the two girls, Maria, wanted to exchange addresses, she was attractive and normally it would have gone through my mind that I could visit her in Norfolk some day, perhaps start a relationship and live there, but on this day, wandering through the streets on the outskirts of Vienna, the idea meant nothing to me, I was still consumed by Ingvild, whom I had met only once, at Easter that year, but whom I later wrote to. Everyone else paled into insignificance compared with her. I got a lift with a stern-looking blond woman in her thirties to a gas station on the motorway, where I asked some truck drivers if they had any room for me, one of them nodded, he must have been in his late forties, dark complexioned and thin with deeply glowing eyes, first though he had to have something to eat.

I waited outside in the warm dusk smoking and watching the lights along the road that were beginning to become more and more distinct as evening fell, surrounded by the drone of traffic, occasionally interrupted by the brief but heavy slamming of doors, the sudden voices of people crossing the parking lot on their way to or from the service station. Inside, people sat silently eating on their own except for a few families who swamped the tables they sat around. I was filled with an inner exultation, this was precisely what I loved best, the familiar, the known – the motorway, the gas station, the cafeteria, which weren't familiar at all actually, everywhere I looked details differed from the places I knew. The driver came out, nodded to me, I followed him, clambered up into the enormous vehicle, put my backpack in the back, and settled in. He started the engine, everything rumbled and shook, lights were switched on, we set off slowly, gradually sped up, but were still lumbering, until we were safely coasting on the inside lane of the motorway, at which point he glanced at me for the first time. Sweden? he said. Norwegen, I said. Ah, Norwegen! he said.

Throughout the night and well into the next day I sat at his side. We had exchanged the names of some soccer players, Rune Bratseth in particular, had excited him, but since he couldn't speak a word of English that was as far as we got.

I was in Germany, and I was very hungry, but without a krone in my pockets all I could do was smoke and hitch and hope for the best. A young man in a red Golf stopped, his name was Björn, he said, and he was going a long way, he was affable, and in the evening when he had gone as far as he was going to go, he invited me into his house and gave me some muesli and milk, I ate three portions, he showed me some pictures of his holidays with his brother in Norway and Sweden when he was young, their father was crazy about Scandinavia, he told me, hence the name Björn. His brother's name was Tor, he said, shaking his head. He drove me to the motorway, I gave him my cassette of the Clash's triple album, he shook my hand, we wished each other good luck, and I took up a position at one of the on-ramp again. After three hours a tousled bearded man in a red 2CV stopped, he was going to Denmark, I could have a lift all the way. He asked me questions, was interested when I said that I wrote, I wondered if he might have been a professor of some kind, he bought me food at a cafeteria, I slept for a few hours, we reached Denmark, he bought me more food, and when I finally left him I was in the middle of Jutland, only a few hours away from Hirtshals, so I would soon be home. But the last part of the journey was more difficult, I got lifts of thirty-odd kilometers at a time, by eleven in the evening I had advanced no farther than Løkken, and I decided to sleep on the beach. I wandered along a narrow road through a low forest, here and there the asphalt was covered with sand, and soon dunes rose before me, I walked up them, cast my eyes over the shiny gray sea lying in front of me in the light of the Scandinavian summer night. From a campsite or a cluster of seaside cabins a few hundred meters away came the sound of voices and car engines.

It was good being by the sea. Breathing in the faint aroma of salt and the raw breeze off the water. This was my sea. I was nearly home.

I found a dip in the sand and unrolled my sleeping bag, crept inside, pulled up the zip, and closed my eyes. It was unpleasant, anyone could stumble across me out here, that was how it felt, but I was so tired after the past few days that in an instant I was gone, as if someone had blown out a candle.

I awoke to rain. Cold and stiff, I struggled out of the sleeping bag, pulled on my trousers, packed everything, and set off for the town. It was six o'clock. The sky was gray, there was a light, almost imperceptible, drizzle, I was freezing cold and walked fast to generate some heat. I'd had a dream and the images were still tormenting me. Dad's brother, Gunnar, had been in it, or his anger, that was because I had drunk so much and done so many bad things, I realized now as I hurried through the same low forest I had walked through the previous evening. All the trees were motionless, leaden, beneath the dense cloud cover, more dead than alive. The sand lay in mounds between them, swept up in their changing and unpredictable yet always distinctive patterns, like a river of fine sand grains traversing the coarser tarmac.

I came onto a bigger road, continued along it for some distance, put down my backpack by a crossing, and started thumbing. It wasn't many kilometers to Hirtshals. Though what would happen there, I had no idea. I had no money so it wouldn't be that easy to get onto the Kristiansand ferry. Perhaps I could arrange to have a bill sent on to me? If I came across a kindly soul who appreciated the predicament I was in?

Oh no. Now the raindrops were getting bigger as well.

Fortunately it wasn't cold though.

I lit a cigarette, ran a hand through my hair. The rain had made my hair gel sticky, I dried my hand on my thigh, leaned forward and took the Walkman from my pack, rummaged through the few cassettes I had with me, chose *Skylarking* by XTC, put it in, and straightened up.

Had there been an amputated leg in the dream as well? Yes. It had been sawn off just below the knee.

I smiled, and then, when the music began to flow out of the tiny speakers I was taken back to the time the record came out. It would have been the second class at *gymnas*. Mostly, though, I was filled with recollections of the house in Tveit: sitting in a wicker chair drinking tea and smoking and listening to *Skylarking*, head over heels in love with Hanne; Yngve, who was there with Kristin; all the conversations with Mom.

A vehicle came down the road.

When Miss Moon lays down
And Sir Sun stands up
Me, I'm found floating round and round
Like a bug in brandy
In this big bronze cup

It was a pickup truck with a company name on the hood in red, probably a builder on his way to work, as he raced past he didn't even look at me, and then the second song seemed to rise out of the first, I loved this segue, something rose in me as well, and I punched the air several times as I slowly danced round and round.

Another vehicle hove into view. I stretched out my thumb. Once again the driver was sleepy and didn't acknowledge my presence with so much as a glance. I was obviously hitching on a road with a lot of local traffic. But couldn't they stop anyway? Take me to a main road?

Only after a couple of hours did someone take pity on me. A German in his midtwenties with round glasses and a severe expression pulled over in a tiny Opel, I ran toward him, threw my backpack onto the backseat, which was already full of baggage, and got in beside him. He had come from Norway, he said, and was on his way south, could drop me off by the motorway, it wasn't far, but it might help. I said, yes, yes, very good. The windows misted up badly, he leaned forward as he drove and wiped the windshield with a rag. Maybe that's my fault, I said. What? he said. The mist on the window, I said. Of course it is, he hissed. OK, I thought, if that's how you want it, and leaned back in my seat.

He dropped me off twenty minutes later, by a big gas station, I walked back and forth outside asking everyone I saw if they were going to Hirtshals and whether they would take me with them. I was wet and hungry, my appearance was a mess after all the days on the road, and everyone shook their heads until, a long time later, a man driving a van I could see was full of bread and bakery products smiled and said, come on, jump in, I'm going to Hirtshals. The whole way I kept thinking I should ask him if I could have something to eat, but I didn't dare, the closest I came was to say that I was hungry, but he didn't take the hint.

As I was saying good-bye to him in Hirtshals a ferry was just about to leave. I ran over to the ticket office with my backpack heavy on my back, breathlessly explained my situation to the clerk, I had no money, would it be possible to have a ticket anyway and have the bill sent on to me? I had a passport, so could produce ID, and I was reliable. She smiled nicely and shook her head, she was unable to help, I had to pay cash. But I *have* to get across! I said. I *live* there! And I haven't got any money! She shook her head again. Sorry, she said, and turned away.

I sat down on a curb in the harbor area with my backpack between my legs and watched the big ferry slip its moorings, glide away, and vanish from view.

What was I going to do?

One possibility was to hitchhike south again, to Sweden and then go up that way. But wasn't there some water that had to be crossed as well?

I tried to visualize the map, wondering if there was a land connection between Denmark and Sweden somewhere, I didn't think there was, was there? So you would have to go right down to Poland and then up through Russia to Finland and from there into Norway, was that right? A couple of weeks' hitchhiking then. And you would probably need a visa or something for the Eastern Bloc countries. Of course I could go to Copenhagen, that was only a few hours away, and then do whatever it took to get some money for the ferry to Sweden. Beg on the streets if necessary.

Another way would be to get Mom to transfer some money to a bank here. That wouldn't be a problem, but it might take a couple of days. And I didn't have any coins to phone home.

I opened another packet of Camels and looked across at the vehicles that were quietly rolling in and joining the new queue as I smoked three cigarettes, one after the other. Lots of Norwegian families who had been to Legoland or the beach in Løkken. Some Germans heading north. Lots of camper vans, lots of motorbikes, and, farthest away, the juggernauts.

With a dry mouth, I took out my Walkman again. This time I inserted a Roxy Music cassette. But after only the second song the sound became distorted and the battery light came on. I put the Walkman back and stood up, swung my backpack over my shoulder, and set off for the town center, through the few dreary Hirtshals streets. Now and then hunger gnawed at my guts. I considered going to the bakery and asking if they could spare me some bread, but of course they wouldn't give me any. I couldn't bear the thought of such a humiliating rejection and decided to save my efforts until I was in serious discomfort, and wandered back toward the harbor. I stopped in front of a kind of café-cum-snack-bar, where it would surely be possible to get a glass of water at least.

The girl nodded and filled a glass from the tap behind her. I sat down by the window. The place was nearly full. Outside, it had started raining again. I drank the water and smoked. After a while two boys my age came in the door, wearing full rain gear. They undid their hoods and looked around. One of them came over to me. Were the seats free? Of course, I said. We got into conversation, it turned out they were from Holland, on their way to Norway and they had cycled up. They laughed in disbelief when I told them I had hitchhiked from Vienna without any money and now I was trying to get on the ferry. Is that why you're drinking water? one asked, I nodded, he asked if I would like a cup of coffee, that would be nice, I answered, he stood up and went off to get me one.

I left with them, they said they hoped we would meet again on board, took their bikes, and were gone, I plodded over to the truck queue and began to ask the drivers if they would take me along, I had no money for the boat. No, no one was interested, needless to say. One by one they started their engines and trundled on board while I walked back to the café and sat watching the ferry, which, once again, glided slowly away from the quay and became smaller and smaller until, half an hour later, it had disappeared.

The last ferry left in the evening. If I didn't get on it I would have to hitch down to Copenhagen. That would have to be the plan. While waiting, I took the manuscript from my backpack and read. I had written a whole chapter in Greece, on two mornings I had waded out to a little island and from there to another island with my shoes, T-shirt, writing pad, pen, cigarettes, and a paperback copy of *Jack* in Swedish in a little bundle on my head. There, in a hollow in the mountainside, I had sat all on my own writing. It felt as if I had arrived at where I wanted to go. I was sitting on a Greek island in the middle of the Mediterranean writing my first novel. At the same time I was restless, there was *nothing* there, only me, and it wasn't until that was all there was that I experienced the emptiness. That was how it was there, my own emptiness was everything, and even when I became immersed in *Jack* or was bent over my pad writing about Gabriel, my protagonist, what I noticed was the emptiness.

Sometimes I dived into the water, dark azure and wonderful, but I had hardly swum a few strokes before it occurred to me there might be sharks there. I knew there were no sharks in the Mediterranean, but I still had these thoughts as I scrambled up onto the shore dripping wet and cursing myself, it was idiotic, scared of sharks *here*, what was this, was I seven years old? But I was alone beneath the sun, alone by the sea, and utterly empty. It felt as if I were the last human on earth. It rendered both my reading and writing meaningless.

Yet when I read the chapter about what I considered to be a seamen's pub in the harbor quarter of Hirtshals I thought it was good. The fact that I had been accepted at the Writing Academy proved I had talent. Now all I had to do was demonstrate it on paper. My plan was to write a novel during the coming year, and then have it published next autumn, depending on how long it took to print and that kind of thing.

Water Above/Water Below it was called.

18

A few hours later, in the falling dusk, I walked along the queue of lorries again. Some of the drivers were dozing in their cabs, I knocked on the side window and saw them give a jolt, then either open the door or roll down the window to hear what I wanted. No, I couldn't have a lift. No, that wasn't going to happen. No, of course not, were they supposed to pay for my ticket or what?

The ferry was moored at the quayside with its lights blazing. Everywhere around me people began to start up their engines. One line of cars moved slowly forward, the first ones disappeared through the open jaws into the bowels of the ship. I was desperate, but told myself everything would be fine in the end. Had there ever been any stories of young Norwegians starving to death on their holidays or being stranded in Denmark, unable to get home?

Outside one of the last, three men stood chatting. I walked over to them.

"Hi," I said. "Could any of you take me on board? I haven't got any money for the ticket, you see. And I have to get home. I haven't eaten for two days, either."

"Where are you from?" one asked in broad Arendal dialect.

"Arendal," I said, in as thick an accent as I could muster. "Or, to be precise, Tromøya."

"I'll be damned!" he said. "That's where I'm from!"

"Which town?"

"Færvik," he said. "And you?"

"Tybakken," I said. "Could you take me then?"

He nodded.

"Jump in. Squat down as we drive on board. It'll be a cinch."

And that was what I did. As we drove on board I sat huddled up on the floor with my back to the windshield. He parked, switched off the ignition, I grabbed my backpack and jumped down to the deck. My eyes were moist as I thanked him. He shouted after me as I left, hey, hold on! I turned, he handed me a Danish fifty-krone note, said he didn't need it, perhaps I did?

I sat down in the cafeteria and ate a large portion of meatballs. The boat began to move off. The air around me was full of animated conversation, it was evening, we were under way. I thought about my driver. Usually I had no time for his type, they had wasted their lives sitting behind a wheel, they had no education, were fat and full of prejudices about all sorts of things, and he was no different, I saw that right away, but what the hell, he had got me on board!

After the cars, trucks, and motorbikes had – amid much revving and banging – driven off the ferry and onto the roads in Kristiansand the next morning, the town lay still behind them. I sat on the steps of the bus station. The sun was shining, the sky was high, the air already warm. I had saved some of the money I had been given by the truck driver so I could call Dad and say I was coming. His pet hate was surprise visitors. They had bought a house thirty kilometers or so away, which they rented out in the winter and lived in themselves throughout the summer until they had to start back at work in Northern Norway. My plan was to stay there a few days and then borrow some money for a ticket to Bergen, perhaps catch a train there, which was the cheapest.

But it was too early to ring.

I took out the small travel diary I had been keeping for the past month and entered everything that had happened from Austria upward. I spent a few pages on the dream I had in Løkken, it had made such an impression on me, it was deeply entrenched in my body, like a barrier or a boundary I mustn't cross, it seemed important.

Around me, the frequency of the buses began to increase, until at one point barely a minute passed without a bus stopping and disgorging its passengers. They were going to work, I could see it in their eyes, they had that vacant wage-earner look.

I stood up and went for a walk around town. The pedestrian street, Markens, was almost completely deserted, only a lone figure dashing up or down. Seagulls were pecking and snatching at the rubbish under a trash can with no bottom. I ended up at the library, it was habit that drove me there, some of the same sensation of panic I'd had when I walked around here during my years at *gymnas* had me in its grip now, I had nowhere to go and everyone could see that, I had always solved this by seeking refuge here, the place where you could hang around without anyone questioning what you were doing.

Before me lay the market square and the gray stone church with the verdigris roof. Everything was small and dismal, Kristiansand was a minor town, I could see that very clearly now after having been in Southern Europe and experiencing how things were there.

Against the wall on the other side of the street sat a tramp, asleep. With his long beard and hair and his ragged clothes he looked like a wild man.

I sat down on a bench and lit a cigarette. Just suppose he was the one who had the best life! He was doing exactly what he liked. If he wanted to break in somewhere, he did. If he wanted to drink himself senseless, he did. If he wanted to hassle passersby, he did. If he was hungry he stole some food. Fine, people treated him like shit or as though he didn't exist. But as long as he didn't care about anyone else, it was water off a duck's back.

This must have been how the first humans lived before they established communities and started farming, when they just wandered around eating whatever they could find, sleeping wherever felt right, and every day was like the first or the last. The tramp had no house to return to, no house to tie him down, he had no job to attend to, no schedules to keep, if he was tired, well, then he lay down wherever he was. The town was his forest. He was outdoors all the time, his skin was tanned and wrinkled, his hair and clothes filthy.

Even if I wanted to, I could never end up the way he was, I knew that. I could never go mad and become a tramp, it was inconceivable.

An old VW camper van stopped by the market square. A plump, lightly clad man jumped out on one side, a plump, lightly clad woman jumped out on the other. They opened the rear door and started unloading boxes of flowers. I threw my cigarette down on the dry asphalt, slipped on my backpack, and walked back to the bus station, where I rang Dad. He was bad-tempered and annoyed and told me I had arrived at an inconvenient time, they had a little child now, they couldn't receive visitors at such short notice. I should have phoned before, that would have been OK. As it was now, Grandma was coming, and a colleague too. I said I understood, apologized for not calling before, and we hung up.

I stood with the receiver in my hand for a while thinking, and then I dialed Hilde's number. She said I could stay there and she would come and pick me up now.

Half an hour later I was sitting beside her in her old Golf, on our way out of town, with the window open and the sun in my eyes. She laughed and said I smelled terrible, I would have to have a bath when we arrived. Then we could sit in the garden behind the house, in the shade, and she could serve me breakfast, I looked like I needed it.

I stayed at Hilde's for three days, long enough for Mom to transfer some money into my account, and then I caught the train to Bergen. I left in the afternoon, the sun flooded the heavily forested countryside in Aust-Agder, which received it in its manifold ways: the water in the lakes and rivers glittered, the dense conifers shone, the forest floor blushed, the leaves on the deciduous trees flashed on the few occasions a gust of wind caught them. Amid this interplay of light and color the shadows slowly lengthened and thickened. I stood by the window in the last carriage for a long time watching features of the countryside that kept disappearing, cast aside as it were, to be replaced by new ones, which always made their appearance in quick succession, a river of stumps and roots, cliffs and uprooted trees, streams and fences, unexpected cultivated hillsides with farmhouses and tractors. The only feature that didn't change was the rails we followed, and the two shimmering points where the sun was reflected on them all the way. It was a strange phenomenon. They looked like two balls of light, which seemed to be standing still while the train was traveling at more than a hundred kilometers an hour, and the balls of light remained at the same distance from me.

Several times during the journey I went back to see the balls of light again. They lifted my spirits, made me somehow happy, as though there was hope in them.

Otherwise I sat in my seat smoking and drinking coffee, reading newspapers but no books, on the basis that it might affect my prose, that I might lose whatever it was that had got me into the Writing Academy. After a while I took out the letters from Ingvild. I had carried them with me all summer, the folds were wearing thin and I knew them nearly by heart, but a radiance emanated from them, something good, something pleasurable, which touched me whenever I read them. It was her, both what I remembered of her the one time we had met and the her that arose from what she wrote, but it was also the her of the future, the unknown her that awaited me. She was different, something else, and the odd thing was that I also became different and something else when thinking about her. I liked myself better when I thought about her. It was as though thinking about her erased something in me, and that gave me a fresh start or moved me on.

I knew she was the right one, I had seen that straightaway, but perhaps I hadn't thought, only felt, that what she had in her and what she was, and which in glimpses her eyes revealed, was something I wanted to be close to or embrace.

What was it?

Oh, her self-awareness and insight into the situation, which laughter suspended for an instant, but which returned the very next second. Something evaluative and skeptical even, in her nature, that wanted to be won over, but was afraid of being duped. In it resided vulnerability but not weakness.

I had enjoyed talking to her so much, and I had liked writing to her so much. The fact that she was the first thought in my mind the day after we had met didn't necessarily mean anything, it was often like that, but it hadn't stopped there, I had thought about her every day since, and now four months had passed.

I didn't know if she felt the same way about me. Presumably she didn't, but something in the tone of her writing told me there was some excitement and appeal in this for her too.

Mom had moved from a terrace apartment to a basement one in a house in Angedalen, in Førde Municipality, ten minutes from the center. It was a wonderful location with a forest on one side, a field ending in a river on the other, but the flat was small and studenty, one big room with a kitchen and bathroom, that was it. She was planning to stay there until she found something better to rent or perhaps even buy. I had intended to do some writing while I stayed with her, during the two weeks before I would finally move to Bergen, and she suggested I use Uncle Steinar's cabin, which was up by the old house in the forest pasture above the farm Grandma came from. She drove me there, we had a coffee outside the house, then she made her way back and I went into the cabin. Pine walls, pine floor, pine ceiling, and pine furniture. A woven rug here and there, a few plain paintings. A pile of magazines in a basket, a fireplace, a kitchenette.

I placed the dining table by a wall without a window, put my pile of papers on one side, a pile of cassettes on the other, and sat down. But I couldn't write. The emptiness I had first felt on the island off Antiparos returned, I could feel it again, exactly as it had been before. The world was empty, or nothing, an image, and I was empty.

I went to bed and slept for two hours. When I awoke dusk was falling. The bluish-gray twilight lay like a veil over the forest. The thought of writing still repelled me, so instead I put on my shoes and went outside.

I could hear the roar of the waterfall in the forest above, otherwise everything was still.

No, it wasn't, I could hear bells ringing somewhere.

I walked down to the path by the stream and followed it up into the forest. The spruces were tall and dark, the rock face beneath was covered in moss, here and there roots lay bare on the surface. In places small, thin deciduous trees tried to force their way up into the light, elsewhere little clearings had formed around fallen trees. And alongside the stream the forest was open, of course, where it swirled and crashed, threw itself over rock and stone on its way down. Otherwise everything was dense and dark green from the spruce needles. I could hear my own breathing, could feel my pulse beating in my chest, throat, and temples as I walked up. The noise from the waterfall became louder, and soon I was standing on a crag above a deep pool beneath, looking at the steep bare rock face where the water plummeted downward.

It was beautiful, but it was of no use to me, and I walked up through the trees beside the waterfall, climbed to the exposed rock that I wanted to follow right to the top, a few hundred meters above me.

The sky was gray, the water that cascaded down beside me shiny and clear, like glass. The moss I was walking on was drenched and often gave way; my foot slipped and the dark rock beneath was revealed.

Suddenly something jumped out just in front of my feet.

Paralyzed by fear, I stood stock still. My heart seemed to have stopped too.

A small gray creature darted off. It was a mouse or a small rat.

I laughed nervously to myself. Continued upward, but the little scare had a hold on me, now I peered into the dark forest with a sense of unease, and the constant blanket of sound from the waterfall, which I had hitherto regarded as agreeable, became threatening, prevented me from hearing anything else except my own breathing, so a few minutes later I about-turned and made my way back down.

I sat by the brick grill outside the farmhouse and lit a cigarette. It might have been eleven o'clock or maybe half past. The farmhouse looked the way it must have when Grandma worked here, in the 1920s and '30s. Yes, everything looked more or less the same as it did then. Yet everything was different. It was August 1988, I was an '80s person, contemporaneous with Duran Duran and the Cure, not that fiddle and accordion music Grandpa listened to in the days when he trudged up the hill in the dusk with a friend to court Grandma and her sisters. I didn't belong here, with all of my heart I felt that. It didn't help that I knew the forest was actually an '80s forest and the mountains actually '80s mountains.

So what was I doing here?

My plan had been to write. But I couldn't, I was all on my own and lonely to the depths of my soul.

When the week was over and Mom drove up the narrow gravel road, I was sitting on the steps waiting with my rucksack packed and ready between my legs, not having written a single word.

"Have you had a nice time?" she said.

"Yes, great," I said. "I didn't get much done though."

"Oh well," she said, looking at me. "But perhaps the rest did you good."

"Yes, I'm sure it did," I said, buckling my seat belt, and then we drove back to Førde, where we parked and had lunch at Sunnfjord Hotel. We chose a window table, Mom hung her bag over her chair, then we went over to the buffet in the middle of the dining room to serve ourselves. The place was quite empty. When we sat down, each with a plate, a waiter came over, I asked for a Coke, Mom wanted a Farris mineral water, and after he had gone she began to talk about her plans – which now looked as if they were going to materialize – to establish a farther training course in psychiatric patient care at the school. She had located some suitable premises herself, a wonderful old school, according to her, which wasn't that far from the School of Nursing. It had soul, she said, it was an old timber building, with big rooms, high ceilings, quite different from the cramped brick bunker she was teaching in now.

"That sounds good," I said, my gaze wandering to the parking lot, where a handful of vehicles glinted in the sunlight. The mountainside across the river was completely green, apart from one plot that had been blasted out with dynamite, where a house had been built that vibrated with all of its many different colors.

The waiter returned and I drank the glass of Coke in one long swig. Mom began to talk about my relationship with Gunnar. She said I seemed to have internalized him and turned him into my superego, the one that told me what I could and couldn't do, what was wrong and what wasn't.

I put down my knife and fork and looked at her.

"Have you been reading my diary?" I said.

"No, not your diary," she said. "But you left a book you'd been writing in on your holiday. You're usually so open and tell me everything."

"But, Mom, that was a diary," I said. "You don't read other people's diaries."

"No, of course not," she said. "I know that. But if you leave it on the sitting-room table, there's hardly anything secret about it, is there?"

"But you could see it was a diary, couldn't you?"

"No," she said. "It was a travelogue."

"OK, OK," I said. "That was my mistake. I shouldn't have left it lying around. But what was it you said about Gunnar? That I'd internalized him? What did you mean by that?"

"That's how it seemed from the dream you described and your subsequent thoughts."

"Really?"

"Your father was very strict with you when you were growing up, as you know. But then he was suddenly gone, and perhaps you had a sense that you could do whatever you liked. So you've got two sets of norms, but both derive from the outside. What's important is that you set your own limits. That has to come from the inside, from you yourself. Your father didn't do that, and that's maybe why he was so confused."

"Is," I said. "He's still alive to my knowledge. Anyhow, I spoke to him on the phone a week ago."

"But now it appears you've installed Gunnar in your father's place," she continued, flashing me a look. "This has nothing to do with Gunnar. We're talking about setting your limits. But you're old enough now. You'll have to work it out for yourself."

"That's what I'm trying to do in my diary," I said. "Then all sorts of people read it and it becomes impossible to work it out for myself."

"I apologize," Mom said. "I really didn't think you regarded it as a diary. If I'd known, I wouldn't have read it."

"I told you it's not a problem," I said. "Shall we have something for dessert?"

We sat in her apartment talking until late, then I went into the hall, closed the door behind me, found the air mattress, which was leaning against the wall in the little bathroom, laid it on the floor, covered it with a sheet, undressed, switched off the light, and lay down. Faintly I could hear her moving around indoors and the occasional car passing outside. The smell of plastic from the air mattress reminded me of my childhood, camping trips, and the open countryside. Times were different now, but the feeling of anticipation was the same. The next day I was off to Bergen, the big university town, I would be living in my own digs and attending the Writing Academy. In the evenings and at night I would sit in Café Opera or go to gigs with great bands at Hulen. It was fantastic. But the most fantastic thing of all was that Ingvild would be moving to the same town. We had arranged to meet, I had her phone number, I would call her when I arrived.

It was too good to be true, I thought, lying there on the airbed, filled with a restlessness and a joy that this was about to begin. I lay on one side, then on the other, listening to Mom talking in her sleep in the sitting room. Yes, she said. Then there was a long pause. Yes, she said again. That's true. Long pause. Yes. Yes. Mhm. Yes.

The following day Mom took me to Handelshuset, where she wanted to buy me a jacket and some trousers. I chose a fur-lined denim jacket, it looked pretty cool, and a pair of green military-style pants, as well as some black shoes. Then she drove me to the bus station, gave me the money for the ticket, stood by the car waving as the bus moved off and into the road.

After a few hours of forests, lakes, vertiginously steep mountains and narrow fjords, farms and fields, a ferry and a long valley where the bus was high up a mountainside one minute and right down by the water's edge the next, and an endless succession of tunnels, the frequency of houses and signs began to increase, there were more and more populated areas, industrial buildings appeared, fences, gas stations, shopping centers, and estates on both sides of the road. I saw a sign for the business school and it struck me, that was where Agnar Mykle went forty years ago, on one side I saw Sandviken Psychiatric Hospital rise like a fortress at the foot of the mountains, while on the other the water glittered in the afternoon sun, with yachts and boats whose outlines seemed to blur in the haze against a backdrop of islands and mountains and the low sky over Bergen.

I jumped off the bus at the far end of Bryggen, the old wharf. Yngve was working the evening shift at the Orion Hotel and I had arranged to pick up the key to his flat there. The town around me was sunk in the stupor that only late-summer afternoons can evoke. Now and then a figure sauntered past in shorts and a T-shirt, followed by a long flickering shadow. House walls shimmering in the sun, motionless leaves on trees, a yacht chugging out of the harbor, masts bare.

The reception area at the hotel was packed with people. Yngve, busy behind his desk, looked up at me and said a busload of Americans had just arrived, look, here's the key, see you later, OK?

I caught the bus to Danmarksplass and walked the three hundred meters up to his flat, unlocked the door, put down my backpack in the hall, stood still for a while and wondered what to do. The windows faced north and the sun was in the west, setting over the sea, so the rooms were dark and chilly. They smelled of Yngve. I went into the sitting room and looked around, then into the bedroom. There was a new poster on the wall, an eerie photograph of a naked woman with *Munch og fotografi* written at the bottom. Photos he had taken himself were there too, a selection from Tibet, the ground was a gleaming red, a group of ragged boys and girls posing for him, their eyes dark and foreign. In one corner, beside the sliding door, was his guitar leaning against an amplifier. On top of it a large echo box. A plain white IKEA blanket and two cushions converted the bed into a sofa.

I had visited Yngve several times while I was at *gymnas*, and to me there was something almost sacred about his rooms, they represented who he was and who I wanted to become. Something that existed outside my life and something that one day I would move into.

Now I was here, I thought, and went into the kitchen to make some sandwiches, which I ate standing in front of the window, with a view of the terraces of old workers' houses going down to Fjøsangerveien at the bottom. On the other side, the mast on Mount Ulriken flashed in the sunshine.

It occurred to me that I had been on my own a lot recently. Apart from the few days with first Hilde and then Mom, I hadn't spent time with anyone since I said good-bye to Lars in Athens. I could hardly wait for Yngve to come home.

I put on a Stranglers' record and settled down on the sofa with one of Yngve's photo albums. My stomach ached and I didn't know why. It felt like hunger, not for food but for everything else.

Perhaps Ingvild was also in town? Perhaps she was sitting in one of the hundred thousand studio apartments around me?

One of the first questions Yngve asked me when he arrived was how it was going with Ingvild. I hadn't told him much, a few words when we were sitting on the steps earlier that summer, that was all, but it had been enough for him to realize it was serious. Maybe also that it had huge significance for me.

I told him she was coming to Bergen around now and would live in Fantoft, and I would be calling her to arrange the first meeting.

"Might turn out to be your year," he said. "New girlfriend, Writing Academy . . ."

"We're not there yet."

"No, but from what you've said, she's interested, isn't she?"

"A little maybe. But I doubt it means as much to her as it does for me."

"But it could. If you play your cards right."

"For once, you mean?"

"I didn't say that," he said, eyeing me. "Feel like some wine?"

"Certainly do."

He got up and disappeared into the kitchen, reappeared with a carafe in his hand and went to the bathroom. I heard some snorting and gurgling noises, then a steady glug until he emerged holding a full carafe.

"Vintage 1988," he said. "But it's pretty good. And there's plenty of it too."

I took a swig. It was so sour it made me wince.

Yngve smiled.

"Pretty good?" I said.

"Taste is relative, as you know," he said. "You have to compare it with other homemade wine."

We drank for a while without speaking. Yngve stood up and went toward the guitar and amplifier.

"I've written a couple of songs since you were last here," he said. "Want to hear them?"

"I'd love to," I said.

"Well, they're not really songs," he said, fastening the strap over his shoulder. "Just a few riffs really."

I felt a sudden tenderness as I watched him.

He switched on the amplifier, stood with his back to me and tuned the guitar, adjusted the echo box and began to play.

The tenderness vanished, this was good, what he was playing, the guitar sound was big and majestic, the riffs melodious and catchy, it sounded like a cross between the Smiths and the Chameleons. I couldn't understand where he had got it from. Both his musicality and the dexterity were way beyond my capacities. He simply had the gift, from the moment he started, as though it had always been there.

He turned toward me only after he had finished and put down the guitar.

"That was really good," I said.

"Do you think so?" he said, sitting down on the sofa. "It's just a couple of little ideas. I could use some lyrics so that I can finish them off."

"I don't understand why you don't play in a band."

"Well," he said. "I jam a little with Pål now and then. Otherwise I don't know anyone who plays. You're here now though."

"I can't play."

"You can start by writing a few lyrics, can't you? And you can play the drums as well."

"No, I can't," I said. "I'm not good enough. But maybe I could write something. That'd be fun."

"You should," he said.

Autumn was on its way, I thought, as we stood in the road outside the long line of low brick terraced houses waiting for the taxi. There was a kind of heaviness in the light summer night, impossible to localize yet unmistakable. An augury of something damp and dark and gloomy.

The taxi arrived a few minutes later, we got in, it raced recklessly down to Danmarksplass, past the big cinema and over a bridge, along Nygård Park and into the center, where I lost my bearings, streets were just streets, houses just houses, I disappeared into the large town, was swallowed up by it, and I liked that, because I became visible to myself, the young man on his way into a metropolis filled with glass and concrete and tarmac, strangers caught in the light from street lamps and windows and signs. A shiver ran down my spine as we drove into the town center. The engine hummed, the traffic lights changed from green to red, we stopped outside what must have been the bus station.

"Isn't that where we went that time?" I said, nodding toward the building across the road.

"That's right," Yngve said.

I had been sixteen, visiting him for the first time; I had held the hand of one of the girls we were with in order to get in. I had borrowed Yngve's deodorant, and in the minutes before we left his place he had stood in front of me, rolled up the sleeves of my shirt, passed me his hair gel, watched me rubbing it in, and said, good, now let's go.

Now I was nineteen and all this was mine.

I caught a glimpse of the lake in the middle of the town, and then we turned left, past a large concrete building.

"That's the Grieg Hall," Yngve said.

"So that's where it is," I said.

"And there's Mekka," he said straight afterward, nodding toward a supermarket. "That's the cheapest in town."

"Is that where you shop?" I said.

"If I've got any money," he said. "Anyway, this is Nygårdsgaten. Do you remember the Aller Værste! song? 'We ran down Nygårdsgata as though we were in the Wild West.'"

"Yes," I said. "What about Disken then? 'I went into Disken and the place was bloody heaving?'"

"That was the disco in Hotel Norge. Right behind that building there. But it's called something else now."

The taxi pulled into the curb and stopped.

"Here we are," the driver said. Yngve passed him a hundred-krone note, I got out, looked up at the sign on the building where we were parked. Café Opera it said in pink and black letters on a white background. Inside the big windows the place was full of people, shadowy figures among the small clear flames of the candles. Yngve got out on the other side of the taxi, said good-bye to the driver, and slammed the door shut. "Right, in we go," he said.

He stopped inside the entrance and scanned the crowd. Looked at me.

"No one I know. Let's go upstairs."

I followed him up, past some tables, which were laid out in exactly the same pattern as downstairs, and over to the bar. I had been there before, but only fleetingly and in the daytime: this was different. Everywhere people were drinking beer. The room looked a lot like an apartment, I reflected, with chairs and tables and a curved bar in the middle.

"There's Ola!" Yngve exclaimed. I followed the direction of his nod. Ola, whom I had met once earlier this summer, was sitting at a table with three others. He smiled and waved. We walked over.

"Find yourself a chair and let's sit here, Karl Ove," Yngve said.

There was a chair beside a piano by the other wall, I went over and took it, feeling quite naked as I lifted it into the air, was that how I should do it? Could I carry it through the room like this? People looked at me, the place was full of students, regulars who were on their home ground, and I blushed, but saw no alternative and carried the chair to the table where Yngve was already sitting.

"This is my little brother, Karl Ove," Yngve said. "He's about to start at the Writing Academy."

He smiled as he said that. I briefly met the eyes of the three people I hadn't seen before: two girls and a boy.

"So you're the famous little brother," said one of the girls. She had fair hair and narrow eyes, which almost vanished when she smiled.

"Kjersti," she said.

"Karl Ove," I said.

The other girl had black hair in a pageboy cut, bright red lipstick, and a black outfit, she told me her name, and the boy next to her, a shy figure with reddish-blond hair and pale skin, followed suit with a broad smile. I forgot their names the very next second.

"Want a beer?" Yngve said.

Was he going to leave me here, all on my own?

"Please," I said.

He stood. I looked down at the table. Suddenly remembered I could smoke here, took out my tobacco pouch and began to make a roll-up.

"Were you at R-roskilde?" Ola said.

He was the first person I had met since junior school who stammered. You wouldn't believe it to look at him. He had Buddy Holly glasses, dark hair, regular facial features, and even though he didn't dress flashily at all there was still something about him that had made me think he was in a band the first time I saw him. Nothing had changed. He was wearing a white shirt, black jeans, and a pair of black pointed shoes.

"I was," I said. "But I didn't get to see many bands."

"Why n-not?"

"There was so much else going on," I said.

"Yes, I c-can imagine." He smiled.

You didn't have to be with him for long to know that he had a warm heart. I was glad he was Yngve's friend, and the stammering, which had made me ill at ease the previous time – did Yngve have friends who stammered? – didn't feel as disconcerting now that I could see that at least he had three more friends. None of them reacted to the stammer, neither with forbearance nor condescension, and what I myself felt when he said anything –

that the situation I found myself in, he is stammering now and I mustn't show that I've noticed, was so obvious and awkward, because couldn't he see that was what I was thinking while he was talking? – wasn't apparent on their faces.

Yngve placed the beer on the table in front of me and sat down.

"So what do you write?" said the dark-haired girl, looking at me. "Poetry or prose?" Her eyes were also dark. There was something unmistakably aloof about her manner.

I took a long swig of beer.

"I'm writing a novel at the moment," I said. "But I'm sure I'll be doing some poetry as well. I haven't done much of that, but perhaps I'll have to . . . heh heh!"

"Wasn't it you who had your own radio program and stuff?" Kjersti said.

"Plus a review column in the local paper," Yngve added.

"Yes," I said. "But that's a while ago now."

"What's your novel about then?" said the dark-haired girl.

I shrugged.

"Variety of things. It's a mixture between Hamsun and Bukowski, I suppose. Have you read any Bukowski?"

She nodded and slowly turned her head to watch the people coming up the stairs.

Kjersti laughed.

"You'll have Hovland as your teacher, did Yngve tell you? He's fantastic!"

"Good," I said.

There was a little pause, the focus of conversation moved away from me, and I leaned back as the others chatted. They knew one another as they were in the same department, Media Studies, and that was what they were talking about. Names of lecturers and theorists, titles of books, records, and films ping-ponged across the table. While they were talking Yngve took out a cigarette holder, stuck a cigarette in it, and started smoking with gestures that the presence of the mouthpiece made seem affected. I tried not to look at him, not to show I had noticed, which is what the others did too.

"Another beer?" I said as a distraction, he nodded, and I walked over to the bar. One of the barmen was standing by the beer tap on the opposite side while the other was putting a tray of glasses through a hatch which turned out to be a dumbwaiter.

How wonderful, a little lift going up and down between floors with food and drink!

The barman by the tap turned lethargically, I raised two fingers in the air, but he said nothing and turned back. The second barman faced me, and I leaned over the bar to signal that I wanted to order.

"Yes?" he said.

He had a white towel slung over his shoulder, a black apron over a white shirt, and long mutton chops, and what looked like a tattoo was visible on his neck. Even the barmen looked cool in this town.

"Two beers," I said.

He held the glasses in one hand under the two taps while scanning the room.

A familiar face appeared at the back, it was Yngve's friend Arvid, he was with two others, they made a beeline for the table where Yngve was sitting.

The first barman put two glasses on the bar.

"Seventy-four kroner," he said.

"But I've just ordered them from the other barman!" I said, nodding toward the second man.

"You just ordered two from me. If you've ordered two from him as well, you'll have to pay for four."

"But I don't have enough money."

"Are you expecting me to pour the beer down the drain? You have to be clearer with your orders. One hundred and forty-eight kroner, please."

"Just a moment," I said, and went over to Yngve.

"You got any money?" I said. "You'll get it back when I have my study loan."

"Weren't you supposed to be paying for this round?"

"Yes . . ."

"Here you are," he said, handing me a hundred-krone note.

Arvid looked at me.

"Ah, it's you, is it?"

"Yes," I said with a quick smile, not knowing quite what to do, and ended up pointing toward the bar and saying, "Just gotta . . . ," and went to pay.

When I returned they had sat down at another table.

"Did you get *four* beers?" Yngve said. "Why?"

"Just the way it went," I said. "Some mix-up with the order."

The following morning it was raining, and I stayed in the flat all day while Yngve was at work. Perhaps it was meeting his friends that had done it, perhaps it was just term fast approaching, at any rate I suddenly panicked, I was no good and soon I would be sitting alongside the other students, who were probably much more experienced and gifted than me, writing texts, reading them out, and being judged.

I took an umbrella from the hat shelf, opened it, and made my way downhill in the rain. There was a bookshop in Danmarksplass, as far as I remembered. Yes, there it was. I opened the door and went in, it was completely empty and sold predominantly office equipment, it seemed, but they had some shelves of books, which I ran my eye along, with the dripping umbrella in my hand. I had very little money, so I decided to buy a paperback. Hunger by Hamsun. It cost 39.50, which left me with twelve kroner, I spent it on a nice loaf at the baker's in the little market square just behind. I plodded back uphill in the pouring rain which, along with the dark heavy clouds, cast a thick shroud over the landscape and changed its whole appearance. The water ran down windows and over car hoods, trickled out of gutters and down the hills, where it formed plow-shaped wavelets. The water gushed past me as I trudged upward, rain beating down on my umbrella, and the bag containing the loaf and the book slapping against my thigh with every step I took.

I let myself into the flat. The room inside was dimly lit, in the corners farthest from the windows it was dark, but all the furniture and objects in it quietly made their presence felt. It was impossible to be there without sensing Yngve, his personality seemed to permeate the rooms, and while I was slicing the fresh bread on the counter and taking out margarine and brown cheese, I wondered what atmosphere my room would exude and whether there was anyone in existence who would care. Yngve had found a place for me, he knew a girl who was going to Latin America for a year, she lived up on the Sandviken side of Bergen, in Absalon Beyers Gate, and I could have it until next summer. I was lucky, most new students lived in one of the dorms at first, either Fantoft, where Dad had rented a room during his studies when I was small, or Alrek, where Yngve had stayed for the first six months. Living in a student hall had low status, I knew that, the cool option was to live in town, preferably near Torgalmenningen, but Sandviken was good too.

I ate, cleared away the food, and settled down to read in the sitting room with a cigarette and a cup of coffee. Usually I read quickly, raced through the pages without taking much notice of how it was written, what devices or style of language the writer used, all I was interested in was the plot, which sucked me in. This time I tried to read slowly, take it sentence by sentence, notice what went on in them, and if it seemed significant to me, to underline the passage with the pen I held at the ready.

I discovered something on the very first page. There was a tense shift. First of all, Hamsun wrote in the past, then he suddenly switched to the present, and then back again. I underlined it, put the book down, and went to get a sheet of paper from the desk in my bedroom. Back on the sofa, I wrote:

> Hamsun, Hunger. Notes, August 8, 1988
> *Starts in general terms, about the town. Perspective from a distance. Then main protagonist wakes up. Switches from past to present. Why? To create more intensity, presumably.*

Outside, the rain was pouring down. The roar of the traffic in Fjøsangerveien sounded like an ocean. I carried on reading. It was striking how simple the storyline was. He wakes up in his room, walks noiselessly downstairs as he hasn't paid his rent for a while and then into the town. Nothing particular happens there, he just walks around and is hungry and thinks about it. I could write about exactly the same topic. Someone waking up in their room and going outside. But he had to have something about him, something special, like him being hungry for example. That was what it was all about. But what could it be?

Writing isn't black magic. You just have to come up with an idea, as Hamsun had done.

Some of my fears and anxieties subsided after I had formulated that thought.

When Yngve came home I was asleep on the sofa. I got up the moment I heard the door, rubbed my face a couple of times, for some reason not wishing to show that I had been sleeping in the middle of the day.

I heard him put his backpack down on the floor in the hall, he hung his jacket on the hook and said a brief hi to me on his way to the kitchen.

I recognized the closed face. He didn't want to have anything to do with anyone, least of all me.

"Karl Ove?" he shouted after a while.

"Yes?" I said.

"Come here."

I did as he said and stopped in the doorway.

"Just look at the brown cheese. You can't cut such thick slices. Do you want me to show you how to do it?"

He placed the slicer on the cheese and drew off a slither.

"Like this," he said. "Do you see how easy it is to cut a thin slice?"

"Yes," I said, and turned away.

"And another thing," he said.

I turned back.

"If you eat here clear away the crumbs. I don't want to have to go around cleaning up after you."

"OK," I said, and went into the bathroom. There were tears in my eyes, and I rinsed my face a couple of times with cold water, dried it, went into the sitting room, sat down, started reading *Hunger* while listening to him eat in the kitchen, clean up, and go into the bedroom. Soon there was total silence and I realized he must have fallen asleep.

A similar incident took place the next day, this time what annoyed him was that I hadn't dried the bathroom floor after having a shower. He ordered me around this time as well, as though he were on a higher level than me. I said nothing, bowed my head, did as he commanded, but inside I was furious. Later that day, as we were returning from a shopping trip I closed the car door in a way that he considered was too hard – do you have to slam the door so hard, can't you just be a little bit careful, this is not my car – and I exploded.

"Stop telling me what to do, alright!" I yelled. "I can't take any more of this! You treat me like a kid! Always telling me off!"

He looked at me for a moment with the car key in his hand.

"Have you got that?" I said, my eyes shiny.

"I'll never do it again," he said.

And he never did, either.

We went out often that week, and every time the same thing happened, Yngve met people he knew, introduced me to them, said I was his brother and I was about to start at the Writing Academy. That gave me an advantage, I was somebody already, didn't have to prove myself, although it also made things more difficult since I had to live up to the billing. Had to say something a writer-to-be might conceivably say which they hadn't considered before. It didn't work like that though. They had considered everything, they all knew more than me, indeed to such a degree that I gradually realized that what I said and thought was what they had said and thought a good while ago and had now put behind them.

But it was good drinking with Yngve. Our spirits rose after a few beers, all that lay between us during the day, the silences that could develop from nowhere, the irritation that could set in, the sudden inability to find areas of common interest, even though there were so many, all of that vanished as our spirits soared and we felt the concomitant warmth: we looked at each other and knew who we were. Walked through the town half drunk and uphill to the apartment without a care in the world, not even the silences troubled us, streetlights shone on the smooth asphalt, taxis raced past in dark haste, lonely men or women came toward us, or other young people who had been out on the town, and I could look at Yngve, who was walking bent double, just as I was, and ask: how is it with Kristin, have you got over her? And he could look at me and answer no, I'll never get over her. No one can hold a candle to her.

The drizzle, the clouds above scurrying past, illuminated from below by the lights, Yngve's serious face. The strong odor of car fumes that I had realized always hung over Danmarksplass. The moped carrying two teenagers, which stopped at the traffic lights: the boy at the front who put his feet down on the road; the girl at the back with her arms wrapped tightly around him.

"Do you remember when Stina broke up with me?" I said.

"Vaguely," he said.

"You played the Aller Værste! for me. 'All things pass, all things must decay.'"

He looked at me and smiled.

"Did I?"

I nodded.

"The same holds true for you now. It'll pass. Then you'll fall for another girl just the same."

"How old were you then? Twelve? It's not quite the same. Kristin was the love of my *life*. And I only have one."

I said nothing in response. We walked up the hill on the other side of Verftet, the old docklands complex, turned left beneath the massive red brick building I knew was a school.

"But one good thing has come out of it," he said. "Showing no interest in other girls has meant they've suddenly started taking an interest in me. I don't give a damn, and as a result I can have them."

"I know that's how it works," I said. "My problem is that I can't not give a damn. Take Ingvild, for example. I get so damn nervous when we meet that I can't say a word. So she thinks that's the way I *am*, and then it's no good."

"Don't worry," Yngve said. "It'll be fine. She knows who you are. You've been writing to each other all spring and summer after all."

"But that's the point, then I'm *writing*," I said. "Then I can be anyone I want to be. I can take my time, think things through. But I can't when I meet her face-to-face."

Yngve snorted.

"Don't think about it so much and it'll be fine. She'll be feeling the same as you."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, of course! Have a few beers with her and relax. It'll be fine."

He took the key from his pocket, lowered his umbrella, and went in through the gate, up the little steps, which were dark and slippery from the rain. I stood behind him waiting for him to open the door.

"Feel like a glass of wine before going to bed?" he said.

I nodded.

My impatience grew throughout the week, I became more and more restless, a feeling I had otherwise never experienced. It must have been because I wanted life to get moving, to turn serious. And to do my own thing, not to be dependent on Yngve for whatever I did. I had already borrowed a couple of hundred kroner from him and probably needed a couple more to tide me over until my student loan arrived. I had been stupid enough to tell the post office that I was changing address when I moved from Håfjord, to c/o Yngve, so when I arrived, a debt recovery letter from the Northern Norwegian electricity company and the shop where I had bought the stereo were waiting for me. The latter was the more serious: if I didn't pay this time they would take legal action to retrieve the money.

If it had been a good sound system I wouldn't have minded so much. But what I had bought was such crap. Yngve had a NAD amplifier and two small but good JBL speakers, and Ola also had a good system, made up of components he had bought individually, that was what you should have, not a fucking Hitachi rack system.

Soon I would receive twenty thousand kroner.

I was also wondering whether to buy myself a porn magazine. I was living in a big town now, I knew no one, all I had to do was take one down from the shelf, place it on the counter, pay, put it in a bag, and go home. But I couldn't bring myself to do it, I was in a nearby tobacconist's a couple of times, and my eyes roamed down to the women's blond hair and their big breasts, and the mere sight of their skin, printed on glossy paper, made my throat tighten. But it was always a newspaper that I placed on the counter, and a pouch of tobacco, never any of the magazines. Mostly because I was living with Yngve, it didn't feel right to have to hide things in his place, but also because I didn't have the courage to meet the assistant's eyes as I laid the magazine on the counter.

I would have to wait.

The day of the move came, with Yngve I carried my Håfjord possessions up from the cellar into the car, there were eight boxes in all and they completely blocked the rear view when Yngve, more cautiously than usual, pulled away from the curb and set off down into Bergen.

"If you brake sharply now my neck's a goner," I said, because the boxes reached right up to the car roof.

"I'll try not to," he said. "But I can't promise anything."

For the first time in several days it was nice weather. The dense cloud cover over the town was grayish white, and the light in the streets around us was gentle, though not such that it veiled or enhanced, it was more that it allowed whatever there was to appear in its own right. Asphalt: gray and speckled black, walls: green and yellow, dulled by car fumes and street dust, trees: gray and green, the water in the bay by Verftet: gray and shiny. The colors became more vivid as we began to climb the hills on the Sandviken side of town, most of the houses there were timber constructions, and the shiny paint shimmered through the neutral light.

Yngve pulled up to the curb by a little park, in front of a telephone booth. On the wall across the road there was a sign saying Absalon Beyers Gate.

"Is it here?" I asked.

"It's the corner house," Yngve said, getting out. He raised his hand in a brief greeting, I followed his gaze, there was a girl with a cloth in her hand watching us from behind the window in the ground-floor apartment.

We crossed the street, she came to the door, I shook her hand. She said it was good timing, she had just finished cleaning the place up.

"Come on in!"

The apartment consisted of a small room, furnished in the simplest fashion: beneath the window there was a sofa, in front of it a coffee table, and against the wall on the opposite side a desk. There was also a sofa that could be turned into a bed. Adjoining the little room, separated by a door, was a tiny kitchenette. That was all. The walls were a dark, brownish color, and that would have been drab but on the fire wall beside the kitchen door a landscape had been painted: a tree on a cliff above the sea, not dissimilar to the picture on the front of matchboxes, the one Kjartan Fløgstad had used as the cover for *Fire and Flame*.

She noticed me staring at it, and smiled.

"Yes, isn't it nice!" she said.

I nodded.

"Here are the keys," she said, passing me a little bunch of them. "This one's for the front door, this is for this one, and that's for a storage room in the loft."

"Where's the toilet?" I said.

"Downstairs. There's a shared shower and toilet. It's a bit impractical, but it reduces the rent by quite a bit. Shall we go down and have a look?"

The staircase was steep, the corridor downstairs narrow, with a small basement studio on one side, where someone named Morten lived, a shower and a toilet on the other. I liked the unrefinedness of it and the old walls that vaguely smelled of mold, it had a Dostoevsky feel, the impoverished young student in the metropolis.

Back upstairs, she gave me a wad of rental forms, already filled in, grabbed the empty pail in one hand, the broom in the other, and turned to us in the doorway.

"I hope you'll have a nice time here! I've spent some happy hours here anyway."

"Thank you," I said. "Have a good trip and see you next summer!"

She disappeared around the corner with the broom slung over her shoulder, and we set about bringing in the boxes. When that was done, Yngve got in his car and drove down to the hotel, where he had an afternoon shift, while I put my feet on the table and smoked a cigarette before starting to unpack.

The apartment was at street level, the sidewalk went by the windows, and if there wasn't a constant stream of people passing, there was a regular bobbing of heads, and so enticing was the sight of a curtainless apartment that almost everyone succumbed to the temptation to peer in. I was bending over my record collection when I turned and met the gaze of a woman in her forties, who despite immediately looking away still left an impression on me. I put up the poster of John Lennon, turned and met the eyes of two twelve-year-old boys, I assembled the coffee machine, inserted the plug in the socket beside the cupboard, turned and found myself looking straight into the eyes of a bearded man in his late twenties. To put an end to this, I pinned a bedsheet over one window, a tablecloth over the other, and then I sat down on the sofa, strangely restless, it was as though the tempo inside me was greater than that outside.

I played a few records, brewed some tea, and read some pages of *Hunger*. Outside, it was beginning to rain. In the short pauses between the LP tracks I heard raindrops pitter-pattering against the window just behind my head. Now and then I heard noises from the floor above as dusk fell and the room slowly darkened. The stairs creaked, loud voices came from above, music was turned on, it was an early drinking session.

I wondered whether to call Ingvild, she was the only person I knew in town, but dismissed the idea, I couldn't meet her unprepared, I had only one chance and I didn't want to waste it.

45

Strange what an impression she had made. I had sat at the same table as her for half an hour.

Could you fall in love within half an hour?

Oh yes, you certainly could.

Could someone you didn't know, you barely knew about, captivate your senses entirely?

Oh yes.

I got up to find her letters. The longest one had arrived in the middle of the summer, she told me she was on her way across America with her ex-host family, they stopped at all the sights worthy of the name, they were many, according to her, nearly every single town had something it prided itself on and was famous for. She used the stops to sneak off and have a quiet cigarette, she wrote, otherwise she lay on her bed in the mobile home staring out at the countryside, which at times was sensationally beautiful and dramatic, at others monotonous and boring, though always exotic.

I could visualize her, but it was more than that, I also identified with her, that is, I knew exactly what she thought, how she felt, there was something about the tone in which she wrote, or the glimpses she gave of herself, which I recognized from myself, and I hadn't experienced that before, another person reaching the point where I was. Light, happiness, a lightness of feeling, excitement, somehow balancing on the edge of nausea, constantly on the verge of despair, because I wanted it so much, it was all I wanted, but what if it didn't work out? What if she didn't want me? What if I wasn't good enough?

I put down the letters, slipped on my jacket and shoes and went out, considered walking down to see Yngve, he didn't finish his shift until eleven, but if I was lucky he wouldn't have much to do, so we could exchange a few words or have a smoke or something.

First I crossed the street to have a look up at the floor above mine, but all I could see was the backs of some heads in the window. It was raining quite heavily, I didn't have an umbrella and I didn't want to wear my raincoat, so even though it was unpleasant and hair gel was beginning to run down my forehead, I hunched my shoulders and began to tramp downhill.

In the district closest to me, the houses were white and made of wood, all the angles askew, the roofs of varying heights, some had stone steps down to the pavement, others none. In the district below, the buildings were made of brick, long, relatively tall blocks of flats that might have been built at the beginning of the twentieth century, probably for workers, judging by the plain, unadorned walls.

Rising above the town, visible from even the deepest and darkest alleyway, were the mountains. And below, in glimpses between houses and trees, was the sea. The mountains here were higher than those in Håfjord, and the sea was just as deep, but they didn't affect your consciousness to the same degree; the main weight here lay in the town, in the cobblestones, the asphalt, the solid blocks of flats and timbered houses, in the windows and lights, cars and buses, the mass of faces and bodies in the streets, against which the sea and mountains were insubstantial, almost weightless, something that merely caught your eye, a backdrop.

If I had lived here all on my own, I thought, in a little cabin in the mountains, for example, without a house nearby, but set in exactly the same landscape, then I would have felt the weight of the mountains and the depth of the sea, then I would have heard the winds sweeping across the peaks, the waves beating against the shore, and although I would hardly have been afraid, I would definitely have been vigilant. I would have taken my leave of the landscape every night and woken up to it every morning. Now that wasn't the case, I could feel it with every fiber of my being, here it was faces that counted.

I walked by the long red timber shed, where the rope makers used to ply their trade, up the road on the other side, past the supermarket, down to the wider main road and turned right at the bottom, past the quiet gray Saint Mary's Church, which I had noticed when I visited Yngve and Mom here three years ago, as it was so unpretentious and merged so unobtrusively into its surroundings, it had stood there since the twelfth century, past it and down to Bryggen.

Cars drove by with their lights on. The water, gently billowing in the harbor, was pitch-black. A few yachts were moored to the quay, their shiny hulls dully reflecting the light from the street lamps along the road. On board one of them some people sat drinking under a canopy, voices low, faces barely illuminated. From over in Vågsbunnen came the strident sounds of cars, music, shouting, which had already become distant on the way here.

Yngve was standing behind the reception desk next to a colleague. He turned his head toward me as I entered.

"Are you bored already?" he said. Glanced at his colleague. "This is my brother, Karl Ove. He moved here a week ago."

"Hi," said the other person.

"Hi," I said.

He went into the back room. Yngve tapped a pen on the desk in front of him.

"Just had to get a breath of air," I said. "I thought I would pop by so my walk had some purpose."

"Well, there's nothing going on here," he said.

"So I see," I said. "Are you going home afterward?"

He nodded.

"But Asbjørn's in town. Perhaps we can drop in on you tomorrow and see how you're getting on?"

"Yes, why don't you," I said. "Could you bring an umbrella with you? You've got two, haven't you? Then I can borrow it until I get my study loan."

"I'll try and remember."

"See you then."

He nodded, and I went back out. I still didn't want to sit around in my flat, so I went for a walk through the rain-wet streets, up past Café Opera, which as predicted was packed with people, but I didn't dare venture in alone, down to the sea on the northern side of Vågen, past some run-down warehouse buildings, up a hill, on the crest of which I stopped because now, lo and behold, Bryggen and Sandviken were below me, on the far side of the bay, glittering in the damp gray-black air!

I strolled down to the broad open square on the southern side, passed a hotel of brick and glass, called Neptun, an apt name, it struck me, in this town where water was constantly trickling and dripping, and then I thought

I had better remember it so that I could write it down when I got home, looked behind me and saw a large stone gate at the end of a pedestrian street, and knew this was one of the old town gatehouses because Mom had shown me an identical one at the other end of the city center. I crossed the street, passed a large office block that towered up from the water like a rock face, rounded the corner and in front of me stood the Strandkai Terminal, where the Sognefjord ferry departed, and behind it, once again, Vågsbunnen.

A rush of happiness surged through me. It was the rain, it was the lights, it was the city. It was me, I was going to be a writer, a star, a beacon for others.

I ran a hand through my hair, greasy with gel, wiped it on my trouser leg, and stepped up my pace in the hope that this feeling of happiness would last all the way home and deep into the time awaiting me in the flat until I felt able to go to bed.

While asleep that night I imagined my bed was in the street. That wasn't so strange, I thought as I woke up, presumably from the distant pealing of church bells, because the bed was against the wall under the windows, and not only could you clearly hear every footfall on the pavement outside, but the house was also situated next to a junction where people going in their various directions stopped to have a chat on their way home from town, and across the street was a telephone booth, which it turned out was in constant use, also at night, people trying to book taxis, crowds of them, people wanting to deliver a few home truths to a partner or a friend or whoever it was they imagined had let them down and now needed to be put in their place or begged for forgiveness.

I lay still for a while to gather my thoughts, then dressed and went down to the basement with a towel in one hand and shampoo in the other. The corridor was full of steam, I placed my hand on the shower door, it was locked, a girl's voice from inside shouted, I won't be long! OK, I said, and leaned against the wall to await my turn.

The door beside me opened and a boy my age with tousled hair stuck his head out.

"Hi," he said. "Thought I heard someone. My name's Morten. Have you moved in to the apartment on the ground floor?"

"Yes," I said, shaking hands.

He chuckled. He was standing there in no more than his underpants.

"What do you do?" he said. "Are you a student?"

"I've just come to town," I said. "I'm about to start a kind of writing course."

"Interesting!" he said.

At that moment the shower door opened. A girl I reckoned was in her midtwenties came out. She had a large towel wrapped around her body and a smaller one around her head. A cloud of steam followed.

"Hi," she said with a smile. "We'd better do proper introductions later. Anyway, the shower's free now!"

She went down the corridor.

Morten chuckled.

"And what about you?" I said. "Are you a student?"

"Let's save that for later! You have a shower, and we'll come back to it!"

The shower-room floor was made of concrete and freezing cold where the hot water hadn't been. The drain was full of tangled hair that glistened in the foam from her shampoo. The foot of one wall panel was warped, and the otherwise white door was black and discolored at the bottom and a good way up. But the water was hot, and soon I was massaging shampoo into my hair and for some strange reason humming "Ghostbusters."

Returning upstairs, I didn't dare go out as Yngve hadn't said when they would come, but that didn't matter, my body felt much calmer than the day before, and I spent my time putting the kitchen utensils in their places, arranging clothes in the wardrobe, putting up the last posters, making a list of what I needed to buy when the study loan arrived. That done, I stood by the door and tried to see the room through Yngve's and Asbjørn's eyes. The typewriter on the desk, that looked good. The poster of the barn and the bright-yellow corn under the dramatic black American sky, that was good, a source of inspiration. The poster of John Lennon, the most rebellious of the four Beatles, that was also good. And my record collection on the floor against the wall, it was large and impressive, even for Asbjørn, who I was told knew what he was talking about. On the downside, the book collection was limited, comprising only seventeen volumes, and I didn't have enough experience of other collections to determine what impression the various titles made. *Beatles* and *The Snails* by Saabye Christensen, couldn't be too far wide of the mark though. The same was true for Ingvar Ambjørnsen. I had three of his books: *The 23rd Row*, *The Last Joint Venture*, and *White Niggers*.

I left *Novel with Cocaine* open on the table and placed a couple of issues of *Vinduet* next to it, one open, one closed. Three books open seemed a bit much, it looked arranged, but no one would be suspicious of two open and one closed, that was perfect.

An hour later, while I was trying to write, there was a ring at the door. Yngve and Asbjørn were standing on the steps. There was a restlessness about them, I felt, they couldn't wait to move on.

"Bit of a surprise, you turning up in Bergen, Karl Ove," Asbjørn said with a smile.

"Yes," I said. "Come in!"

I closed the door behind us. They stood in the middle of the floor looking around.

"You've done a nice job here," Yngve said.

"Mm," Asbjørn said. "Great place to have a room. Hang on though."

"Yes?" I said.

"The Lennon poster has to come down. It doesn't work."

"Oh?" I said.

"That's what you have at *gymnas*. John Lennon. C'mon."

He smiled as he spoke.

"Do you agree?" I said, looking at Yngve.

"Of course," he said.

"What should I put up instead?"

"Anything," Asbjørn said. "Norwegian C&W would be better. Bjøro Håland."

"Actually I like the Beatles," I said.

"You're kidding me," Asbjørn said. "Not the Beatles surely."

He turned to Yngve and smiled again.

"I thought you said your brother had great taste in music. And his own radio program."

"No one's perfect," Yngve said.

"Take a seat," I said. Even though I had been wrong-footed by the Lennon-poster discussion, and my head was still buzzing, since I had understood exactly why it was wrong the moment Asbjørn opened his mouth, it was schoolboy-ish of course, I was still proud to have them both here, in my place, surrounded by my possessions.

"We were thinking of going into town and having a café au lait or something," Yngve said. "You coming?"

"Can't we have a coffee here?" I said.

"It's better in Café Opera, isn't it?" Yngve said.

"Sure," I said. "Just a moment. I'll put on some clothes."

When we emerged onto the steps, both Yngve and Asbjørn donned shades. Mine were indoors, but it would have been too embarrassing to go back to get them, so I rejected the idea, set off down the hill with them, along the wet streets gleaming with the reflected sunbeams breaking through the holes in the clouds above us.

I had met Asbjørn only a couple of times, had never chatted with him at any length, but I knew he was important to Yngve, so he was important to me too. He laughed a lot, and always went very quiet afterward, I had noticed. He had short hair, a hint of sideburns, a slightly plump face and warm, observant eyes. With a not infrequent glint in them. Today, like Yngve, he was dressed all in black. Black Levi's, black leather jacket, black Doc Martens with yellow seams.

"Getting into the Writing Academy is pretty cool," he said. "And of course Ragnar Hovland's bloody great. Have you read anything by him?"

"No, actually I haven't," I said.

"You must. *Sveve over Vatna*, that's the definitive Norwegian student novel."

"Really?"

"Yes. Or the definitive Bergen novel. It's completely over the top. Oh yes, he's good, he is. He likes the Cramps. Enough said!"

Over the top was an expression they used a lot, I had noticed.

"Yes," I said.

"You've heard of the Cramps, I take it."

"Yes, of course."

"You're starting tomorrow, aren't you?" Yngve said.

I nodded.

"I'm a bit nervous, I must admit."

"You got in," Yngve said. "They know what they're doing."

"Let's hope so," I said.

Café Opera during the day was quite different from Café Opera in the evening. Now it was no longer packed with students drinking beer, now there were all sorts of people, even older ladies in their fifties, each with a cup of coffee and a piece of cake in front of them. We found a window table on the ground floor, hung our jackets over the backs of our chairs, and went to order. I was flat broke, so Yngve bought me a café au lait while Asbjørn ordered an espresso. When I saw him being handed a little cup I recognized it, it was like the one Lars and I had been served at the first motorway café after the Italian border, we had asked for coffee and were given those tiny cups, with coffee that was so concentrated and strong it was completely undrinkable. I had spat it back into the cup and looked at the waiter, who ignored me, nothing wrong with this coffee, *ragazzi*.

But Asbjørn seemed to like it. He blew on the black-brown surface and took a sip, put the cup down on the saucer and looked out the window.

"Have you read anything by Jon Fosse?" I said, looking at him.

"No, is he good?"

"No idea. He's one of the teachers, too."

"He writes novels, I know," Asbjørn said. "He's a modernist. A Vestland modernist."

"Why don't you ask me if I've read anything by Jon Fosse?" Yngve said. "I read books too, you know."

"I haven't heard you mention him, so I figured you hadn't," I said. "But you have?"

"No," Yngve said. "But I might have."

Asbjørn laughed.

"You two are brothers and no mistake!"

Yngve took out his cigarette holder and lit up.

"You haven't given up on the David Sylvian poses yet, I see," Asbjørn said.

Yngve just shook his head and slowly blew smoke across the table.

"I was looking for some Sylvian glasses, but my *frame* of mind changed when I heard the price."

"Dear God, Yngve," Asbjørn said. "That's the worst joke yet. And that's saying something."

"Yes, I hold up my hands." Yngve laughed. "But out of ten puns maybe one or two work well. The problem is you have to go through all the bad ones to get to the really good ones."

Asbjørn turned to me.

"You should've seen Yngve when he joked that the tiny rural airstrip in Jølster would have to be called Astrup International Airport. After our famous local artist. He laughed so much he had to leave the room!"

"Well, it was a good one," Yngve said, starting to laugh. Asbjørn laughed as well. Then, as if a switch had been thrown, he stopped and for a moment sat completely still. Took out his pack of cigarettes, he smoked Winstons, I noticed, lit one, and emptied his cup of espresso with his second sip.

"Is Ola in town, do you know?" he asked.

"Yes, he's been here for a while," Yngve said.

They began to talk shop. I had never heard of most of the names they mentioned, I knew nothing about Media Studies, so I couldn't join in, not even when they touched on films and bands I knew. It almost developed into an argument. Yngve thought there was nothing that was genuine per se, everything was in some way a pose, even Bruce Springsteen's image, which he used as an example. His naturalness was as affected and carefully studied as the eccentricity and posturing of David Sylvian or David Bowie. Of course, Asbjørn said, you're absolutely right, but that doesn't necessarily mean there can be no genuine expression, does it? Who then? Give me an example, Yngve said. Hank Williams, Asbjørn suggested. Hank Williams! Yngve snorted. He's surrounded by myths, that's all there is to him. What sort of myths? Country music myths, Yngve protested. Oh my God, Yngve, Asbjørn said.

Yngve glanced over at me.

"It's the same in literature. There's no difference between pulp fiction and highbrow fiction, one is as good as the other, the only difference is the aura they have, and that's determined by the people who read the stuff, not by the book itself. There's no such thing as 'the book itself.'"

I hadn't thought about any of this before, and I said nothing.

"What about comic books then?" Asbjørn said. "Is Donald Duck just as good as James Joyce?"

"In principle, yes."

Asbjørn laughed and Yngve smiled.

"But in all honesty," Yngve said. "It's the reception that defines a work or an artist, and that's what artists play on, of course. Irrespective of whether they enjoy high or low status, everything is a pose."

"You work as a *receptionist*, so you ought to know about *reception*," Asbjørn said.

"And the seams on your Doc Martens, by the way, they aren't real, they just *seem* it," Yngve said.

They laughed again, and then there was silence. Yngve got up for a newspaper, I did the same, and while we flicked through the pages I was so exhilarated by this scenario, by me sitting with two worldly-wise students in a café in Bergen on a Sunday afternoon and the fact that this wasn't an exception, wasn't a visit, I was part of this scenario and belonged here, I was so exhilarated that I could hardly take in what I was reading.

Half an hour later we left, they were going to see Ola, he lived in one of the streets behind the Grieg Hall, and Yngve asked me if I wanted to join them, but I said no, I had to try to prepare for the following day, while the real reason was that I was so happy it was too much for me and I had to be on my own.

We parted at the end of Torgalmenningen, outside a restaurant called Dickens, they wished me luck, Yngve told me to call and say how everything had gone, I asked if he could lend me some money, the very last time, he nodded and dug up a fifty-kroner note, and then I hurried across the large open square in the middle of the town as the rain gusted down, for even though the sun was still shining on the houses along the mountainside, the sky directly above me was heavy and black.

Back home in my room, I didn't just take down the poster of John Lennon, I tore it into small pieces and threw them into the wastepaper basket. Then I decided to ring Ingvild and ask if we could meet over the weekend, it was a good opportunity, I was in such a cheerful mood, and it was as though my cheerfulness opened a path to her, because it was her I had been thinking about all the way up the long hills, as though my inner being knew no better way to cope with the excitement after the hour with Yngve and Asbjørn than to counter it with more excitement, of a very different kind it was true, for while the unbearable excitement generated by Yngve and Asbjørn resided in the moment itself, what was happening there and then, the tension and excitement I felt with regard to Ingvild was about what was going to happen, at some point in the future, when the tension could actually be released and she would be mine.

Her and me.

The thought that this was indeed a possibility, and not just an illusory dream, exploded inside me.

Outside, the sky was clouding over, the sun could no longer be glimpsed, rain spattered on the road. I ran over to the telephone booth, placed the slip of paper showing the Fantoft number on top of the coin box, inserted a five-krone piece in the slot, dialed the number, and waited. A young man's voice answered, I asked to speak to Ingvild, he said no one by that name lived there, I said she was moving in soon, maybe she hadn't done so yet, he said, oh yes, that's right, one of the rooms is still unoccupied, I apologized for the disturbance, he said it was no problem, and I cradled the receiver.

At around seven the doorbell rang. I went out into the hallway and opened up; it was Jon Olav.

"Hi!" I said. "How did you know I was here?"

"I called Yngve. Can I come in?"

"Yes, yes, of course."

I hadn't seen him since Easter when we had been out in Førde and met Ingvild. He was studying Law in Bergen, but I understood from what he said over the next half an hour that he spent most of his time and energy on Young Friends of the Earth. He was the idealistic type, always had been: one summer when we had been staying with Grandma and Grandpa in Sørbøvåg, twelve or thirteen we must have been at the time, I had been leaning over the handlebars of a bike and talking about various girls who lived nearby, one of whom I had described as yucky, quick as a flash he had riposted, think you're a great catch, don't you?

I had cycled back and forth in my embarrassment, and I have always remembered that moment, his consideration for others and willingness to spring to their defense.

We chatted and drank a cup of tea, he asked if I wanted to see his place, it was nearby, of course I did, and off we went, down the hills.

"Have you seen anything of Ingvild this summer?" I said.

"Yes, a bit, a couple of times. How's it going with her? You were writing letters, weren't you?"

"Yes, we've been writing ever since. She's coming to Bergen now, so I was thinking of meeting her."

"Are you interested?"

"That's an understatement," I said. "I've never felt so strongly about anyone."

"Wow," he said with a laugh. "Here we are, by the way."

He stopped by one of the doors to a long tall brick building opposite the ropemaker's shed. The hall and stairs were made of wood, making it seem bare, almost primitive. The place consisted of two small rooms with a toilet in the corridor, no shower. His record collection, which I flicked through while he was in the bathroom, was small and random, there were as many good records as there were bad, some everyone bought when they came out, a couple of really good ones, like the Waterboys, a couple of less good ones, like the Alarm. It was the kind of collection that belonged to someone who wasn't particularly interested in records and who mostly followed the herd. But he had been in a band once, he could play the saxophone, and he had taught me the basic beat on the drums when we were young, and how to coordinate the hi-hat, the snare, and the bass drum.

"We'll have to go out one evening," he said when he returned. "Then you can meet my friends."

"Are they the same ones as before?"

"Yes. They always will be, I hope. Idar and Terje, they're the two I see most."

I got up.

"Let's talk about it. I'd better be off. First day of the course tomorrow."

"Congratulations on getting in, by the way!" he said.

"Thank you, it's a nice feeling," I said. "But I'm a bit nervous too. I've got no idea what the level is."

"Just do your thing. What I read was good anyway."

"Let's hope it goes alright," I said. "Catch you later!"

I came in the middle of the night, it woke me up and I lay for a few seconds in the darkness wondering whether to get up and put on clean underpants, but fell asleep immediately afterward. At ten to six I opened my eyes again. As soon as I became conscious and knew where I was, my stomach churned with nerves. I closed my eyes in an attempt to go back to sleep, but the tension inside me was too strong, so I got up, wrapped a towel around my waist, walked down the cold stairs, along the cold corridor, and into the equally cold shower room. After half an hour under the boiling hot water I went back upstairs and dressed, carefully and methodically. A black shirt and the black vest with the gray back. The black Levi's, the studded belt, the black shoes. Not a drop of gel spared to make my hair stand up as it should. I had also saved a plastic bag Yngve had given me, from Virgin, and in it I put my notebook and a pen, as well as *Hunger*, to give it a bit more weight.

I made the bed into a sofa again, had a cup of tea with a generous helping of sugar as I didn't feel like any breakfast, sat looking out the window, at the shiny telephone booth, sparkling in the sunshine, the sunless grass in the park behind, the trees at the back, and then the mountain that rose steeply, with the row of brick houses above, also in shadow, then got up and put on a record, flicked through a few issues of *Vinduet*, all to pass the time until it was nine and I could leave. Lessons didn't start until eleven, but I had planned to walk around town first, perhaps find a café and read a little.

A chimney sweep came down the street with his long brush wound into a ring over one shoulder. A cat strolled across the grass. An ambulance drove down the road along the mountainside, behind the brick houses, visible between them as it passed, it moved slowly, no siren blaring, no lights flashing.

Right there, at that precise moment, I felt as if I would be able to meet whatever challenges came my way, as if there were no limits to what I could do. This wasn't about writing, this was something else, a boundlessness, as if I could get up and go now, this very minute, and then just walk and walk to the end of the earth.

This feeling lasted for thirty seconds perhaps. Then it was gone, and even though I tried to summon it back, it refused to return, a bit like a dream that goes, slips from your grasp as you struggle to recall it after waking.

When, a couple of hours later, I wandered down to the center it was with a gentle, not unpleasant, nervousness in my body, indeed I felt light and at ease as I walked, there was something about the sun shining and the life in the streets around me. On my way up the hill to the square known as Klosteret I saw that long stalks of grass were growing through the asphalt and that in some places there were small bare boulders between the houses, they linked the town to the wild mountains around, and to the sea below, everything that had not been wrought by human hand, and the fact that the town was part of the landscape, not separate, somehow closed in around itself, as I had felt during the first two days there, sent a fresh wave of good feeling through me. Rain fell everywhere, the sun shone everywhere, everything was connected with everything.

Yngve had explained the route to me in detail and I had no problem finding my way, I walked down a narrow path, passed some strange crooked cottages, and there, at the bottom of a hill, lay Verftet at the water's edge. Made of brick, and built in the nineteenth century, it even had a tall factory chimney. I walked round to the entrance, touched the door, it was open, went in. An empty corridor with some doors, no signs. I continued along it. A man came out of one door, in his thirties or thereabouts, wearing big black glasses, a stained t-shirt, an artist.

"I'm looking for the Writing Academy," I said. "Do you know where it is?"

"No idea," he said. "It's not here anyway."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure," he said. "If I wasn't I wouldn't have said anything."

"No, right," I said.

"But try upstairs on the other side. There are some offices and stuff there."

I did as he said. Went upstairs and through the door. A corridor with some pictures of Verftet in its heyday on the walls, a spiral staircase at the end.

I opened a door and walked along a corridor, one of the many doors was ajar and I peeped in, a workshop, I turned around and went back, stopped at the entrance hall, where a woman, probably in her early thirties with a light-blue coat and a plump face, big eyes and slightly crooked teeth, was just coming in.

"Do you know where the Writing Academy is?" I said.

"I think it's up there," she said. "Are you in the course?"

I nodded.

"Me too," she said, laughing. "I'm Nina."

"Karl Ove."

I followed her up the stairs. She carried a big bag over her shoulder, and the conventionality of her appearance, which resided not just in her coat, bag, and the small ladylike boots she wore but also in the way her hair was pinned up, how little girls used to have it in the nineteenth century, disappointed me, I had expected something rougher, wilder, darker. Not the norm at any rate. If they let in the norm, maybe I was also there because I was the norm.

She opened the door at the top of the stairs, and we stepped into a large room with slanting walls and three big windows on one side, two doors with a bookshelf between them on the other. In the middle were some desks arranged in a horseshoe shape. Three people sat there. Two men were standing in front of them. One, tall and slim, wearing a suit jacket with the sleeves rolled up, looked straight at us and smiled. He wore a gold chain around his neck, I noticed, and had several rings on his fingers. The other man, shorter in stature, also wearing a suit jacket, with a slight paunch which the much-too-tight jacket emphasized, sent us a hasty glance and looked down. Both had mustaches. The former may have been pushing thirty-five; the latter, who stood with his arms crossed, was around thirty.

They appeared nervous, in the sense that they both radiated a feeling that they would rather not be right here, right now. But in diametrically opposed ways.

"Welcome to the Writing Academy," the tall one said. "Ragnar Hovland."

I shook his hand, said my name.

"Jon Fosse," said the other one, and he said it quickly, in fact, he almost spat it out.

"Take a seat while we're waiting," Ragnar Hovland said. "There's coffee in the pot, and water in there, if you want it."

As he said this he alternated his gaze between Nina and me, but once he had finished he looked away. His voice trembled slightly as though he really had to make an effort to say what he did. At the same time he gave an impression of wiliness, as though he knew something no one else knew and then looked away to laugh at us inside.

"I haven't read any of your books yet," I said, looking at him. "But I've just been working as a teacher and at the school we used one of your textbooks."

"Well, that's strange," he said. "I've never published any textbooks."

"But I saw your name on it," I said. "I'm absolutely certain. Ragnar Hovland, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. But, as I said, I haven't written any textbooks."

"But I saw it," I said.

He smiled.

"You couldn't have. Unless of course I have a doppelgänger somewhere."

"I'm absolutely positive," I said, but realized I wouldn't get any farther with this and put my bag down on a chair, went to the coffee machine, pulled a plastic cup off the low stack and filled it with coffee. I had seen his name, I was pretty sure. Why wouldn't he admit it? Surely there was no shame in publishing a textbook for schoolchildren? Or was that precisely what it was?

I took a seat, lit a cigarette, and pulled over an ashtray. Across the table a dark-haired, middle-aged woman sat looking at me. She smiled when I met her eyes.

"Else Karin," she said.

"Karl Ove," I said.

Beside her a girl was reading. She was probably about twenty-five, had long fair hair in a ponytail, it seemed to tauten her face and, along with her small straight lips, gave her a stern appearance, which the fleeting glance she sent me – where I sensed a good deal of skepticism – reinforced.

On her other side there was a man of the same age, tall and thin, he had a small head and a big Adam's apple, and a conspicuously drooping mouth, there was something distinctly formal about him, and conventional.

"I'm Knut," he said. "Nice to meet you."

At the door two more appeared, one had a beard and glasses, a red lumberjack shirt, a light-blue windbreaker, and a pair of brown corduroy trousers. He reminded me of the kind of temp who worked in shops selling second-hand comics or something like that. The other was a girl, quite short, wearing a large black leather jacket, black trousers, and a pair of robust black shoes. Her hair was also black, and she tossed her head and stroked back her bangs twice in the short time I was watching them. But her mouth was sensitive, and her eyes were as black as two lumps of coal.

"Petra," she said, and pulled a chair back.

"And my name's Kjetil," he said, and smiled slyly down at the desk.

She blinked twice in quick succession, and her lips drew back over her teeth as though she were snarling.

I didn't want to gape, so I stared through the large attic windows onto the fjord, there was a dock on the other side, containing a great rusting hull of a boat.

The door opened again, a woman of thirty to thirty-five came in, thin with a gray, dull appearance, apart from her eyes, which were happy and alive.

I took a sip of coffee and glanced at the dark-haired girl again.

Her face was so attractive, but her aura was hard, almost brutal.

She looked at me, I smiled, she didn't smile back, and I blushed, stubbed my cigarette out firmly in the ashtray, took my pad and placed it on the desk in front of me.

"I imagine that's everyone," Ragnar Hovland said, walking to the other end of the room with Jon Fosse, where there was a board on the wall. They sat down.

"Shall we wait for Sagen?" Fosse said.

"We'll give him a few more minutes," Hovland said.

I was definitely the youngest person there, by a fair margin. The average debut age for writers in Norway was a little over thirty, I had read somewhere. I would be a little over twenty. But several of the others were also younger than the average. Petra, the stern girl, Knut, Kjetil. They were all around twenty-five. The dark-haired one might be forty. She dressed like a forty-year-old anyway, wide sleeves and big earrings. But tight pants. Meticulously drawn eyebrows. And thick lipstick on her narrow lips. What the hell could she write?

And then there was the other one: Nina. There was something nebulous about her face, pale, a lot of skin, dark shadows under her eyes, cascading fair hair. She was probably better at writing; however, how good could she be?

In through the door came a short man who must have been Sagen. He was wearing a blue fur trapper hat, a brown leather jacket, blue shirt, and dark-brown corduroy trousers. Dark curly hair, a slight paunch.

"Sorry I'm late," he said, opened the door to the right, rummaged around in the room there, reemerged minus his jacket and hat. Sat down. A little bald patch.

"Shall we start then?" he said, looking at the other two. Hovland holding the edge of the chair, Fosse sitting with his arms crossed and looking down with his head turned to the side. Both nodded, and Sagen welcomed us to the course. He told us a little about how the school had come about, it had been his idea, how it had been established, this was the second year, and how it was a privilege to be here, we had been selected from more than seventy applicants, and the lecturers were among the best writers in the country. He turned it over to Fosse and Hovland, who told us a bit about the teaching program. This week we would go through the texts that we had sent in with our applications. Then there would be a section devoted to poetry, followed by one on prose, drama, and essays. In between there would be writing periods and guest lecturers. One of them would be here for several of the periods, his name was Øystein Lønn and he would be a kind of main teacher, as well as Hovland and Fosse, that is. In spring there would be a longish period for writing, after which we would submit an extended piece before the end and we would be assessed on that. As for teaching, the two lecturers would deal with the theory first, and this would be followed by written activities and textual analysis. There would be no history of literature, Jon Fosse said, this was the first time he had spoken, the texts they would go through and discuss would be predominantly recent ones, therefore modernist and postmodernist.

Øystein Lønn, another unknown writer.

I put up my hand.

"Yes?" Hovland said.

"Do you know anything about who the other guest lecturers are?"

"Yes. Not all the names have been confirmed yet. But Jan Kjærstad and Kjartan Fløgstad are two definites."

"Great!" I said.

"No women?" Else Karin said.

"Yes, of course," Hovland said.

"Perhaps we should do a round of introductions?" Sagen said. "If you say who you are, how old you are, and what you write, that sort of thing."

Else Karin, who started, took her time and looked at everyone around her individually as she spoke. She was thirty-eight, she said, and had published two novels, but she had never had any form of training, this year she hoped to take a step forward. Bjørg, the dull woman with the lively eyes, had also published a novel. None of the others had made their debut yet.

When it came to my turn, I said who I was, told them I was nineteen and wrote prose, somewhere between Hamsun and Bukowski, and was working on a novel at the moment.

"Petra, twenty-four, prose," Petra said.

We were given a syllabus, and then Sagen fetched a pile of books, they were for us, a gift from a publishing house, we could choose: either *Gravgaver* by Tor Ulven or *Fra* by Merete Morken Andersen. I hadn't heard of either of them, but chose Ulven because of his name, wolf.

Everyone drifted out of the rooms at the same time, and up the hill above Verftet I found myself walking alongside Petra.

"What do you think?" I said.

"About what?"

"The course!"

She shrugged.

"The lecturers were full of themselves and vain. But they might be able to teach us something all the same."

"They weren't vain, were they?"

She snorted and tossed her head, ran her hand over her fringe, looked at me and a little smile flitted across her lips.

"Did you see all the jewelry on Hovland? He was wearing a necklace and rings and even a bracelet. Looked like some sort of pimp!"

I didn't say anything, although I thought she was being hard.

"And Fosse was so nervous he didn't even dare look at us."

"They're writers, aren't they?" I said.

"So? Is that supposed to give them a dispensation? They only sit somewhere and write. That's all there is to it."

Kjetil sidled up alongside us.

"I wasn't actually accepted," he said. "I was on the waiting list and someone bailed at the last minute."

"That was lucky for you," Petra said.

"Yes, it wasn't a big deal. I already live here, so all I had to do was turn up."

He spoke Bergen dialect. Petra spoke Oslo dialect, the others did too, apart from Nina, who came from Bergen, and Else Karin, who came from somewhere in southern Vestland. I was the only Sørlander, and now that I thought about it, had there been any writers from Sørland at all? Vilhelm Krag, yes, but that was around the turn of the last century. Gabriel Scott? Same. Bjørneboe, of course, but then he had almost tried to erase any traces of his origins from his personality, at least that was how it seemed, judging by the TV interviews I had seen, in which he had spoken a refined form of *riksmål*, and, as far as the books he wrote were concerned, there weren't many characteristic Sørland features such as sea-smoothed rocks or double-ender boats in them.

Else Karin came up behind us all in a flurry. She seemed to be one of those women who surrounded themselves with a cloud of gestures and objects, bags and clothes, and cigarettes and arms.

"Hi," she said, planting her eyes on me. "I've worked out that I'm exactly twice your age. You're nineteen and I'm thirty-eight. You're really young!"

"Yes," I said.

"Fantastic that you got into the course."

"Yes," I said.

Petra turned away, Kjetil watched us with his good-natured eyes. Then we caught up with the others, they were standing at an intersection waiting for the lights to go green. The houses opposite were run-down, the walls gray with traffic fumes and dust from the road, the windows completely opaque. The sun was still shining, but over the mountains to the north the sky was very black.

We crossed the road, walked up a gentle hill, past a secondhand bookshop of the grubby kind, from what I could see in the windows: various comics were hanging at the back and some cheap paperbacks were laid out on a green felt cloth, all badly faded by the sun, which shone on the shop front during the afternoon. A bit farther, on the other side of the road, was the indoor swimming pool. I decided I would go there someday soon.

Up at Café Opera, we dispersed, I said good-bye and hurried homeward. I would have liked to buy some books, preferably a couple of collections of poetry because I had barely read a poem in my life, except for those we'd had at school, which had mostly been by Wergeland and Wildenvey, and the stuff I encountered during the weeks when we put on a kind of cabaret in Norwegian at *gymnas*, with Lars and me reading texts by Jim Morrison, Bob Dylan, and Sylvia Plath on stage. Those six poems were the only real poems I had read in my life, and first of all, I didn't remember any of them, and secondly, I had an inkling the kind of poems we would be analyzing at the Writing Academy would be different. However, books would have to wait until my loan arrived.

In the mailbox at home there were nothing but advertising leaflets, but among them was a little catalogue for an English book club based in Grimstad, of all places, which I perused carefully as you didn't need to have cash to get books there. I put a cross by *Shakespeare's Complete Works*, Oscar Wilde's *Collected Works*, T. S. Eliot's *Complete Poems and Plays*, all in English, and on one of the last pages there was a photography book, which I ordered, with pictures of scantily clad and naked women, it wasn't porn though, it was art, or at least serious photography, but for me it was all the same, and pins and needles ran down my spine at the thought that I could soon be sitting here and poring over them and . . . yes, jerking off. I still hadn't done it, but now I sensed that it would be unnatural not to do it, everyone probably did it, and then up came this opportunity, this book, and I put a cross next to it, wrote the number and title on the back, my name and address underneath, and tore out the order form. It was free, the book club also paid the postage.

While I was posting it I could send some change-of-address cards, I thought, and strolled off to the post office with the form and my little red and black address book in hand.

On the way back it began to rain. And it wasn't just the odd drop or two, gradually increasing in intensity, which I was used to, no, here it went from zero to a hundred in one second flat: one moment it wasn't raining, the next, billions of drops were falling to the ground at once, and from the road around me came a spattering, almost a clattering sound. I jogged downhill, laughing inside, what a fantastic town this was! And as always when I saw or experienced something wonderful, I thought of Ingvild. She was a living person who existed in the world with her own way of perceiving it, her own memories and experiences, she had her mother and father, her sister and her friends, the countryside she had grown up and walked in, all this resided within her, this immense complexity that is another person and of which we see so little when we are with them, yet it is enough to like them, to love them, for it takes nothing for this to happen, two serious eyes that suddenly beam with happiness, two playful teasing eyes that suddenly become unsure or introspective, that falter, a person faltering, is there anything more beautiful than that? With all their inner richness, yet faltering all the same? You see it, you fall in love with it, and it is not much, perhaps you will say it is not much, but the heart is always right. It never errs.

The heart never errs.

The heart never ever errs.

For the next few hours it was all pounding rain, bobbing umbrellas, furious windshield wipers, car headlights piercing the rain and murk. I sat on the sofa occasionally looking out to see what was happening, occasionally looking down at my book, Ulven's *Gravgaver*, of which I understood not one word. Even when I really concentrated and read as slowly as I could, several pages at a time, I didn't understand. I understood as good as all the words, that wasn't the problem, and I also understood the sentences, as such, but I didn't understand what they meant. I had no idea. And that took the wind out of my sails because I knew of course that there was a reason we had been given these two particular books. They were regarded as good literature, as having importance, and I didn't understand them.

I didn't have a clue. There was something about someone coughing on an old gramophone recording, then there was a man who drove an unbelievably warm car to a funeral, and then there was a couple who were at some kind of holiday resort. I understood that, but firstly there was no plot, and secondly there was no sequence of events, and no coherence, everything came at you higgledy-piggledy, and that was fine per se, but *what* was it that was higgledy-piggledy? It wasn't thoughts, there was no one in particular thinking this. There were no lines of argument either, or descriptions, it was just a bit of everything all at the same time, but it was no use trying to understand this, as I couldn't make sense of the bigger picture, what did it *mean*?

I hoped this was what we were going to learn.

I would have to follow closely, note down everything that was said, not waste a moment.

Modernism and postmodernism Fosse had said, that sounded good, it meant us and our time.

While I was eating lunch, that is, because of my impecunious state, five slices of bread, butter, and three soft-boiled eggs, there was a knock at the door. It was my neighbor from down below, Morten, holding a long black umbrella with a walking-stick handle and wearing a red leather jacket, blue Levi's, and boat shoes with white socks, and even though his hair wasn't a mess this time, there was still something wild about him, perhaps especially the look he was giving me, but it was in his body language too, as if something powerful was stirring inside him and he was expending all his energy on that. And then there was his laughter, which burst forth in the strangest of places.

"Hi again!" he said. "Can I come in? For a chat? A bit brief last time, you might say, heh heh."

"Come in," I said.

He stopped inside the door and looked around.

"Have a seat," I said, kneeling down by the stereo to put on a record.

"*Betty Blue*, yep," he said. "I've actually seen that one."

"It's a good film," I said, and turned to face him. He hitched his trousers up over his knees before he sat down. There was something formal about him, which, along with the vague yet intense impression of wildness, filled the whole room.

"Yes," he said. "Not bad, that one. Especially when she went nuts!"

"Yes, she did go nuts," I said, sitting down on the chair across the table from him.

"Have you lived here long?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"No, sir! I moved in two weeks ago."

"And you're studying Law?"

"Exactly. Clauses and paragraphs. And you're going to be a writer, didn't you say?"

"Yes. Started today."

"Shit, I wouldn't mind doing that. Articulating everything you feel inside," he said, thumping his chest. "I get so sad sometimes. Maybe you do, too?"

"Yes, it happens."

"Great to get it out, is it?"

"Yes. But that's not why, you know."

"Why what?"

"Why I write."

He looked at me with a self-assured smile, slapped both palms against his thighs, and prepared to stand up, or so it seemed, but he didn't, instead he leaned back in the sofa.

"Are you in love? Right now, I mean," he said.

I looked at him.

"Are *you*? Since you're the one asking."

"I'm fascinated by a girl. If I can put it like that. Fascinated."

"I am too," I said. "Incredibly so."

"What's her name?"

"Ingvild."

"Ingvild!" he said.

"Don't tell me you know her," I said.

"No, no. Is she a student?"

"Yes."

"Are you a couple?"

"No."

"Same age as you?"

"Yes."

"Monica's two years older than me. That's perhaps not so good."

He fiddled with the ribs of the umbrella, which was propped up against the sofa next to his calf. I took out my tobacco pouch and began to make a roll-up.

"Have you met the others in the house yet?" he said.

"No," I said. "Only you. And I caught a glimpse of the girl who was having a shower."

"Lillian," he said. "She lives behind the staircase on the same floor as you. An old lady lives above her. She sticks her nose into everything, but she's not dangerous. Above you is Rune. A nice fellow from Sogndal. That's it."

"I'll get to know them in time," I said.

He nodded.

"But now I won't take any more of your time," he said, getting up. "See you. I have the feeling I'll be hearing more about Ingvild soon enough."

He went out, his steps grew fainter as he went downstairs. I continued eating.

The next morning I walked up to the university to find out whether my loan had come through, it hadn't, and I went down a street alongside Høyden, as the university area was called, at the end was Mount Dragefjell, where the

Law students' building was, there I turned right down one of the narrow alleyways and emerged unexpectedly by the swimming pool. As I passed I drew the air deep into my lungs because from a grating set in the pavement came the smell of chlorine, and with it all the pleasant memories of my childhood unfolded like flowers in the first rays of sun after a night of slumber.

Where I walked, however, there wasn't much sun to speak of, the rain was pouring down, hard and unremitting, and between the buildings the water in the fjord was heavy and gray, beneath a sky that was so low and full of moisture that the dividing line between it and the fjord appeared to have been erased. I had admitted defeat and put on a raincoat, a light-green affair that made me look like a bumpkin from the hills or something, but in this weather there was nothing else you could do, these weren't showers that were over in half an hour; the cloud cover above me was thick and gray, bordering on black, and hung over the town like a tarpaulin bulging with water.

It affected the atmosphere in the classroom because with all the boots and umbrellas and wet coats, as well as the gray light outside, which caused the room to be reflected in the windows, it was vaguely reminiscent of how it had been in all the various classrooms I had sat in over the years, including those in Northern Norway, which had already joined all the other good memories I had of rooms.

I sat down, took out my notebook, grabbed one of the stapled copies from the pile, and started to read, as that was what all the others were doing. Under the board sat Fosse and Hovland, doing the same. We were going through Trude's – she was the stern one – texts first. They were poems, and they were beautiful, I could see that right away. There were dreamy landscapes, horses, wind, and light, all concentrated into a few lines. I read them, but I didn't know what I was supposed to be looking for, had no idea what was good or not, or what might make them better. And as I read the fear grew in my breast, for this was immeasurably better than what I had written, there was no comparison, this was art, that at least I did understand. And what would I say if Fosse or Hovland asked me to comment on them? Some horses standing under a tree and, in the next line, a knife sliding across skin – what did it mean? Horses galloping across a field with thundering hooves and an eye hanging above the horizon?

Minutes later work started in earnest. Fosse asked Trude to read. She sat still for a few moments, concentrating, then she began. Her voice seemed to tone into her poems, it wasn't as if the poems came out of her mouth, I felt, rather, that they were already there in advance and she used her voice to access them. At the same time there was no room for anything else, her voice could only contain the poems, the few words that made up a rounded whole, with nothing of her in it.

I liked her writing, but also felt uncomfortable because it meant nothing to me, I didn't know what she was trying to say or what the poems were about.

After she had finished, Hovland took over. Now we had to comment on the texts, and we would do it in sequence so that everyone spoke and had a chance to say something. What we had to remember, he said, was that none of the texts we discussed in class was necessarily finished or complete, and we learned through criticism. But it wasn't only criticism of our own texts that was important to us, it was equally important to be involved and discuss others' texts, for what this course was based on primarily was reading, learning to read, improving our ability to read. For a writer it was perhaps most important not to write, but to read. Read as much as you can because in so doing you won't lose yourselves, become unoriginal, what happens is the opposite, by doing this you'll find yourselves. The more you read, the better.

The round of comments began. There was a lot of hesitation and groping for words, most people confined themselves to saying they liked this image or that sentence, but amid all this some concepts emerged which were carried on and slowly became the standard currency for everyone, such as "rhythm," the rhythm was "good" or "didn't quite flow," and then there was mention of "tone" and "the opening" and "the ending" and "deleting" and "cutting." That was a nice opening, and the rhythm's spot on, there's something a little unclear in the middle section, I'm not quite sure what it is, but something jars there, well, maybe you could shorten it a bit, I don't know, but then there's that strong image at the end which elevates the whole poem. That was how it began to sound when poetry was being discussed. I liked this way of talking because it didn't exclude me, I could understand openings and endings, I became particularly good at endings, the idea that something had to rise and resonate after the last line. I always looked for that, and if I found it I piped up. If I didn't, I said so too. You sort of shut off the poem here, I would say then. Can you see? The last line? It's a conclusion, it shuts itself off. Can't you delete it? Then you open everything up. Do you see? Also the question of line breaks came up in these readings. It soon transpired that chopped-up prose, as it was called, whereby standard prose was divided up as if it were a poem, was the enemy, the nightmare in person. It looked like a poem, but it wasn't, and this was the 1970s, something they did back then. We also discussed all the literary devices, such as metaphors and alliteration, but not often, because Fosse and the students who wrote poetry had an aversion to metaphors, I noticed, there was almost something ugly about metaphors, or old-fashioned, in the sense of passé or antiquated and useless for our purposes. It was bad taste, quite simply, tacky. Alliteration was even worse. What was important was mostly rhythm, tone, line breaks, openings and endings. Jon Fosse, I noticed, when he made any comments, was always looking for whatever was unusual, different, out of the ordinary, as well.

This first session, however, was almost completely terminology-free, only Knut had a vocabulary fit to talk about poems, and his words also had the greatest impact. Trude sat in deep concentration, taking it all in, making occasional notes and also asking direct questions, why this, why not that. I could see she was a writer and a poet, and she not only wanted to go far, she was already well ahead.

When my turn came I said the poems were full of atmosphere and they were profound but a bit difficult to talk about. In some places I didn't quite understand what she was trying to achieve. I said I agreed with a lot of what

Knut had said, I particularly liked *this* line while she might consider leaving out *that* line.

While I was speaking, I could see she didn't care. She didn't take any notes, she wasn't concentrating, and she watched me with a little smile at the corners of her mouth. I was upset and angry, but there was nothing I could do, other than sit back, push my papers away, say I had nothing more to add, and sip my coffee.

After that Jon Fosse held forth. While both the way he moved his head – in jerks, like a bird, sometimes as if he had been startled by or remembered something – and the way he spoke – hesitantly, full of pauses, stutters, coughs, snorts, an unexpected deep breath here and there – suggested nervousness and unease, what he said was, by contrast, completely assured. He was utterly sure of himself, there was no room for doubt: what he was saying was right.

He went through all the poems, commented on their strengths and weaknesses and said that horses were a fine ancient motif in poetry and art. He cited the horses in *The Iliad* and the horses in the Parthenon Frieze, he cited the horses in Claude Simon, but these, he said, were more a kind of archetype, I don't know, have you read Ellen Einan? Something here is reminiscent of her. Dream language.

I wrote everything down.

The Iliad, the Parthenon, Claude Simon, archetype, Ellen Einan, dream language.

On my way home that afternoon I nipped up the alleyway to the left after the hill by Verftet to avoid having to walk with the others. It was still raining, as persistently and heavily as when I arrived, and all the walls, all the roofs, all the lawns, and all the cars were wet and shiny. I was elated, it had been a good day, and Trude's total disregard for what I had to say, indeed her demonstration of this to others, didn't bother me at all anymore because in the break, when we had been in the café opposite Klosteret, I had spoken to Ragnar Hovland and exchanged opinions about Jan Kjærstad. In fact, it had been me who brought up his name. Else Karin had asked me what I liked reading, apart from Hamsun and Bukowski, I had said my favorite author was Kjærstad, especially his last book, *The Big Adventure*, but also *Mirrors* and *Homo Falsus*, yes, and also *The Earth Turns Quietly* was good. She said his books were a little cold and contrived. I said that was exactly the point, Kjærstad wanted to describe humanity in a different way, not from within but from without, and the notion that characters in books were warm was a delusion, that was a construct too, of course, we had just got used to it and thought of this mode as genuine or warm while other ways of writing were equally genuine. She said yes, I understand that, but I still think his characters are cold. And this "I think" was a victory for me, it wasn't an argument, just a feeling, empty words.

After the break it was Kjetil's turn, and his texts, which were prose and bordered on fantasy and the grotesque, were talked about in quite a different way. This wasn't about openings and endings or tone, we dealt more with the plot and individual sentences, and when someone said it was too exaggerated, I said I had perceived this to be the whole point, that it was "over the top." The discussion was much livelier, this was easier to talk about, and it was a relief, this was material I could get my head around.

Tomorrow my texts would be read and discussed. I was terrified, yet looking forward to it too, as I walked up Strandgaten, in some way what I had written had to be good, otherwise I wouldn't have been accepted into the course.

Up the mountainside, from the station with the gleaming cobblestones, the bright red Fløibanen glided smoothly into the green. Funicular, it said in neon lights, and there was something alpine about this short ascent, a funicular railway rising from a town center, a stone's throw from the old German wooden houses. If you took away the water you could well imagine yourself in the German-Austrian Alps.

And, oh, the darkness that was a constant in Bergen! Not linked to night in any way, nor to shadow, nevertheless it was almost always here, this muted darkness suffused with falling rain. Objects and events became so concentrated when it was like this because the sun opened up airspace, and everything that was in it: a father putting shopping bags in the trunk of a car outside Støletorget, while the mother bundled their children onto the back seat, got in at the front, drew the safety belt across her chest and buckled it into place, watching this when the sun was shining and the sky was light and open was one thing, then all their movements seemed to flutter past and vanish the moment they were carried out; however, it was a very different matter watching the same family if it was raining, enveloped by the muted darkness, for then there was something leaden about their movements, it was as if they were statues, these people, transfixed in this moment – which, the very next, they had left anyway. The garbage cans outside the stairs, seeing them in strong sunlight was one thing, they were hardly there, as almost nothing was, but it was quite a different matter in rain-darkened daylight, then they stood like shining pillars of silver, some of them magnificent, others sadder and more wretched, but all there, just then, at that moment.

Yes, Bergen. The *incredible* power that lay in all the various housefronts squeezed together everywhere. The head rush you had as you slogged your way uphill and saw this, at your feet, could be wonderful.

But it was also good to lock yourself in your room after a walk through the town, it was like being in the eye of a storm, sheltered from prying eyes, the only place where I was totally at peace. This afternoon I had run out of tobacco, but I had known it would happen and had saved all the stubs from recent days. After putting on the coffee machine, I took the scissors from the drawer and set about snipping the ash off the stubs. When I had done that I opened them up and sprinkled the bone-dry tobacco into the pouch, which in the end was half full. My fingertips were black and reeked of smoke, I rinsed them under the tap, and then I cut a slice of raw potato and put it into the pouch; soon the tobacco would have absorbed the moisture and be like new again.

In the evening I went to the pay phone and called Ingvild. Once again a man answered. Ingvild, yes, hold on a moment and I'll see if she's at home.

I was trembling as I waited.

Footsteps approached. I heard someone take the receiver.

"Hello?" she said.

Her voice was darker than I remembered.

"Hello," I said. "Karl Ove here."

"Hi!" she said.

"Hi," I said. "How's it going? Have you been in town long?"

"No, I arrived on Monday."

"I've been here a couple of weeks already," I said.

Silence.

"We were talking about meeting, if you remember," I said. "I don't know if you still want to, but what about Saturday?"

"Yes, I've got nothing on the calendar then, no." She chuckled.

"Café Opera maybe? Then we can go to Hulen afterward. What about that?"

"Just like real students do, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Sounds fine. But I warn you: I'll be a bundle of nerves."

"Why?"

"Well, I've never been a student before. Plus, I don't know you."

"I'll be a bundle of nerves too," I said.

"Good," she said. "So perhaps it doesn't really matter if we don't say much."

"No," I said. "Quite the contrary. That sounds great."

"Now don't exaggerate."

"It's true!" I said.

She chuckled again.

"This is my first student date. Café Opera on Saturday. Shall we say . . . well, when do students actually go out?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. Seven?"

"That sounds about right. Let's say seven then."

My stomach constricted as I crossed the street and went back to my room.

I felt as if I could throw up at any time. And that was after everything had gone well. However, saying a few words on the phone was not the same as sitting face-to-face, with nothing to say and your guts on fire.

There were two things that particularly bothered me in those days. One was that I came too fast, often before anything had happened at all, and the other was that I never laughed. That is, it did happen once in a while, maybe once every six months, when I could be overcome by the hilarity of something and just laugh and laugh, but that was always unpleasant because I completely lost control of myself then, I was unable to regain my composure, and I didn't like showing that side of me to others. So basically I was able to laugh, I had the capacity, but in my everyday life, in social situations, when I was with people around a table chatting, I never laughed. I had lost that ability. To make up for this, I smiled a lot, I might also emit some laughter-like sounds, so I don't think anyone noticed or found it conspicuous. But I knew: I never laughed. As a result, I became especially conscious of laughter as such, as a phenomenon, I noticed how it occurred, how it sounded, what it was. People laughed almost all the time, they said something, laughed, others said something, everyone laughed. It lubricated conversations or gave them a shot of something else, which didn't have so much to do with what was being said as with being together with others. People meeting. In this situation everyone laughed, each in their own way, of course, and sometimes because of something genuinely funny, in which case the laughter lasted longer and could at times completely take over, but also for no apparent reason at all, just as a token of friendliness or openness. It could conceal insecurity, I knew that well, but it could also be strong and generous, a helping hand. When I was small I laughed a lot, but at some point it stopped, perhaps as early as the age of twelve, at any rate I remember there was a film with Rolv Wesenlund that filled me with horror, it was called *The Man Who Could Not Laugh*, and it was probably when I heard about it that I realized actually I didn't laugh. From then on, all social situations were something I took part in and watched from the outside as I lacked what they were full of, the interpersonal link: laughter.

I wasn't glum though. I wasn't a wet blanket! I was no introverted brooder! I wasn't even shy!

I just seemed to be.

Even though it was only the third time I had attended the Writing Academy it already felt familiar, almost homey, both the way there, first the steep hills down to Vågsbunnen, then along the row of office blocks and shops in Strandgaten, then up the hills by Klosteret and down the narrow alleyway opposite, all woven into the veil of rain that fell from the low sky and even the room we occupied, with the bookshelf on one side, the board on another, and the slanting wall with the windows on a third. I entered the room, said hi to those already present, took off my wet coat, retrieved my papers and book from my wet plastic bag, placed them on the table, poured myself some coffee, and lit a cigarette.

"What weather," I said, shaking my head.

"Welcome to Bergen," Kjetil said, looking up from a book.

"What are you reading?" I said.

"*All Fires the Fire*. Short stories by Julio Cortázar."

"Are they good?"

"Yes. But they're perhaps a bit cold," he said, smiling. I smiled back. In the middle of the table was a pile of photocopies, I recognized them as mine from the typeface, the typewriter symbols and the few corrections I had made with a black felt pen, and took one.

Else Karin caught my eye.

She was sitting with one leg tucked underneath her on the chair, her left arm wrapped around her knee, her right hand holding a cigarette and my manuscript.

"Are you nervous?" she said.

"Yes and no," I said. "A bit maybe. Did you like it?"

"You'll have to wait and see!" she said.

Bjørg, who was sitting next to her, glanced at us and smiled.

Through the door at the other end came Petra – with neither an umbrella nor rain gear – her black leather jacket glistening and her wet hair hanging over her forehead. Right behind her came Trude, wearing green waterproof trousers and jacket, the hood laced up tightly around her neck, on her feet high wellies, on her back a leather backpack. I stood up, went to the kitchenette, and poured myself another cup of coffee.

"Anyone else want any?" I said.

Petra shook her head, no one else looked in my direction. Trude was standing under the slanting window and pulling off her trousers, and even though she had jeans underneath, just the movements, wriggling and squirming, gave me a hard-on. I put my hand in my pocket as I walked back to my place as nonchalantly as possible.

"Is everyone here?" Hovland said from his chair under the board. Fosse was sitting beside him with his arms crossed and his eyes downcast, as on the first two days.

"We're going to spend the first part of today on Karl Ove's texts. Then we'll go through Nina's after the break. If you're ready, Karl Ove, you can start reading yours."

I read, the others followed attentively in their copies. When I had finished, the commentary round began. I jotted down key words. Else Karin thought the language fresh and alive, but the plot somewhat predictable, Kjetil said it was credible but slightly tedious, Knut thought it was reminiscent of Saabye Christensen, not that there was anything wrong with that per se, as he put it. Petra considered the names stupid. Come on, she said, Gabriel and Gordon and Billy. That's intended to be cool, but it's just childish and silly. Bjørg thought it was interesting, but she would like to know more about the relationship between the two boys. Trude said the writing had oomph, but there were many clichés and stereotypes, in fact, as far as she was concerned there were so many it bordered on being unreadable. Nina liked the radical use of "a" endings in the Norwegian and the descriptions of nature.

Finally, Hovland gave his opinion. He said this was realistic prose, it was recognizable and good, in some places he had been reminded of Saabye

Christensen as well, and of course there were some linguistic shortcomings here and there, but the writing had great power, and it was a story, which was an artistic achievement in itself.

He looked at me and asked if I wanted to add anything or if I had any questions. I said I was happy with the way we had gone through the text and I had got a lot out of it, but I was wondering what the clichés and stereotypes were, could Trude give me some examples?

"Yes, of course," she said, and picked up her text. "'Land where no white man has set foot' for example."

"But that's supposed to be a cliché," I said. "That's the whole point. That's how they see the world."

"But even *that's* a cliché, you know. And then you've got 'the sun peeped through the foliage' and 'the ominous black clouds that betokened thunder' – betokened, right? Then you have 'the Colt nestling warmly in his hand' – nestling warmly. I ask you. And it's like that throughout."

"It's also quite affected and pseud," Petra said. "When 'Gordon,'" she said, making finger quotes and smiling, "says '*gir deg five seconds*,' that's so stupid because we understand the writer wants us to understand the characters have seen it on TV and, like, use English."

"Now I think you're being unfair," Else Karin said. "This is not poetry we're talking about. We can't make such high demands of single sentences; it's the totality that counts. And as Ragnar said, this is a story, and making it work is an art."

"Just keep at it," Bjørg said. "I think it's interesting! And I'm sure there will be a lot of changes along the way."

"I agree," Petra said. "Just change the stupid names and I'm happy."

After this discussion I was angry and ashamed, but also confused because although I assumed the positive words had been said to reassure me, the fact still remained that I had gotten into the course, which, for example, Kjetil had not, so there must have been something good in what I had written. Clichés though were the bane, and according to Trude my texts consisted of nothing else. Or was it just that she was so snobbish she thought she *was* someone, a poet, in some way better than everyone else? Else Karin had said that I wasn't writing poetry, and Hovland had also emphasized that this was realistic prose.

This was how my mind was working as the others unpacked their lunches and Else Karin put on a new pot of coffee. But I realized I couldn't turn introspective now, that would give the impression it had upset me, that they had scored a hit, which would be the same as admitting that what I wrote wasn't as good as what they wrote.

"That book you were reading, could I have a look at it?" I said to Kjetil.

"Of course," he said, and passed it to me. I skimmed through it.

"Where's he from?"

"Argentina, I think. But he lived in Paris for a very long time."

"Is it magic realism?" I said.

"Yes, you might call it that."

"I really like Márquez," I said. "Have you read him?"

Kjetil smiled.

"Yes, but he's not quite my style. It's a bit too high-flown for me."

"Mhm," I said, handing the book back and writing 'Julio Cortázar' in my notebook.

After lessons I went to Høyden to pick up my student loan. I joined the line at the Natural History Museum, it wasn't very long, the day was almost over, I showed my ID, signed, and was given an envelope with my name on it, I shoved it into my plastic bag and set off toward the Student Center, where, among many other things, there was a little bank. The gray concrete building on a gentle slope shimmered in the rain. Through the doors, one at the front and two at the sides, students came and went, individuals hurrying, groups walking slowly, some familiar with this world, others new like me, they weren't difficult to spot, at least if my theory was correct: that those who seemed flustered and confused, with all their senses open, could not have been there more than a few days.

I went in, up the long stairs, and entered the large open concourse, full of columns and staircases, people at stands everywhere, there was the Student Radio, Student Newspaper, Student Sports Association, Student Kayak Club, Student Christian Association, but I had been here before and headed with determined step toward the bank at the end, where once again I joined a line, and after a few minutes I had transferred the money into my account and taken out three thousand kroner, which I stuffed into my pocket before going down to Studia, the student bookshop, where I wandered among the shelves for the next half hour, at first disorientated and irresolute, there were so many subjects that were interesting and I thought I might need when I was writing, such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, or art history, but I concentrated on literature, that was the most important, I wanted something about how to read poetry, and perhaps a book about modernism, as well as some collections of poetry and novels. First I found a novel by Fosse, called *Blood. The Stone Is*, the cover was black with a picture of a semi-illuminated face, I turned the book over, on the back it said "Jon Fosse, 27 years old, cand. Philol. and lecturer at the Writing Academy in Hordaland, has this year published his fourth book," and I was proud because I studied at the Writing Academy, it was almost as though this was about me. I had to have that one. In addition, there were several books by James Joyce, I chose the one with the most appealing title, *Stephen Hero*, and then I found one on textual analysis, it was Swedish and called *From Text to Plot*, I had a flip through, the chapters were entitled "What Is a Text?," "Explain or Understand?," "The Text," "The Plot," "The Story," and might have been a bit basic, I thought, yet there were terms in it I didn't understand, such as "Toward Critical Hermeneutics" or "Historical Time and Phenomenological Time's Aporia," but that just whetted my appetite, I wanted to learn, and I took the book with me. I found a collection of poems by Charles Olson, I knew nothing about him, but as I leafed through it I saw the same kind of poetry as Trude had written, and I took that as well. It was called *Archaeologist of Morning*. I added two books by Isaac Asimov to the pile, I had to have something light to read as well. Beside them was a novel by someone called John

Berger, G., on the inside flap it said it was an intellectual novel, and I took that, too. I couldn't find any Cortázar, but I did find a paperback entitled *The Thief's Journal* by Jean Genet, which I couldn't resist either, and finally I decided I should have some philosophy as well and was lucky enough to lay my hand immediately on a book about philosophy and art: *Introduction to Aesthetics*, Hegel.

After paying for all these books I went up the stairs to the canteen. I had been there once before, with Yngve, but then I hadn't needed to think, he took care of everything, now I was on my own, and my brain reeled at the sight of all the students sitting in the enormous room eating.

At one end was the counter, where you were either served lunch or you helped yourself to what there was in the glass cabinet, and then you paid at one of the three cash registers and went to find somewhere to sit. The windows at the opposite end were misted up, the air, through which the buzz of voices rose and sank, was damp and clammy.

I looked across all the tables, but needless to say didn't see anyone I knew. The thought of sitting there all alone was terrible, so I turned and went the other way, for there, at the side facing Nygård Park, was the Grill, where they served hot dishes and beer, a bit more expensive than the canteen, but what did that matter, my pockets were full of money and I didn't need to scrimp and save.

I ordered a hamburger, fries, and a large beer and carried the tray to an unoccupied window table. The students sitting here seemed older and more experienced than those in the canteen, and there were also some older men and women who, I guessed, were lecturers, unless they belonged to the group of eternal students I had heard about, men in their forties with tousled hair and beards and sweaters, who in the fifteenth year of their studies were still working on their majors in an attic somewhere as the world raced past.

As I ate I flicked through the books I had bought. On the inside flap of the Fosse book there was a 1986 quote from Kjærstad: "Why isn't *Bergens Tidende* full of feature articles about Jon Fosse?"

So Fosse *was* a good writer, and not just that, he was one of the leading lights in the country, I thought, raising my gaze as I chewed the bread and meat into a tasty pulp. The bushes in Nygård Park stood like a green wall against the narrow wrought-iron fence, and in the gray air above them the rain angled down, caught by a sudden gust of wind that whistled along the street beneath me the very next moment and flapped at the umbrellas of two women who had just walked down the stairs.

In the evening I called Yngve and asked where he had been hiding recently. He said he'd been working and had been out the night the loan arrived and I had to get a phone so that he didn't have to walk all the way up to my digs every time he wanted something from me. I said I'd gotten my loan now and I would think about buying a phone.

"Did you have a good time?" I persisted.

"It was good. I came home with a girl."

"Who was she?" I said.

"No one you know," he said. "We've seen each other at Høyden, that's all."

"Are you going out with her now?"

"No, no, no. It's not like that. What about you? How's it going?"

"Fine. But there's a lot to read."

"Read? I thought you were supposed to be writing."

"Ha ha. I just bought a Jon Fosse. Looks good."

"Oh yes," he said.

There was a silence.

"But if you haven't started writing yet, perhaps you can write some lyrics for me? Or preferably several. So that I can finish the songs."

"I'll try."

"Why don't you?"

I sat over Yngve's songs all evening and into the night, with music on my stereo, drinking coffee and smoking. When I went to bed at three, I had two semi finished, well on the way, and one completely finished.

YOU SWAY SO SWEETLY

Give me a smile
don't be unfair
just want to undress you
layer by layer

Dance, dance, dance
In a mindless trance
Don't ever stop
Keep on dancing
Until you drop

You sway so sweetly
You sway so sweetly

Give me a smile
don't try to fight
just wanna love you
all day and night

Dance, dance, dance
In a mindless trance
Don't ever stop
Keep on dancing
Until you drop

You sway so sweetly
You sway so sweetly
You sway so sweetly
You move so well

After lessons on Friday we went out. Hovland and Fosse took us on their obviously well worn path to Wesselstuen. It was a great place, the tables were covered with white cloths, and as soon as we sat down a waiter in a white shirt and black apron came over to take our orders. I hadn't experienced that before. Our mood was nice and relaxed, the week was over, I was happy, there were eight of us carefully selected students sitting round the table with Ragnar Hovland, already a legend in student circles, at least in Bergen, and Jon Fosse, one of the most important young postmodern writers in the country, who had also received good reviews in Sweden. I hadn't spoken to them privately yet, but now I was sitting next to Hovland, and when the beer arrived, and I'd had a swig, I seized the opportunity.

"I've heard you like the Cramps."

"Oh?" he said. "Where have you heard such malicious gossip?"

"A friend told me. Is it true? Are you interested in music?"

"Yes, I am," he said. "And I do like the Cramps. So, yes . . . Say hi to your friend and tell him he's right."

He smiled, but there was no eye contact.

"Did he mention any other bands I liked?"

"No, just the Cramps."

"Do you like the Cramps then?"

"Ye-es. They're pretty good," I said. "But the music I listen to most at the moment is Prefab Sprout. Have you heard their latest? *From Langley Park to Memphis*?"

"Certainly have, although *Steve McQueen* is still my favorite."

Bjørg said something to him from across the table, and he leaned over to her with a polite expression on his face. Jon Fosse sat beside her and chatted to Knut. His texts had been the last ones we went through, and he was still full of it, I could see that. He wrote poems, and they were remarkably short, often only two or three lines, sometimes only two words beside each other. I didn't grasp what they were about, but there was something brutal about them, and you wouldn't believe that when you saw him sitting there smiling and laughing, his presence was almost as friendly as his poems were short. He was garrulous as well. So personality wasn't the reason.

I put my empty beer glass down on the table in front of me and wanted another, but I didn't dare call over the waiter, so I had to wait until someone else ordered.

Petra and Trude sat beside me chatting. It was as if they knew each other from before. Petra suddenly seemed very open while Trude had completely lost her stern concentrated demeanor, now she had a girlish air, as though a burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

Although I couldn't really claim to know any of the other students, I had seen enough of them to form an impression of their characters, and even though these didn't necessarily coincide with their texts, except in the case of Bjørg and Else Karin, who both wrote the way they looked, I felt pretty sure I knew who they were. The exception was Petra. She was a mystery. Sometimes she would sit quietly staring down at the desk, with no presence in the room at all, it was like she was gnawing at her insides, I thought then, for despite not moving and despite her eyes being fixed on the same point, there was still an aggression about her. She was gnawing at herself, that was the feeling I had. When she eventually looked up there was always an ironic smile playing on her lips. Her comments were usually ironic, and not infrequently merciless, though somehow correct, albeit exaggerated. When she was enthusiastic this could vanish, her laughter might then become heartfelt, childish even, and her eyes, which so often smoldered, sparkled. Her texts were like her, I thought, as she read them, just as spiky and grudging as she was herself, at times clumsy and inelegant, but always full of bite and force, invariably ironic, though not without passion even so.

Trude got up and walked across the room. Petra turned to me.

"Aren't you going to ask me what bands I like?" she said with a smile, but the eyes she fixed on me were dark and mocking.

"I could," I said. "What bands do you like?"

"Do you imagine I care about boys' room banter?" she said.

"How should I know?" I said.

"Do I look like that type of girl?"

"In fact, you do," I said. "The leather jacket and everything."

She laughed.

"Apart from the stupid names and all the clichés, and the lack of psychological insight, I quite liked what you wrote," she said.

"There's nothing left to like," I said.

"Yes, there is," she said. "Don't let what others say upset you. It's nothing, just words. Look at those two," she said, motioning toward our teachers. "They're wallowing in our admiration. Look at Jon now. And look at Knut lapping it up."

"First of all, I'm not upset. Second of all, Jon Fosse is a good writer."

"Oh, really? Have you read any of his stuff?"

"A little. I bought his latest novel on Wednesday."

"*Blood. The Stone Is*," she said in a deep Vestland voice, fixing me with her eyes. Then she laughed that heartfelt bubbling laugh of hers, which was abruptly cut short. "Ay yay yay, there's so much posturing!" she said.

"But not in the stuff *you* write?" I said.

"I've come here to learn," she said. "I have to suck as much out of them as I can."

The waiter came over to our table; I raised my finger. Petra did the same, at first I thought she was making fun of me, but then realized she wanted a beer too. Trude came back, Petra turned to her, and I leaned across the table to catch Jon Fosse's attention.

"Do you know Jan Kjærstad?" I said.

"Yes, a bit. We're colleagues."

"Do you consider yourself a postmodernist as well?"

"No, I'm probably more of a modernist. At least compared with Jan."

"Yes," I said.

He looked down at the table, seemed to discover his beer, and took a long swig.

"What do you think of the course so far?" he said.

Was he asking me?

I flushed.

"It's been good," I said. "I feel I've learned a lot in a short time."

"Nice to hear," he said. "We haven't done much teaching, Ragnar and I. It's almost as new to us as it is to you."

"Yes," I said.

I knew I ought to say something, I suddenly found myself at the beginning of a conversation, but I didn't know what to say, and after the silence between us had lasted several seconds, he looked away, his attention was caught by someone else, whereupon I got up and went to the bathroom, which was behind the door at the other end of the room. There was a man peeing in the urinal, I knew I wouldn't be able to perform with him standing there, so waited for the cubicle to become vacant, which happened the very next moment. There was some toilet paper on the floor tiles, wet with urine or water. The smell was rank and I breathed through my nose as I peed. Outside the cubicle I heard water rush into the sinks. Immediately afterward, the hand dryer roared. I flushed and went out, just as the two men left through the door, while another older man with a huge gut and a ruddy Bergen face came in. Although the toilet was a mess, with the floor wet and dirty and the smell vile, it still had the same solemnity as the restaurant outside with its white tablecloths and aproned waiters. No doubt it had something to do with its age: both the tiles and the urinals came from a different era. I rinsed my hands under the tap and looked at my reflection in the mirror, which bore no resemblance to the inferiority I felt inside. The man positioned himself, legs apart, by the urinal, I thrust my hands under the current of hot air, turned them over a few times, and went back to the table, where there was another beer waiting for me.

When it was finished and I had started on the next, slowly my timidity began to ease, in its place came something soft and gentle and I no longer felt I was on the margins of the conversation, on the margins of the group, but in the center, I sat chatting first with one person, then with another, and when I went to the toilet now it was as though I took the whole table there with me, they existed in my head, a whirl of faces and voices, opinions and attitudes, laughter and giggles, and when some began to pack up and go home I didn't notice at first, it happened on the extreme periphery and didn't matter, the chatting and drinking carried on, but then first Jon Fosse got up, followed by Ragnar Hovland, and it was terrible, we were nothing without them.

"Have another one!" I said. "It's not so late. And it's Saturday tomorrow."

But they were adamant, they were going home, and after they had gone, the urge to leave spread, and even though I asked each and every one of them to stay a bit longer the table was soon empty, apart from Petra and me.

"You're not going to go as well, are you?" I said.

"Soon," she said. "I live quite a way out of town, so I have to catch the bus."

"You can crash at my place," I said. "I live up in Sandviken. There's a sofa you can sleep on."

"Are you that keen to keep drinking?" She laughed. "Where shall we go then? We can't stay here any longer."

"Café Opera?" I suggested.

"Sounds good," she said.

Outside, it was lighter than I had expected, the remnants of the summer night's luster had blanched the sky above us as we ascended the hill toward the theater, past the row of taxis, the ocher glow from the street lamps as if drawn across the wet cobblestones, the rain pelting down. Petra was carrying her black leather bag and although I didn't look at her I knew her expression was serious and dogged, her movements rigid and awkward. She was like a polecat: she bit the hands of those who helped her.

At Café Opera there were many vacant tables, we went up to the first floor, beside a window. I got us two beers, she drank almost half hers in one swig, wiped her lips with the back of her hand. I searched my brain for something to say, but found nothing, and drank almost half mine in one swig too.

Five minutes passed.

"What did you actually do in Northern Norway?" she said out of the blue but in a matter-of-fact way, as though we had been chatting for ages, while staring into the nearly empty beer glass she was nursing in front of her.

"I was a teacher," I said.

"I know that," she said. "But what made you decide to do that? What did you hope to achieve?"

"I don't know," I said. "It just happened. The idea was to do some writing up there, I suppose."

"It's a strange notion, looking for work in Northern Norway so you can write."

"Yes, maybe it is."

She went to get some beer. I looked around me; soon the place would be full. She had rested her elbow on the bar, held up a hundred-krone note, in front of her one of the barmen was pouring a beer. Her lips slid over her teeth as she knit her brow. On one of the first days she told me she had changed her name. Her surname, I assumed, but no, she had changed her first name. It had been something like Anne or Hilde, one of the most common girl's names, and I had thought a lot about Petra rejecting her first name, because personally I was so attached to mine, changing it was inconceivable, in a way everything would change if I did. But she had done it.

Mom had changed her name, but that was to dad's surname, it was a convention, and when she changed it again, it was back to her maiden name. Dad had also changed his name, that was more unusual, but he had changed his surname, not his first name, which was him.

She walked across the floor, half a liter in each hand, and sat down.

"Who do you think will make it?" she said.

"What do you mean?"

"In class, at school."

I didn't care much for her choice of word, I preferred Academy, but I said nothing.

"I don't know," I said.

"I said *think*. Of course you don't know."

"I liked what you wrote."

"Flattery will get you nowhere."

"It's true."

"Knut: nothing to say. Trude: posturing. Else Karin: housewife's prose. Kjetil: childish. Bjørg: boring. Nina: good. She's repressed, but she writes well."

She laughed and slyly glanced up at me.

"What about me?" I said.

"You," she snorted. "You understand nothing about yourself and you have no idea what you're doing."

"Do you know what you're doing?"

"No, but at least I know I don't know," she said, and laughed again. "And you're a bit girly. But you've got big strong hands, so that makes up for it."

I looked away, my insides on fire.

"I've always had a wicked tongue on me," she said.

I took some long swigs of the beer and scanned the room.

"You weren't offended by that little gibe, were you?" she said, with a giggle. "I could say far worse things about you if I wanted."

"Please don't," I said.

"You take yourself too seriously as well. But that's your age. It's not your fault."

And what about you then! I felt like saying. What makes you think you're so damn good? And if I'm girly, you're butch. You look like a man when you walk!

I said nothing though, and slowly but surely the fire subsided, not least because I was beginning to get seriously drunk and approaching the point where nothing meant anything anymore, or to be more accurate, when everything meant the same.

A couple more beers and I would be there.

In the room, between all the occupied tables, strode a familiar figure. It was Morten, wearing his red leather jacket and carrying a light brown backpack and a folded umbrella in his hand, the long one I had seen before. When he spotted me his face lit up and he rushed at full speed across to our table, tall and lanky, his hair spiky and glistening with gel.

"Hi there!" He grinned. "Out drinking, are you?"

"Yes," I said. "This is Petra. Petra, Morten."

"Hi," Morten said.

Petra gave him a once-over and nodded, then turned and looked the other way.

"We've been out with the Academy," I said. "The others went home early."

"Thought writers were on the booze twenty-four/seven" he said. "I've been in the reading room until now. I don't know how this is going to work out. I don't understand a thing! Not a thing!"

He laughed and looked around.

"Actually I'm on my way home. Just popped by to see if there was anyone I knew. But I'll tell you one thing: I admire you writers-to-be."

He looked at me seriously for a moment.

"Well, I'm off," he said. "See you!"

When he had rounded the corner by the bar I told Petra he was my neighbor. She nodded casually, drank the rest of her beer, and got up.

"I'll be off now," she said. "There's a bus in fifteen minutes."

She lifted her jacket from the back of the chair, clenched her fist, and put it in the sleeve.

"Weren't you going to sleep at my place? It's not a problem, you know."

"No, I'm going home. But I might take you up on your offer another time," she said. "Bye."

So, with her hand around her bag and a steadfast gaze ahead she walked toward the staircase. I didn't know anyone else there, but sat for a little longer, in case someone turned up, but then being on my own began to prey on my mind and I put on my raincoat, grabbed my bag, and went out into the blustery night.

I woke up at around eleven to rattling and banging inside the wall. I sat up and looked around. What was that noise? Then I realized and slumped back into bed. The mailboxes were on the other side of the wall, but so far I hadn't slept long enough to know what it sounded like when the postman came.

Above me someone was walking around singing.

But the room, wasn't it remarkably light?

I got up and lifted the curtain.

The sun was shining.

I got dressed, went over to the shop and bought some milk, rolls, and today's papers. When I returned I opened the mailbox. Apart from two bills that had been sent on to me, there were two parcel-delivery cards. I hurried to the post office and was given two fat parcels, which I opened with the scissors in the kitchen. Shakespeare's *Complete Works*, T. S. Eliot's *Complete Poems and Plays*, Oscar Wilde's *Collected Works*, and a book with photos of naked women.

I sat down on my bed to flick through it, trembling with excitement. No, they weren't completely naked, many of them were wearing high heels and one had a blouse hanging open around her slim, tanned upper body.

I put down the book and had breakfast while reading the three papers I had bought. The main news in *Bergens Tidende* was a murder that had taken place yesterday morning. There was a picture of the crime scene, which I thought I recognized, and I had my suspicions confirmed when I read the text underneath: the murder had been committed only a couple of blocks from where I was sitting now. And as if that wasn't enough the suspected murderer was still at large. He was eighteen years old and attended technical school, it said. For some reason, this made quite an impression on me. I pictured him at this moment, in a basement apartment, so I imagined, alone behind drawn curtains which every so often he parted to see what was going on in the street, he viewed it from ankle height, his heart pounding and despair tearing at his insides because of what he had done. He punched the wall, paced the room, considering whether to hand himself in or wait for a few days, and then try to get away, on board one of the boats perhaps, to Denmark or England, and then hitchhike his way down through Europe. But he had no money and no possessions, only what he had on him.

I peered out the window to see if anything unusual was happening, uniformed officers gathering, for example, or some parked police cars, but everything was as normal, except for the sunshine, that is, which hung like a veil of light over everything.

I could talk to Ingvild about the murder, it was a good topic of conversation, his presence here, in my part of town, right now, while virtually the whole of the police force was out looking for him.

Perhaps I could write about that too? A boy who kills an old man and goes into hiding while the police slowly close in on him?

I would never ever be able to do that.

A wave of disappointment washed over me and I got up, took the plate and glass, put them in the kitchen sink, together with all the other dirty crockery I had used during the week. Petra was wrong about one thing, and that was that I didn't understand myself, I thought, looking across the resplendent green park as a woman crossed with a child holding each hand. Self-knowledge was the one quality I did have. I knew exactly who I was. Not many of my acquaintances knew as much about themselves.

I went back into the living room, was about to bend down to browse through my records when it was as if my eye was *dragged* toward the new book. A stab of joy and fear went through me. It might as well be now, I was alone, I had nothing in particular to do, there was no reason to defer it, I thought, and picked the book up, looked over my shoulder, how could I take it down to the bathroom unnoticed? A plastic bag? No, who on earth takes a plastic bag with them to the toilet?

I opened the button of my jeans and unzipped, pushed the book down, covered it with my shirt, leaned forward as far as I could to see what it looked like, whether anyone would realize I had a book there.

Maybe.

What about taking a towel with me? If anyone came I could casually hold it over my stomach for the few seconds the encounter lasted. Then I could have a shower afterward. Nothing suspicious about that surely, going to the toilet and then having a shower.

And that was what I did. With the book stuffed down my trousers and clasping the biggest towel I had, I went out the door, crossed the landing, down the stairs, along the corridor, into the bathroom, where I locked the door, pulled out the book, and began to leaf through.

Even though I had never masturbated before and wasn't exactly sure how to do it, I still knew how, the expressions "jerk off" and "beat the meat" had been ever present in all the jokes I had ever heard over the years, not least in soccer changing rooms, and so with the blood throbbing in my member I took it out of the little pouch formed by my underpants, and as I ogled the long-legged red-lipped woman standing outside a kind of holiday bungalow in the Mediterranean somewhere, judging by the white walls and the gnarled trees, beneath a line of washing, with a plastic bowl in her hand, although otherwise completely naked, while I looked and looked and looked at her, all the beautiful erotic lines of her body, I wrapped my fingers around my dick and jerked it up and down. At first the whole shaft, but then after a few times only the tip, while still staring at the woman with the bowl, and then as a wave of pleasure rose in me, I thought I should look at another woman too, to make maximum use of the book, and turned over the page, and there was a woman sitting on a swing, wearing only red shoes with straps up her ankles, and then a spasm went through me and I tried to bend my dick down to ejaculate into the toilet, but I couldn't, it was too stiff, so instead the first load of sperm hit the seat and slowly oozed down while later blobs were pumped out, farther down, after I had the great idea of leaning forward to improve the angle.

Oh.

I had done it.

I had finally done it.

There was nothing mysterious about it after all. On the contrary, it was incredibly easy and quite remarkable that I hadn't done it before.

I closed the book, wiped the seat, washed myself, stood stock still to hear if, contrary to expectation, anyone was outside, shoved the book back down my trousers, grabbed my towel, and left.

It was only then that I wondered if I had done it right. Should you shoot into the toilet? Or maybe the sink? Or a wad of rolled-up toilet paper in your hand? Or did you usually do it in bed? On the other hand, this was an extremely secretive business, so it probably didn't matter if my method deviated from the norm.

Just as I had put the book down on the desk, folded the unused towel and placed it in the cupboard, there was a ring at the door.

I went out to answer it.

It was Yngve and Asbjørn. Both were wearing sunglasses, and as on the previous occasion there was something restless about them, something about Yngve's thumb in his belt loop and Asbjørn's fist in his trouser pocket or them both standing half turned away until I opened the door. Or perhaps it was the sunglasses they didn't take off.

"Hi," I said. "Come in!"

They followed me into my room.

"We were wondering if you felt like coming with us into town," Yngve said. "We're going to some record shops."

"Great," I said. "I've got nothing to do anyway. Right now?"

"Yes," Yngve said, picking up the book with the naked women. "I see you've bought a photography book."

"Yes," I said.

"It's not hard to guess what you're going to use that for," Yngve laughed. Asbjørn chuckled too, but in a way that suggested he wanted this aspect of the visit over as quickly as possible.

"These are serious pictures, you know," I said as I put on my jacket, bent over and tied my shoes. "It's a kind of art book."

"Oh yes," Yngve said, putting it down. "And the Lennon poster has gone?"

"Yes," I said.

Asbjørn lit a cigarette, turned to the window, and looked out.

Ten minutes later, side by side, all wearing sunglasses, we were crossing Torget. The wind was blowing off the fjord, flags were fluttering and cracking on masts, and the sun, which was shining from a clear blue sky, glittered and shimmered on every surface. Cars tore down the street from Torgalmenningen like a pack of hounds whenever the traffic lights changed to green. The market was packed with people, and in the fish tanks in the midst, caught in their few cubic meters of greenish and probably freezing cold water, cod swam around with their mouths agape, crabs crawled on top of one other, and lobsters lay still, their claws bound with white elastic.

"Shall we eat at Yang Tse Kiang afterward?" Yngve suggested.

"We could," Asbjørn said. "If you promise not to say Chinese food in China tastes quite different."

Yngve didn't answer, took out a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, and stopped by the traffic crossing. I looked to the right where there was a vegetable stall. The sight of the orange carrots lying in bunches in a big heap made me think of the two seasons I had worked at the market gardener's on Tromøya, when we pulled up the carrots, washed and packed them, and I was always so near to the earth, rich and black, under the late-August and early-September evening sky, the darkness and the ground so close together, and the rustle of the bushes and trees at the end of the field sent small shivers of happiness through me. Why? I thought now. Why had I been so happy then?

The lights changed to green and we crossed the street surrounded by a crowd of people, passed a watchmaker's shop, continued to the large square that opened up between the buildings like a clearing in a forest, I asked where we were going actually, Yngve said *actually* we were going to Apollon, and afterward we were planning to visit some secondhand record shops.

Flicking through records in music shops was something I was good at, I knew most of the bands in the racks, I picked them up and looked to see who the producer was, who played what on the various tracks, which studio was used. I was a connoisseur, yet still I glanced over at Yngve and Asbjørn as we went through the LPs, and if either of them lifted a record out, I tried to see what it was, what passed muster here, and in Asbjørn's case I could see it was partly old stuff, and curiosities such as George Jones or Buck Owens, what particularly caught my eyes was a Christmas record he held up to show Yngve, they laughed, Asbjørn said it was really over the top, and Yngve said yes, it was really camp. But he kept to the same categories that I liked, British post-punk, American indie rock, the odd Australian band perhaps, and of course a couple of Norwegian bands, but nothing beyond that as far as I could see.

I bought twelve records, most by bands I already had and one on Yngve's recommendation: Guadalcanal Diary. An hour later, sitting in a Chinese restaurant, they laughed at me for having bought so many records, but I sensed there was some respect in their laughter, it didn't just say I was a new student who had never had so much money in his hands before but that I was dedicated. A huge dish of steaming rice was set on the table, it stuck to the big accompanying porcelain spoon, we dug in and transferred a heap onto our plates, Yngve and Asbjørn poured the brown sauce onto the rice and I did the same. It almost completely disappeared between the grains, and what had been at first thick and black was brown the very next moment, and the grains of rice visible through it. It tasted a little sharp, I felt, but the next mouthful, of beef chop suey, more than compensated for that. Yngve ate with chopsticks, manipulating them with his fingers like a native. Afterward we had fried banana with ice cream, and then we had a cup of coffee with a small After Eight mint in the saucer.

During the whole meal I had tried to figure out what exactly the chemistry was between two such good friends when they got together. How long they looked into each other's eyes when they said anything before breaking off and looking down. What they talked about, for how long, and why they had chosen that particular subject. Reminiscing: do you remember the time . . . ? Other friends: did he say this or that? Music: have you heard this or that song, this or that record? School? Politics? Something that had just happened, yesterday, last week? When a new topic was broached was it linked to the previous one, did it peel off, so to speak, or was it just plucked out of the air?

But this didn't mean that I sat silently observing them, I was actively involved throughout, I smiled and made comments, the only thing I didn't do was embark on long monologues of my own, out of the blue, which both Yngve and Asbjørn did.

So what was going on? What was it all about?

First of all, they asked each other almost no questions, which I usually did. Second, to a large extent everything was connected, very little came up that was unrelated to what went before. Third, most of it was aimed at making them laugh. Yngve told a story, they laughed at it, Asbjørn picked up the baton and moved the story into hypothetical mode, and if that worked, Yngve built on it until it became wilder and wilder. Their laughter ebbed away, a few seconds passed, Asbjørn recounted something that was closely related, also with the intention of making them laugh, and then it was more or less the same routine. Now and again they did touch on serious matters, in the same way, then they tossed a subject back and forth, sometimes in the form of a debate, all right, yes, but, you could say that, but no, I'm not with you there, and there might be a pause, which made me fear there was bad blood between them, until a new story, anecdote, or piece of banter emerged.

I was always especially vigilant with regard to Yngve, it was important for me that he didn't say anything stupid or display any form of ignorance, thus appearing inferior to Asbjørn, but that wasn't the case, they were on a level footing, and that pleased me.

Both replete and content, I walked uphill from the center with a bag of records dangling from each hand, and it was only when I was almost home and saw a police car slowly driving past that I remembered the young murderer. If the police were still looking for him, well, he would be in hiding somewhere in the town. Imagine how frightened he must be. Imagine how insanely frightened he must be. And horrified by what he had done. He had killed another human being, stabbed a knife into another person's body, who fell to the ground dead. For what? a voice must be shouting in his head. For what? For what? A wallet, a few hundred-krone notes, nothing. Oh, how terrible he must feel.

When I had got myself ready to meet Ingvild it was only a few minutes past five, and so to kill the remaining time, I went down to Morten's and knocked on his door.

"Come in!" he yelled from inside.

I opened the door. Dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, he turned down the stereo.

"Hello, sir," he said.

"Hello," I said. "Can I come in?"

"Why of course, grab a seat."

The white brick walls were high with two narrow, rectangular, almost opaque skylights as windows at the top. The room was spartanly furnished, if not bare: a box bed, also white, with a brown mattress upholstered in a kind of corduroy and large brown cushions made of the same material. A table in front and a chair on the other side, both the sort you find at flea markets and in secondhand shops, 1950s style. A stereo, some books, of which the fat red *Norwegian Law* was the most prominent.

He sat down on the bed with two of the large cushions behind him and appeared more relaxed than I had seen him before.

"One week at damned Høyden behind me," he said. "Out of how many? Three hundred and fifty?"

"It's better to count days in that case," I said. "Then you've already done five."

"Ha ha ha! That's the most foolish thing I've ever heard! In which case, there are two and a half thousand to go!"

"That's true," I said. "If you think in years, you've only got seven left. On the other hand, you haven't done a thousandth yet."

"Or a millionth, as someone in my class once said," he said. "Sit down, monsieur! Are you going out tonight or what?"

"What do you mean?" I said, sitting down.

"You look like you are. So well-groomed, sort of."

"Yes, but I have to be. I'm meeting Ingvild. In fact, it's the first time."

"First time? Did you find her in a lonely-heart ad? Ha ha ha!"

"I met her once this spring, in Førde, for half an hour or so. I completely fell for her. Since then I've hardly thought about anything else. But we've been writing to each other."

"I see," he said, and leaned across the table, knocked a cigarette packet back toward him, opened it, and tapped out a cigarette.

"Want one?"

"Why not? My tobacco's upstairs. But you can have a roll-up from me some other time."

"I moved here to get away from people who smoke rollies," he said, throwing me the packet.

"Where are you from?" I said.

"Sigdal. A little dump in Østland. All forest and misery. That's where they make the kitchens, you know. Sigdal Kitchens. We're very proud of that."

He lit up and ran his hand quickly through his hair.

"Is it good or bad to look well groomed?" I said.

"It's good, of course," he said. "You're going on a date. You have to doll yourself up a bit."

"Yes," I said.

"And you're from Sørland?" he said.

"Yes. I come from a little dump down there. Or rather a shithole."

"If you come from Shithole, I come from Shitville."

"Hole and ville are quite alike, if you don't like one you won't like the other," I said.

"Ha ha! What was that again?"

"Dunno," I said. "I just made it up."

"Oh, that's right, you're a writer," he said, as he leaned back against the cushions on the bed, put one foot on the mattress, and blew smoke up to the ceiling.

"What was your childhood like?" he said.

"My childhood?"

"Yes, when you were a young boy. What was it like?"

I shrugged.

"Don't know. I howled a lot, I remember."

"Howled a lot?" he said, and then went into a fit of hysterics. It was contagious, I laughed too, although I didn't really know what he was laughing at.

"Ha ha ha! Howled?"

"What's wrong with that?" I said. "I did."

"How?" he said, sitting up. "OOOOOOUUUU! Like that?"

"No, howled as in blubbered. Or cried, if you want it in plain language."

"Oh, you cried a lot as a child! I thought you howled and yelled!"

"Ha ha ha!"

"Ha ha ha!"

After we had finished laughing there was a pause. I stubbed out the cigarette in the ashtray, crossed my legs.

"I went around on my own a lot when I was a kid," he said. "And I longed to get away from *ungdomsskole* and *gymnas*. So it's fantastic to be here, basically, in my room, even though it looks terrible."

"Mm," I said.

"But I'm nervous about studying Law. I'm not sure it's really up my alley."

"You only started on Monday, didn't you? Isn't it a bit early to say?"

"Maybe."

A door slammed outside.

"That's Rune," Morten said. "He's always taking showers. An unbelievably hygienic person, you have to say."

He laughed again.

I got up.

"I'm meeting her at seven," I said. "And I've got a few things to do first. Are you going out this evening?"

He shook his head.

"I was going to read."

"Law?" I said.

He nodded.

"Good luck with Ingvild!"

"Thanks," I said, and went back up to my place. Outside, the evening was exceptionally light; the sky in the west, which I could barely see from the window, rising from the trees and rooftops, had a reddish glow. Some black clouds hung like disks in the distance. I put on an old Big Country single, ate a bread roll, put on my black suit jacket, moved my keys, lighter, and coins from my trouser pocket to a jacket pocket to avoid the inelegant bulge on my thigh, put the tobacco pouch in the inside pocket, and went out.

Ingvild didn't see me at first when she entered Café Opera. She wandered around shyly, looking from side to side, dressed in a white pullover with blue stripes, a beige jacket, and blue jeans. Her hair was longer than when I last saw her. My heart was pounding so much I could barely breathe.

Our eyes met, but hers didn't light up as I had hoped. A little smile on her lips, that was all.

"Hi," she said. "You're already here?"

"Yes," I said, half getting up. But we didn't know each other, a hug was perhaps too much, yet I couldn't just sit down again, like some jack-in-the-box, so I followed through and offered my cheek, which luckily she brushed with hers.

"I'd hoped I would arrive first," she said, hanging first her bag, then her coat over the back of the chair. "So that I would have home advantage."

She smiled again and sat down.

"Would you like a beer?"

"Ah, good idea," she said. "We have to drink. Could you get this round and I'll get the next?"

I nodded and went over to the bar. The room had begun to fill up, there were a couple of people ahead of me in the queue, and I studiously avoided looking straight at her, but from the corner of my eye I could see that she was staring out the window. She had her hands in her lap. I was glad of the break, glad not to be sitting there, but then it was my turn, I was given the two beers and had to go back.

"How's it going?" I said.

"With my driving? Or are we past that stage?"

"I don't know," I said.

"There's so much that's new," she said. "New room, new subject, new books, new people. Well, not that I've studied any other subject before," she added with a giggle.

Our eyes met, and I recognized that happy-go-lucky expression in her eyes that I had fallen for the first time I saw it.

"I said I'd be a bundle of nerves!" she said.

"I am too," I said.

"*Skål*," she said, and we clinked glasses.

She leaned to the side and took a packet of cigarettes from her bag.

"Well, how are we going to do this?" she said. "Shall we start again? I come in, you're sitting here, we give each other a hug, you ask how it's going, I answer, and then I ask you how it's going. A much better start!"

"I feel a bit the same," I said. "A lot of new things. Especially at the Academy. But my brother is studying here, so I've been hanging on his coattails."

"And your crazy cousin's?"

"Jon Olav, yes!"

"We've got a cabin where his grandparents live. There's a fifty percent chance they're your relatives too."

"In Sørbøvåg?"

"Yes, we've got a cabin on the other side of the water, at the foot of Lihesten."

"Have you? I've been there every summer since I was a kid."

"You'll have to row over and visit me one day then."

There was nothing I would rather do, I thought, a weekend alone with her in a cabin beneath the mighty Lihesten, what on this earth could be better than that?

"That'd be fun," I said.

There was a pause.

I tried to keep my eyes off her, but couldn't stop myself, she was so beautiful sitting there looking down at the table with the lit cigarette in her hand.

She glanced up and met my gaze. We smiled.

The warmth in her eyes.

The light around her.

At the same time there was that slightly awkward insecurity that came over her when the moment was past and she watched her hand flicking the ash from her cigarette into the ashtray. I knew where the feeling came from, I recognized it in myself, she was wary of herself and the position she was in.

We stayed there for almost an hour, it was torture, neither of us managed to get a grip on the situation, it was as if it existed independently of us, something much bigger and heavier than we could handle. When I said anything, it was tentative, and every time it was the tentativeness, not what was said, that prevailed. She kept looking out the window, not wanting to be where she was, either. But, I sometimes thought, perhaps she too is struck by sudden intense waves of happiness at just sitting there with me, as I was at sitting with her. I couldn't begin to guess, I didn't know her, didn't have a clue what she was like normally. But when I suggested leaving, it was relief she felt, I could see that. The streets had grown dark, apart from the heavy rain clouds there was something summery about the dusk, it was more open, lighter, filled with promise.

We walked up a hill toward Høyden, along a road cut into the mountain, a high wall on one side, railings on the other, and a row of tall brick houses beneath. The rooms inside the lit windows looked like aquariums. People were out in the streets, footsteps resounded in front of and behind us. We said nothing. All I thought about was that she was only a few centimeters from me. Her footsteps, her breathing.

When I woke up the next morning it was raining, the steady precipitation that was so typical of this town, distinguishable neither by its force nor its ferocity but still dominating everything. Even though you wore a rain jacket and rubber boots when you went out, you were still wet when you got back home. The rain crept up your sleeves, soaked into your collar, and the clothes under your rain gear steamed with humidity, not to mention what the rain did to all the walls and roofs, all the lawns and trees, all the roads and gateways as it relentlessly bucketed down onto the town. Everything was wet, everything had a membrane of dampness over it, and if you walked along the quay it felt as though what was above water was closely related to what was below it, in this town the borders between the two worlds were fluid, not to say floating.

It even affected your mind. I stayed at home all Sunday, yet still the weather seeped into my thoughts and feelings, which were somehow enveloped in something gray and unvarying and vague, reinforced by the Sunday atmosphere – empty streets, everything closed – which compounded with all the countless other Sundays I had known.

Apathy.

After a late breakfast I went out and called Yngve. Fortunately he was in. I told him about my date with Ingvild, how I was unable to say anything or be myself, he said she probably felt exactly the same way, that was his experience, they were just as nervous and self-critical. Call her and thank her for the evening, he said, then suggest meeting again. Not perhaps for a whole evening but a coffee. Then I would know how the land lay. I said we had already arranged to meet again. He asked who suggested it. Ingvild, I said. Well, then there you go, he said. Of course she's interested!

I was happy to hear he was so sure. If he was sure, I was too.

Before we hung up he told me he was going to have a party at his place on Saturday, I could come and bring someone with me. As I ran across the street in the rain, I wondered who it should be, who I could take with me.

Oh, Ingvild of course!

Back home again, I thought about Anne, who had been the technician for me when I was working for local radio in Kristiansand, she was in Bergen and would no doubt like to come along. Jon Olav and his friends. And maybe Morten?

Three times during the following hours I went down to the basement with the book stuffed down my trousers. I spent the rest of the day writing, and when evening came I sat on the sofa with the collection of poetry and the text analysis book I had bought to prepare for the poetry course that began the next day.

The first poem was short.

Nowadays

Whatever you say, let
the roots follow, let them
dangle

With all the dirt

just to make it absolutely clear
where they came from

Make it absolutely clear where *who* came from?

I read it again, and then I realized it was referring to the roots of words. That is, you should display the roots of words and the dirt around them to make it clear to those listening where the words came from. So, talk coarsely, or at least don't be frightened to.

Was that all there was to it?

No, surely it couldn't be. The words were probably a symbol of *something else*. Perhaps of us. In other words, *we* mustn't hide our origins. *We* mustn't forget who we once were. Even if they were nothing to be proud of. The poem wasn't at all difficult, you just had to read carefully and think about every word. But this didn't work with all the poems, some of them I couldn't crack however many times I read them and however much I thought about what they might mean. One poem in particular irritated me.

He who walks with a house on
his head is heaven he
who walks with a house
on his head is heaven he who walks
with a house on his head

This was pure surrealism. Was it the man who had the house on his head – and what did that mean, by the way? – who was like a heaven or was it the house that was his heaven? OK, let's say the house was a symbol of a head and his thoughts were various rooms in the house and this arrangement was heaven. So? Where was he going with this? And why repeat *exactly* the same words two and a half times? This was just pretension, he had nothing to say, he put a few words together and hoped for the best.

For the next two days we were bombarded with poems and names of poets, schools and movements. There were Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud, Guillaume Apollinaire and Paul Éluard, Rainer Maria Rilke and Georg Trakl, Gottfried Benn and Paul Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann and Nelly Sachs, Gunnar Ekelöf and Tor Ulven, there were poems about cannons and corpses, angels and whores, gatewomen and turtles, coachmen and soil, nights and days, all thrown together in incongruous assortments, it seemed to me as I sat there taking notes, because, since I had never heard of any of these names before, apart from Charles Baudelaire and Tor Ulven, it was impossible to establish any kind of chronology in my mind, they all became part of the same morass, modern poems from modern Europe, which clearly wasn't so modern after all, it was quite a long time since the First World War had raged, and I talked a bit about that in one of the breaks, the paradox of the poems being modernist while being so old-fashioned, at least as regards the content. Jon Fosse said that was an interesting point, but they were modern primarily in terms of form and the radical thinking they expressed. This was still radical, he said. Paul Celan, no one had gone farther than he had. And that made me realize that everything I didn't understand, everything I couldn't get my head round, everything in these poems that appeared closed or introspective to me, *this* was precisely what was radical about them and made them modern, also to us.

Jon Fosse read a poem by Paul Celan called "Death Fugue," and it was dark and hypnotic and eerie, and I read it again at home in the evening, and heard in my inner ear the way Fosse had recited it, and I found it just as hypnotic and eerie then, surrounded by my own familiar things, which merely by virtue of these words going through my head lost their familiarity, they too were woven into the poem, and darkness swept through the poem, for the chair was only a chair, dead; the table was only a table, dead; and the street outside, it lay empty and still and dead in the darkness that emanated not only from the sky but also from the poem.

Although the poem touched a nerve in me, I didn't understand how it did or why.

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink it and drink it
we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined

One thing was the fathomless darkness that existed in this poem, quite another was what it meant. What thoughts lay behind it? If I were ever to write like this I would have to know where it originated, be conversant with its starting point, the philosophy it expressed. I couldn't just write something similar. I had to understand it.

What would I write if I were to write a poem right now?

It would have to be about what was most important.

And what was most important?

Ingvild was.

So, love. Or falling in love. The lightness of spirit that flooded through me whenever she was on my mind, the surge of happiness at the thought that she existed, she was here now, in the same town, and we would meet again.

That was what was most important.

What would a poem about that be like?

Immediately, after two lines, it would be traditional. There was no way I could rip it into pieces, so to speak, and fling it over the pages the way modernists did. And the images that came to mind when I was thinking about it were also traditional. A mountain stream, cold mountain water glittering in the sun, the high mountains with white glaciers down the sides of the valley. That was the only image of happiness I could conjure up. Her face maybe? Zoom in on her eyes, the iris, the pupil?

Why?

The way she smiled?

OK, that's fine, but I was already light miles away from the starting point, the dark hypnotic and bewitching allure of Paul Celan.

I got up from the bed and switched on the light, sat down at the desk, and began to write. Half an hour later I'd finished a poem.

Eye, I'm calling you, come
Face, my beloved, sorrow
And life that plays
a black melody
Eye, I'm calling you, come

That was the first decent poem I had written, and when I switched off the light and settled back in bed I had a better feeling about the Writing Academy than I'd had since I started. I had made huge progress.

The next day we were given our first written assignment, by Jon Fosse. Write a poem based on a picture, he said, any picture at all, and after lunch I was on my way to the art museums by Lille Lundgård Lake to look for a picture I could write about. The sun had come out in the morning, and there was a vibrancy about all the colors in town, everything was wet and gleamed with rare intensity, dazzling beneath the verdant mountain slopes and the azure sky.

Once inside, I took out my notebook and a pen from my backpack, then deposited it in a cloakroom, paid, and went into the quiet, almost deserted gallery. The first picture that caught my eye was a simple landscape painting, depicting a village by a fjord, everything was clear and tangible, the sort of scene you could imagine seeing anywhere along the coast, yet there was something dreamlike about it, not in a fairy-tale way as with Theodor Kittelsen, this was a different dream, harder to grasp, but even more compelling.

Had I seen this landscape in real life, I would never have dreamed of staying there. But when I saw it here, hanging in the white room, I wanted to go there, I longed to go there.

My eyes moistened. I liked the picture, which had been painted by someone called Lars Hertervig, it was so intense, and in a way it turned the whole situation on its head, I wasn't just a Writing Academy student without a notion in his head about art, who had to write a poem about a picture, a pretender, but rather someone who felt so passionate about it that it brought tears to his eyes.

Happy about this, I went on. The museum had a large collection of Astrup paintings, I knew, that was one of the reasons I had come here. Astrup came from Jølster, Grandma's home village, where his father had been the priest. During the whole of my childhood we'd had an Astrup painting on the wall above the staircase. It portrayed a meadow stretching up to an old farmyard, beneath some mighty towering, though not unfriendly, mountains, and it was a midsummer night, the light floated gently across the meadow, which was full of buttercups. I had seen this picture so many times it was part of me. Outside the wall it hung on was the road and a housing estate, a quite different, sharper, and more concrete world with manhole covers and bicycle handlebars, mailboxes and caravans, homemade carts with baby-carriage wheels and kids with moon boots, nevertheless the nocturnal world in the picture was not a dream, not a fairy tale, it also existed in reality, near the farm Grandma came from, where many of her siblings still lived and whom occasionally we visited in the summer. Grandma could remember Astrup, Mom said, he was someone people talked about in the village, and at Grandma and Grandpa's house there was another picture he had painted – which I had also seen all my life. It depicted a birch forest, thick with black and white tree trunks and children walking between them picking something or other, the picture was eerie and almost completely without a sky, but it hung there in the midst of their everyday life, above their sideboard, and merged into the sense of security there.

By and large all the pictures by Astrup had motifs from Jølster, they portrayed places I knew in real life, and were recognizable, yet they weren't. This duality, scenes that were both known and unknown, wasn't something I thought about or reflected on, but I was still familiar with it, in much the same way that I never reflected on the room I went into to read, although I was familiar with it: the way I left the reality surrounding me and went into another from one moment to the next, and invariably longed to be where I wasn't.

The Astrup painting was part of me, and when Jon Fosse asked us to write a poem based on a picture, that was the first one that occurred to me. I walked around the museum, keeping my senses open, if anything loomed up and inspired me I would write about it, but if not, I would write about an Astrup painting that was already in my head.

I wandered around for half an hour, stood taking notes in front of the picture by Lars Hertervig and the Astrup paintings, described the details so that I could remember them later, when I got home and had to write the poem. Afterward I walked around the lake and into Marken, an area of the town I had hardly ever been in before. It was packed, the sunshine had brought people outside. I had a coffee and wrote a few lines at Café Galleri, continued toward Torgalmenningen and there, seeing the church towering over the town, it struck me that I could pop up and see whether Ingvild was in the reading room. The mere thought made me tremble. But there was nothing to fear, I told myself, she was only a human being like everyone else, the same age as me even, and it wasn't just me who had found it difficult to talk and behave naturally last time, she had probably felt the same, and the very idea that she might be full of trepidation but wanted this as much as me was such a good, uplifting thought that I rushed up the steps to Høyden.

Besides, I thought, when I arrived at the top and started walking in the direction she had indicated, I did also have a reason to see her, I was going to invite her to Yngve's party. If this went well, I could wait until later, then I would have a reason to ring her again, but if it didn't I could use the invitation as a trump card.

After the bright sunshine, the entrance to the Psychology Building was so dark that at first I couldn't read the letters on the sign there. And when they became clearer I was so distracted by nerves that for a few seconds I could hardly concentrate. My throat dry, my head burning, I finally managed to locate the reading room, and when I got there, so obviously flustered compared with the students I had met on the way, and scanned the rows of desks, there was someone standing at the far end waving, it was her, she cleared her desk at top speed, put on her denim jacket, and came over to me with a smile on her lips.

"Great to see you!" she said. "Shall we go for a coffee?"

I nodded.

"You'll have to lead. I don't know my way around here at all."

There were lots of students outside today, on benches and curbs and steps, and in the canteen at Sydneshaugen School, where we sat down with a cup of coffee, there was plenty of room between the tables. The atmosphere between us this time was much more relaxed, first we chatted a little about her studies and the people she shared her kitchen with in Fantoft, I told her about Morten, mentioned Yngve, how fantastic it had been to visit him in Bergen when I was at *gymnas*, she started to tell me about her childhood, she said she had been a typical tomboy playing soccer and climbing trees, I commented that there couldn't be much left of that in her now, she laughed and said she hadn't been planning to play soccer in Bergen, but that she would be going to the stadium the next time Sogndal came and she had also been thinking of taking in some of the home games at Fosshaugane. I talked a bit about IK Start and said that Yngve and I had been at the stadium when they beat Rosenborg 4-3 in the last match of the season in 1980 and became league champions, I described how we had stormed onto the field and stood outside the dressing room cheering on the players, and how they had tossed their shirts out, and unbelievably I had caught Svein Mathisen's, the most valuable of all, number nine, but a man had ripped it out of my hands and gone off with it. I said it was great being able to talk with a girl like her about soccer, she said she might have a few more surprises up her sleeve. She started to talk about her sister again, and then about all her inferiority complexes, there wasn't one thing she was good at, or so it seemed, but what she said was constantly contradicted by her laughter, and her eyes, which not only belied her tale of wretchedness but also turned it onto its head. For some reason I told her about an incident in my childhood, I had got hold of some slalom goggles, I could only have been eight or nine, they were so cool, but there was one snag, they didn't have any glass in them. Despite that I put them on the next time we went miniskiing on the slopes down from our house. It was snowing, the snow blew into my eyes making it almost impossible to see but I kept on going all the same, and everything was fine until some bigger boys turned up. They thought my goggles were as cool as I did, and said so, at which my chest burst with pride, and then of course they asked if they could borrow them, I said no, no way, but in the end I allowed myself to be persuaded, and one of them donned the goggles and was about to set off when he turned to me and said, there's no glass in them! He didn't make fun of me or anything, he was just genuinely surprised, why would anyone ski with slalom goggles if there was no glass in them?

We sat there for half an hour until I accompanied her back to the reading room. We stopped outside and continued chatting, then Morten came up the hill, it was impossible to mistake him, even at a distance, there weren't many young men who wore red leather jackets, and of those only Morten could stride along the way he did, his limbs as rigid as a doll's, yet energetic and full of power. But now his head wasn't held high, as it had been the other times I had seen him, it was bowed, and as he approached and I waved a hand in greeting, I could see his face was racked with anguish.

He stopped, I introduced Ingvild and Morten, he smiled fleetingly, then trained his eyes on mine. There were tears in them.

"I'm so desperate," he said. "I'm so fucking desperate."

He looked at Ingvild.

"Excuse my language, fair maid."

He turned back to me.

"I don't know what to do. I can't stand it. I have to get hold of a psychologist. I *have* to talk to someone. I called one, and do you know what they said? They only take acute cases, I said I *was* an acute case, I can't stand it any longer, I said, and they asked whether I had suicidal thoughts. Of course I have suicidal thoughts! I've got a broken heart and everything's going to pot. But apparently that wasn't acute *enough*."

He fixed his eyes on me. I didn't know what to say.

"You study Psychology, Ingvild, don't you?"

She glanced at me before answering.

"I started a week ago."

"Do you know where I can turn in such circumstances?"

She shook her head.

He looked at me again.

"I may come up and see you tonight. Is that alright?"

"Yes, of course, come whenever you like," I said.

He nodded.

"See you," he said, and strode off again.

"Is he a close friend?" Ingvild said when he was out of earshot.

"I can't say he is, no," I said. "He's the neighbor I was telling you about. I've only spoken to him three or four times. He wears his heart on his sleeve. Never seen anything like it."

"You can say that again," she said. "I'll be off then. Can you call me?"

What a shock. For a brief moment, no more than a second or two, I was unable to breathe.

"Yes," I said. "I can."

When, shortly afterward, I stopped at the top of the hill and saw the town beneath me, my feeling of happiness was so ecstatic that I didn't know how I would be able to make it home, sit there and write, eat, or sleep. But the world is constructed in such a way that it meets you halfway in moments precisely like these, your inner joy seeks an outer counterpart and finds it, it always does, even in the bleakest regions of the world, for nothing is as relative as beauty. Had the world been different, in my opinion, without mountains and oceans, plains and seas, deserts and forests, and consisted of something else, inconceivable to us, as we don't know anything other than this, we would also have found it beautiful. A world with gloes and raies, evanbillits and conulames, for example, or ibitera, proluffs, and lopsits, whatever they might be, we would have sung their praises because that is the way we are, we extol the world and love it although it's not necessary, the world is the world, it's all we have.

So as I walked down the steps toward the town center on this Wednesday at the end of August I had a place in my heart for everything I beheld. A slab of stone worn smooth in a flight of steps: fantastic. A swaybacked roof side by side with an austere perpendicular brick building: so beautiful. A limp hot-dog wrapper on a drain grille, which the wind lifts a couple of meters and then drops again, this time on the pavement flecked with white stepped-on chewing gum: incredible. A lean old man hobbling along in a shabby suit carrying a bag bulging with bottles in one hand: what a sight.

The world extended its hand, and I took it. All the way through the town center and up the hills on the other side, straight into my room, where I immediately sat down to write my poem.

At the beginning of the first class on the following day we handed in our pieces of work. While we sat chatting and drinking coffee, they were being copied, we could hear the drone of the photocopier and, as the door was open, see the flashes in the room whenever the machine illuminated the sheet of paper. The pile was ready, Fosse distributed the poems, for the next few minutes we read in silence. Then he threw out his arm and checked his watch, time for the analysis.

There was already a routine: one student read, the others commented in turn, and when the round was over, the teacher gave his analysis. The latter carried the most weight, especially when the teacher was Fosse, because even though he never seemed to be at ease, there was a gravitas and a conviction in what he said that made everyone listen whenever he spoke.

He spent a long time on each poem, went through them line by line, sometimes word by word, praised what was good, rejected what wasn't, highlighted what was promising and could be developed in other directions, concentrated throughout, his gaze fixed on the text, hardly ever on us, making notes on what he said.

My poem, which was the last one we analyzed, was about nature. I had tried to describe the beauty and openness of the countryside, and the poem closed with the grass whispering *come*, as though it were talking to the reader and expressed the feeling I'd had when I saw the painting. As it was a landscape painting there was nothing modern about the poem, and I had sat over it for a while trying various techniques to make it feel more contemporary and had suddenly thought of a word, *widescreen*, which I put to use in *widescreen sky*, it made the same kind of impression I had created in my prose, the boys' reality was colored by what they had seen on TV and read, but mostly TV. This produced the same effect, indirectly. It represented a break with the lyrical and poetic description of nature, I had thought, and when I read the poem aloud to the others it seemed to have that function.

Fosse, wearing a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves and blue jeans, stubble on his chin and dark bags under his eyes, didn't study the poem immediately after I had read it out, as he had done with some of the others, but went straight to the point.

He said he liked Astrup, and I wasn't the first to choose a painting by him, Olav H. Hauge had done so, too. Then he started on the poem. The first line, he said, is a cliché, you can cross that out. The second line is also a cliché. And the third and fourth. The sole value of this poem, he said after rejecting every single line, is the phrase *widescreen sky*. I've never seen that before. You can keep that. The rest you can scrub.

"But then there's nothing left of the poem," I said.

"No," he said. "But the description of nature and your enthusiasm for it are clichés. There's nothing of Astrup's mystique in your poem. You've completely trivialized it. But *widescreen sky*. As I said, that's not bad."

He looked up.

"That's it then. Anyone want to come for a beer at Henrik's?"

Everyone did. We walked together through the drizzle up to the café across the street from Café Opera. I was on the verge of tears and didn't say a word, knowing full well I could only get away with this while we were walking, you could be silent now but as soon as we sat down I would have to say something and seem happy, or at least interested, so that they wouldn't realize how much Fosse's words had hurt me.

However, I thought, as I slumped down on the sofa with a beer on the table in front of me, I mustn't appear too enthusiastic either, then it would be obvious that I was fighting too hard to act nonchalant.

Petra sat down beside me.

"Nice poem you wrote," she giggled.

I didn't answer.

"It's what I told you, you take yourself too seriously. It's just a *poem*," she said. "Come on now."

"Easy for you to say," I said.

She looked at me with those ironic eyes of hers and smiled her ironic smile.

Jon Fosse eyed me.

"It's difficult to write good poems," he said. "Not many people can. You found a great word there, and that's something, you know."

"Yes. Yes, I know," I said.

He looked as if he wanted to say more, but instead he sat back and averted his gaze. His attempt to console me was even more humiliating than his analysis. It meant he perceived me as someone who needed consoling. He talked literature with the others, but he consoled me.

I couldn't be the first to leave, everyone would think it was because I was upset and couldn't take criticism. Nor the second, nor the third. They would think the same. If I was the fourth, though, no one would think that, at least not with any reasonable justification.

Fortunately this didn't look as though it was going to be a long evening, we had come here for a beer following the day's work, and after an hour I was able to get up and go without losing face. It was raining harder now, the wind was gusting through the streets, which in the center were empty now that the shops were closed. I didn't give a damn about the rain, I didn't give a damn about people, I didn't give a damn about all the rows of crooked wooden terraced houses on the sloping mountainside I was walking up as fast as I could. I just wanted to get home, lock the door, and be on my own.

Once indoors, I took off my shoes, hung my dripping raincoat in the wardrobe, and placed the bag with my texts and notebook on the top shelf because one glance at that and my mortification would return.

To my dismay, we had been given another writing assignment. Another poem had to be written this evening and read and assessed the following day. I wasn't going to give a damn about that either, was I?

Anyhow I can't be bothered with it now, I thought, and lay down on my bed. The rain beat against the window above my head. There was a faint whoosh as the wind swept across the grass and pressed against the walls of the houses. The woodwork creaked. I was reminded of the wind outside the house where I grew up, its whoosh was so much stronger and more powerful because of the trees it moved. What a sound it had been. It soared into the air, moved off, disappeared, soared again, sigh after sigh went through the forest and the trees threw themselves forward and backward, as though trying to escape.

The trees I had liked best were the pines that stood on the vacant plots in the housing estate. They had been part of a forest, but then it had been cut down, the rocks had been blasted and lawns had been laid and houses built, which they stood beside. Tall and slim, many of them with branches only toward the top. Reddish, almost flamelike, when the sun shone on them. They resembled masts, I thought, whenever I was standing by the window in my bedroom and looking up at the neighboring plot, where they swayed back and forth and creaked, the plots of land were ships, the fences railings, the houses cabins, the estate an armada.

I got up and went into the kitchen. The night before I had put all the dirty dishes and cutlery in the sink, filled it with hot water, squirted a bit of soap in it, and left it to soak; now all I had to do was rinse everything in cold water and it would be spotlessly clean. I was pleased at having discovered this method, thereby avoiding all the hassle.

Once this was done, I sat down at my typewriter, switched it on, rolled in a sheet of paper, and stared at it for a while. Then I began to write a new poem.

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I took out the sheet of paper and looked at it.

The thought of reading this at the Academy filled me with glee, I purred with delight as I imagined what it would be like, how they would react, what they would say. The text consisted of nothing more than clichés and I would have to cross everything out, except for one word?

Ha ha ha!

I poured a cup of coffee and lit a cigarette. The delight was not undiluted, I would be taking a big risk if I read it aloud, it was a provocation, a slap in the face, and if there was one thing I didn't want, it was to fall out with anyone. My fear of this was so strong that it made the thought of doing it even more enticing. It was the attraction of the forbidden that I could feel, that I could actually do it, a dizzying sensation, like the fear of heights.

At around eight there was a ring at the door, I thought it would be Morten, but it was Jon Olav, he stood there in an open jacket and sneakers in the rain, as though he had only crossed the yard, and in a way this was true, it wasn't far from his place to mine.

"Are you working?" he said.

"No, I've finished," I said. "Come in!"

He flopped down on the sofa, I made two cups of coffee and sat on the bed.

"How's it going at the Academy?" he said.

"Well enough, I suppose," I said. "But it's tough. They don't mince their words when we discuss texts."

"Really?" he said.

"Now we're writing poetry."

"Can you do that?"

"I've never done it before. But that's the whole point of being there. You have to try new things."

"Yes," he said. "I haven't really got going yet. And there's so much to read that I already feel left behind. It's not like arts subjects, where you can get by with what you already know or use your common sense . . . Well, of course you have to use your common sense as well," he laughed. "But there's so much you have to *know*. There's quite a different degree of precision involved. So the only thing that counts is reading. And everyone's so disciplined. They're in the reading room from the crack of dawn to late at night."

"But not you?"

"I'll have to at some point." He smiled. "I just haven't started yet."

"I think the Writing Academy's just as tough, only in a different way. We don't have to *know* the way you do. You can't read your way to becoming a writer."

"That's clear," he said.

"You've either got it in you or you haven't, I figure. But it's important to read too, of course. But that's not the decisive factor."

"No, right," he said, taking a sip and glancing at the desk and the meager selection of books on the shelf.

"I've been thinking of writing about ugliness and trying to find the beauty in it, if you see what I mean. It's not true that a thing of beauty is exclusively beautiful, or ugly things are only ugly. It's a lot more relative than that. Have you heard the latest by Propaganda?"

I looked at him. He shook his head. I went over and put the record on the stereo.

"This part is nice and dark and beautiful, and then all of a sudden we're in an atonal ugly part and it destroys the beauty, but it's still good, you see?"

He nodded.

"Listen. This is where the ugly part starts."

We both sat listening in silence. Then it finished and I went over and turned down the volume.

"What you said about ugliness was really good. But it wasn't quite how I'd imagined it," he said. "It wasn't *that* ugly."

"Maybe not," I said. "But writing's different anyway."

"Yes," he said.

"I wrote a poem just now. I'm going to read it out at the Academy tomorrow. Well, I'm not sure. It's pretty radical. Do you want to see it?"

He nodded.

I went to the desk, picked up the poem and passed it to him.

He took it unsuspectingly, read with concentration, then I saw a pink flush spread across his cheeks and he suddenly turned round and burst into loud laughter.

"You're not going to read this, are you?" he said.

"Yes, I am," I said. "That was the idea."

"Don't even think about it, Karl Ove. You'll make a fool of yourself."

"It's a provocation," I said.

He laughed again.

"It certainly is," he said. "But don't read it out loud. You said you weren't sure. Don't do it."

"I'll see," I said, took the piece of paper he handed me and placed it on the desk. "Would you like some more coffee?"

"I have to be getting back soon."

"By the way, Yngve's having a party on Saturday. Do you feel like coming? He asked me to ask you."

"Yes, that would be fun."

"I was thinking of having drinks here before. Then we can take a taxi up there afterward."

"Great!"

"I'm sure you can bring along some friends if you like," I said.

He got up.

"What time shall I come by?"

"I don't know. Seven?"

"See you then," he said, slipped his feet into his shoes, shrugged on his jacket, and went out. I accompanied him to the steps. He turned to me.

"Don't read it out loud!" he said. Then he disappeared around the corner into the darkness and rain.

Just after I had gone to bed, at around two, I heard someone stop outside the front door, unlock it, and then slam it shut. From the footsteps that went along the hall and down the stairs I guessed it was Morten. Some music was put on, louder than he had ever played it before, it lasted for maybe five minutes, then suddenly everything went quiet.

Waking up the next day, I still hadn't decided what to do, and I took the poem with me so that I could make a last-minute decision. It wasn't difficult. As I went into the seminar room and saw the others sitting in their places, relaxing with a cup of tea or coffee on the desk in front of them – a handbag, backpack, or plastic bag resting against the desk leg unless they were lying against the wall behind them with the wet umbrellas, which were sometimes left open on the floor in the photocopy room or between the table and the kitchenette, so that they could dry, ready for use again – as I saw all this and absorbed the friendly atmosphere this created, I realized I couldn't read the poem out loud. It was full of hatred, it belonged in my room, where I was all alone, not here where I was with other people. Of course I could break down the partition between these two worlds, but there was something very strong holding them apart, which told me they shouldn't be mixed.

Having to admit I hadn't written a poem was humiliating. Everyone realized I hadn't written one because of Fosse's analysis the previous day, and that was tantamount to saying I had no spine, no stamina, was hypersensitive, a child, I lacked independence and strength of mind.

To rectify this impression I tried to appear attentive, interested and enthusiastic as the others' poems were analyzed. And it went quite well, I had already begun to grasp the technique of how to comment on poems, I knew what to look for, what was considered good or not good, and also succeeded in articulating this in a concise, comprehensible manner, which not everyone could do. For people who were supposed to have language at their fingertips there was a conspicuous amount of fumbling and hesitation, around the table there were evasive looks and arguments that were retracted the moment they were presented, some almost unbearably flimsy and lame, and sometimes when I spoke up it was simply to bring clarity and order into the discussion.

On my way home I popped into Mekka and spent more than seven hundred kroner on food, I came out with six full bags, and the prospect of lugging them all the way home was so demoralizing that I hailed a taxi, which pulled into the curb and came to a halt, I put the bags into the trunk and got into the back to be transported through the wet streets like royalty, elevated from the daily slog that was evident all around me, and even though it was expensive and I knew I was spending all the money I had saved by shopping at Mekka it was worth it.

At home I put away my things, took a little trip down to the basement with the photography book, had lunch, and tried to do some writing, not poems this time, I had finished with poems, I was a prose writer, and when I noticed that the sentences were coming as easily as before, all I had to do was write, I was relieved because somehow I had feared that Fosse's analysis of the catastrophic poem would affect my confidence with regard to prose, too, but such was not the case, everything flowed as before, and I wrote four pages without a pause before going to phone Ingvild.

This time I wasn't so nervous, first of all she had asked me to call, and secondly I was only going to invite her to the party – if she said no, it wasn't the same as her saying no to me.

Under the little dome of transparent plastic I stood with the receiver pressed to my ear waiting for someone to pick up at the other end. Raindrops sailed across the plastic, gathered in large clusters beneath, and let go at regular intervals and fell with a little plop onto the asphalt. In the light from the street lamp above me, the air was striped with rain.

"Hello?"

"Hi, I'd like to speak with Ingvild . . . "

"Hi, it's me!"

"Hi. How's it going?"

"Well, I think. Yes, it's going pretty well. I'm sitting alone in my room reading."

"Sounds nice."

"Yes, and what about you?"

"It's going well. I was wondering whether you felt like going to a party on Saturday? Tomorrow, that is. My brother's having a party at his place."

"Sounds like fun."

"I'm having a few people over first. Then we're taking a taxi. He lives in Solheimsviken. Would seven-ish be OK?"

"Yes."

"Jon Olav's coming anyway, so there's someone you know."

"Is he everywhere, that cousin of yours?"

"Yes, you could say that . . . "

She chuckled, and then there was a silence.

"Does that work then?" I said. "Seven tomorrow at my place?"

"Yes. I'll bring along my usual cheery good humor and positive approach to life!"

"Great," I said. "See you then. Bye."

"Bye."

The next morning I cleaned my room, changed the bedding, washed my clothes, and hung them on the stand in the basement, I wanted everything to be perfect in case she came home with me after the party. Something had to happen anyway, that much was obvious. My passivity and awkwardness the first time were understandable but not crucial; our second meeting had been different, it took place in the middle of the day and was a chance for us to get to know each other better, but now, the third time we were meeting in Bergen I would have to make my intentions known, make a move, otherwise she would slip through my fingers. I couldn't talk my way into a relationship with her, some action was required, a kiss, a hug, and then, perhaps later that night when we were walking in the streets outside Yngve's place, a question, would you like to come home with me?

It was an intimidating thought, but I had to, there was no way out, otherwise nothing would happen. And it wasn't that I had to follow this plan slavishly, I would have to improvise as I went along, read the situations, try to see what she wanted, where she was, but I couldn't not act, I had to act and then she could reject me if she wasn't willing or felt it was too soon.

But if she wanted to come home with me I would *have* to tell her about my physical problem. I *couldn't* go through the humiliation of trying to hide the fact that I came so quickly, as I had done so many times, I just had to tell her, treat it as a minor matter, no big deal, a manageable problem. The only time I had really made love to a girl, in a tent at Roskilde Festival that summer, it had got better and better the more times we did it, so at least I knew I *could*. I hadn't liked her much though, not as a person, she didn't mean anything to me beyond the sex, but Ingvild did, everything was at stake with her, I only wanted to be together with her, and I *couldn't* allow myself to fail because of that.

I also knew it helped to drink, but I shouldn't get *too* drunk, then she might think I was after only one thing with her. And I wasn't! Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Jon Olav and his two friends, Idar and Terje, were the first to arrive. I'd had three beers beforehand and was feeling confident in everything I said and did. I put out a dish of potato chips and a bowl of peanuts, and told them about the Writing Academy. They had read books by Ragnar Hovland, knew about Jan Kjærstad and Kjartan Fløgstad, of course, and I suspected they were impressed when I told them they were going to come and teach us.

"I imagine they'll tell us a bit about their writing," I said. "But the main thing is they're going to read our texts and talk about them. Do you like Kjærstad?"

At that moment the bell rang and I went to answer the door. It was Anne. She was dressed in black, had a little hat on her head and a long lock of hair hanging down over her face. I leaned forward to give her a hug, she placed a hand on my back, held it there for a moment after I had straightened up.

"Great to see you," she said with a little laugh.

"Great to see you too," I said. "Come in!"

She put down a small backpack on the floor inside the door and said hello to the others as she took off her coat. Her bubbly personality had once struck me as incompatible with the black Gothic element of her interests and approach to life. It was the Cult and the Cure, the Jesus and Mary Chain and the Belgian Crammed Discs bands, This Mortal Coil and the Cocteau Twins with Anne, fog and darkness and death romance, but with a smile on her lips and excited little jumps wherever she went. She was older than me, but when we had worked together, she behind the knobs and switches in the control room on the other side of the window, me behind the microphone, I once had the sense she might be interested in me, without being able to say for certain, such matters were impossible to know with certainty, anyway nothing happened, we were friends, both music fans, me slightly more interested in pop than her. Now she was a student, alone in Bergen like me, but she already had a host of friends as far as I could glean from what she said, reclined over the armrests of the chair, chatting with the others. No surprises there, she was outgoing and soon became the focal point of the little student gathering in my room that evening.

I drank steadily to reach a level where I no longer considered what I said or did, I just *was*, free and easy, so when the bell rang at a little before eight and I went out to open the door, I wasn't in the slightest bit nervous or tense, just happy to see her, Ingvild, standing on the steps in the rain with a bag over her shoulder and a smile on her face.

I gave her a hug, she followed me in, said hello to the others, a touch shy, possibly also nervous, and took a bottle of wine from her bag. I hurried into the kitchen to fetch a corkscrew and a glass. She sat down between Jon Olav and Idar on the sofa, inserted the corkscrew, placed the bottle between her knees, and pulled out the cork with a pop.

"So this is where you live," she said, filling her glass with white wine.

"Yes," I said. "I've been cleaning all day to get ready for you all."

"I can imagine," she said.

Her eyes narrowed and seemed to fill with laughter.

"*Skål*," she said.

"*Skål*," said the others, and we clinked bottles and glasses.

"What are you writing actually?" Idar said.

"A novel," I said. "A contemporary novel. I'm trying to make it entertaining but profound, too. It's not so easy. I'm fascinated by paradoxes. By whatever is both ugly *and* beautiful, both high *and* low. A bit like Fløgstad actually."

I glanced at Ingvild, who looked at me. I couldn't show the others how ridiculously in love I was, that all I really wanted to do was sit and stare at her, and I couldn't show her, either, so I tried to pay her as little attention as possible.

"But now I want to be published," I said. "I don't want what I write to be read by only a few people. There's no point in that. I might just as well do something else. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes," Idar said.

"Did you read your poem then?" Jon Olav laughed.

"No," I said, glaring at him. I didn't like him laughing. It was as though he was trying to tell the others something.

"What kind of poem?" Anne said.

"It was just something I wrote for the Academy. A practice activity," I said, and got up, went over to the record player, and put on *The Joshua Tree.*

"It wouldn't be hard to recite from memory," Jon Olav said, and laughed again.

I spun around.

"If you want to be a jerk, that's fine by me," I said.

He stopped laughing, as I thought he would, and at first looked surprised.

"What's the matter?" he said.

"I'm serious about what I do," I said, and sat down.

"*Skål*!" Jon Olav said.

We *skål*-ed, the brief flash of ill will was gone, the conversation flowed again. Ingvild didn't say much, interjected with the odd ironic comment, livened up when the conversation turned to sport, and I liked that so much, while at the same time it struck me that I didn't know her at all, so how could I have fallen so much in love with her, I wondered, sitting on the stool across the table from her, a bottle of cold Hansa beer held to my mouth and a lit cigarette in my hand, but I knew the answer with the whole of my being, there was no arguing with feelings, and nor should you, they always knew best. I saw her, she was here, and what she radiated, which was her, lived its life irrespective of what she said or didn't say.

Now and then I was struck by the illuminating thought that here I was, in *my* place, surrounded by *my* friends, and only a meter away was the girl I loved more than all else.

Life can't get better than that.

"Anyone want another beer?" I asked, rising to my feet. Idar and Terje and Anne nodded, I fetched four beers from the fridge, handed them around, saw there was a space between Jon Olav and Ingvild on the sofa if they squeezed together, and sat down there. When I opened the beer it foamed over, I held it away from me, the froth landed on the table, oh shit, I said, put down the bottle, went for a cloth from the kitchen and wiped it up. On the wall between the windows, just behind the sofa, there was a nail, and for some reason I hung the cloth there.

"A wet cloth has come between us," I said to Ingvild, and plopped down on the sofa. She looked at me in bemusement, and I guffawed from the pit of my stomach, haw, haw, haw.

I rang for two taxis from the telephone booth opposite. The others stood on the steps drinking and chatting. I watched them, thinking once again, they've come to *my* place for drinks. The rain had eased, but the sky was still overcast. A pale darkness hovered in the streets, through which we passed shortly afterward, it suddenly became lighter as we emerged by Puddefjorden and the high open sky there, then it became darker again as we climbed the hills in Solheimsviken, between the rows of workers' houses.

It was already half past nine. We were more than a little late. Yngve had said eight or half past when I asked him when we should turn up, however this was worse for us, not for them, not for all Yngve's friends and acquaintances, our presence didn't mean anything to them.

I paid one taxi driver, Jon Olav paid the other, and then I walked up the short drive, with the others close on my heels, and rang the bell.

Yngve opened the door. He was wearing a white shirt with gray stripes and black trousers, his hair was combed back except for a strand hanging over one side of his forehead.

"We're a bit late," I said. "Hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," he said. "The party's a flop anyway. No one's turned up."

I looked at him. What did he mean?

He said hi to the others, didn't make any fuss about Ingvild, fortunately, I didn't want her to realize how much I had talked about her to Yngve. We took off our shoes and coats in the entrance hall and went into the sitting room. It was empty apart from Ola, who was watching TV.

I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Are you watching *TV*?" I said.

"Yes? No point starting a party if there are no people."

"Where are they then?"

Yngve shrugged and forced a weak smile.

"I didn't give much advance warning. But there are lots of you!"

"Yes," I said, sitting down on the sofa under the *Once Upon a Time in America* poster. I was shaken, this was a bolt out of the blue, I had imagined the rooms would be packed with people, sophisticated young men and women, a buzz of conversation, laughter, the air dense with smoke, and then this! Yngve and Ola watching the Saturday film on NRK? And it would have to be when I brought Ingvild! I wanted her to see Yngve and his friends, students who had been here several years and knew the town, knew the university, knew the world, so that I could share the limelight with them, he was my brother, I was invited to his parties. But what did she see? Two guys watching TV, no guests, they hadn't come, they had other, better, things to do on a Saturday evening than go to a party at Yngve's.

Was he a loser? Was Yngve a sad loser?

He switched off the TV, moved the two chairs to the table with Ola, fetched some beers, and sat down, started talking to the others, a bit of polite small talk to make them feel at home, Anne and Ingvild and Idar and Terje, what they studied, where they lived, and the atmosphere, which at first had been somewhat hesitant, despite the fact that we had been drinking together for more than two hours, soon began to lift. The conversation went from involving the whole table to breaking up into smaller groups, I chatted with Anne, she was unstoppable, suddenly there was so much she had to tell me, I felt claustrophobic and said I had to go to the toilet. From there I went into the kitchen, where Terje was chatting to Ingvild, smiled at them, went over to Ola and Yngve, there was a ring at the door, Asbjørn walked in, followed closely by Arvid, and now the apartment was full, there were people everywhere, or so it felt, faces and voices and bodies in motion everywhere, and I mingled among them, back and forth, drank and chatted, chatted and drank, getting drunker and drunker. The sense of time vanished, everything was open, I was no longer inhibited by my own shortcomings, I walked around happy and free without a thought for anything except the moment and Ingvild, whom I loved. I kept my distance, if there was one thing I knew about girls it was that they didn't want someone who was easy to get, someone who followed them around, slack-jawed, so instead I chatted with the others, who, in intoxication's shining light, were drawn from the darkness as if by a torch. Everyone was interesting, everyone had something to say that I could listen to and be moved by until I left and they were reclaimed by the darkness.

I sat between Ola and Asbjørn on the sofa. On the other side of the table sat Anne, she asked if she could bum a cigarette off me, I nodded, the next moment her head was down and she was concentrating on rolling it.

"I th-thought of something," Ola said. "George V. Higgins, have you r-read anything by him?"

"No," I said.

"You sh-should. It's good. Really good. Almost only dialogue. Very Am-m-merican. Hard-boiled. *The Friends of Eddie Coyle*."

"Then there's Bret Easton Ellis," Asbjørn said. "*Less Than Zero*. Have you read that one?"

I shook my head.

"An American in his twenties. It's about a gang of kids in Los Angeles. They've got rich parents and do what they like. It's all boozing and dope and parties. But everything's utterly cold and stripped back. It's a very good novel. Kind of hyperrealistic."

"That sounds good," I said. "What was his name again?"

"Bret Easton Ellis. Remember you heard it here first!"

He laughed and looked away. I glanced at Yngve, who was talking to Jon Olav and Ingvild, he had that excited flush he sometimes had when he was trying to make a point.

"And the latest John Irving is also very good," Asbjørn said.

"Are you kidding?" I said. "John Irving's a mainstream author."

"He can still be good," Asbjørn said.

"The hell he can," I said.

"But you haven't read it!"

"No, but I know it's crap."

"Ha ha ha! You *can't* say that."

"I write myself, for Christ's sake. And I've read John Irving. His latest novel is poor, I *know* it is."

"For Christ's sake, Karl Ove," Asbjørn said.

"Imagine us sitting here, Anne!" I said. "So far from shitty Kristiansand!"

"Yes," she said. "But I don't know what I'm doing here. You know what you're doing. You're going to be a writer. But there's nothing I want to be."

"I *am* a writer," I said.

"You know what?" she said.

"No?" I said.

"The only thing I want to be is a legend. A real legend. I've always thought that. And I've never doubted that that's how it will be."

Asbjørn and Ola exchanged glances and laughed.

"Do you understand? I've always been sure of it."

"What kind of legend?" Asbjørn said.

"Any kind," Anne said.

"What can you do then? Sing? Write?"

"No," she said. Tears began to run down her cheeks. I looked at her at a loss to understand. Was she crying?

"I'm never going to be a legend!" she wailed.

Everyone was staring at her now.

"It's too late!" she exclaimed, and put her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook. Ola and Asbjørn burst into laughter, Yngve and Jon Olav and Ingvild sent us questioning looks.

"I'm never going to be a legend," she repeated. "I'm never going to be anything!"

"You're only twenty," I said. "It's not too late."

"Yes, it is!" Anne said.

"So?" Jon Olav said. "What do you want to be a legend for? What's the point?"

She got up and went toward the front door.

"Where are you going?" Yngve said. "You're not going, are you?"

"Yes," she said.

"Come on, stay a bit longer," he said. "You definitely won't be a legend if you leave at midnight. Come on. I've got a whole gallon of wine. Would you like a glass? It's a legendary vintage."

She smiled.

"Perhaps one glass then," she said.

Yngve got her one and the party continued. Ingvild stood by the wall with a glass in her hand, a tingle ran through me, she was so beautiful. I must go and talk to her, I thought, and went over.

"A real student party, huh!" I said.

"Yes," she said.

"Have you read anything by Ragnar Hovland by the way? He writes a lot about this sort of thing, I believe."

She shook her head.

"He's one of the teachers at the Academy. From Vestland, like you. In fact, I've got a bit of Vestland in me, too. I mean, my mom comes from Sørbøvåg after all. So I'm half a Vestlander anyway!"

She looked at me and smiled. I clinked glasses with her.

"*Skål*," I said.

"*Skål*," she said.

From the sofa I met Anne's eyes. I raised my glass to her too, and she raised hers. Jon Olav stood in the middle of the floor swaying back and forth, searching with his hand for something to lean on, found nothing and staggered a few steps to the side.

"He can't take his drink!" I laughed.

He regained his balance and, with a rigid, expressionless face, walked through the room and into the adjacent bedroom.

Where were Idar and Terje?

I went for a walk to find out. They were sitting in the kitchen chatting, their heads bowed over the table and their hands wrapped around a bottle of beer. When I returned, Ingvild was sitting beside Anne on the sofa. Anne's eyes were glazed and somehow completely disconnected with her smile.

She turned to Ingvild and said something. Ingvild took a deep breath and sat up straight, from which I concluded that what Anne had said shocked her. She replied, Anne just laughed and shook her head. I went over to them.

"I know your sort," Anne said, getting up.

"I won't stand for that," Ingvild said. "You don't know me."

"Yes, I do," Anne said.

Ingvild laughed scornfully. Anne walked past me, I sat down where she had been sitting.

"What did she say?" I asked.

"She said I was the sort who took other women's men."

"Did she say that?"

"Did you two ever go out together?" she asked.

"Us? No. Are you crazy?"

"I won't stand for that," Ingvild repeated, and got up.

"Of course not," I said. "But please don't go because of Anne. It's not very late! And it is a good party, isn't it?"

She smiled.

"I'm not going," she said. "Only to the bathroom."

I went into the bedroom. Jon Olav was lying on the bed, on his stomach with his head burrowed into the blanket and one hand hanging limply over the side. He was snoring. Arvid stood in the hall doorway.

"Hi, Knausgaard junior," he said.

"Are you going?" I said, suddenly afraid, I wanted everyone to stay and the party never to end.

"No, no," he said. "I'm going for a little walk to clear my head."

"Good!" I said, and went back into the sitting room. Ingvild wasn't there. Had she gone after all? Or was she still in the toilet?

"Won't be long now before Yngve puts on Queen," Asbjørn said to me, getting up from the stereo. "This moment always comes. When he's so drunk that the evening is as good as over. At least for him."

"I like Queen too," I said.

"What is it with you two?" he said with a laugh. "Is it genetic or was there something in the air on Tromøya? Queen! Why not Genesis? Pink Floyd? Or Rush!"

"Rush is pretty good," Yngve said from behind us. "In fact, I've got a record of theirs."

"What about Bob Dylan then? He's got such good lyrics! Ha ha ha! Yes, how he didn't get the Nobel Prize is a scandal."

"The only thing Rush and Dylan have in common is that you don't like them," Yngve said. "Rush is good in lots of ways. The guitar playing, for example. But you can't hear that."

"Now you disappoint me, Yngve," Asbjørn said. "Falling so low that you defend Rush. I'd come to terms with you liking Queen, but Rush . . . What about ELO? Jeff Lynne? Nice arrangements, eh?"

"Ha ha," Yngve said.

I went into the kitchen. Ingvild was sitting with Idar and Terje. Darkness hung over the valley below. The rain was illuminated in the light from the street lamps. She looked up at me and smiled, a touch quizzically, what now?

I smiled back, but had nothing to say, and she turned to the other two. In the sitting room the music was taken off and the murmur of voices rose for some seconds until the scratch of the stylus on a new record came through the speakers. It was the first notes of A-ha's *Scoundrel Days*. I liked the record, it was full of memories, and I went into the sitting room.

At that moment Asbjørn came out of the adjacent room. He strode with a determined step across the floor toward the stereo, leaned over, lifted the stylus, and took the record. Clearly, his movements were for show, almost didactic.

He held up the record and started to bend it.

The room went quiet.

Slowly he bent the record farther and farther until at last it cracked.

Arvid laughed out loud.

Yngve had been watching Asbjørn. Now Yngve turned to Arvid, poured the wine into his hair and walked out.

"What the f . . . ?" Arvid said, getting up. "I didn't do anything, did I?"

"Aren't you g-going to b-burn some b-books too?" Ola said to Asbjørn. "Make a l-little b-bonfire?"

"Why did you do that?" I said.

"Jesus," Asbjørn said. "You guys don't have to make such a fuss. I was just doing him a favor. Yngve knows me. He knows I'll buy him a new record. Perhaps not by A-ha, but a new record anyway. He's playing to the crowd."

"It might not be the material value of the record on his mind," Anne said. "You might have hurt his feelings."

"Feelings? Feelings?" Asbjørn laughed. "He's playing to the crowd!"

He sat down on the sofa and lit up. He acted as if nothing had happened, or was so drunk he didn't care, yet at the same time something came over him, either a facial expression or his body language, which suggested a guilty conscience, and then it took over, then it was obvious to everyone that he was sorry for what he had done. The music came back on, the party continued, after half an hour Yngve returned, Asbjørn said he would replace the record and soon everything was fine between them again.

After the beer ran out I had started downing wine. It was like fruit juice, and the source was inexhaustible. Now it wasn't only time that was dislocated, it was also space, I no longer knew where I was, it was as though darkness had descended between the various faces I spoke to. And how they shone. I was very close to my emotions, in that I talked completely without inhibitions, said things I never usually said and didn't know I had even thought, such as when I joined Yngve and Asbjørn and said I was so happy they were such good friends or when I went over to Ola and tried to explain how I had felt about his stammer the first times I had heard it, all while the wave which was connected with the thought of Ingvild rose within me more and more often. It was like a feeling of triumph, and while I was in the bathroom, looking at myself in the mirror, washing my hands and moistening my hair to make it stand up, smiling all the time, my thoughts coming in short jerky phrases, *fucking great, oh fucking bliss on earth, oh so good, so fucking good!*, I decided to make a move on her, kiss her, seduce her. I wasn't planning to invite her back to my place any more, no, there was a room upstairs on the second floor I had discovered, an old maidservant's room, no one was staying there now, it was probably used as a guest room, it was perfect.

I went into the sitting room, she was talking to Ola, the music was loud, on the verge of distortion, around them some people were dancing, I watched them until she looked at me. Then I smiled, and she smiled back.

"Can I talk to you?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

"The music's so loud here," I said. "Shall we go into the hall or something?"

She nodded. We went into the hall.

"You're so beautiful," I said.

"Was that what you wanted to say?" she laughed.

"There's a room upstairs, on the second floor. Shall we go up there? It's an old servant's room, I think."

I set off up the stairs and a moment later I heard her following me. I waited on the second floor, took her hand and led her up to the room, which was exactly as I remembered it.

I put my arms around her and kissed her. She stepped back and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"There's something I have to tell you," I said. "I'm . . . well, a kind of monster, when it comes to sex. It's a bit difficult to explain, but . . . oh, to hell with it, it doesn't matter."

I sat down beside her, put my arm around her and kissed her and laid her down and kissed her again, she was bashful and reserved, I kissed her neck, caressed her hair, slowly pulled up her sweater, kissed one breast, and she sat up and pulled down her sweater and looked at me.

"This doesn't feel right, Karl Ove," she said. "You're moving too fast."

"Yes," I said, and sat up as well. "You're right. I apologize."

"Don't apologize," she said. "Never apologize. There's nothing I hate more."

She got up.

"Are we still friends?" she said. "You know I like you very much."

"And I like you," I said. "Shall we join the others downstairs?"

We joined the others, and perhaps because her rejection had sobered me up, I suddenly saw everything very clearly.

There were very few people there. Eight, apart from us – that was the extent of the party. What for several hours had appeared to be a grand decadent human spectacle, the great student party, with quarrels and friendship, love and confidences, dancing and drinking, all borne aloft on a wave of happiness collapsed in an instant and revealed itself for what it was: Idar, Terje, Jon Olav, Anne, Asbjørn, Ola, Arvid, and Yngve. All with small glazed eyes and ungainly movements.

I wanted the party back, I wanted to be in the center again so I poured some wine and drank two glasses quickly, one after the other, and then one more, and that helped, slowly the thought of the meager turnout relaxed its grip and I sat down beside Asbjørn on the sofa.

Jon Olav came in from the bedroom. He stopped in the doorway. People clapped.

"Wahey!" Ola shouted. "Back from the dead!"

Jon Olav smiled and sat down on the chair beside me. I continued talking with Asbjørn, trying to explain to him that I also wrote about young people who drank and took dope, in as cold and stripped-back a style as that American writer Asbjørn had mentioned earlier. Jon Olav looked at us and grabbed one of the half-full bottles of beer on the table.

"*Skål* to Karl Ove and the Writing Academy!" he shouted. Then he laughed and took a swig of the beer. I was so angry that I stood up and leaned toward him.

"What the FUCK do you mean?" I yelled. "What the FUCK do you know about anything? I'm SERIOUS about what I do, do you understand?

Do you know what that is? Don't you dare come here and be ironic with me! You think you're so damned smart! But you study Law! Remember that! Law!"

He looked up at me, surprised and maybe a bit frightened, too.

"Don't you dare come here!" I yelled, and left the room, put on my shoes, opened the door, and went outside. My heart was beating fast, my legs were shaking. I lit a cigarette and sat down on the wet brick step. The rain was percolating down through the darkness above and landing in the small front garden with a quiet pitter-patter.

If only Ingvild would come now.

I inhaled deeply in order to do something at a slow deliberate pace. I let the smoke settle deep into my lungs before gently exhaling it again. I felt an urge to smash something. To take one of the curbstones and hurl it through the window in the door. That would give them something to think about. Twats. Fucking shitheads.

Why didn't she come?

Come on, Ingvild, come on!

Getting steadily wetter in the rain, I finally decided to stand up, threw the cigarette butt into the garden, and went to join the others. Ingvild was in the doorway talking to Yngve, they didn't see me and I stopped and tried to catch what they were saying, perhaps she was asking him questions about me, but no, they were talking about the best way home. Yngve said he would call a taxi for her if she wanted, she did, and when he turned down the music and lifted the receiver, I went into the bedroom to keep out of her way, mostly so as not to remind her of what had happened. She started to put on her coat and hat, I went into the living room and sat down on the sofa, and waved to her when she poked her head around to say good-bye. And that was fine, I was one of them, and not the person who had tried to sleep with her in the loft.

Shortly afterward Yngve ordered two more taxis, and then there were only Ola, Asbjørn, Yngve, and me left. We played records and chatted about them, stared for long spells into the air until someone made a move and put on another good song. In the end, Ola got up, he was going to take a taxi, Asbjørn went with him, and I asked Yngve if it was OK if I slept on his sofa, and it was, of course.

On waking, my first thought was the scene in the servant's room on the second floor.

Was it real? Had I dragged her up there, pushed her down on the bed, and pulled her jumper up over her breasts?

Ingvild? Who was so fragile and apprehensive and shy? Whom I loved with all my heart?

How could I have done that? What was I thinking?

What a stupid idiot I was.

I had ruined everything.

Everything.

I sat up, pulled the blanket to the side, ran my hand through my hair.

Jesus Christ.

For once none of the details of the night's events had disappeared, I remembered everything, and not only that, the images of Ingvild, the way she looked at me, which I hadn't taken in at the time, but which I grasped the full significance of now, were ever present, they quivered in my consciousness, especially when I pulled up her jumper, the look she gave me, because she didn't want it, yet she let me do it anyway, it was only when I closed my lips around her nipples that she sat up and said no.

What must she have thought? I don't want this, but he wants it so much, should I let him?

I got up and went to the window. Yngve must have been asleep, at any rate it was silent in the apartment. My head was heavy, but it wasn't bad considering how much I had drunk. What was it again? Beer on wine, not so fine. Wine on beer, never fear? I had drunk beer first, then wine, that was why.

Oh hell!

Hell, hell, hell.

What a stupid fool I was.

She was so lovely and so alive.

I went into the kitchen and drank a glass of water. The clouds over the town were dense and grayish white, the light between the houses was like milk.

From the bedroom came the sound of footsteps. I turned, Yngve appeared in just his underpants, he went into the bathroom without looking at me. He looked pale and groggy. I brewed up coffee, found some ham and cheese and salad, sliced the loaf of bread, and listened to him showering.

"So," he said as he emerged, wearing a light-blue shirt and jeans. "Was it a good party?"

"It was," I said. "But I made a terrible blunder with Ingvild, that was the only down side."

"Really?" he said. "I didn't notice. What happened?"

He poured coffee into a cup, added a drop of milk, and sat down. I blushed and looked out the window.

"I took her up to the room on the second floor and made a move."

"And?"

"She didn't want it."

"That can happen," he said, stretched for another slice of bread and buttered it. "It doesn't necessarily mean anything. Except that she didn't want it then. You were probably a lot drunker than she was, that could be the reason. It could have been too early. You don't know each other that well, do you?"

"No."

"If she's serious, I mean really serious, she might not want it to happen like that, at a party."

"I don't know," I said. "All I know is that I made a big, big blunder. Now I've scared her off. I'm sure of that."

Yngve placed a piece of ham on the bread, sliced a bit of cucumber, and raised the sandwich to his mouth. I poured coffee into a cup and took some sips.

"What are you going to do about it then?"

I shrugged.

"There's nothing I can do."

"What's done is dung and cannot be undung," he said. "Yes, a poor one, I'll admit that. Sorry. But I had a good one this summer, we ordered some shrimp, they came in a bowl and went in a flash."

"Ha ha," I said.

"You have to meet her again, as soon as possible, and then you have to apologize to her, it's as simple as that. You're sorry and it wasn't like you."

"Yes."

"Can't you invite her down here? Ola and Kjersti are coming at two. I'm going to make waffles. That would be the perfect setting."

"Do you think she'd come here again after last night? I don't think so."

"We can drive over and pick her up. You knock on the door and invite her, say I'm waiting in the car outside. If she says no, well, it's not the end of the world."

"Are you up for it?"

"Absolutely."

An hour later we got into the car and drove downhill to Danmarksplass, turned right at the crossing and headed for Fantoft. It was a Sunday, the traffic was minimal, there were already little patches of yellow in the green mountains on both sides of the valley. Autumn was here, I thought, tapping my fingers on my thigh to the music.

"I've written some lyrics for you, by the way," I said.

"Oh, fantastic!"

"Yes, but I don't think the lyrics are that fantastic. That's why I haven't shown them to you. I wrote them more than a week ago."

"What's the title?"

"'You Sway So Sweetly.'"

He laughed.

"Sounds like good pop lyrics, if you ask me."

"Mm, maybe," I said. "And now that I've told you they're done, you'll have to see them too."

"If they're no good you'll just have to write some more."

"Easier said than done."

"Are you a writer or aren't you? I only need a few verses and a chorus, then I can finish the songs. Easy enough for someone like you."

"I'll do it then."

He signaled left, we entered a large square in front of some high-rise buildings.

"Is it here?" I said.

"Haven't you been here before?"

"No."

"Dad lived here for a year, did you know that?"

"Yes, I did. Leave the car here and I'll pop up to her place."

I knew the address by heart, so after a bit of confusion I found the right block, took the lift up to her floor, went down the corridor until I saw the right number on the door, concentrated for a few seconds, then rang the bell.

I heard her footsteps inside. She opened the door, and when she saw me she almost jumped backward with the shock.

"You?" she said.

"I'd like to apologize for last night," I said. "I don't usually behave like that. I'm really sorry."

"Don't apologize," she said, and suddenly I remembered that was exactly what she had said the previous night.

"Would you like to come with me to Yngve's? He's going to make waffles. Ola and Kjersti, he was at the party last night, do you remember him, they'll be there too."

"I don't know . . . ," she said.

"Come on. It'll be nice. Yngve's outside now. He'll drive you back afterward as well."

She looked at me.

"OK then," she said. "Let me just change. Hang on a minute."

Yngve was waiting outside, leaning against his car smoking.

"Nice to see you again," he said with a smile.

"You too," she said.

"I'll sit in back," I said. "You go in front."

She did, pulled the safety belt across her chest, clicked the buckle into place, I looked at her hands, they were so attractive.

Not much was said on the way to town. Yngve asked Ingvild about her classes, and about Kaupanger, she answered, asked him about his and about Arendal, I slumped back against the seat, glad to have avoided responsibility for the conversation.

Every Tuesday evening, right through our childhood, Yngve or I made waffles. It was something we were good at, it was in our blood, so for me the following afternoon, eating waffles in the living room and drinking coffee, was not as strange and un-studenty as it was for the others, quite the contrary, the waffle iron was one of the few objects I had brought with me from home when I moved a year ago.

As in the car, I let the conversation flow without me. Sitting at the table with Yngve, Ola, Kjersti, and Ingvild, after what had happened the night before, I had everything to lose. The other three were more experienced; if I said anything it might be stupid and my inexperience would appear in flashing lights before Ingvild's eyes. No, I said as little as possible, mumbled *I agree* once or twice, nodded now and then, and smiled. I interspersed the conversation with the odd question to Ingvild, mostly just to show I was thinking about her and it was important to me that she was there.

"Put on a record, will you?" Yngve said. "And I'll make some more waffles."

I nodded, and while he went into the kitchen I knelt down by his record collection. I saw it as a test, it was decisive which music I chose, and in the end I opted for R.E.M.'s *Document* LP. By mistake I put on the second side and realized what a terrible mistake I had made just as I sat down, next to Ingvild.

This one goes out to the one I love.

I blushed.

She would think I had chosen this song to tell her. Face-to-face. This is for the girl I love.

She must think I'm an absolute jerk, I thought, looking out the window so that she couldn't see how red faced I was.

This one goes out to the one I've left behind.

No, no, no. Oh, how embarrassing!

I glanced at her, to see whether she had noticed.

She hadn't, but if she had and thought I was sending her a secret message, would she show it in any obvious way?

No.

I took a sip of coffee, wiped up the small dark seeds of the raspberry jam with the last bite of waffle on the plate, put it in my mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

"Excellent waffles," I said to Yngve, who had come into the room at that very moment.

"Yes, I used lots of eggs this time."

"The way you t-talk!" Ola said. "Anyone would think you were a c-couple of old b-biddies."

This one goes out to the one I love.

I got up and went to the bathroom, rinsed my face with cold water, avoided looking at myself, dried my hands and face on the towel hanging there, which smelled faintly of Yngve.

When I went back in, the song had finished. We sat for another half an hour, and when Ola and Kjersti were about to go, I said that maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea if we went too, in fact I had a lot going on tomorrow, and Ingvild said, yes, she did too, and five minutes later we were in Yngve's car again, heading at full speed for Fantoft.

Ingvild got out, waved to us, Yngve turned the car and started to drive back to town.

"That went well, didn't it?" he said.

"Do you think so?" I said. "Did she enjoy herself?"

"Ye-es. I'm sure she did."

"The waffles were good anyway."

"They were."

Not a lot more was said before he dropped me outside my building. I jumped out, thanked him for the lift, closed the door, and ran up the three steps to the door as he turned the corner.

I had imagined it would be good to get home, but the smell of the freshly cleaned floor and bed linen, which still hung in the air, reminded me of the plans I'd had before the evening started, imagining I would wake up here with Ingvild this morning, and a new wave of despair and anger at myself washed in over me, as well as all my feelings about the Academy, which launched themselves at me from all sides. The typewriter, the books, the plastic bag with my notebook, the pens, yes, even the sight of the clothes I had worn there depressed me and filled me with a sense of hopelessness.

Bonfire of books, Ola had said, and I understood the need for it very well, just toss everything you didn't like and didn't want, all life's detritus, into the flames and start afresh.

What a fantastic thought. Lug all my clothes, all my books, and all my records into the park, pile them up on the grass, plus my bed and desk, typewriter, diaries, and all the damned letters I had received, in fact everything that carried the tiniest hint of a memory: into the fire with it. Oh, the flames licking up at the dark night sky, all the neighbors flocking to their windows, what's going on, well, it's just our young neighbor purging his life, he wants to make a new start, and he's right, I'd like to do that too.

And then all of a sudden bonfire after bonfire, the whole of Bergen aflame at night, helicopters with TV cameras hovering above, reporters in dramatic mode, saying Bergen is ablaze tonight, what is happening, they appear to be lighting to the fires *themselves*.

I sat down on the chair by my desk, the sofa and the bed were too soft and giving, I wanted something harder. I rolled a cigarette and lit it, but it was too crooked and saggy, I stubbed it out after a few puffs, there was a packet of cigarettes in my jacket pocket, wasn't there, yes, much better, and then, staring down at the table I tried to do a reality check, look at the situation as rationally and objectively as I could. The Writing Academy, it had been a defeat, but first of all, was it such a problem that I couldn't write poems? No. Secondly, was this always going to be the case? Couldn't I teach myself, couldn't I develop over the year? Yes, of course. And if I was going to develop I would have to be open and, importantly, unafraid to make mistakes. Ingvild, with her I had made a fool of myself, once by being boring and reticent, once by coming on to her much too quickly and with force. In other words, I had been insensitive. I hadn't taken her wishes into account sufficiently. That was the point. I hadn't considered her feelings, only my own. But, of course, I had been drunk, that did happen now and then, it happened to everyone. And, on top of that, if she had any feelings for me, surely that wouldn't ruin everything? If she had any feelings for me surely she would be able to put herself in my shoes too and understand how things turned out the way they did? Fortunately, we had two previous meetings to build on, one in Førde, when everything had gone like a dream, and the other in the canteen, when at least we had chatted normally. And there were the letters. They were funny, I knew that, or at least they weren't boring. Moreover, I was attending the Writing Academy, so I wasn't like all the other students, I was going to be a writer, people found that interesting and exciting, perhaps Ingvild did too, although she hadn't said as much. And then there was the waffle session at Yngve's that we'd just had, that did a little to remedy the impression I had made the previous night, now at least she could see how nice Yngve was, and as we were brothers, the notion that I was nice as well might not be too distant.

At around seven I went down and rang the bell at Jon Olav's.

"Good to see you!" he said with a smile. "Come in. We've got a little debriefing to do."

"Good to see you too," I said, and followed him in. He brewed some tea and we sat down.

"I'm sorry I shouted at you," I said. "But I don't want to apologize."

He laughed.

"Why not? Are you too proud?"

"I was angry when you said what you said. I can't apologize for that."

"No," he said. "I went too far there. But you were too much. You were almost manic."

"I was just drunk."

"I was also drunk."

"No hard feelings?" I said.

"No hard feelings. But did you mean what you said? That Law is nothing?"

"Of course not. I had to say something."

"I don't have much time for the legal milieu myself," he said. "I see Law primarily as a tool."

He looked at me.

"Now you have to say that you see writing as a tool!"

"Are you at it again?" I said.

He laughed.

When I returned I lay down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. I could still be friends with Jon Olav. That was no problem. But not with Ingvild, that was quite a different matter and much more complicated. The question was basically what to do. What had happened had happened and couldn't be undone. For the future, though, what could I do? What would be best?

I had taken the initiative twice now, invited her out today and yesterday. If she was interested she would contact me, drop by, she knew where I lived, or write a letter. It was up to her. I couldn't invite her out again, that would be too pushy and now I had no idea if she was really interested in me and needed a sign.

The sign would be her coming over.

That was how it would have to be.

I didn't expect any moves on the Monday after Yngve's party, it was too early, Ingvild wouldn't contact me that evening, I knew that, yet still I sat waiting and hoping; whenever I heard footsteps in the street I leaned forward and peeped out the window. If someone stopped on the steps, I froze. But of course it wasn't her, I went to bed, another day dawned, more rain and mist, another evening spent waiting and hoping. Tuesday was a more realistic bet, she would have had time to think, distanced herself from what had happened and her real feelings would have had time to develop. Someone walking in the street: over to the window. Someone on the steps: I froze. But no, it was too early, tomorrow maybe?

No.

Thursday then?

No.

Friday, would she come with a bottle of wine we could share?

No.

On Saturday I wrote her a letter, even though I knew I wouldn't mail it, she was the one who had to take the initiative, she was the one who had to make an approach.

In the evening I heard music coming from Morten's room in the basement, we hadn't spoken since the last time at Høyden when he was so desperate, I thought I could join him for a little while, I hadn't spoken to a living soul all day and was hungry for company. I went downstairs and knocked on his door, no one answered, but I knew he was there, so I opened it.

Morten was kneeling on the floor, his hands folded and outstretched. On a chair in front of him sat a girl. She was leaning back with her legs crossed. Morten turned to me, his eyes crazed, I closed the door and hurried back to my room.

He came up next morning, said he had made a last-ditch attempt, but it had led nowhere, it had failed, she didn't want him. Nevertheless he was in good spirits, it shone through his stiff body language and formality of expression, what radiated from him was not despair but warmth.

To me he was like a character from one of the many Stompa books I had read when I was smaller, a young Norwegian boy at a boarding school in the 1950s.

I told him about Ingvild, he advised me to go and see her, sit down with her and tell her everything.

"Tell it as it is!" he said. "What have you got to lose? If she loves you she'll obviously be happy to hear it."

"But I have already," I said.

"When you were drunk, yes! Do it now that you're sober. It requires courage. And that'll impress her."

"The blind leading the blind," I said. "I saw you in action downstairs, didn't I?"

He laughed.

"But I'm not you. What works for one person doesn't necessarily work for another. I think the two of us should pay a visit to Christian one evening. We can take Rune along. All of us. What do you say?"

"I don't have a phone," I said. "So if Ingvild wants to get hold of me she would have to walk up here. And I'd have to be at home."

Morten got up.

"Naturally. But I don't think staying *on the premises* is the be-all and end-all."

"I don't, either. But I'd like to be here anyway."

"OK, we'll wait then. Goodnight, my friend."

"Goodnight."

I went out and called Yngve, he wasn't home, I remembered it was Sunday and he was probably working at the hotel. I rang Mom. We first went through events in my life, that is, at the Academy, then through events in hers. She was looking for somewhere new to live, and she was working hard on plans to introduce an engineering course at her school.

"We must try to meet soon," she said. "Perhaps you and Yngve could come to Sørbøvåg one weekend? It's a long time since you've been there. We could all meet up."

"Good idea," I said.

"I'm busy next weekend. What about the weekend after?"

"I'll see what I can do. Yngve has to be free too."

"Let's start there then. And we'll see what happens."

It really was a good idea. Grandma and Grandpa's farm was a completely different world because it was rife with childhood memories, untouched somehow, as I was there so seldom and because of its location, on a little hill with a view of the fjord and the mountain behind, so close to the sea, far away from everything. It would be wonderful to spend a few days there, where no one cared about what I was or what I wasn't, I had always been enough for them.

This week we were going through short prose at the Academy. The pointillist novel was all the rage, a form whose Norwegian history began with Paal-Helge Haugen's *Anne*, from what we were told, this and other pointillist novels were situated somewhere between prose, the line, that is, and poetry, the point. I read it, and it was fantastic, permeated with darkness much like Paul Celan's "Death Fugue," but I couldn't write like that, there was no chance, I didn't know what created this permeation of darkness. Even though I went through sentence by sentence, it was impossible to say, it wasn't in any defined place, wasn't conjured up by any particular words, it was immanent everywhere in the same way that a mood is immanent in a mind. Mood isn't in a particular thought or a particular part of the brain, nor in a particular part of the body, such as a foot or an ear, it is everywhere, but nothing in itself, more like a color in which thoughts are thought, a color through which the world is seen. There was no such color in what I wrote, no such hypnotic or evocative mood, in fact there was no mood at all, and that was the heart of the problem, I assumed, the very reason I wrote so badly and immaturely. The question was whether you could *acquire* such a color or mood. Whether I could fight my way there or whether it was something you either had or you didn't have. At home, writing, I thought what I did was good, and then came the round of critique at the Academy, where the same was said every time, a bit of polite praise for appearance's sake, such as, there's a lively narrative style, before they weighed in with clichéd, stereotyped, perhaps even tedious. But what hurt me most was that my writing was immature. When the prose course began we were given a simple task, we had to write about one day or the start of a day, and I wrote about a young man waking up in his rented room to the sound of the mail, he slept on the other side of the wall to the mailbox, and it made a racket. After breakfast he went out, on the way he saw a girl, whom I described, and whom he decided to follow. When I read this out the atmosphere became rather uncomfortable. They came up with the usual vague praise, said it was good, said it was easy to visualize, suggested I delete this and that. . . It was only when it came to Trude's turn that what I had sensed in the air was articulated. It's so immature! she protested. Listen:. . . he looked at her well-formed 501 bottom. I mean, honestly, a well-formed 501 bottom?! She's just an object, and, not only that, he stalks her as well! Had this been an exploration of immaturity and the objectification of women I wouldn't have said anything, but there's nothing in the text that suggests it is. In short, it's a bit creepy to read, she concluded. I tried to defend myself, conceded she had made some good points, but insisted my text *dealt with* exactly what she had said and there *was* a distance in the writing. I could of course have added a meta-level in the text, I said, as Kundera does, but I didn't want to, I tried to stay on the same level as the character.

"That isn't apparent from what I read anyway," Trude said.

"No," I said. "Maybe it isn't visible enough."

"I thought it was fun!" said Petra, who for some reason often defended me during these critique sessions. Presumably because she also wrote prose. Whenever we discussed our texts feelings became heated and more and more often the group tended to divide into two camps: on one side were those of us who wrote mainly prose and, on the other, those who wrote poetry, with Nina, who wrote equally brilliantly in both genres, in the middle. Not that she said that much, she was perhaps the one student who found it hardest to formulate her views orally, it was almost impossible to grasp what her opinion was, if she had an opinion at all, that is. Judging by what she said, it didn't seem so, it was all vague, completely directionless, she might just as well have been presenting arguments about coats as about literature, but what she wrote was crystal clear, not in the sense that her opinions became coherent there, no, it was the language, her sentences, they were as clear and exquisite as glass. She was the best, Trude was the next best, then Knut. Petra, whose sentences resembled beetles at the bottom of a bucket, wasn't in the competition, I figured, she wasn't the finished article in the way that the other three were, but one day she would utterly outshine them, her talent was so obvious and it lay in her unpredictability: anything could happen in her texts, it was impossible to predict from the person she was or what she wrote, with the others you often could, but not with Petra, something unusual or unexpected was always in the cards. I was at the bottom, with Kjetil. The last two students, Else Karin and Bjørg, were above us, they'd both had novels published, in a way they were full-fledged writers, and what they handed in was also always accomplished and reliable. But sparks never flew in their writing in the way that they did in Nina's and Petra's, they were more like two horses hauling logs through the forest in the winter, it was heavy work, they made slow progress, their eyes were firmly set on the path ahead.

If I was at the bottom I had to rise. If I accepted that I belonged down there, in the terrible abyss of immaturity and ineptitude, I had failed. I couldn't fail. After a stint at the Academy, I weakened and told myself it was right, I wasn't a writer, I had no business being there, but never for long, maximum one evening, then my mind rose up in opposition, it wasn't right, I might not be a writer now, but this was a temporary state that had to be, and would be, overcome, and when I woke in the morning, showered, and packed my things to go to the Academy, it was with a newfound self-confidence.

Rounding off the week at either Wesselstuen or Henrik had started to become a habit. I hadn't gone along the first two Fridays, but this afternoon I decided I couldn't sit at home waiting every single weekend, and if Ingvild were to stop by this evening of all evenings, she would probably leave a note.

During the month we had been at the Academy, we had got to know the teachers better and better, they weren't stiff and uncomfortable anymore even though I had a suspicion the awkwardness would never quite go, it was in their characters and nature, especially in Fosse, who had less of the outgoing spirit that Hovland revealed with his repartee and the constant, though slightly evasive, glint in his eye. No such repartee with Fosse, no such glint. But he still came close to us, expressed his opinions about what we were discussing, at first in a serious tone, but that often dissipated into laughter, in his rather sniffling, semi-giggling way, and sometimes he told us anecdotes about experiences he'd had, which, taken as a whole, gave us a picture of who he was. Not a complete one though because he was a very private person, like Hovland, who hardly ever spoke about anything to do with his private life, but with what they revealed of themselves in class there was enough for me to have a sense of who they were. Fosse was shy, but also self-assured, to a very high degree, he knew who he was and what he was good at, the shyness was more like a cloak he had wrapped around himself. With Hovland it was the opposite, I established, with him the shyness was protected by his quick tongue and ironic sense of humor. It was obvious that Hovland and Fosse both liked and respected each other, although what they wrote was like night and day. Twice they had sung a children's song – *Blåmann, blåmann bukken min* – at the end of the evening.

We walked up the gentle slope from Nøstet, put down our umbrellas, shook and closed them, went up to the first floor at Henrik, found a table, ordered beers, and chatted. It was several days since the immaturity comment had been made, and I had come up with a new idea for a novel, inspired somewhat by the handful of novels I had read by Borges and Cortázar that week, also any thoughts about Ingvild had been entirely lost in all the prevailing tensions at the Academy, so I was in a relatively good mood. After maybe an hour most of us had drunk enough for the limits on what could be said and what could not, which everyone felt to varying degrees, started to loosen. Jon Fosse was describing his childhood and he said that at a certain point he could have ended up on the streets. Petra laughed in derision. You could not, she declared. You're just mythologizing your own past. On the streets, right! Ha ha ha. No, no, Fosse insisted in his quiet way, looking down at the table, that was precisely how it had been. He could have been on the streets. Who's ever heard of a street urchin in a village? Petra countered. No, this was

Bergen, Fosse replied. Everyone listening to this exchange was ill at ease. Fortunately Petra dropped the topic. The evening continued, more beer was drunk, the atmosphere was good, until Jon Fosse got up to go to the bar. The street urchin wants some beer, Petra said. Jon Fosse didn't respond, got his beer, came back, sat down. Petra taunted him with another gibe a little later, in the same way, calling him a street urchin. Eventually, he rose to his feet.

"Well, I can't be bothered with this," he said, put on his jacket and went down the stairs.

Petra laughed as she looked down at the table.

"Why did you do that? You made him leave," Trude said.

"Ach, he's so pompous and self-important. On the streets . . . "

"But you didn't have to bully him. What good could that do?" I said. "*We* wanted him here. *We* thought it was fun drinking with him."

"Since when have you been our rep?"

"Come on. You behaved very badly," Knut said.

"Jon's a nice friendly man. There's no reason to treat him like that," Else Karin said.

"Now all of you just give it up," Petra said. "You're a bunch of hypocrites. Everyone thought what he said about ending up on the streets was ridiculous."

"I didn't," I said.

"No, because you're another one who'd like to be a street urchin. Street urchin! Have you ever heard anything so stupid!"

"Now let's drop this," Knut said. "You apologize on Monday if you dare."

"I certainly won't," Petra said. "But we can drop it. I agree. It's a trivial matter."

Everything was different after Fosse had gone, people packed up and left one by one soon after, apart from Petra and me – we went to Café Opera. She asked if she could crash at my place, I said, of course, and we found ourselves a table and carried on drinking. I told her about my new idea for a novel. So, it would consist of a variety of dialogues, people talking in various contexts, in cafés, on buses, in parks, and all the conversations would be about central themes in these people's lives, so they spoke about something important, one said he had just been told he had cancer, for example, or a son had been sent to prison, perhaps for a murder, but then, I told Petra – who was listening, though not looking at me, apart from an occasional fleeting glance, followed by one of her equally fleeting smiles – but then, the context for these conversations is slowly revealed. There was a man recording them on tape. Why did he do that? I said to Petra, well, come on, tell me, she answered, I smiled, she smiled, well, that's what I'm working on, I said. Well, he belongs to, or is employed by, an organization. In all towns of a certain size there are people who work for this organization, they all go around recording conversations, which are written down and filed away somewhere, and this isn't something that started this year, it's been going on since time immemorial. I think there are conversations in existence from the Middle Ages, and from antiquity, thousands upon thousands of them, all in some way important for the respective individuals.

"And?" Petra said.

"And? Nothing else. That's it. Do you believe it?"

"I think it's a fun idea. But why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do they collect conversations? What do they do with them?"

"I'm not quite sure. I suppose they just document them."

"Now I remember what this reminds me of. Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire*. Have you seen it? There are some angels going around and listening to people's thoughts."

"But these are conversations. And they're not angels."

"Yes, yes, but have you seen it?"

"A long time ago. But that wasn't what I was thinking of. Not at all, in fact."

And it was true, I hadn't had that film in my mind for one second, although I understood what she meant, there was a similarity.

"Do you want another beer?" I said, getting up.

"Please," she said.

In the queue I scanned the room to see if Ingvild might have come, which I had been doing ever since I set foot in Café Opera, but she was nowhere to be seen. I raised two fingers in the air and saw the almost imperceptible twitch in the barman's eye that told me he had registered the order, not without a mild sense of pride, I was an old hand at this game now.

What if they *were* angels?

That would solve everything! They were collecting material for a bible in reverse, one about humans they couldn't understand. For them humanity was incomprehensible! So they analyzed these conversations!

I placed the two large beers on the table and sat down.

"I've heard you shouldn't talk about what you're planning to write," I said.

"Why not?" Petra said, not that interested, she was staring into the distance and her lips slid over her teeth the way they did when she was thinking about something else or when I imagined she was thinking about something else.

"You should keep your powder dry, in a way," I said. "Save it."

"Ach, that's just what people say. You do as you like. If you want to talk about it, you just talk away to your heart's content."

"Maybe you're right," I said.

I always felt so pure and innocent when I was with her, like a squeaky-clean middle-class son, the teacher's pet, good at school but zero at life. She told me that in recent weeks she had gone out nearly every night, on her own in the bar at Wesselstuen, and men always came up and bought her a drink, she didn't spend a single krone all night, she said, and did nothing in return, except listen to them, not even that sometimes. It amused her, these men were entertaining, she said, and she would never have met them otherwise. I didn't understand what pleasure she could derive from that, but I respected her, admired her even, for it, I had read Bukowski and Kerouac of course and all the other books about people hanging out in bars drinking, and I had been drawn to life in the glittering shadows ever since *gymnas*, but I didn't know it, didn't go there myself, to sit alone in a bar chatting with strangers would have been inconceivable for me, it was closer to my nature to make waffles alone in my room, I reflected, that at least was the feeling Petra evoked in me, I was that type, a shallow happy-go-lucky kid who was always calling Mom and was a bit afraid of Dad. She got off her high horse when she sat with me, and I didn't understand why, but I was happy she did and so I just had to put up with her laughing at me and making derogatory comments. She did that to everyone anyway.

I looked behind me at all the small knolls, the heads.

Ingvild?

No.

Anyone else I knew?

No.

I looked at my watch. Half past eleven.

Angels studying the bible in reverse!

Could I pull that one off?

"I'm writing a short story about a hairdresser's," Petra said. "There are two dogs lying in a basket. This is my idea!"

"I'm sure it'll be really good," I said.

"Talking about it isn't a problem anyway," she said, and smiled as her eyes narrowed into a sudden sneer.

"Hello," said a familiar voice behind me.

It was Yngve.

"Hello!" I said. "I was hoping you would be out tonight."

"I'm just nosing around. I've come from work, thought I'd see if there was anyone here I knew."

"Get yourself a beer and sit down! This is Petra, by the way, from the Academy. This is my brother, Yngve."

"Guessed as much," Petra said.

When he sat down a few minutes later I was a bit concerned that Petra would give him a hard time, in her eyes he would seem pretty straitlaced, but that didn't happen at all, on the contrary, they chatted while I leaned back and drank beer and relaxed and listened with half an ear. Petra asked Yngve what he was studying, and that alone was unexpected. Perhaps it was the Fosse incident that had forced her to pull herself together. Yngve started telling Petra about a book by Baudrillard on America, she was interested and I was happy. She got up to go to the bathroom, Yngve said he liked her, she was nice, I said yes, but she's got a terrible tongue on her when the mood takes her.

We stood in the taxi queue outside Wesselstuen, we waited twenty minutes, then we were in the backseat of an elegant low-slung Mercedes gliding through the rain-gleaming streets up to my place. I paid, checked there wasn't a message by the front door or the door to my room, unlocked it, not caring what Petra might think about what she saw, which I would have with almost anyone else, made some tea, put on some Velvet Underground, who for some reason I associated with her, perhaps it was her cynicism and urbanity that did it. She said Yngve was nice and asked how we got along, I answered that we had a good relationship, but I might be too dependent on him in Bergen, at least that thought had gone through my head, I didn't have any of my own friends, except for those at the Academy, so I had to rely on Yngve. Once a little brother, always a little brother, she commented. We smoked our cigarettes, I said I didn't have a spare duvet, but she could have mine, she snorted and said the bedspread was enough, she would sleep in her clothes, that wasn't a problem, she often did that. OK, I replied, but what about a sheet? She snorted again, as you wish, I said, and stood up.

Should I get undressed in front of her? Or sleep with my clothes on too?

No, to hell with it, I lived here, I thought, and started getting undressed. She turned away and fidgeted with something or other until I was in bed, supporting myself on one elbow. She looked at me.

"What's that there? Ugh, how revolting!" she said. "Have you got *three* nipples?"

What on earth was she talking about?

I looked down at my nipples.

She was right. An extra nipple had grown next to one of the original two, just as big.

Horrified, I held it between thumb and forefinger.

Could it be cancer?

"Yuck!" she said. "If I'd known you were a freak I wouldn't have stayed here."

"Relax," I said. "It's just a pimple. It's grown in a pore or whatever you call them. Look now!"

I squeezed the new nipple and a yellow blob squirted onto my chest.

"Ugh! Ugh! What are you doing!" she said.

I got up, took a towel from the cupboard and wiped the pus, looked down at my chest, which was back to normal now, and got into bed.

"Will you turn off the light?" I said.

She nodded, went over to the switch and pressed it, sat down on the sofa, swung her legs up, and pulled the white bedspread over her.

"Goodnight," I said.

"Goodnight," she said.

I woke to her walking through the room and sat up.

"Are you going?" I said.

"I guess so," she said. "It's nine. Sorry to wake you up."

"No problem," I said. "Don't you want any breakfast?"

She shook her head.

"What a racket you made last night. Do you remember?"

"No."

"You stood up, threw the duvet on the floor, and stamped on it, really hard again and again. 'What are you doing?' I said. 'There's a mink in the duvet!' you shouted. I almost died laughing. What a sight that was."

"Is that true? I don't remember anything."

"It's true. Thanks for the use of the sofa. See you!"

I heard her walk through the hall, heard the front door open and shut, her footsteps round the corner and fade as she went down the hill. A vague image of an animal appeared, it was between the duvet cover and the duvet, I remembered it and remembered throwing down my duvet in fear and disgust. I had no memory of stamping on it at all. How spooky. For all I knew, there might have been scenes like that here every night.

Two evenings later there was a ring at the door, I jumped up, absolutely convinced it was Ingvild, who else could it be?

Jon Olav.

He wondered what had happened to me, was I writing twenty-four hours a day or what?

Yes, it was a bit like that.

He asked me if I felt like going out for a beer, Sunday was a good day for it, everything was so still and peaceful.

I said probably not, I had a lot to do.

"OK," he said, getting up and putting on his jacket. "Thanks for the chat."

"Thank *you*. Are you going out anyway?"

"I'll see. By the way, I met Ingvild yesterday."

"Oh? Where?"

"There was a party in Møhlenpris. Loads of people."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing special. Actually I didn't talk to her that much."

"Anyone else I knew there?"

"Yes, lots. Several of those at Yngve's party. Asbjørn and Ola, was that his name? Very nice guy anyway."

"Yes, he is," I said. "Whose party was it?"

"I don't know. I went with some friends of friends. It was big. Half of Høyden was there."

"I was home," I said.

"So you said. You could catch up now."

"I feel like a drink, but no."

"OK. I respect a man who has self-discipline!"

He left, and I sat down to write. I had three complete conversations now and was going to try to finish a fourth before I went to bed. This one takes place in a café, the two participants are criminals and they become edgy and evasive when they catch sight of the microphone the collator positions on the table, they soon leave.

I went to bed early and fell asleep at once as usual. At seven I was woken by a dream, which was a very rare occurrence.

I had been dreaming about a party with Yngve and Ingvild. I went into the hall, stopped by the living-room door, they were standing at the far end, by a window. Ingvild looked at me, then she tilted her head and Yngve kissed her.

I lay back in bed.

Ingvild was going out with Yngve.

That was why she hadn't come.

I brooded over it all morning. I believed in dreams, I believed they told you something about life and at a deeper level were always true. If so, the image had been unmistakable. They were standing together, Ingvild saw me and then she kissed Yngve.

Surely that couldn't be true?

Dear God, tell me it isn't so!

But I knew it was, and the truth burned inside me all day. The whole of my body ached, my stomach churned, at times I could barely breathe, my heart was beating so fast.

Oh God, tell me it isn't true.

Suddenly it all changed. A dream? Was I a complete moron? Who believed in dreams?

It was only a dream.

I found my running shoes and the old tracksuit I had once been given by Yngve, which I regarded as a good omen, he had never wished me any ill, and then I went into the street and began to run. I hadn't run since I lived in Northern Norway, I was gasping for breath after only a few hundred meters. But I had to smash this ridiculous idea, crush it, and my method was to wear myself out, run and run until there was nothing left to run with, and then take a hot shower and sit reading a neutral novel of some kind, which dealt with anything other than love, and then, as tired as a child after a long day, go to bed, hopefully to wake up refreshed the next morning, free of jealousy and unfounded suspicions.

It didn't quite go according to plan, the image stayed with me all week, but it didn't torture me in the same way, there was a lot to think about in connection with classes, and when I called Yngve to arrange the details for the trip to Sørbøvåg I noticed nothing unusual about him.

It had just been a dream.

We had Friday free, and I planned to catch the boat north on Thursday afternoon, although Yngve couldn't come until the day after. Mom was taking the Friday off and would pick me up from the quay at Rysjedalsvika.

The rain was teeming down as I jumped off the bus by Fisketorget and walked over to Strandkai Terminal, where the boat was moored with the engines running, waiting for passengers. The water level in Vågen was high, the bluish-gray sea bobbed up and down, a very different density from the angry raindrops lashing the surface. I bought a round-trip ticket from the office window, crossed the quay, went up the gangway on board, found myself a seat at the very front so that I could see the countryside through the large sloping front windows while it was still light.

Hydrofoil had been one of the magic words in my childhood, along with *catamaran* and *hovercraft*. I didn't know for sure, but I assumed this boat with its split hull was a hydrofoil. I still liked the word.

Through the side windows I saw passengers arriving with suitcases and bags, heads tucked into their coats beneath the rain, moments later they sat down around me, all performing the same series of movements. Waterproofs had to be removed, umbrellas closed and placed on the racks above the seats, bags placed on the floor under the back of the chair, tray tables raised and vacant seats pulled down before they could slump into their own seat with a sigh. The snack bar at the back of the boat, where you could get newspapers and coffee, hot dogs and chocolate, was open. Most of the passengers appeared to be from the rural areas of Sogn og Fjordane, there was something about the way they dressed that you rarely saw in Bergen, but also about the way they behaved, as though the thought that someone could see them had never occurred to them, and maybe also about their physiognomy, that is, their facial features and body types. In the weeks I had lived here I had started to recognize certain Bergen faces, there were similarities, whether they were boys, elderly women, or middle-aged men they had some common features I hadn't seen elsewhere.

Among these faces there were hundreds, indeed probably thousands, which were not similar. They disappeared, dissolved the moment they had passed, while the Bergen faces returned, oh, there was *that* type! Bergen had been a town ever since the early Middle Ages, and I liked the idea that Håkon's Hall and Saint Mary's Church weren't the only remnants of those times, as well as the countryside of course, and that the crooked trading houses in Bryggen weren't the only remnants of the fifteenth century, but also the various facial features, appearing and reappearing in new generations, still visible around town. I saw elements of the same faces in the people around me on the boat, except that I associated them with the farms and villages of the fjord landscapes to the north. Mom told me that in her grandparents' time they used to attribute specific characteristics to people from the various farms. This family was like this, that family was like that, and the idea was inherited down through the generations. That mode of thinking belonged to a completely different era and was basically incomprehensible to me, who hadn't come from any of the places I had grown up in, unlike all the others there. Everything was first generation with me, everything was happening as if for the first time, nothing, neither bodies, faces, customs, nor language, originated in that place or had been bound up with it for a longer period, and so couldn't be viewed in that way.

Actually there were only two forms of existence, I reflected: one that was tied to a place and one that wasn't. Both had always existed. Neither could be chosen.

I got up and went behind to the snack bar, bought a coffee and a chocolate Daim, and as I folded down the table and put the cup in the tiny round hollow, the mooring ropes were thrown on board, the gangway was lifted, and the engine revs increased. The hull trembled and shook. Slowly the boat moved forward as it swung to the left and soon the bows were facing the islands off Bergen. I closed my eyes, enjoyed the throb of the boat, the regular hum that rose and sank, and fell asleep.

When I opened my eyes I saw the contours of an enormous forest stretching back and, behind it, in the distance, a range of mountains.

So, not far to go.

I got to my feet and walked to the stern, up the stairs, and onto the deck. It was empty and as I approached the railings, no longer sheltered by the superstructure, the wind was so strong that it almost upended me. I held on tight and was laughing inside with joy because not only was the wind full of raindrops, which beat against my face, but darkness had fallen and the immense wake behind us was a luminous white.

Only when the lights of the ferry terminal became visible, just a few small twinkling dots in the dense darkness, still far off, although – because of the boat's great speed – we would soon be gliding alongside, illuminating the waiting room, the ticket office window, the two buses, some cars, and a crowd of people about to either embark or meet someone, only then did I go back in.

Mom was one of those waiting with their arms down by their sides and head bowed in the rain and wind, she waved to me, I went over and gave her a hug, and as we walked toward the car the express ferry was already roaring into the distance.

"Great to see you," she said.

"Ditto," I said, and got in. "How are things?"

"Good, I think," she said. "There's a lot to do, but it's interesting work, so I'm not grumbling."

We drove through the forest and came out by the bay on the other side, by the shipyard where Kjartan worked. There was an enormous hull visible in a dock hall or a dock. Kjartan crawled through shafts and small passages fitting pipes, and when he talked about his work it was not without a certain pride in his voice, although he did admit he was a mediocre, if not poor, pipefitter, it lay so far from who he was, it was such an ill-suited occupation for him and had been ever since he joined the proletariat at the end of the 1970s. He was also the safety rep at the shipyard, which had occupied a lot of his time, from what I gathered.

A steep climb up a forest-clad mountain, over the summit and down the other side, to Hyllestad, the municipal center at the end of Åfjorden, along the fjord to Salbu, where Grandma and Grandpa's and Kjartan's houses stood on top of a little hill.

Rain fell across the cones of light as Mom parked in the yard, and when she switched off the headlamps it was as if for a moment the deluge had stopped until the engine died and the rat-a-tat-tat on the roof and hood took over.

I got out, took my bag, stepped across the soft gravel and opened the front door.

Oh, that smell.

I hung my jacket on the hook above Grandpa's overalls, moved back a couple of steps to make room for Mom, who hung up her coat, put her bag at the foot of the stairs, and went into the living room.

Grandma was in the chair beside the window at the back, Grandpa on the sofa beneath the window in the long wall, both watching TV with the volume deafeningly loud.

"Well, look who it is," Grandpa said.

"Hi," I said.

"Yes, the Norwegian population is growing!" he said.

"Think I've stopped growing now," I said, and turned to Grandma, wanting in some way or other to greet her with more warmth, but I couldn't exactly give her a hug where she was sitting, I had never done that and I never would. She held one arm across her chest, as if in a sling, it trembled and shook. Her head shook too and her feet were stretched out on a stool. How's everything, Grandma? No, I couldn't say that.

I walked toward her and smiled.

She looked at me and her mouth moved.

I went up to her and lowered my head to hers.

She had almost no voice left, all I heard was a breathy whisper.

What did she say?

Hi.

Her eyes smiled.

"I came by boat," I said. "The rain's terrible."

Yes.

I straightened up and looked at the door as Mom came in.

"Shall we make some supper?" she said.

The next morning I slept until twelve and went down in time for lunch, which they always had at this time here. Mom had made potato dumplings, we ate them in the kitchen, the mist hung heavy in the air and the leaves on the tall birch outside the window were yellow and glistened with moisture.

After lunch, while they rested, I went for a stroll around the five-acre property. Beyond the little mere, which was black and covered with water-lily leaves alongside the banks, rose the spruce-clad hillside, silent and somber against the low sky. I wandered over to the barn, even more sunken and run-down than I remembered, opened the door to the animals on the ground floor, the three cows shifted in their stalls, the one farthest away turned its head and watched me with its gentle eyes. I walked past them and through the low door leading to the barn. It was half full of hay, I climbed to the edge of the loft and swung myself up, poked my head into what had once been a henhouse, and where there were still feathers on the floor, even though it must have been ten years since a hen had roosted on a perch here.

I would have to bring Ingvild here one day.

This was such a happy thought, that she might sit on the sofa and chat with Grandpa, chat with Mom, and see this world here, which was so magical for me. At the same time there was something almost criminal about the idea, something transgressive and forbidden, of bringing two completely different worlds together in this way: if I saw her on the sofa I would immediately realize that she didn't belong there.

I went onto the barn bridge and lit a cigarette, shielded it with my hand against the drizzle, which was turning into rain. Mom appeared outside the house, she opened the car door and got in, drove toward me so that she could turn. I went down to find out where she was going.

"I'm off down to the shop. Want to come with me?"

"No, I think I'll do a bit of writing."

"OK. Is there anything you want?"

"Some newspapers would be nice."

She nodded, turned, and drove back down. Soon afterward her car passed me on the road below.

I tossed my cigarette where they usually burned paper and went indoors. Both of them had got up, they were in the kitchen. I quietly closed the door behind me, thought of going up to my room and trying to write a bit, but then I saw something through the open door and stopped. Grandma lifted her trembling hand and took a swipe at Grandpa, which with some fumbling footwork he managed to sidestep. She sat down in her wheelchair, paddled it with her feet and took another swipe. He stepped to the side again. All this went on in eerie slow motion and without a sound. Grandpa went out the other door, into the living room, and Grandma maneuvered her chair back to the table with tiny feet movements.

Upstairs in my room, I lay on the bed. My heart was pounding with agitation at what I had just witnessed. It had been like a dance, the grisly dance of the aged.

I had never considered what the relationship between my grandmother and grandfather was like, in fact, I had never thought they even *had* a relationship. But they had been married for what would soon be fifty years, they had lived on this modest farm, brought up four children, struggled and toiled to make ends meet. Once they had been young, as I was now, with their lives ahead of them, as I had mine. I had never considered that, either, not *seriously*.

Why did she try to hit him?

She was heavily medicated, which made her paranoid, gave her delusions, that was why.

I knew that, but it didn't help, the image of the two of them was stronger.

Through the floor I could hear the radio, the weather forecast and the news. I could imagine him sitting right next to it with one hand under his ear, staring straight ahead, unless his eyes were closed in concentration.

Grandma trembling in the kitchen.

The impact of what I had seen was so overwhelming that I got up and went downstairs in an attempt to smooth things over, my presence might reestablish a kind of normality, I thought vaguely, as the steps creaked beneath me and the sight of the gray telephone on the table under the mirror reminded me of the old telephone they'd had, the one hanging on the wall, consisting of a mouthpiece and an earpiece, all in black Bakelite.

But could that be right? Could there have been such an old nineteenth-century-style contraption here when I was young? Or had I seen it in a film and imagined there was one here and it had stuck in my memory?

I opened the living-room door, Grandpa instantly got up in the awkward way he did and straightened as he watched me.

"It's good you came," he said. "I've been thinking we should put up a new fence below the barn, and now that you're here perhaps you could help me?"

"Be happy to," I said. "Right away?"

"Yes," he said.

In silence, we put on our outdoor gear, I followed him down to the cellar, where he had some green weather-treated fence posts and a roll of wire netting. I carried everything down to the end of the property, to the top of the little mound where the neighbor's land started, and went back to fetch the sledgehammer Grandpa had just pointed to.

Manual work was not my strong suit, to put it mildly, so I was a bit nervous as I walked toward him with the sledgehammer in my hand, I wasn't sure I could do this or do it in a way that would satisfy him.

Grandpa took some wire cutters from an overall pocket and snipped off the old netting, then wriggled the first post back and forth until it was loose enough for him to pull up. I did the same on the other side, according to his instructions. When we had done that he put one of the new fence posts in position and asked me to knock it into the ground with the sledgehammer. My first blows were circumspect and probing, but he didn't say anything and soon I had built up enough courage to hit it harder and with more assured swings.

The black peaked cap he always wore was dotted with droplets of rain. The blue material of his overalls had darkened. He gazed across the fjord and told me the story about the plane crash on Mount Lihesten in the 1950s, I had heard it many times, it was the mist and the drizzle that had reminded him, I supposed. But I liked hearing him tell stories, and when he had finished and hadn't said anything for a few minutes, he just stood there with his head bowed next to the fence post, which was now firmly bedded in, I asked him about the war. How had it been here during the war, had anyone offered any resistance and had there been any Germans stationed here? We moved toward where the next post would be and he started telling me about those days in April 1940. When the invasion was announced he and a pal went to Voss, where they were mobilizing for war. They went on foot, borrowed a boat and rowed across Sognefjord, crossed the mountain, it was April, crusty snow and moonlit nights, he said, descended to Voss, to the military camp there, where everyone from Vestland was supposed to meet. He shook his head and laughed. They were all drunk when he arrived and there were hardly any weapons. Nor any uniforms. The officers were in Fleischer's Hotel drinking. When they ran out of booze, he told me, they requisitioned the bar on the cruise ship *Stella Polaris*. It was moored in Bergen and the alcohol was sent up by train.

"So what did you do?" I said.

"At first we tried to get hold of weapons and uniforms. We walked around Voss and asked all the uniformed soldiers we met if they could help us. No one could. My friend said to a guard, you know we're soldiers even though we're not in uniform. Can you phone someone? No, answered the guard, and then he showed us the telephone cable. It had been cut. So we went back home. When we rowed across Sognefjord we took boats with us and left them on the northern side so the Germans would find it harder if they followed us. But of course when we arrived, the country had been occupied."

It took him an age to tell the story, no detail was too trivial, right down to the dogs barking as he approached the farms at night, and by the time he had finished there was only one post left. I hammered it in, he fetched the roll of wire netting, we started to attach it to the posts, he held it while I banged in fence staples.

"There were Germans stationed here, yes," he said. "I got to know one of them well. He was an Austrian and had been to Northern Norway when he was growing up, they sent poor kids up here in the summer in the thirties, and he had been one of them. A nice fellow. He had a lot of interesting things to say."

Grandpa told me there had been a prison camp in the district, mostly Yugoslavs and Russians working on a road project. Grandpa had a truck, it had been requisitioned by the Germans, and he often used to drive to the camp, which was in Fure. He took food with him for the prisoners, he said, Grandma made packed lunches and he hid them under rocks in the surrounding terrain. He said he reckoned the guards knew, but they turned a blind eye. Once he had seen one of the prisoners being shot.

"He was standing in front of the German soldiers screaming *Schiesst! Schiesst!* And that was when one of them shot him. But the officers were furious. Discipline was strict, you know. So the soldier who fired his gun was sent to the Eastern Front. For German soldiers Norway was a dream posting compared with all the other places they could have been stationed. Toward the end of the war they mostly sent old men and young boys here. I remember I saw a new contingent arriving, and one of the officers said to them: *Was wollen Sie hier, alte Leute?*"

He laughed. I hammered in the staples and unrolled the wire as far as the next post. He carried on telling me stories. The Austrian, who seemed to be a friend from what he said, decided to make his escape in the days before the

German capitulation, he boarded a boat with a woman from the village and her two sons, and vanished. Later the two sons were found floating in the water on the other side of the fjord, presumably killed with a rock.

I looked at him. What on earth was he telling me?

"Not so long ago a book came out about it. I've got it in the house. It's very interesting. Who could have guessed he would be capable of something so awful? But he must have killed them. There is quite simply no other explanation. And then he disappeared. Into thin air. He may still be alive."

I straightened up and helped Grandpa roll out the wire to the next post, where I pulled it as tightly as I could and secured it at the top and bottom so that it would retain the tension, then I banged in more staples.

"What was he like?" I said, and looked up at Grandpa, who was gazing into the mist above the fjord.

"He was a nice man, you know," he said. "Polite and cultivated and friendly. I haven't got a bad word to say about him. But there must have been something else inside him," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Did he get away, do you think, or did he die?"

"It's hard to say," he said. "He probably died trying to escape."

That was the last post, Grandpa snipped off the ends of the wire and I carried the roll and the sledgehammer to the cellar while he walked beside me. As we entered the living room, both red in the face after the rain, Mom was making pancakes in the kitchen. Grandma was sitting in her chair, and when she saw me she said something. I went up close and lowered my head.

The clock, I thought she said. He's taken the clock.

"Who has?" I said.

Him, she said, looking at Grandpa, who sat down on the sofa.

"He's taken the clock?" I whispered as softly as I could so that he wouldn't hear.

"Yes," she whispered.

"I doubt that," I said. "Why would he?"

I stood up, my stomach hurt, I went to join Mom, half closing the door behind me so that they wouldn't hear us in the kitchen.

Mom was holding a ladle over the big hotplate and carefully pouring the mixture, which immediately began to solidify with a sizzle.

"Grandma says Grandpa took her clock," I said. "Stole it from what I could hear."

"Yes, I heard her say that too," Mom said. "It's the medication. It might be making her paranoid and causing her to imagine things. She's pretty bad at the moment. But she'll come out of it. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said.

For some reason I was close to tears and went into the hall, put on my boots, and stood under the overhang by the front door to have a smoke.

A bus stopped down by the road outside the school. A few minutes later Kjartan walked up over the hill, dark eyed and white skinned, carrying a bag in one hand, some letters and a newspaper in the other. *Klassekampen*. He had read it for as long as I could remember.

"Hello there," he said.

"Hi, Kjartan," I said.

"Did you arrive yesterday?"

"Yes," I said.

"We'll have a chat later," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Mom's making pancakes. They'll probably be ready in a quarter of an hour or so."

He continued toward his door, stopped and looked across.

"There's that one-legged crow!" he said.

I took a few steps toward him and stared in the direction he was pointing, up to the pole carrying the electricity cable to the barn. Sure enough, on the top, there was a crow with one leg.

"Johannes shot its other leg off. It's stayed here ever since."

He chuckled and closed the door behind him, I stubbed out my cigarette in the soft gravel and took it with me to put in the trash can under the sink.

"Yngve called, by the way," Mom said. "He had to do an extra shift this evening and won't be here until tomorrow morning. He's driving up," he said.

"That's too bad," I said. "Shall I set the table?"

"That'd be nice," she said.

After we had eaten at the table in the TV room, since Grandma and Grandpa had moved their bedroom to the living room because of the trouble Grandma had with stairs now, Kjartan looked at me and asked if I felt like catching up at his place. I nodded, we went up to the large open and light top floor of his house, he put on some coffee, I settled down on the sofa and looked through the pile of books on the table.

Bobrowski. Hölderlin. Finn Alnæs, *Musica*, the first volume in his major oeuvre *Ildfesten*, which, according to Mom, he had broken the back of now, only two of the promised five novels had come out anyway. Kjartan had been passionate about these books for several years, there was something about the presence of the cosmos that appealed to him, I gathered from the way he talked about them.

"Are you learning anything at the Writing Academy?" he said from the kitchen.

"Yes, I am," I said.

"I've met Sagen," he said. "He's run lots of the writing courses for Sogn Skrivarlag."

"We haven't met him yet," I said. "We've only had classes with Fosse and Hovland."

"I don't know them," he said, and came in with two cups. They were wet, he had just rinsed them, in mine there were still coffee grains at the bottom, half dissolved in the water.

"We've finished the poetry course now," I said.

"So you've been writing poems?"

"Yes, we had to. But it didn't go well."

"Don't say that," he said. "You're only nineteen. When I was nineteen I barely knew what a poem was. You're lucky to be there."

"You're right," I said. "Have you written anything recently?"

"A couple of poems."

He got up and went over to the dining-room table, where his typewriter was, grabbed a pile of sheets, flipped through them, came back, and handed them to me.

"You can take a look if you like."

"Yes, I'd love to!" I said, suddenly touched that he regarded me as his peer.

dwindling beck

skegges nibble
at the green rock
weave through the swaying grass
the shade cools

a brother of the sun
lashes its tail

"What's a skegge?" I said, looking up at him.

"Skegge? A trout. What do you think?"

"It's very good," I said. "I particularly like the start. It seems to elevate it somehow."

"Yes," he said. "It's the trout in the mere, you know."

I read on.

with a mouth of lush church grass
I stand at the crossroads
drinking the light of faith
on the shores of eternity
I lead my body, on
like a dun horse in the dusk
toward the forest somewhere

I had tears in my eyes again, this time because of the poem, the image of the body that he leads toward the forest like a horse in the dusk.

I seemed to be full of tears, they had accumulated inside me, waiting for an opportunity to be released.

"This poem is fantastic," I said.

"Do you think so?" he said. "Which one is it?"

I passed it to him.

He skimmed through it for a few seconds and snorted.

"'On the shores of eternity,'" he recited. "I was being a bit ironic there, you know."

"Yes," I said. "Nevertheless."

He got up and went to get the jug of coffee, poured some, and placed it on a newspaper.

A door opened downstairs; from the way it was closed I realized it was Mom.

"So this is where you are!" she said.

"We're reading some poems," Kjartan said. "Have a look if you like."

"I'd love to," she said.

I got up and walked with the cup in my hand to the other end of the room, where there were bookshelves, an armchair, and a stereo. I took out a few books and thumbed through them.

When they started talking, I stood by the window and gazed out, at Mount Lihesten, which had just become visible through the mist, a black wall rising where the sea began and falling at the end where the fjord finished.

Was that where Ingvild's family cabin was?

When I entered the living room, Grandma was asleep in her chair, her head lolled back, her mouth wide open. She'd had Parkinson's disease for as long as I could remember, I had barely a memory in which she wasn't shaking. But when I was a boy the illness wasn't as far advanced, it didn't prevent her from working on the small farm she had moved to at the end of the 1930s when she married Grandpa, and where she had lived ever since. According to

Borghild, she had been surprised how tiny it was and how small people were out here. It might have been simply that conditions were tougher here than in the inland region she came from, there was less food and therefore also smaller people. Mom told me she had always emphasized that they should be impeccable, in terms of what they wore and the way they behaved, and for that reason had the reputation of wanting to be better than others. Grandpa worked as a driver, he drove buses; Grandma was in charge of nearly everything that was done on the farm. This was the 1950s, but from what Mom had told me about her childhood it sounded more like tales from the previous century. A man came here in the autumn and did their slaughtering for them, she told me, Grandpa never did it himself. Every single part of the animal found a use. Grandma rinsed the intestines in the stream to use them for sausages. The blood was boiled in big pots in the kitchen. I had no idea what else she did, apart from what Mom told me. There were only two generations between us, yet I knew nothing of how she had spent her life, not really, not essentially, I knew nothing of her relationship with objects and animals, life and death. When Grandma and I looked at each other it was from either side of a chasm. For her, family was the central point in her life, in other words, her family, the one that came from the farm where she grew up, and then her children. I had the impression that Grandpa's family, which had moved inland from the islands a generation earlier, was not important. Her family was the center of her existence, and the soil. Kjartan would sometimes say that the soil was her religion, that they were soil worshippers in Jølster, where she came from, a kind of ancient heathendom they had clad in the language and rites of Christianity. Look at Astrup's pictures, he would say, all the fires they lit on Midsummer Eve, that's Jølster folk for you, they dance around the flames as though they were their gods. Kjartan would laugh when he said such things, and it was not without disdain, yet there was always some ambivalence because Kjartan had a lot of her in him: the serious attitude to life and the deep sense of duty were in Kjartan too, and if she worshipped and cultivated the soil, Kjartan worshipped and cultivated nature, the presence of the universe in the form of birds and animals, mountains and skies. He would deny that any such connection existed between him and his mother, after all he was a communist, an atheist, a ship's pipefitter. However, all you had to do was look them in the eye to banish any lingering doubts. They had the same brown eyes, the same wary gaze.

Now there was nothing left of her life, disease had consumed her, eaten up her body, leaving only shaking and fits. It was hard to believe when I saw her sitting there asleep with her mouth agape that her strong will, which couldn't even rule her body now, and her strict morality, which she was no longer able to express, could have left such a deep mark on her children. But it had.

Mom helped Grandma into bed, undressed her, brushed her hair, and helped her on with her nightdress, all while I read *The Ceremonies*, my latest favorite book, trying not to look. Not because Grandma was being undressed necessarily, but because it was Mom doing it, and it seemed so intimate and private, the daughter caring for her old mother, this wasn't meant for my eyes, so I sat with my eyes trained on my book, attempting to let it absorb me.

It wasn't difficult, all the spaces in it were so open, and still connected with one another in quite sensational ways. Not just the spaces, incidentally, also the characters, which were usually closed off, could suddenly open and simply merge into one another. A man staring at an axolotl in an aquarium is mysteriously transformed into an axolotl staring out from an aquarium at a man. A fire in antiquity becomes a fire in the modern age. Then there were all the other peculiar things that went on. A man suddenly starts regurgitating rabbits, it becomes a problem, a minor catastrophe, the whole of the apartment he has rented is full of small white rabbits.

Mom said goodnight to her parents, came out, and closed the sliding door.

"Would you like some coffee? Or is it too late for you?" she said.

"I wouldn't mind a cup," I said.

I liked these short stories so much, but I couldn't write like this, I didn't have the imagination. I didn't have any imagination at all. Everything I wrote was connected to reality and my own experiences.

Yes, but not the new novel.

A wave of pleasure surged through me.

It was really fantastic. Some mysterious men, maybe angels, who collect people's conversations and reflect on them.

But this pleasure didn't come alone, it also brought with it some despair, because I knew I would never be able to carry it off. I couldn't write the story, it would never work.

Mom came with a pot of coffee and two cups, put them down, and went to fetch a dish of thin squares of potato crepe.

"Borghild made them," she said. "Do you want to try a bit?"

"Please."

Borghild was Grandma's sister, a strong vivacious woman who lived alone in a little house above the farm where they grew up. She usually cooked for the weddings in the district, she knew all the old recipes and everything about the family, those who had died and those who were still alive. Mom was close to her, even more now, as they didn't live far from each other.

"How are you, Karl Ove?" Mom said. "You've said so little since we've been here. That's not like you."

"Maybe not," I said. "But I'm fine. The Writing Academy's pretty hard going, that's all."

"What's hard going about it?"

"It feels as if I'm not good enough to be there. I don't write well enough, it's as simple as that."

"Remember you're only twenty," Mom said.

I took a whole crepe and ate it in two bites.

"Nineteen," I said. "But I'm at the Academy now, you know. It doesn't help me to think it might be better when I'm twenty-five."

Mom poured coffee into the two cups.

"And I'm in love," I said. "That might be why I'm not saying much."

"Someone you've met this autumn?" she said, and lifted her cup to her lips and drank while watching me.

"I met her at Easter, when I was staying with you. Just once. Then we wrote to each other, and then we met in Bergen. She's studying Psychology. Comes from Kaupanger. Same age as me."

"But you're not seeing each other?"

I shook my head.

"That's the point. I don't know if she wants me. I made a fool of myself and then . . . well, nothing."

A snore that sounded like a snarl came from the other room. Then someone coughing.

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Mom said.

"Maybe," I said. "We'll see. Otherwise I'm OK. I love being in the apartment and Bergen generally."

"I might come and see you both in a couple of weeks," Mom said. "There are also a couple of student friends I'd like to visit. Gerd, do you remember her?"

"Yes, of course."

"I've been wondering whether to do another course, you know. I'd like to do a degree as well. But it's a question of finance and I would also have to apply for a leave of absence."

"Yes," I said, taking another crepe.

Upstairs in the bedroom, I lay in the darkness for a long time before I fell asleep. The darkness linked the little space inside with the enormous space outside. The old wooden bed was like a little boat, or that was how it felt. Now and then a tree whooshed and the rain on the leaves pitter-pattered against the window. When it stopped, there would be a whoosh somewhere else, from some other trees nearby, as though tonight the wind had strategically deployed its energies and was riding across the countryside in several units.

The feeling I had when I arrived here was that life was over. Not in the sense that the house stood under the sign of death, more that what was going to happen had happened.

I lay on my other side, my head on my arm. The sound of my pulse beating reminded me of something Grandpa had once said, that you shouldn't lie listening to your heartbeat if you wanted to sleep. It was an odd thing to say, I couldn't remember what had occasioned the comment, but whenever I lay like this and my pulse beat against my ear I was reminded of it.

Only a few months ago Mom had told me that Grandpa had suffered from anxiety for a long period at the beginning of the 1960s, it had been so bad that he didn't go to work, he didn't move from the sofa, so terrified was he of dying. Kjartan was the last child at home then, he had been young and wouldn't have understood anything.

This information was unsettling, in a way, most of all because I hadn't known anything about it and would never have guessed. Were there more such pockets of drama in the lives of my closest family? But the information in itself, what it said about Grandpa, I couldn't get to tally because if there was one characteristic I associated with Grandpa it was his *joie de vivre*. Then again I had never thought of him as an independent person with an independent life, he had always been simply "Grandpa," in the same way that Grandma had always been "Grandma."

A whoosh went through the old birch again, and a little cascade of droplets hit the wall, as though it were a dog shaking off the rain.

Darkness. Silence. The beat of my pulse. Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum.

Unlike with Grandpa it wasn't death I heard but life. My heart was young and strong, it would beat away through my twenties, it would beat away through my thirties, it would beat away through my forties, and it would beat away through my fifties. If I got to Grandpa's age, and he was eighty, I had used only a quarter of my life so far. Almost everything lay before me, bathed in the hopeful light of uncertainty and opportunity, and my heart, this loyal muscle, would take me through it whole and unscathed, ever stronger, ever wiser, ever richer in life lived.

Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum.

Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum.

I saw Yngve's car from the living-room window, the windshield wipers sweeping from side to side, the dark shadow in the driver's seat that was him, and told Mom, who was massaging Grandma's feet on her lap, that Yngve had arrived. She gently lifted Grandma's feet to the floor and got up. Grandma and Grandpa had eaten lunch at twelve, we had waited, now she went into the kitchen to prepare the meal.

The car stopped outside. Straight afterward the door opened, I heard him in the hall and turned to him as he came in.

"Hi," he said.

"The Norwegian population is growing, I can see," Grandpa said.

Yngve smiled. His eyes brushed mine.

"Hi," I said. "Good trip?"

"Absolutely fine," he said, and passed me a pile of newspapers. "Brought these along for you."

Mom came in.

"There's some food ready if you're hungry."

We went into the kitchen and sat down. Mom had made a big pot of stew. I guessed the plan was to freeze it so that Grandpa only had to heat it when they were alone again.

"Was the drive OK?" Mom said, placing the pot on the table, where there were already crisp breads and butter and a jug of water.

"Yep," Yngve said.

It was as though he had a membrane around him which prevented me from getting into proper contact. But that didn't have to mean anything, sometimes that was how it was, and he had been driving for several hours, sitting alone in the car and thinking his own thoughts, it was a change coming here, where we had been all day and a very different atmosphere of familiarity and naturalness had been established.

Yngve filled his deep dish with stew, positioned the ladle on my side of the pot, I helped myself. Steam rose from the dish, I took a crisp bread and bit off a piece, poured water into a glass, raised a spoonful of stew to my mouth, blew on it.

"Ann Kristin says hello, by the way," Yngve said. "I met her yesterday and said I was coming up here."

"Thanks," Mom said.

"Where did you meet her?" I asked as casually as I could. He had said he was staying in town to work, not to go out, and if he had gone out and met Ann Kristin, then he was lying and why would he lie?

"In the canteen at Sydneshaugen," he said.

"Oh," I said.

After the meal we drank coffee in the living room, Grandpa talked, we listened. Kjartan came in, wearing the same clothes he had worn for the past two days, his hair a mess, eyes flashing behind his glasses. Yngve didn't respond to Kjartan's monologic conversation as he usually did, there was something submissive and withdrawn about him, as though he were looking inward and not outward. Could be anything, I thought, he was just a bit reticent.

Outside, the rain was coming down.

Kjartan went back to his flat, I read the newspapers, Mom washed up in the kitchen, Yngve took his bags up to his room and was gone for a while. When he returned he sat in the chair by the fireplace with a book.

I lowered the newspaper and stared out the window. Dusk was falling. The light from the lamp outside the neighbors' house, a stone's throw below us, was striped with rain.

Grandma was asleep in her chair. Grandpa had also fallen asleep. Mom, on the sofa beside him, was reading. Yngve was reading too. I watched him, and knew he had noticed, because you do when someone watches you in a silent room, you notice. Nevertheless, he didn't look up, he kept his eyes firmly on the book.

There *was* something wrong.

Or was I being paranoid?

He was reading, for Christ's sake, I couldn't make *that* into a sign that something was wrong.

I lifted the newspaper and continued reading. Then it was his turn to watch me. I concentrated on not looking up.

Why was he watching me?

He got up and went out. Grandpa woke as the door was closed, blinked a few times, struggled to his feet and wandered over to the wood burner, opened it, and threw in two logs. The wooden floor above creaked.

Then it went quiet.

Had he gone to bed?

Now?

Because he had been out last night? And hadn't been working at the hotel as he said?

I took my cup to the kitchen and poured myself a refill. The fjord lay a somewhat lighter shade of dark in the growing murk. The rain drummed on the roof and walls. I went back to the living room, grabbed my pouch of tobacco, and made myself a roll-up. Grandpa was cleaning his pipe, he tapped it on the glass ashtray a few times, poked at some black clumps and flakes with the white pipe cleaner. Grandma had woken up, she tried to sit upright, leaned forward but fell back again. Then she moved her hand to the two buttons on the armrest, succeeded in pressing one, and the chair began to rise with a low hum as she was lifted up, or pushed forward, and a moment later was able to grasp the walking frame. But her back was too bent for her to walk, and Mom got up and asked where she wanted to go. I couldn't hear the answer that issued from her trembling lips, but it must have been the kitchen, because that was where they steered her steps. While all this was going on, Grandpa was engrossed in his pipe activities.

The floorboards above creaked, and then the staircase. The door opened and Yngve fixed me with a look.

"Coming for a walk, Karl Ove?" he said. "There's something we have to discuss."

The hope that had held me aloft melted and my insides crumbled. Everything collapsed.

Yngve was going out with Ingvild.

I got to my feet and went into the hall. He had his back to me as he put on his waterproof jacket. He said nothing. I slipped my feet into my shoes, bent over and tied them, then rose and put on my jacket. He stood still, waiting. After I had zipped up, he opened the door. Fresh air streamed into the house. I pulled the hood over my head and tied it under my chin, Yngve walked over to the car, opened the door and took out his umbrella. The rain was a regular drumbeat on the gravel and the house, more of a soft patter beyond in the vast darkness, where it fell on grass and moss, trees and bushes.

Yngve opened the umbrella, I closed the door behind me, we set off down the hill. I stared at him, he had his eyes on the path ahead. My legs were trembling jelly, my insides in disarray, but there was also something hard in the center. I wasn't going to give him anything. He would get nothing from me.

We walked through the gate, past the neighbors' house and down onto the asphalt road.

"Shall we walk down?" Yngve said.

"OK," I said.

The junction, where three roads met, was illuminated by street lamps, but as soon as we had passed it and come onto the road leading into the valley, the night was all around us. Trees stood like a wall on either side. There was a faint rushing sound from the river and the rain falling in the forest. Otherwise all we heard was our own footsteps. I stared at him. He glanced at me.

"There's something I have to tell you," he said.

"Yes, so you mentioned," I replied. "What do you have to tell me?"

He looked straight ahead again.

"Ingvild and I are going out together," he said.

I said nothing, just glared at him.

"It's only . . . ," he began.

"I don't want to hear any more," I said.

He went quiet, we carried on walking.

The falling rain, our footsteps, the wall of trees in the darkness. The smell of wet spruce, the smell of wet moss, the smell of wet asphalt.

"I have to explain what happened," he said.

"No, you don't."

"But, Karl Ove . . . "

"I don't want to hear about it, I told you."

We reached the firing range, a shed in front of a long narrow piece of open ground to the right of the road.

In the distance was the drone of traffic. It came down the slope from the mountain at the end of the valley.

"It wasn't something I planned," he said.

"I DON'T want to hear!" I said. "Don't you understand? I don't want to hear anything!"

We walked on in silence. He glanced at me once, was about to say something, changed his mind, looked down, stopped.

"I'm going back then," he said.

"You do that," I said, and carried on walking, listening to the sound of his fading footsteps behind me. The next moment a car came around the bend and transformed the darkness into an inferno of light. It lingered on the retina for several seconds after the car had passed, and I walked on blindly until my eyes had got used to the night again, and the road and the trees reappeared.

I would never talk to him again. I couldn't leave until tomorrow morning, so I would see him, and I would see him in Bergen, that was inevitable, sooner or later I would bump into him, the town wasn't that big, but I wouldn't say anything then, nor here, I wouldn't say a word to him ever again.

I walked to the end of the valley, to where the waterfall plunged down the mountainside and the river flowed beneath the road, saw the faint glint of water as it hit the rocks and the pool at the bottom, it seemed almost obscene, water in the water, in the pouring rain, on top of that, and then I made my way back. My jeans were wet and I was frozen, and there was nothing good waiting for me in the house.

Had they slept together?

Everything in me seized up. I stopped.

Yngve had slept with her.

When he left here he would go home and sleep with her again.

Stroke her breasts, kiss her on the mouth, pull down her panties, penetrate her.

My heart was pounding wildly, as though I'd been running.

She called his name, whispered his name, kissed him, spread her legs for him.

I moved off again.

She would ask how it had gone, what I had said. He would tell her. I was the "him" they talked about. The little brother. The naïve little brother who sat in his room waiting for her, who thought she wanted him, while she was out partying with Yngve, fucking at Yngve's place. Just that, the fact that she spent the night at his place and in the morning showered in the bathroom there, sat down and had breakfast there, with a growing sense that it was normal and her due.

She caressed him, she must have done that, she looked into his eyes, she must have done that, she said she loved him, she must have done that, this wasn't me being paranoid, this is what happened. It happened every day.

The little house on the hill shone before me, the darkness profound, almost impenetrable on all sides.

I would never be a part of his life again. I would never visit him wherever he lived. I wouldn't give a damn about him in a way that I had never done with anyone else before. If he thought everything would be as it was between us, that I would ever tolerate this, then he had another think coming.

Now it was all about getting through the evening. He was here, I couldn't avoid him, but it didn't matter, I would ignore him, and that was good because then he would believe it was just something I was doing now and eventually everything would go back to normal, only later would he realize that in fact I would never speak to him again.

I opened the front door and went into the hallway, hung up my jacket, darted up to my room and changed my trousers, dried my face on a towel in the bathroom, then went down to the ground floor and into the living room, where they were watching TV.

Yngve wasn't there. I looked at Mom.

"Where's Yngve?" I said.

"He's gone to see Kjartan," Mom said.

I sat down.

"What's going on?" Mom said.

"Nothing," I said.

"Something is going on, I can see," Mom said.

"Do you remember me saying I was in love?" I said.

"Yes, of course," Mom said.

"Yngve's going out with her," I said. "He's just told me."

Mom took a deep breath and sighed as she looked at me.

"Well, it's not *my* doing," I said.

"You mustn't fall out," she said. "It'll pass, Karl Ove. It's bad now, but it"ll pass."

"Yes, it might," I said. "But that doesn't mean I ever want anything to do with him again."

She got up.

"I've made some supper," she said. "Can you set the table?"

"Alright."

I carried in cups and plates, bread and butter, salmon and scrambled eggs, a selection of meats and cheese, a pot of tea and milk. Once I had finished Mom asked me if I could go get Yngve. I looked at her.

"OK," I said. I slipped on my shoes and walked the few meters down the yard to the other door. Perhaps he would think everything was as it was when I arrived and he was welcome to think that.

I opened the door, entered the hall, went over to the stairs. Music was on loud upstairs. I took a few steps up, enough to see the living room. Yngve was sitting in a chair staring into the air. He hadn't heard me. I could have shouted, but I didn't because, to my horror, I saw tears running down his cheeks.

Was he crying?

I quietly went back down, out of sight. Stood for a moment in the hall, silent. That was the first time I had seen him crying since he was a little boy.

But why was he crying?

I stuffed my feet into my shoes, closed the door carefully behind me, and trudged across the yard.

"He's coming," I said as I went into the living room. "He said we should start."

Early the next morning Mom drove me to the ferry in Rysjedalsvika. The boat was fairly empty when it arrived, I sat down in the same seat I'd had on the way over. The weather had eased a little during the night, the sky was still overcast, but the cloud cover was lighter and it wasn't raining anymore. The boat sliced through the heavy gray water at such a strangely fast pace beneath the tall, motionless, overarching mountains between which the fjord lay.

I had gone to bed before Yngve returned in the evening and was up before he woke in the morning, so I hadn't seen him since briefly catching sight of him in the chair at Kjartan's, but I had heard him, his voice from the floor below as I was trying to sleep and his footsteps up the stairs to his room on his way to bed. Being under the same roof as him was unbearable, I seemed to burn inside, all I could think of was that he would regret what he had done.

Now, surrounded by light in a boat in the middle of the fjord, on my way home, everything seemed different. Now it was her I thought about. She had allowed herself to be taken in by him, to be blinded by his surface charm and had said yes. She didn't realize I was better than him. She had no idea. But she would find out. And what then? Would I be there for her? Or would I let her go her own way?

Could I go out with her after she had been with Yngve?

Oh yes, I could.

If she wanted to be with me, I would.

There was nothing to say I had to remain in Bergen after this year and nothing to say she had to, if they broke up.

I went to the back, to the snack bar, and ordered a coffee, took it with me up onto the deck and sat down on a bench under the roof, from where I could see the forest, which, on the way, had just been a large deep shadow beneath the mountains, but was now clearly defined beneath the white sky. Dark green, almost black, spruces packed into a dense jagged area with the odd deciduous tree luminous in its autumn-yellow colors.

I caught a taxi home from the ferry quay, after all that had happened I deserved that. However, being back in my room, surrounded by all my possessions, didn't feel as good as I had imagined because this was where I had waited for her, day in, day out, and now, knowing what I did, that she had never been on the point of coming up to see me, but had been with Yngve, I could see with total clarity how foolish I had been. All the fine thoughts I'd had about her, the whole dream I had built up around her appeared immeasurably naïve now that I knew how the land actually lay, what had actually gone on.

Yngve knew how I had felt, he knew that I was waiting at home, hoping, while he was meeting her and going out with her. Was that part of the thrill, I wondered? Having me sitting here like an idiot looking out the window?

I couldn't stay in my room, so I put on my jacket and went out, but where could I go? It was Sunday, all the shops were closed and I didn't want to sit on my own in the cafés that were open.

I stopped outside the block of apartments where Jon Olav lived and rang the bell. No one answered, I walked on, up the hill and down past Støletorget, and soon I was crossing Torgalmenningen, burning inside the whole time, I was a fool, I had nowhere to go, no one to visit, I just walked, burning with shame about everything. I walked along Nygårdsgaten, cut up by the Science Building and went into the park, the plan was to sit down and have a smoke, it was Sunday, I was out for a Sunday walk, but in the park, look, that was where I held Ingvild's hand and I didn't want to think about that, even then she must have known she didn't want me, that I was no good for her, and I didn't want to go to Danmarksplass, Yngve lived there, and for all

I knew she had his keys for the weekend and was in his flat now. I didn't want to walk the other way either, Sydneshaugen School was there, where we had drunk coffee, the gate where we had stood talking when Morten appeared. Instead I walked down the first hill and came out by the Grieg Hall, followed the road past the library and the station, turned right, where the old town gate once stood, and then continued uphill, back along the roads at the top of Fjellsiden.

Yngve was probably on his way home now. If Ingvild wasn't in his flat he would drive straight up to Fantoft, where she would be expecting him.

She opens the door and gazes at him with tenderness and affection.

They embrace.

They kiss and kiss with mounting passion.

Glance at the room, then they undress each other at top speed.

A cigarette afterward.

What did your little brother say?

He got angry. But it'll pass. You should have seen him. Ha ha ha!

Ha ha ha.

Wave upon wave of heat rose to my head, which I lowered, and into my face. I walked past an old fire station, it was made of wood and painted white, beneath it the town's myriad colors vibrated, I walked along the very highest line of houses until I slowly began to descend and was back outside my place.

That is where he lives, I thought. The brother who believes he's a writer. And when I opened the door and went into my room it was as though I was still in the street looking at myself, the conceited idiot who closed the curtains and kept out the world.

Rolf Sagen was going to teach us for the next two weeks. His course didn't deal with genres, neither prose, nor poetry, nor drama, nor essays, but writing itself, the process of writing and a variety of relevant strategies. He gave us a number of practical tips, such as how it could be useful for prose writers and dramatists to make what he called a "hinterland," you wrote down everything about the characters and their relationships and in so doing knew much more about why they acted as they did than was apparent from the finished text – "hinterland" was the complete world of which the narrative revealed only glimpses – and also he talked about the underlying motives or premises of writing. Sagen was a trained psychologist, and he spoke a lot about how important it was to penetrate down into the deeper layers of consciousness when you wrote. He had a few activities for us to do. One of them was about emptying our minds of thoughts, it was like meditation, we should try to be ahead of our thoughts, deny them space, just forge on into the unthought, and then, at his command, write down the first things that occurred to us.

"Let's start now," he said, and so we sat around the table, all of us with our heads bowed and eyes closed. I couldn't do it, I was just thinking about this situation, about having to empty my mind, but it was beyond me. Two minutes passed, three, maybe four.

"Now write," he said.

The first thing that occurred to me was the name of a town: Darmstadt. I wrote a little story about it. When everyone had finished we had a break and when we resumed we had to read out what we had written.

Sagen held his beard between thumb and forefinger in concentration, nodded and said this was interesting, unusual, remarkable, fruitful. When it was my turn the string of superlatives came to an end. He listened to what I read out, then eyed me.

"You're using only the surface of your mind when you write," he said. "And if you do that there won't be any depth in the text. What was the first word that occurred to you?"

"Darmstadt."

"Hm, a German town," he said. "Have you been there?"

"No."

"Well," he said. "I'm afraid there isn't very much more to say about the text. You'll have to try to penetrate deeper into your consciousness."

"Yes," I said.

What he was actually saying was that my writing was superficial. He was right, I'd realized that there was a chasm between what the others wrote and what I wrote. I described a young man walking the streets of Kristiansand. I hadn't drawn either him or the streets he walked from the depths of my consciousness. Sagen confirmed what I had suspected, he articulated it in words, I had to descend into the depths of my own consciousness, into the darkness of my soul, but how the hell was I supposed to do that? This was not something I found easy! I had read "Death Fugue," no writer had ever delved farther into his consciousness than Celan when he wrote that, but what use was this insight to me?

The next day we had another activity. This time we were given a few nonsense words to keep repeating in our heads until Sagen told us to write the first thing that occurred to us.

Once again all eight of us sat around the table with bowed heads and closed eyes. Now you can write, Sagen said, and I scribbled the first words that came into my mind.

Two leather chairs
in the wind

That was all.

Sagen scratched his chin.

"That's interesting," he said. "Two chairs in the wind. They're outside, I take it. Yes, they must be."

"That's an exciting intro," Knut said.

"You'll have to work on it a bit more, Karl Ove," Trude said. "It might turn into a poem."

"It's an image that doesn't immediately make itself apparent," Sagen said. "There's a tension, there's nothing contrived about it. Yes, that *is* interesting. You're on the right path, I think."

I had been thinking about the two leather chairs we had at home when I was growing up. They stood on a green hill and the wind blew in from the sea.

But this was just nonsense, I realized that, although I found myself unable to dismiss the others' comments that it might be the beginning of something, a poem.

I kept going when I got home.

Two leather chairs
in the wind
a yellow bulldozer – that was the next thing that occurred to me –
noise from a town
you have already left

As soon as I had written that I knew the sort of comments I would get. Delete the yellow bulldozer. Remove the "already" from the last line, it's redundant. So I did that and the poem was finished.

Two leather chairs
in the wind
noise from a town
You have left

At any rate it looked like a poem. I knew where the image of the leather chairs originated, ever since I was small I had been fascinated by the relationship between inside and outside, when what was supposed to be inside was outside, and vice versa. One of the most hypnotic memories I had was the time Geir and I had stumbled over a cellar full of water in a half-finished house. Not only that, there was no floor, so we stood on a little rock surrounded by water, *indoors*! The episode on the garbage dump, which featured in one of the texts that got me accepted into the course, also dealt with this idea, the way Gordon and Gabriel set out chairs, a table, and lamps in the forest. *Two leather chairs in the wind* had its roots there, the magic of childhood in six words. *Noise from a town you have left* was different, I had seen many instances of it in the poems I had read, something is stated and revoked at the same time. Also the converse, where the same merges into the same, such as, *the hare snows into the hare*, but so far I hadn't come up with any such images myself.

Up until now!

Oh!

In a flash I added two more lines.

Two leather chairs
in the wind
noise from a town
you have left.
The girl disappears
into the girl.

That was it. A fully fledged poem.

To celebrate, I stuffed the photography book down my trousers, hung my shirt outside and went down to the basement. With the book open in my left hand, which I could now hold and leaf through simultaneously, and my right hand round my dick, I stared at one photo after another. The girl with the basket of laundry was still my favorite, but there was no longer anything pure about it, every situation I imagined myself in with her was permeated by the thought of Yngve and Ingvild and the fact that I had lost Ingvild, the only girl who meant anything to me. I flicked back and forth, to escape the thought, more or less as Sagen had advised us, it struck me, and I finally succeeded in concentrating long enough on one of the girls' wonderful bodies for me to come.

That was at least something.

Back upstairs, I killed time until I could go to bed. Fortunately I had no problem sleeping twelve hours at a stretch. I couldn't say I looked forward to going to the Writing Academy, not a day passed without something disparaging being said about me, that is, something disparaging about my writing. No one meant it as such, it was called critique, and was supposed to be constructive, but in my case it was so useless because there was nothing *else* in my texts to compensate for the criticism. It *was* immature, it *was* clichéd, it *was* superficial, and I *was* truly incapable of penetrating deeper into my own consciousness, where the essence of a writer was to be found. In all the discussions we had I was reminded of this, it was my role, and if I wrote something good, such as the poem about the two leather chairs, it would still be seen in the light of the person I had shown myself to be, a sort of fluke, the anthropoid who writes *Hamlet*.

The only benefit of the Academy during those days was that so much happened, there was so much to react to while I was there, that the thought of Yngve and Ingvild was pushed into the background. For the same reason, my room was unbearable, there were no distractions, so if we didn't have any writing assignments I went out, just for a walk – one night to Jon Olav's, where I could have a cup of coffee, but then couldn't visit again until a certain number of days had elapsed so that my lack of friends wouldn't become a burden to him, I had placed myself in a kind of quarantine – the next night to Anne's, for her the same rules applied, after a cup of tea and an hour-long chat I couldn't show my face there until after four or five days, preferably more – and there was no one else to visit. I couldn't go to the movies alone, that carried too much of a stigma, and Café Opera was out of the question. To stand alone in the bar, ashamed not to know anyone, that wasn't a situation I wanted to expose myself to. Besides, the chance that I would bump into Yngve and Ingvild, or their friends, was too great. Just the thought of being in the same room as them, of being present as they gazed at each other or even touched each other, made my flesh run cold. Morten was a savior, even though we had nothing in common we could always chat for an hour about something, and he didn't find it strange that I popped by, after all we were "neighbors."

One evening there was a ring at the door. I thought it was Jon Olav and went to open up.

Ingvild stood on the steps.

"Hi," she said, sending me a hurried glance.

At that second, as I met her eyes, it was as though nothing had happened. My heart was pumping as if I were in love.

"*You*?" I said.

"Yes, I thought we should talk."

She looked down as she said that, pushed a strand of hair away from her forehead.

"Come in," I said.

She followed me in and sat down on the sofa.

"Would you like some tea?" I said.

She shook her head.

"I won't be long."

"I'll put some on anyway," I said.

I went into the kitchen and put a pan of water on the stove. Her coming to see me was the last thing I had expected and the place was a mess. I sprinkled tea leaves over the bottom of the teapot and went back to her. She had lit a cigarette. The ashtray was half full, I took it and emptied it in the kitchen trash bin.

"You don't need to tidy up for me," she said. "I'll be off in a couple of minutes. There was just something I had to say to you."

She laughed as she said it. She glanced down, she glanced up.

"The tea will be ready soon," I said. "We're doing poetry at the Academy and we've been given some fantastic poems. Especially one. Would you like to hear it?"

She shook her head.

"Not now, Karl Ove," she said, squirming on the sofa.

"But it's not very long," I said. "Hang on a minute. I'll find it."

"No, please don't. It's not the right moment."

"It'll be fine," I said, rummaging through the pile of photocopied poems, found what I was after, and turned to her.

"Here it is. It won't take long."

I stood in the middle of the floor with the piece of paper in my hand and started to read.

Death Fugue

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink it and drink it
we dig a grave in the breezes there one lies unconfined
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents
he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden
hair Margarete
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are
flashing he whistles his pack out
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a
grave
he commands us strike up for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you in the morning at noon we drink you at
sundown
we drink and we drink you
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents
he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany your golden
hair Margarete
your ashen hair Sulamith we dig a grave in the breezes
there one lies unconfined

He calls out jab deeper into the earth you lot you
others sing now and play
he grabs at the iron in his belt he waves it his

eyes are blue
jab deeper you lot with your spades you others play
on for the dance

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon in the morning we drink you
at sundown
we drink and we drink you
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Sulamith he plays with the serpents
He calls out more sweetly play death death is a master
from Germany
he calls out more darkly now stroke your strings then
as smoke you will rise into air
then a grave you will have in the clouds there one
lies unconfined

Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany
we drink you at sundown and in the morning we drink
and we drink you
death is a master from Germany his eyes are blue
he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true
a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
he sets his pack on to us he grants us a grave in
the air
He plays with the serpents and daydreams death is
a master from Germany

your golden hair Margarete
your ashen hair Shulamith[*]

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[*] Translated by Michael Hamburger

I read it as I had been taught, with a regular rhythm, not stressing individual words, not stressing anything because it carried meaning, rhythm was paramount, rhythm was everything.

While I was reading, Ingvild smoked and studied the floor in front of her.

"Isn't that good?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

"I think it's fantastic. Absolutely brilliant. I've never read anything like it."

I sat down at the other end of the sofa.

"Yngve told you what happened, didn't he?" she said.

"The tea," I said, and got up. "Just a minute."

I went to the kitchen, poured the boiling water over the dry tea leaves, which would swell up and become soft and supple within seconds, the biggest would go clumpy, while all the properties in them would be released and infuse the water and color it, golden at first, then darker and darker.

I brought out the teapot with two cups, put them on the table.

"It has to stew a bit first," I said.

"I have to go soon," she said. "I only wanted to talk to you about what has happened."

"Can't you have a cup of tea anyway?" I said.

I filled her cup, the tea was too thin, and I poured it back into the pot, and then I poured again. This time it was darker, if not perfect, at least drinkable.

"Do you take milk?"

She shook her head and grabbed the cup with both hands, took a sip and put the cup back on the table.

"It had nothing to do with you," she said. "What happened."

"Right," I said, filling my own cup.

"I hope we can be friends despite everything. I'd like to be friends with you."

"Of course we can be friends," I said. "Why shouldn't we be able to?"

She smiled, no eye contact, took another sip.

"So, how are things?" I said.

"They're fine," she said.

"How's the course going?"

She shook her head.

"I'm not sure," she said.

"Same here," I said. "But the Academy course only lasts a year, not six like in Psychology. I'll have to see what I do afterward. Maybe Lit. But I'm planning to keep writing."

Silence.

It was painful with her there.

"Do you still live in Fantoft?" I said.

She shook her head.

"I'm moving into a collective."

"Are you?"

"Yes. I think I'll have to go," she said, and stood up. "Thank you for the tea. See you."

I accompanied her to the hall, smiled at her and said good-bye, watched her disappear around the corner, went back in, washed the two cups, emptied the ashtray so that I wouldn't be reminded of her visit, lay back on my bed and stared at the ceiling. It was eight o'clock. Two hours until I could sleep.

For as long as there were classes at the Academy I coped very well during the day. I trudged through the rain in the morning and, if nothing else, appreciated meeting the other students, we saw so much of one another that I was relatively natural with them, and then I trudged home through the rain in the afternoon beneath the fast-darkening sky. I made myself something to eat, I sat and read until my restlessness became too much and drove me out, mostly into the great nothing, in other words, I met no one. I had nowhere to go, and I couldn't stay in my room, what was I supposed to do? Ten wild horses couldn't drag me into a cinema on my own or into Café Opera. Living like this was fine for a while, there was nothing wrong with it as such, the situation was explicable, I was taking a course in which there were very few students and those there were, were older than me, none would have been a friend of mine under normal circumstances, which contrasted sharply with the situation for the average student, who was surrounded by hundreds, if not thousands, of other like-minded people. Yes, there was a rational explanation, I was at the Writing Academy, and when I finished there I would take out a student loan and go to Istanbul to write, a town where no one expected me to know anyone, which farthermore was exotic and foreign, an adventure, Christ, a room of my own in Istanbul!

I wrote letters and described my plans. I read novels I had heard about at the Academy, by Øystein Lønn, Ole Robert Sunde, Claude Simon, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, although they were difficult for me I plowed through them in the hope that something would stick. I walked down into the town center and bought records, drank coffee in the cake shops old people frequented, where I didn't care how I looked or what impression I made or if people wondered why I was on my own. I didn't give a shit about old people and I didn't give a shit about myself, either. I sat there studying the records, reading books, drinking coffee, and smoking. Then I walked home, killed time, went to bed, another day dawned. The weekdays were no problem, the weekends were more difficult, at two or three in the afternoon the urge to go out and have fun, like other students, slowly made itself felt, at six or seven it became acute, they were drinking all around me while I sat alone. At eight or nine it felt better, soon I would be able to go to bed. And occasionally something would hold my attention, a book or my writing, to make me forget time and the situation, and when I next checked my watch it could be twelve, one or even two. That was good, for then I would sleep in longer the following morning, shorten the day. Some Saturdays I went out in the evening, I was sick of my room and my footsteps were drawn to the town center, past Café Opera perhaps, where the windows were full of laughing, chatting people and golden beer, and although all I had to do was open the door and go in, it wasn't locked of course, I *couldn't* do it, in some way or other this was how life had become. Once I did anyway, and it was as I had imagined, a nightmare, I burned inside as I stood at the bar drinking, my chest burned and my head burned, I knew no one, I had no friends, and everyone could see that, I was alone in the bar acting as if it were the most natural thing in the world, I drank and calmly surveyed the room, is there anyone I know here tonight? . . . No, indeed, how strange, not one! Never mind, it's nice anyway, to have a beer before I go home to bed . . . busy day tomorrow, might as well take it easy now . . . As I hurried home afterward I was furious at myself and my own stupidity, I shouldn't have gone there, it was ridiculous, why did I have to display my failings in that way?

The following weekend I rang Yngve. He had a TV, I would ask him if he was planning to watch the Saturday match, if so, could I pop up? I hadn't forgotten the business with Ingvild, I would never forgive him for it, but we had been brothers for much longer than I had been in love with Ingvild, and it ought to be feasible to separate the two relationships from one another, to have two thoughts in your head at once.

"Hello," he said.

"Hi, this is Karl Ove."

"Long time, no hear," he said. "How's it going?"

"Fine. I was wondering, actually, if you were going to watch the soccer match this afternoon?"

"I was, yes."

"Would it be OK if I came up to see it?"

"Yes, of course. It would be great."

"Will Ingvild be there? If so, I won't come."

"No, she's at home this weekend. Just come on up."

"Alright, see you then. Bye."

"Bye."

"By the way, have you done the pools?"

"Yes."

"How many lines?"

"Thirty-two."

"OK. See you."

I bought a bag of beer in the nearby shop, showered and changed clothes, trotted up the hill in the rain, went into the kiosk and did the pools, waited for a bus, jumped on, sat looking at all the lights and movement that abounded in this town, the dislocations of color and form that occurred, all the light that glittered in the water, floated in the water, all the umbrellas and swishing windshield wipers, all the lowered heads and laced-up hoods, all the rubber boots and waterproof jackets, all the water running down the gutters, by the curbsides, and on the roof, the gulls circling above and settling on the top of a flagpole, bedraggled, or on the ridiculously high statue in Festplassen, a man of normal dimensions standing on a pillar, how high was it, twenty meters? Thirty? Christian Michelsen, what had he done to deserve such a fate?

Bergen, the town of swishing windshield wipers.

Bergen, the town of drafty, toiletless studios.

Bergen, the town of human fish. See their gaping mouths.

This is where Grandpa came after selling books in the outlying districts, going from door to door, offering his little library, and with the money he bought himself a new suit. This is where he bought the ring to marry Grandma. Bergen, this was *the* town for them. He dressed up when he came here, put on his best clothes and his finest hat, presumably he had always done that.

Across Danmarksplass, to the right under the signs by the little wooden shed where they sold tires, to the left again straight afterward, and uphill between the workers' houses.

Everything was normal, I thought, as I rang the bell and waited for him to open up. Everything was as it had been.

And it was.

Yngve had bought chocolate toffees, just like the ones Dad used to give us while we watched the televised English soccer matches on a Saturday afternoon when we were growing up, he had brewed up a pot of coffee, which we drank before moving on to beer and chips at the start of the second half. We kept track of the scores in the other eleven matches, he had ten right so far, but it all went haywire toward the end, I had seven correct results, which was more or less what I got whenever I did the pools.

After the match Asbjørn and Ola came up, we sat drinking and talking for a while, then we caught a taxi into town and went to Café Opera. Ingvild's name wasn't mentioned once. I kept a fairly low profile for the first few hours, I had nothing to say, nothing to contribute, but I got drunker and drunker and then there I was, aglow at the center of the world, babbling away about anything that came into my head. I told them I was going to move to Istanbul to write next year, I said I wrote better than Bret Easton Ellis, he had a cold heart and I didn't, I said that Jan Kjærstad had read what I'd written and liked it. We can't go home now, I groaned, when they flashed the lights and fortunately no one had any plans to, almost everyone who had been in Café Opera was now in the streets chatting and waiting to hear about a party. Erling and Arvid were there, they lived in a big house up in Villaveien, right behind the Student Center, in a collective, we could go there, apparently there wasn't that much to drink, but that wasn't a problem because someone immediately jumped into a taxi to get what booze they had from home, while we slowly made our way upward, Erling and Arvid first, then the rest of us dragging behind like the tail of a comet.

Both Erling and Arvid came from Tromøya. I remembered Erling as the goalkeeper in the team above us when I was growing up. He was always gentle, he always smiled, but he was not averse to making the odd acerbic comment. Although he was not especially tall there was something ungainly and sometimes almost limp about him, I had noticed that even in the days when he kept goal. Arvid was big and sturdy and always occupied a lot of space wherever he was. The two of them formed a focal point. If they gave a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down it was significant. But I was safe, apparently, as I was Yngve's brother. At any rate, I had been when I arrived in Bergen.

The rooms in the old wooden house were spacious and almost entirely unfurnished, I wandered around, the booze came, I drank, someone was staring at me, I went over to him, asked him what he was staring at, he said he hadn't seen me before and was just wondering who I was, I shook his hand and then I bent his fingers back until he screamed and I let go. What are you doing?! he hissed, what the hell is wrong with you? I left him and went into the adjacent room, where there was a whole crowd sitting on the floor, among them one of Yngve's fellow students, the one who had been at the table the first time we went to Café Opera. You're the spitting image of Jan Kjærstad! I shouted, pointing at him. You look just like him! I do not, he said, I don't look anything like him. He doesn't, Karl Ove, said Asbjørn, who was also there. And you look like Tarjei Vesaas! I said, pointing at Arvid. Is that a compliment or what? he laughed. No, in fact it isn't, I said, and turned away because Yngve was standing behind me. Just take it easy, will you, he said. I heard you almost broke someone's fingers in there. That's crazy. You can't do that here. Everyone knows everyone, right? Take it easy. I am taking it easy, I said. I'm having a good time. We're talking about literature. Kjærstad and Vesaas. I left him and went into the kitchen, opened the fridge, the alcohol had made me so damned hungry, and I saw half a chicken, which I grabbed and sank my teeth into, sitting on the counter and occasionally washing it down with whiskey. That moment, which was wonderful, sitting on the counter in a student apartment eating chicken and drinking whiskey was the last I remembered. Afterward everything was black, apart from an image of me hauling rocks into the living room and putting them on the floor, running in and out and continuing until someone stopped me and then everything disappeared again.

This was the pattern for the end of autumn, I tagged along with Yngve and his friends, was silent and shy but polite and affable for the first few hours until alcohol had me in its grip and then anything could pass my lips, anything could happen with my hands, until I woke up in an internal darkness the next day, when image after image of what I had done and said was hurled back at me, and I could only get myself going with a huge effort of will, drag myself back into normality, which then slowly took over. Normality was where I belonged, I realized that more and more, the longer the semester went on, I didn't have the depth or the originality you needed to become a writer, on the other hand I didn't want to sit there with the others without saying a word, inhibited and silent, because that wasn't me either, and so the only thing that helped, the only thing that could raise and transport me into something else, something freer, much closer to myself, was drinking. Sometimes it went well, sometimes the evening finished at the right moment, before anything of consequence had happened, except that I had been happy, but then there were the times it didn't go well and I lost it, the way I had lost it in Northern Norway the year before, I was completely out of control. One habit I had developed was to feel car door handles as I walked past, if one was open I would get into the driver's seat and try to start the engine, I knew you had to connect some wires but I wasn't sure which, and I never succeeded in starting up a car, but the following day just the fact that I had tried was terrible. I released the hand brake inside a car that was open and parked on the hill near where I lived, causing it to roll back down a meter or two and hit the car behind. I ran off chortling inside. Not only that, I also tried to make off with lots of bikes, I entered backyards and searched for ones that were unlocked, if I found one, well, then I would cycle home on it. Once there was a bike beside the bed in my room when I woke up. I had to wait until it was dark before I could take it out and leave it in a neighboring street, scared all the while that someone would see me and the police would come. Another time I saw some people sitting behind a window on the second floor somewhere, I went up the stairs, knocked on the door and went in, they shook their heads, I turned around and went back out. There was no evil in me, I just wanted to destroy things, not people, but so long as my sense of judgment was so clouded anything at all could happen, I realized that, and presumably that was why my fears grew so inordinately in the days afterward. Yngve, with whom I was now spending as much time as I had done before, told me I shouldn't drink and suggested I smoke hash instead, maybe that would be better. He said I had begun to acquire a bad reputation and it was affecting him, too. But he didn't stop inviting me out, probably because he saw more of the person I was normally than the person I could become when we were on the town.

In the middle of November I was broke, but basically that suited me fine, we had a monthlong writing period and so I went to Mom's, stayed in her tiny room and wrote at night while she lay asleep at the far end of the same room, then slept in the hall during the day while she was at work. In the evenings we ate together, chatted or watched TV until she went to bed and my night shift started. After two weeks she drove me to Sørbøvåg, where there was more space, and I immersed myself in the life that went on there, so infinitely far from the life I lived in Bergen, but I was not without a guilty conscience, for what I was doing, the abjectness of it, became so clear when I was surrounded by frailty and disease, but also vitality and warmth.

After Christmas Yngve moved into a collective in Fjellsiden, the apartment he had occupied until then was due to be sold. The collective was in a splendid large detached house, I often went there, it was one of the few places I could go. He lived with three others, one of whom, Per Roger, I talked to, he was interested in literature and was a writer himself, but as he was in Yngve's circle, I felt so inferior to him that I barely answered when he asked me something and nothing came of the relationship.

An essay course started at the Academy, I wrote about Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, one of the books I was really passionate about, alongside Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and even though they didn't fall into the category of literature the teachers favored and taught, I still received some praise from Fosse, he said my language was tight and precise, my arguments solid and interesting, and that I obviously had a talent for nonfiction. The praise was double edged: did it mean that my future lay in literature about literature and not in literature itself?

Øystein Lønn dropped by on various occasions, the idea being that we should hand in our texts to him, but I didn't want to, I couldn't face any more humiliation in the classroom, and instead went to see him privately, at his hotel, with my text in hand. At the beginning of the course he had said he was at our disposal from dawn till dusk, and all we had to do was go and see him if there was anything we wanted to discuss. So, one evening at seven, I trudged down the hills below my place, the street lamps above me swinging in the wind, the rain beating on the walls and roofs. The heavens were inexhaustible, it had rained every day since the beginning of September and except for a couple of hours I hadn't seen the sun for what would soon be eight months. The streets were deserted apart from a few people who rushed past hugging the walls, in Bergen it was vital to get from A to B as fast as you could. The water in Vågen glittered in the reflection from the buildings along the quay, an express ferry drifted in and docked. As I passed the terminal it had lowered the gangplank and passengers were disembarking, mostly into waiting taxis.

Lønn was staying at Hotel Neptun around the corner, I went in, was given his room number at reception, went up, and knocked on the door.

Lønn, a sturdy fellow with big hands and a broad face, stared at me in surprise.

"You said we could come and see you if we had something to discuss," I said. "So I brought a text with me. I wonder if you would mind having a look at it."

"Not at all," he said. "Come in!"

The room was dark, he had only the two bedside lamps switched on, and the carpet, which was red and stretched from wall to wall, seemed to absorb all the light.

"Sit down," he said. "What was it you wanted me to look at? I can do it for tomorrow if you like."

"It's short," I said. "Just over a page."

"I'd better have a look at it then," he said. I passed him the text, he perched a pair of glasses on his nose and began to read.

I glanced around cautiously. It was a story about some young boys who had climbed up the steel cables of a bridge, it was snowing hard, they disappeared in the whirl of falling snow, one of them jumped. It transpired this happened regularly, that a boy jumped to his death. The novella, or short prose text, was inspired by Julio Cortázar.

"Ye-es," Lønn said, removed his glasses, folded them and put them in his shirt pocket. "A nice little story. Concise and pithily told. There's not much more to say about it, is there?"

"No," I said. "Did you like it?"

"Yes, I liked it a lot."

He got up. I got up too. He handed me the text.

"Good luck," he said.

"Thank you," I said.

He closed the door behind me, I walked down the corridor and felt like screaming at my own stupidity, what had I been trying to achieve? What had I expected? That he would say actually I was brilliant? That he would write to his publisher about me?

No, not that I was brilliant, I didn't believe that, but that he should take an interest in me and perhaps tell someone at his publishing house, that would have been a possibility, I had thought. Publishing houses did sometimes take an interest in Writing Academy students, that was well known. So why not in me?

When Lønn finished his course he did it with a few well-chosen sentences about each and every student and the various literary projects that he had been allowed to share. Praise for everyone apart from me, whom he failed to mention.

I left, furious and bitter.

It was true I hadn't handed in any work to him like the others, but he *had* read one of my texts. Why would he make a secret of that? If he thought it was so awful, surely he could at least have said?

After that, I stayed away from the Academy for several weeks. I had already skipped some classes in the autumn, and I stepped it up after Christmas, there was no obligation to attend classes, we were free to decide, and for as long as it felt as if I was having my head shoved down the toilet whenever I was there, I had no reason to attend everything, I reasoned, it was better to sit at home and write, after all that was what I had said when I applied, that the course would give me the opportunity to write full-time for a year.

So during the spring I was more often at home than in the Academy, and after the Lønn business I almost gave up attending classes. I didn't write either, everything felt meaningless, apart from going out, which had continued, I did everything I wanted to do, the decadent bohemian city lifestyle, the writer going to wrack and ruin with his eyes open wide and a bottle on the table. I broke one of my rules, I went out drinking on my own one evening, I sat in Fekterloftet with a carafe of white wine. Fekterloftet's speciality was that all the girls who worked there were stunning. That was why I had chosen this particular place to go, thinking I might be able to start a conversation with one of them, but it didn't happen, they were interested in serving and little else, so once I had finished the second carafe I got up and went to Café Opera, where I hung out in the bar until they closed, without seeing one familiar face, then I walked home. I woke up to someone shaking me, opened my eyes, I was lying in the hall, on the floor, sat up, it was Jon Olav. I had crashed out next to his door. The pockets in my waterproof bulged with small stones. I realized I must have collected them to throw at his window. Then someone living there must have come along and I followed him in. Jon Olav laughed at me, and I went back home, my body aching for more sleep. A couple of days later I went to Café Opera in the morning, I wasn't in the mood to go to the Academy and didn't feel like sitting at home, so I decided to wander down and buy myself a bottle of wine and see what happened. Getting drunk in the middle of the day was a good feeling, there was a lot of freedom in it, suddenly the day opened and offered quite different opportunities now that I didn't care about anything. Just walking down the street to buy some newspapers at a kiosk was an experience when you were drunk. It was as though a hole into the world had been opened, all the usual stuff, shelves of chewing gum, pastilles, chocolate, had an unpleasant air when you saw it through drunken eyes in the middle of the day. Not to mention the newspaper articles I read, back at a window table a few minutes later. Something raw and terrible attached itself to them, while I in fact viewed them with vivid, almost triumphant, feelings. Jesus, man, I was somebody, I could see something no one else could see, I could see into the depths of the world.

I drank all day, at around five I ate there, then I went down to a bookshop and bought a novel by Jayne Anne Phillips, which I tried to read for the next few hours with limited success, I could no longer concentrate for more than a few minutes at a time, every sentence I read made me swell with emotion. I can do that too, I thought. No, I can do better than that. Much, much better.

I started to doze off, closed my eyes and went absent for odd moments, came to with a jerk, how long had I been gone? Around me Café Opera was slowly filling up. Suddenly Per Roger was standing in front of me.

"Hi, Karl Ove," he said. "Are you out on your own?"

I saw no point in denying it and nodded.

"Come over and join us then!" he said. "We're sitting over there."

I stared at him. What was that he said?

"How much have you actually had to drink?" Per laughed. "Are you coming? We've got girls there too!"

I stood up and followed him to their table, sat down on one of the chairs, nodded to the others. There were five of them. The nearest one had shoulder-length fair hair and glasses, sideburns, and a T-shirt with a skull, a snake, and a dagger on underneath a grayish-white goatskin jacket. The guy beside him had long dark hair and sluggish eyes. Then there was a girl, perhaps a couple of years older than me, whom the last member of the group, a short-haired, dark handsome guy with a crafty expression, clearly had a soft spot for.

"This is Karl Ove," Per Roger said.

"I've seen you before," said the fair-haired guy. "You a student?"

"I'm at the Writing Academy," I said.

"Oh really," he said. "You're talking to the wrong man then. If there's one thing I haven't got, it's culture! My name's Gaute by the way."

He was from Bergen, his pal was from Bergen too, while the sly dark-haired guy was from Odda. The girl was an Østlander. Gaute and Per Roger talked and laughed a lot, the others didn't say that much, laughed now and then at what Gaute said, but seemed to be somewhere else. I drank and looked out the window, at the dry asphalt reflecting the street lamps. A little guy, around twenty-five, wearing a white shirt, sat down at the table. His eyes were blue, cold, and bored.

Gaute looked at me.

"Do you know what the skin around a cunt is called?" he said.

"No."

"A woman."

He laughed, I did too, and then we *skål*-ed. Slowly I entered a new phase of intoxication, I rose higher and higher, it was wonderful, I didn't care about anything anymore. Laughed a bit, made the odd comment, went to the bar and got more beer as the glasses emptied.

You didn't have to be with Gaute for long to know that he disliked everything that smacked of power and the Establishment with all his heart, in fact he hated it. I had met a lot of people with antibourgeois attitudes, but they were students and a part of the system, this guy seemed to have drawn his own conclusions, he was completely on the outside, joking and laughing at everything, quips about Jews and blacks came thick and fast, and I laughed at them so much I could hardly stop. When Café Opera closed he suggested we go back to his place and play a few records and smoke a bit, we shambled out, flagged down a taxi, and went to his apartment, which, it turned out, was on the Nordnes peninsula.

When we got out of the taxi and into the stairwell, Per Roger said they had been drinking for six months now and were planning to continue. I said I could imagine doing that. Just stick with us, he said, and then we went into Gaute's apartment.

"It's my mother's," he said. "That's why it's so nice here. Sorry. Ha ha ha! But I don't want any shouting, OK. There are neighbors here too."

"Come on, Gaute," Per Roger said. "If I want to shout I will."

Gaute didn't answer, took out a record, I sat down at the table. The music he played was somber and loud. The other long-haired guy, whose name I couldn't remember, brought an enormous carrot from the fridge and started carving it, sitting on the floor with his back against the wall, engrossed in his task.

"What are you doing?" I said.

He didn't answer.

"He's making a pipe," Gaute said. "He comes from Åsane. Full of losers there, and that's what they do. But you're not a Lords of the New Church man, are you?"

I shook my head.

"Pop and indie," I said.

"Pop and indie," he said, shaking his head. "Can we be bothered to wait for the pipe? You've got tobacco, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"What would you say if I put a bit of horse on the table?" he said, with his cold eyes.

"A horse on the table?" Gaute said, laughing. "What the hell are we going to do with that?"

"Have you got anything to drink?" I said.

"There might be a drop left somewhere. I don't know. You'd better have a look. If you want," he said, nodding toward the kitchen. "I feel like a smoke myself."

He looked at the guy from Odda.

"Did you say you had some on you?" he said.

The Odda guy nodded, took out a clump of hash wrapped in silver paper and a packet of large Rizla papers and passed them to Gaute. He heated up the clump, I put the tobacco in the paper, picked out the longest threads and ran the lighter over it a few times, the way I had seen others do it, gave it to him, he mixed the hash into the tobacco, rolled up the cigarette, licked it, and passed the whole salami to me.

We smoked half of it, I got up and went to the toilet, I felt as though my head had been blitzed, all my thoughts were scattered, one bit here, one bit there, mumbling to myself as I peed.

When I went back in, Gaute and Per Roger were talking loudly, almost shouting, a wild hodgepodge of Jew jokes, wordplay, and brutality. The guy with the eyes wasn't to be seen anywhere. The guy from Odda was sitting with the girl on his lap making out. The long-haired loser was filling the carrot pipe with tobacco. I slid down the wall to the floor. Across the table they began to discuss the most brutal ways you could kill yourself. Gaute leaned forward and passed me the joint. I took a deep drag.

"Give it here," Gaute said with a snigger. I passed him the joint, he took a drag and his cheeks were hollow for ages before he exhaled the smoke and passed the joint on to Per Roger.

"You've landed in a suicidal viper's nest," he said, and laughed. "We'll drink for as long as we can, and then we'll kill ourselves. That's the plan. And you're in, Per Roger says."

"Yes," I said. "For the drinking part anyhow."

"Can't have one without the other," Gaute said, and laughed again. "But we have to do it in turn. So those who are left can sell the hair and the gold teeth and keep going for a few more days. Ha ha ha!"

Per Roger laughed as he stared at me.

Then he said:

wriggle with the snake
slither and slide
whither the viper wills

"What was that?" I said. "Hávamál or what?"

"No, it's a poem I wrote."

"Did you? That's fantastic."

"We all know which snake you're thinking about!" Gaute said. "We also know where it's going! 'Slither and slide,' that's you!"

Per Roger laughed at what Gaute said, but he stared at me with serious wide-open eyes. I looked down.

The Odda guy and the girl got up and were gone. I couldn't be bothered to look where. I disappeared, when I opened my eyes again the room was empty, apart from the guy with the carrot, who was sleeping on the floor. I stood up and went out. The darkness was dense, the streets were deserted. I had no idea what the time was, just walked toward town, barely present inside myself. A car raced up behind me, it was a taxi, I raised my hand in the air, it stopped, I got in, mumbled my address, and when it accelerated down the cobbled street it was as though I was taking off, I was floating on the backseat, like a balloon under the car roof. Oh, I had to control this feeling, I couldn't fly inside the taxi, but it didn't work, I couldn't hold myself down, I floated like a balloon under the roof the whole way home. Once there, I undressed, went to bed and slept like a log. When I awoke it was pitch black outside. I looked at my watch. It was five o'clock.

Five o'clock in the afternoon or the morning?

Surely it had to be the afternoon?

I leaned forward and peered through the window. Two kids in waterproofs were kicking a ball to each other in the park on the other side of the street. Afternoon then. I went down to the basement and had a shower, and then, absolutely ravenous, I fried all the eggs I had and put them on six slices of bread, which I wolfed down. Followed by a liter of milk with Nesquik.

It felt as though I had seen hell's gates open.

I wrote all night with the rain beating against the window and drunken night owls sporadically walking past in the otherwise empty street. In the morning, the house filled with the noise of people starting the day, I went back to bed, and when I awoke, at around one, it was from a dream in which I had died. I was doing this more and more often, and I was more frightened in these dreams than I had ever been awake. Usually I fell from a great height, but sometimes I drowned. It was as if I was absolutely clear-headed and conscious, as if what happened was real. Now I am going to die, I thought.

I got dressed, ate a few slices of bread and butter, and went to Yngve's.

I rang the bell. One of the girls opened the door.

"Hi," she said. "Yngve's out. Would you like to come in and wait?"

"Maybe," I said. "Is Per Roger in?"

"No. He's been away for several days. I think he's on a binge."

I said nothing about having been drinking with him the other night, I didn't want any conversation.

"You'll be alright, won't you?" she said, and when I nodded she disappeared into her room. I slumped on the sofa, took one of the magazines on the table and flicked through.

After a while I went over to the window and looked out at the gray ocean that was the sky and the red rooftops and white walls that ran down cheek by jowl toward the town center. For all I knew he might be out until the following day.

The girl came back, she slipped into the kitchen, poked her head out and asked if I wanted a cup of tea.

"No, thanks," I said. "Incidentally, you don't know where Yngve is, do you?"

"No idea. I think he was going to see Ingvild."

"Oh. Well, that might be a while then," I said. The natural consequence of what she said was that I should go. But I didn't want to. I'll give him another half an hour, I thought, and went into his room. It was a part of the collective and not as private as it would have been, had it been his bedroom in a normal apartment, but I still felt a little uneasy at being there. It smelled the same as the place in Solheimsviken, and the possessions were the same, right down to the white IKEA bedspread. I looked through his record collection, wondering if I should play some music while I was waiting, but decided that would be too much, sitting in his room and playing his records when he came home, that wouldn't look good.

Perhaps it would be best to go home.

I got up and went into the hall. As I bent down to tie my shoelaces the door opened and Yngve stood in front of me with a dripping umbrella in one hand and a Mekka bag in the other.

"Are you off?" he said.

"No, not now," I said. "Didn't think you'd be here for a while."

He took his purchases into the kitchen, I sat down in the living room.

"I'm going to make an omelette," he shouted from inside. "Want one?"

"OK," I shouted back.

We ate without speaking, he sat with the remote control in front of him zapping through the sports pages on Teletext. Afterward he made some coffee, the girl came down, Yngve cracked a joke, she laughed, I lit a cigarette and thought I'd better go now, however it was still better sitting here than at home.

"I've finished the music for your lyrics by the way," he said. "Would you like to hear it?"

I followed him into his room. He hung the guitar strap over his shoulder, switched on the amplifier, adjusted the echo box, and strummed a few chords.

"Ready?" he said.

I nodded and he began to play, slightly embarrassed. He didn't sing very well, but that wasn't the point, I only had to hear how the tune went, nevertheless I still couldn't watch him as he stood there with his head lowered and the guitar hanging over his hips, singing. But it was catchy, a nice simple pop song.

I told him. He lifted the guitar over his head and put it on the stand.

"I need some more songs," he said. "Couldn't you just dash off a few?"

"I'll try."

We went back into the living room. He said he was going to a party tomorrow, someone in his department was giving it, a little out of town.

"Do you feel like coming?"

"Maybe," I said. "Will Ingvild be going?"

"I think so, yes."

I had met them together two or three times. It had been strange, but it had gone well, all three of us pretended nothing had happened, and now that I no longer believed there was a chance of going out with her, I didn't have any problem talking to her either. Once we had been alone at the same table in Café Opera, the conversation had flowed easily and naturally, she talked about her father and her relationship with him, I listened, she talked about her time at *gymnas*, and I told her a little about mine, she laughed in the fantastic way she did, when her eyes seemed to burst into laughter. All my feelings for her were intact, she was still the one I wanted, still the one I yearned for, but now that it was impossible, now that there was a definitive obstacle in the way, I was no longer afraid of talking to her. And while at the beginning of their relationship I had avoided them like the plague, I hadn't wanted to see them at all, yet had started meeting Yngve, though still not her, everything had been turned on its head: now I wanted her to be there or come along when I was with Yngve. I just wanted to see her, just be in the same room as her, be filled with her presence.

I sat up all night penning lyrics for Yngve. It was fun, it was quite different from writing texts to read out at the Academy, here this was about thinking up some phrases that sounded good and then finding something that would rhyme. This wasn't about anything in particular, didn't have a theme, didn't go anywhere, and it was liberating. It was like doing a crossword.

By three in the morning I had one song ready.

Over My Head

I die in dreams
Nights in blue
Cannot forget
Know we're through

Howl at the moon
There we lie
Know no bounds
Off we fly

Know it's alright
Take it as read
Know you can do it
Tho' it's over my head

You're moving on
Why, oh why
You know no bounds
Off you fly

I die in dreams
Nights in blue
No way, it seems
Gone like the dew

Know it's alright
Take it as read
Know you can do it
Tho' it's over my head

When I went to see Yngve the next evening Ingvild was there and I left the lyrics in my jacket pocket, sat down with a beer in my hand instead, and casually asked how she was doing. She was wearing the white sweater with the blue stripes and blue jeans. She was both at home and not at home with her surroundings, and I wondered whether she was always like that, split somehow, always with one eye on herself, or was it just here, at Yngve's? They sat beside each other on the sofa, but apart. They hadn't touched each other since I arrived, either. Was that because of me? Were they being considerate to me? Or was that how they behaved with each other?

She said everything was going well and she loved being in the collective in Nygårdsgaten. The history of the collective went back to the 1960s, she said, actually Kjartan Fløgstad had lived there once. Now some of Yngve's friends lived there: Frank from Arendal, an odd character, according to her, and Atle from Kristiansand, as well as two other girls.

After a while she got up to go for a shower, and after she had gone I took out the song I had written for Yngve. He cast a quick eye over it. It's great, he said, and stuffed it in his back pocket.

Ingvild walked through the room wrapped in a large towel.

I looked away.

"We have to go soon," Yngve said. "You'll have to hurry."

"Yes, yes," Ingvild said.

We had another beer, then he stood up and started to get dressed. Opened the door to the room where Ingvild was standing drying her hair.

"Let's go. Come on," he said.

"I just have to finish drying my hair," she said from inside the room.

"Couldn't you have done it a bit earlier?" Yngve said. "You knew we had to go soon, didn't you?"

He closed the door.

"Good thing I didn't book a taxi anyway," he said without looking at me.

"Yes," I said.

There was a silence. The girl who lived there went into the living room and switched on the television.

At the party, which consisted mainly of Media students, plus a crowd of Music types, I was as usual Yngve's little brother and nothing else. Girls thought it amusing that we were so alike, I said next to nothing, apart from when someone put on a classical record and asked what it was and none of the Media students could answer, and I said, my face half averted and embarrassed at myself, that it was Tchaikovsky. It was. Yngve eyed me with surprise. How did *you* know? he said. Lucky break, I said, and it was, too, I had one record by Tchaikovsky and that was the one.

Ingvild took an early taxi home, Yngve stayed and it was painful to see that he didn't appreciate her more, that he was happy to see her go. If it had been me I would have flung my arms around her. I had worshipped her. I had given her everything I had. Yngve didn't do that. Did he care about her at all?

He must. But he was older, more experienced, a different light burned in him than my stupid naïve one. And what I also saw was that he gave Ingvild space, a larger space than she occupied, which I couldn't have done, never in this world, because we were in the same space, she and I, the space of uncertainty and hesitation, half groping and half clutching. She needed him as much as I did.

After we had run through various dramatists and various drama traditions at the Academy, the idea was that we should write something in the genre ourselves, as usual. I put off doing this until the evening before it was due, then I plodded off to Verftet to sit there all night. We had a standing offer of a desk there if we needed an undisturbed place to write in the afternoon and evening, I had borrowed the keys and done it a couple of times, there was something about being alone in a common room that I liked, perhaps because there was nothing in it that reminded me of myself, I wasn't quite sure why, that was just how it was, also this evening when I let myself in and walked through the empty hallway, up the empty stairs, and into the empty rooms at the top.

The others had already handed in their contributions, photocopies of their work lay in piles on the table in the adjacent room. I found a typewriter, put on some coffee, stared at the reflection of the room in the black windows, as though it had been pulled out of the drifting waters of Vågen. It was nine o'clock, I had decided I would sit here until I had finished, even if it took all night.

I had no idea what to write.

The coffee was ready, I drank a cup, smoked a cigarette, stared at the image of myself in the window. Turned and looked at the bookshelves. They wouldn't have a photography book of scantily clad or naked women here, would . . . ?

But they did have a book about the history of art. I pulled it down and leafed through. Some of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings were of naked women. Perhaps there was something I could use there?

It was too big for me to fit into my trousers. And I didn't want to carry it under my arm because even though the chance of someone appearing at this time was minimal it wasn't impossible, and how would I explain lugging an art book down to the restroom?

I put it in a bag and went down the spiral staircase and into the toilet. A picture by Raphael stood out at once, two women in front of a well, one naked, the other dressed, the naked one was strikingly beautiful, she was looking enigmatically to the side, her small breasts were pert, a strip of cloth covered her nether region, but her thighs were visible and I got a hard-on, I flipped through, stared at a picture by Rubens, *The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* (1618), one of the two naked women was the red-haired, pale freckly type with a small chin and a full body, then there was Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (1485), where one breast was bared, and Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538), in which the woman in the foreground had one hand resting between her legs while she gazed straight at the observer with a provocative, self-assured expression on her face. I studied her naked breasts for a long time, her broad hips and small feet, but there was more to see of course, and I went on to Bartholomeus Spranger's *Vulcan and Maia* (1585), in which the woman, with her hands on a strong bearded man, thrusts her hips forward with a lustful glint in her eye. Her breasts were supple, her skin was all white, her face almost childish. She was good. The next was Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827), the woman in the foreground had her back to us, one breast was revealed, thrust right forward, because she had a sword to her throat, and the whole of her bottom was visible, perfectly formed. During this time, as I flipped backward and forward, trying to decide which picture to go for, I moved slowly, holding myself back. Maybe Delacroix? No, it had to be Ingres! *Odalisque with Slave* (1842). She's lying full-length with her arms behind her head and is all wonderful curves, or, oh, of course *The Turkish Bath* (1862). Only women in this one and they were all naked. They sat and stood in every conceivable pose and every possible type was represented: cool, passionate, half concealed, fully exposed. All skin and flesh and female forms as far as the eye could see. But which one, oh, which one? The one with the chubby face and the open lips? I loved faces in which the mouths were slightly open and the teeth always visible. Or the blond just behind with the haughty gaze? The one with the small breasts staring at her hand? Or the one, oh yes, sitting behind her, leaning back, arms outstretched, eyes closed in ecstasy, it had to be her!

Afterward I stood still for a moment to make sure there was no one in the corridor outside, then I went back up, returned the book to its place on the shelf, poured myself a cup of coffee, lit a cigarette, and sat staring at the blank page.

Nothing. I had no idea what to write.

I went for a little walk inside, browsed through the books, went into the photocopy room, skimmed through the others' work. They were what you would expect, each and every one of them had written in complete keeping with their own particular style. Most I just cast a quick glance at, but I took Petra's into the classroom and read it carefully. It was a kind of absurd, almost surreal, comedy where people did totally unmotivated and pretty crazy things, it was high tempo, devoid of meaning, my main impression was: chaos and randomness.

Surely I could do that too?

I began to write, and I wrote quickly, one scene after the other appeared on the paper, as a kind of extension of what I had read. There might have been some slight similarities in the characterization, what they got up to was also unmotivated and unexpected, but it was not a carbon copy of Petra's, ultimately the characters did do different things, and I was very pleased when I had a first draft at around three. I touched it up, went through the whole drama one more time, and by eight in the morning I had got so far that I was able to photocopy the text ten times and put the copies in a pile beside the others. When the first student arrived, at a quarter to ten, I was asleep in my chair.

The whole day was spent analyzing the texts. I was praised for mine, although Hovland had some criticisms regarding its dramatic quality, in other words, the link between the characters and the scenes, I defended myself by saying there wasn't supposed to be a link, that was the whole point, and he nodded and said yes, but even incoherence requires coherence; the rule of thumb for all writing is that you can write about boredom, but it mustn't be boring.

Petra had watched me during the analysis, but she said nothing, even when Hovland asked her directly for her opinion she said she had no comments to make. It was only when the lesson was over and people were tidying up and putting on coats that it came.

"You copied my text," she said.

"I did not," I said.

"You were here last night, you read my text, and then you wrote yours. That's copying pure and simple."

"No," I said. "I didn't read yours at all. How can I copy it if I haven't read it?"

"D'you think I'm stupid or what? You sat here, read it, and wrote a variation on a theme. You might as well admit it."

"Well, I would admit it if there was anything in your claim," I said. "But there isn't. I *didn't* read your text. And I didn't copy it. If there's any similarity at all it's pure chance."

"Ha!" she said, and got up, put her papers and books in her black bag. "It makes no difference to me, it's alright if you copy what I do, but lying about it is not at all alright."

"I'm not lying," I said. "I didn't know a thing until you read it to us."

She rolled her eyes, put on her jacket, and walked toward the exit. I waited a few minutes, for my head to cool down and for Petra to be so far away that I couldn't catch up with her, then I made my way home. I recognized this situation, it was the same as the one I had been in at school, when I had voted for myself as class rep and received only one vote, and someone found out, by asking everyone in the class who they had voted for. I denied it, they couldn't prove anything, I just said no, it wasn't true. In this case, it *wasn't* possible to prove anything, no one else but me knew that I had read her piece, I just had to keep denying it, she was the one making a fool of herself. But I had no great desire to show my face there again, for if no one else knew for certain, *I* did. The night before, it had seemed natural, a matter of course, I had only borrowed a little from her, surely that was justified, but during the analysis and in our subsequent exchange it took on a different aspect, I had plagiarized her work and what did that make me? How could I become so desperate that I not only plagiarized a fellow student's work but on top of that deluded myself into thinking I had made up everything myself?

Once I had copied a poem into my diary and pretended it was me who had written it. I had been twelve at the time, and strange as it might be that I could so openly dupe myself, you wrote this Karl Ove, you did, while I had copied it from a book, age was a mitigating circumstance. Now I was twenty though, an adult man, how could I have knowingly done anything so base?

For the next few weeks I stayed at home. I wrote my novel, it was hopeless, but I was nearing the end, and it was important I had something concrete and tangible to show for my work this year.

I had sent a text, the one Øystein Lønn had read, to the Cappelen magazine *Signaler* and one day it came back. I nurtured wild hopes of an acceptance as I opened the envelope, but guessed which way the wind was blowing, so it was no surprise when I read:

Dear Karl Ove Knausgaard,

Thank you for sending me your contribution. I read it with interest, but I am afraid I cannot use it in SIGNALER 89.

Best regards,
Lars Saabye Christensen

It gave me a little frisson of excitement to see Saabye Christensen's signature, it meant he had read what I had written. For a few minutes at any rate I had filled his mind with what existed in mine!

XTC brought out *Oranges and Lemons*, I played it again and again, right until deLillos released their *Hjernen er alene*, The Brain Is Alone, then that was what was played on my stereo day and night. Outside, the skies were lighter and the rain fell less often. The feelings of spring, which had been so strong when I was a boy, which had filled all my senses and somehow raised body and soul after the winter's heaviness and darkness, overcame me again. I kept at my novel, I wouldn't finish it until the semester was over, but I planned to hand in what I had done as my final assignment at the Academy. It was the same novel that had got me into the course, and there was no development evident in it, I wrote in exactly the same style now as I had done then, the whole year had been wasted, the sole difference was that when they accepted me I thought I was a writer, while now, on the verge of finishing, I knew I wasn't.

One evening Yngve and Asbjørn appeared on the steps.

"Are you coming out?" Asbjørn said.

"I'd love to," I said. "But I don't have any money."

"You can borrow some if you want," Asbjørn said. "Yngve has a broken heart, so we have to drink him through it."

"It's over with Ingvild," Yngve said, and smiled.

"OK," I said. "Count me in. Hang on a moment."

I grabbed my jacket and tobacco and walked to town with them. The next three days were a blur, we drank day and night, slept at Asbjørn's, got drunk in the morning, ate in town, continued drinking in his apartment, went out in the evening, to all sorts of weird places, such as Uglen or the bar at Rica, and it was wonderful, nothing could beat the feeling of walking across Torgalmenningen and Fisketorget in the middle of the day, drunk, it was as though I was right and everyone else was wrong, as though I was free and everyone else tied and bound to everyday life, and with Yngve and Asbjørn it didn't seem wrong or excessive, just fun. On the last night, we didn't know it would be the last, we took cans of spray paint with us. At Hulen, where we ended up, the place wasn't very full, when I went to the toilet I spray-painted a slogan inside the cubicle, soon afterward a member of the staff came with a cloth and bucket to clean it off, once he had left I did it again, we laughed and decided to go the whole hog, spray paint some buildings in town, and we went out, to Møhlenpris, I wrote U2 STOPS ROCK 'N' ROLL along a big brick wall in letters as high as myself, they had just played on a rooftop, it hadn't been good, and Bono had formulated the slogan U2 Stops Traffic, which was even less good, while Asbjørn wrote RICKY

NELSON RULES OK over the tram depot wall, and Yngve wrote CAT, WE NEED YOU TO RAP on another wall, we continued like this toward his collective, where we stopped to have more to drink. An hour later we had all crashed out. When we woke up it was to the fear of what we had done, because the trail led to us: the graffiti started outside Hulen and continued all the way here, to the wall beside the door, where you could read YNGVE IS A DAMN. . . It wouldn't take much of an investigation to work out where the vandals who had spray-painted the whole of Møhlenpris lived. Especially Asbjørn was jittery, but I wasn't immune, and that was strange because all I wanted to do was to keep on drinking, live the life, not give a damn, yet I hit a wall whenever I did that, a wall of petite-bourgeoisie and middle-class manners, which could not be broken down without enormous anguish and fear. I wanted to, but I couldn't. Deep down, I was decent and proper, a goody-goody, and, I thought, perhaps that was also why I couldn't write. I wasn't wild enough, not artistic enough, in short, much too normal for my writing to take off. What had made me believe anything else? Oh, but this was the life-lie.

What I had learned over the course of the year at the Writing Academy was that there was a literature that was real literature, the true lofty variety, which stretched from Homer's epics and the Greek dramas through the course of history up to the present day with writers such as Ole Robert Sunde, Tor Ulven, Eldrid Lunden, Kjartan Fløgstad, Georg Johannesen, Liv Lundberg, Anne Bøe, Ellen Einan, Steinar Løding, Jon Fosse, Terje Dragseth, Hans Herbjørnsrud, Jan Kjærstad, Øystein Lønn, Svein Jarvoll, Finn Øglænd, the Danes Søren Ulrik Thomsen and Michael Strunge, the Swedes Katarina Frostenson and Stig Larsson. I knew that the great Scandinavian poet of this century was Gunnar Ekelöf, and the great Finnish-Swedish modernist Gunnar Björling, I knew that our own Rolf Jacobsen wasn't fit to tie their shoelaces and Olav H. Hauge was rooted in tradition to a far greater degree than they were. I knew the last great innovation in the novel took place in France in the 1960s, and that it was ongoing, especially in the novels of Claude Simon. I also knew that I couldn't reinvent the novel, I couldn't even copy those who were being innovative as I didn't understand where the novel's *essence lay*. I was blind, I couldn't read; if I read Stig Larsson's *Introduction*, for example, I couldn't say what was new about it or what the essence was, I read all novels the way I had once read crime fiction and thrillers, the endless series of books I had read as a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old, about Black September and Jackal, about spies during the Second World War and randy elephant hunters in Africa. What had changed during this year was that now I definitely knew that there *were* differences. But this hadn't had any impact on my own writing. To solve this problem, I had made a subgenre of the modern novel my own, this was the one I marketed as my ideal, American novels and short stories written by Bret Easton Ellis, Jayne Anne Phillips, Jay McInerny, Barry Gifford. This was how I excused what I wrote.

I had gained an insight. At great expense, but it was real and important: I was not a writer. What writers had, I did not have. I fought against this insight, I told myself I *might* be able to have what writers had, it might be attainable provided I persisted for long enough, while knowing in fact this was only a consolation. Probably Jon Fosse had been right, probably my talent did consist in writing about literature and not writing literature itself.

This was my final assessment, some days after going on a bender with Yngve and Asbjørn, walking home from the Academy after handing in my manuscript. The novel wasn't finished, and I had decided to spend the rest of the spring and summer on it. When it was completed I would send it to a publisher. I had decided on Cappelen, to whom I felt some loyalty after the personal rejection by Lars Saabye Christensen. I assumed I would get another rejection, but I wasn't entirely sure, they might see something in my writing that Jon Fosse and Ragnar Hovland hadn't, after all they, too, had seen something inasmuch as they had accepted me into the course – this was a small hope, but it was there and would be there right until a letter from Cappelen landed in my mailbox. It wasn't over until then.

The light in the town had been changing character during the spring. The dampness and the gloom of the autumn and winter hues were gone. Now the colors were dry and light and with the white houses reflecting the light, even the indirect light when the sun was behind the clouds, shimmering and bright, it was as though the whole town had risen. In the autumn and winter Bergen was like a bowl, it lay still and took whatever came its way; in the spring and summer it was as though the mountains folded back, like the petals of a flower, and the town burst forth in its own right, humming and quivering.

You couldn't sit inside in the evenings then.

I knocked on Morten's door, asked if he wanted to go with me to Christian, and if so, could he lend me some money, he could, and we perched at a table staring at all the beautiful girls who were out walking, not the black-clad, intellectual kind, but the nicely dressed, blond conventional kind, while we discussed how difficult everything was and we slowly got drunk and the evening dissolved into the usual darkness. I woke up under a bush by Lille Lundgård Lake with someone tugging at me, it was a policeman, he said I couldn't sleep there, I got up sleepily and went home.

I knocked on Ingvild's door in her new collective, she was surprised to see me but also happy, I sensed, and I was happy too. It was a big collective with a corner window facing Nygårdsgaten and the Grieg Hall, I said hello to the others living there, faces I had seen but not spoken to, all in some way or other connected with Yngve. Ingvild was fully integrated into student life, that was good to see, at the same time it made her harder to reach, I was on the outside, she said twice she wanted me as a friend and I assumed that probably meant she didn't want me as a boyfriend.

We sat there on the big sofa, she had made some tea, seemed happy, I looked at her, tried not to show how depressed I was, how sorry I was that we weren't together, and never would be, then I smiled and talked about more pleasurable matters, and when I left she must have thought it was all over as far as I was concerned and now we were actually only friends.

Before leaving I asked her if she could lend me a hundred kroner or two. In fact I was flat broke, didn't even have enough money for a smoke.

"Yes, of course," she said. "But I want it back!"

"Goes without saying," I said. "Have you got two hundred?"

I owed both Yngve and Asbjørn so much that I couldn't borrow any more. I also owed Morten quite a bit, and Jon Olav and Anne. I had also begged a hundred here and a hundred there when I had been out, off Yngve's friends, no one was that careful when they were out drinking, and I didn't have to pay everyone back.

Ingvild had two hundred. I stuffed the money in my pocket and went downstairs as she returned to her room.

Strange, I thought as I emerged and felt the warm air on my face and saw the row of trees that had begun to burst into leaf behind the Grieg Hall. The moment she was out of sight, I missed her. I had seen her only a few minutes earlier, she had been sitting a meter away from me, her knees together and her upper body leaning over the table, and now I was both excited and sad at the thought that she might be sitting alone in her room at this minute, at the mere knowledge that she existed.

At the end of May Yngve had exams and I joined them in the evenings when they were out celebrating. The town was awash with people, they were everywhere, the air was warm, the trees were an explosion of green, and as I walked around in the evening beneath the light sky, in the dusk-gray streets that never really became dark, all of this gave me strength, all of this lifted my mood, I had such a strong feeling of being alive and, not least, that I wanted to live more.

The year was over, the next day we would be having the end-of-year meal at the Academy and be given the certificate, or whatever it was, to prove we had attended the course. I would go, say good-bye to everyone, and then I would turn my back. Never think about it again.

Among Yngve's student friends spirits were high, beer after beer was brought to our table, and even though I didn't say that much, even though I was temporarily my silent self, I was still there, I drank and smiled and looked at the others, who babbled away about this and that, Ola was the only person I knew, the others I had only seen, so I sat down beside him, he had always taken me under his wing in the sense that he took me seriously and listened to what I said, as though there was something sensible or interesting in it, although he himself was light-years above it. He even laughed at my jokes. But I didn't want to impose on him, or Yngve, who sat there with his head raised, clinking glasses and talking.

By the time the lights flashed and we drank up, then went downstairs to hang around outside until we were all gathered as usual, I was so drunk that I felt as if I were in a tunnel, the sides were all dark, the light was only ahead, wherever I was looking or thinking. I was free.

"There's our Kjærstad!" I said.

"Enough already," he said. "It's not funny, even if you think it is."

"It is pretty funny," I said. "Shall we get going? What are we waiting for?"

Yngve came over to me.

"Easy now," he said.

"OK," I said. "But let's move."

"We're waiting for someone."

"Aren't you pleased it went well?"

"Of course."

He turned to the others. I rummaged through my pockets for cigarettes, couldn't make my lighter work, and threw it to the ground.

"Got a light?"

I asked the guy who resembled Kjærstad, and he nodded, took out a lighter and lit my cigarette, cupping his hand to shield the flame.

I spat and took a drag, looking around me. The girls with us were four, five years older than me, but I was good-looking, surely this wasn't the first time a twenty-year-old had fucked a twenty-five-year-old?

But I had nothing to say to them, even when I was as drunk as I was now, so there was no hope there. You had to say something first, that much I had learned.

Suddenly they started walking. I followed them, always staying in the middle of the crowd, I saw Yngve's head bobbing up and down a few meters ahead of me, and the luminous May night with all the smells, the animated voices, all the other people on the streets, my brain was whirring with thoughts of how good this was. I was a student in Bergen, surrounded by other students, we were off to a party, walking through the streets of Høyden toward Nygård Park, which lay still, breathing quietly, in the darkness between all the roads and buildings, it was 1989, I was twenty years old, full of life and energy. And watching the others walking with me, I thought they weren't like that, only I was, I rose higher and higher, farther and farther, while they stayed where they were. Fucking Media students. Fucking Media brats. Fucking Media theorists. What did they know about life? What did they know about what was really important?

Listen to my heart beating.

Listen to my heart beating, you dozy fucking little imbeciles. Listen to it beating!

Look at me. Look at the strength I've got!

I could crush every last one of them. And it wouldn't be a problem either. I could just go on and on and on. They could belittle me, they could humiliate me, they always had, but I would never give up, it wasn't in my makeup, while all the other idiots, who thought they were so damned clever, they had nothing inside them, they were completely hollow.

The park.

Oh, Jesus, the entrance to the park! Oh, shit, how beautiful. The dense green foliage, nearly black in the gathering dusk, and the pond. The gravel and the benches.

I took it all in. It became me. I carried it within me.

They stopped, one of them pulled out a bunch of keys from their trouser pocket and opened a door to a detached house on the opposite side of the street from the park.

We went up an old battered staircase, entered an old battered apartment. There was a high ceiling, a fireplace in the corner, rag rugs on the wooden floor, fifties furniture bought at the flea market or at Fretex, the Salvation

Army shop, a poster of Madonna, a poster of Elvis with a gun that Warhol had done, and a poster of the first *Godfather* film.

We sat down. Spirits and glasses appeared on the table. Yngve sat at the head of the table, I sat at the opposite end, I didn't like having anyone close to me, as you had on the sofa.

I drank. More darkness. They discussed, I threw in comments, Yngve sent me occasional glances and I could see he didn't like what I said or the way I said it. He thought I was showing him up. Let him think that, it wasn't my problem.

I got up and went to the toilet. I pissed in the sink and laughed at the idea of them putting in the plug, filling the sink with water and washing their faces the following morning.

I went back, poured more whiskey, almost everything was dark now.

"Look at the park!" I said.

"What about it?" someone said.

"Easy now, Psycho," Yngve said.

I dragged myself to my feet, grabbed my glass and hurled it at him as hard as I could. It hit him in the face. He fell forward. Everyone got up screaming, rushed to his side. I stood still for a moment and watched the scene unfolding. Then I went into the hall, put on my shoes and jacket, and staggered down the stairs, onto the street and into the park. The feeling of finally having acted was strong. I looked up at the sky, which was light and bright and wonderful, and stared into the green darkness of the park, and then I was gone, it was as though I had been switched off.

I woke up on a corridor floor.

It was light, the sun was streaming in through the windows.

I sat up. There were several doors along the corridor. An old lady stood eyeing me, behind her a younger woman, perhaps forty, she was eyeing me too. They didn't say anything, but they looked scared.

I struggled to my feet. I was still drunk, my body leaden. I understood nothing, it was like being in a dream, but I knew that I was conscious and staggered off down the corridor, a hand against the wall every now and then.

There was something about a fire engine. A fire and a fire engine. Wasn't there?

At the end of the corridor there was a staircase, at the bottom a door with frosted glass in the top part. I went down the stairs, pushed open the door, stopped outside, and squinted into the sun.

In front of me was the end wall of the Science Building. To the left was Lille Lungegård Lake.

I turned and looked at the building where I had slept. It was white and made of brick.

A big police car came down the road and turned into the gravel area in front of me as two women came out of the door behind me.

Two officers walked toward me and stopped.

"I think there's a fire," I said. "A fire engine went that way," I said, pointing across. "It's not here. It's farther away. It must be."

"That's him," said the woman behind me.

"What are you doing here?" one policeman said.

"I don't know," I said. "I woke up here. But I think you should hurry."

"What's your name?"

I looked at him. I teetered to the side, he put his hand on my shoulder to steady me.

"What difference does it make what my name is?" I said. "What's a name?"

"You'd better come with us," he said.

"In the car?"

"Yes, come now."

He put his hand on my arm and led me to the car, pushed open the door, and I got in at the back, a large space which I had all to myself.

Now I had experienced this as well. Being driven through the streets of Bergen in a police car.

Had they arrested me?

But it was the end-of-year meal today!

There were no sirens wailing or anything, they drove sedately and stopped at all the traffic lights. They arrived at the police station, grabbed my arm again, and led me into the building.

"I need to make a telephone call," I said. "It's important. I should be at a meeting. They have to know I won't be coming. I have the right to make a call, I know that."

I was laughing inside, this was just like a film, me, flanked by two policemen, asking to make a telephone call!

And I got my way. They stopped by a phone at the end of the corridor.

I didn't know the number of the Writing Academy. There was a telephone directory underneath, I tried to look it up and failed.

I turned to them.

"I give up," I said.

"OK," they said, and led me to a hatch where I had to empty my pockets and hand over my belt, and then they steered me down to the cellar, or whatever it was, at any rate there were iron doors on either side of the corridor and I had to go through one of them. The cell was completely bare except for a big blue mattress.

"Sleep it off here. Someone will collect you for questioning when you wake up."

"Yes sir!" I said in English, standing in the middle of the cell until they had closed the door behind them, then I lay down on the blue mattress and laughed to myself, for a long time, before falling asleep.

The next time I woke up I was still drunk and everything that had happened out there and on the way here had something dreamlike about it. But the iron door and the concrete floor were tangible enough.

I knocked on the door.

I ought to have shouted, but I didn't know quite what. Guard?

Yes.

"Guard, I've woken up!" I shouted. "Guard! Guard!"

"Shut up!" someone shouted.

That frightened me a bit and I sat down on the mattress. Afterward the door was unlocked and a policeman stared in at me.

"Are you sober now?" he said.

"Yes, I think so," I said. "Perhaps not completely though. Better than before anyway."

"Come with me," he said.

We went up from the cellar, him first, me next, into an elevator and through the floors. He knocked on a door, we went into an office, an older man, maybe fifty, maybe fifty-five, plainclothes, looked at me.

"Sit down," he said.

I sat down on the chair in front of his desk.

"You were found in Florida," he said. "You'd fallen asleep in the corridor of a nursing home. What were you doing there?"

"I don't know," I said. "I was so drunk. I don't remember a thing. Just that I woke up there."

"Do you live in Bergen?"

"Yes."

"What's your name?"

"Karl Ove Knausgaard."

"Have you any convictions?"

"Convictions?"

"Have you ever been convicted of anything? Drugs, breaking and entering?"

"No, no, no."

He looked over at a man standing in the doorway.

"Will you check that?"

The man went into the office next door. While he was there the man who was questioning me sat, head down, filling in a form without saying a word. Blinds covered the windows; outside, between the slats, the sky was blue.

The second man came back.

"Nothing," he said.

"You don't remember anything?" said the man questioning me. "Earlier in the evening, you don't remember anything? Where did you go?"

"I was at a party. By the park."

"Who were you with?"

"My brother, among others. And some of his friends."

He looked at me.

"We'd better call him in then."

"Who?"

"Your brother."

"What's he got to do with this? And what's all this about? I slept in the corridor of a nursing home, that's not good, I know, and you might consider it breaking and entering, but that's all I did."

"You don't remember anything?" he said. "The home was burgled last night and in the immediate vicinity there was a car crash. So things were happening. Then we find you in the corridor of the same home. That's what this is about. What's your brother's name?"

"Yngve Knausgaard."

"His address? And yours?"

I told him.

"You'll be hearing from us. You can go now."

I was escorted down to the ground floor, given my few possessions, and I went into the parking lot outside. I was so tired I could barely walk. I stopped several times to catch my breath, and before Steinkjellergaten I had to sit down on a step, I simply had no energy left. Up the hill, would I make it? But ten minutes later, after the passersby had stared at me, every single one, I got to my feet and lurched up the hill. The walk home from the police station took me close to an hour. In my room I lay down on the bed and fell asleep for the third time within twenty-four hours. Not for long. When I opened my eyes again it was still early afternoon. The heaviness had left my body, it felt normal now apart from a terrible hunger. I ate ten slices of bread and cheese, drank a liter of milk with Nesquik, and went to the phone booth to call the Academy. Fortunately Sagen was there. I told him I had been arrested and hadn't been able to go to the dinner. Arrested? he said. Are you joking? No, I said, I spent the night in a cell. I'm still in a bad way, I'm afraid to say. Could you send me the certificate, do you think? Certainly, he said. Shame you weren't here for the meal. Arrested, you say? Yes, I said. Thank you for everything this year anyway. I'm sure we'll meet again.

I hung up and, with my last coins, I caught the bus into town. The sky was dark blue, the sun red, and above Askøy, the clouds in the east looked as if they were on fire. I walked past the Student Center and down to Møhlenpris, intending to visit Yngve, perhaps he could clarify what had happened.

The door was open and I went up the stairs to the floor where the collective was and rang the bell.

Line, a nice blond girl from Østland, a few years older than me, opened the door.

She looked at me with something akin to fear in her eyes.

"Is Yngve in?" I said.

She nodded.

"Come in," she said. "He's in his room."

I went in, took off my shoes, kept my jacket on, knocked softly on Yngve's door and opened it.

He was standing by the stereo and turned when he heard me.

I stared at him in amazement.

Half his face was covered with a bandage.

Suddenly it all came back to me.

I had hurled a glass at him with all the strength I possessed.

I had thrown it at his eye.

He didn't say anything, just looked at me.

"Did I do that?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "Don't you remember?"

"Yes, now I do," I said. "Did I hit you in the eye? Are you blind?"

He sat down on the chair.

"No, the eye is intact. You hit me just next to it. I had to have stitches. There'll be a permanent scar."

I began to cry.

"I didn't mean it," I said. "I didn't mean it. I don't know why I did it. I didn't mean it. Can you forgive me? Oh, Yngve, can you forgive me?"

He sat like an emperor on the chair in the room, his back erect, legs apart, one hand on his knee, looking at me.

I couldn't meet his gaze, I couldn't look at him.

I lowered my head and sobbed.

Part 2

Three and a half years later, between Christmas and New Year 1992, I stood at the far end of the Student Center, by the stairs up to the concourse where the student organizations had their stands, waiting for the Student Radio program manager. I was going to do my civilian service there and had just come down from a couple of months at a camp in Hustad, on the coast outside Molde, where I had been with other Vestland conscripts to learn various aspects of peace work and conscientious objection to military service. It had been a joke; hardly anyone cared about the idealistic sides of the civilian service role. The majority of them were undoubtedly against war, but their principles didn't leave any deeper marks on them and I felt I had been transported back to a seventh grade confirmation camp, where everyone thought it was fun being alone and away from home, but no one had any time for the reason, our relationship with God and Jesus Christ, and consequently every opportunity to sabotage the teaching and exploit the freedoms we had for our own purposes was taken. The difference was really only age – most people in Hustad were in their early or midtwenties – and the length of the course – not two days but two months – and the facilities. They had a well-equipped music room, a well-stocked library, they had a dark room and video equipment, they had kayaks and diving gear and we could earn a diving certificate. Tours to the district were arranged, a bus came and picked us up; one evening we were driven to Kristiansand, where we were allowed to go out and get drunk. But the most important part was the courses. Someone had worked hard for conscientious objectors to be taken seriously back when young people were passionate about such matters and full of idealism. We didn't give a shit. Attendance was obligatory, but those who didn't feel well or had a headache could barely follow what the teacher was saying, and the mismatch between the teachers' idealism and passion for conscientious objection and our ignorance was occasionally painful to behold.

Beside the common-core subjects, we also had some electives, such as film or music or advanced courses on a variety of theoretical areas, and when we were offered the chance to make suggestions I put up my hand and asked if they could arrange a writing course for us. A literary writing course? The proposal was received with enthusiasm; if there was any interest they would certainly arrange it. I became a kind of leader of the little writing group, and the first thing I said was that we couldn't get up at seven, like the others, because if you were writing you might have stayed up all night, that was often when the inspiration came, and the crazy thing was that the teacher responsible for our group bought that lock, stock, and barrel, no, of course, you couldn't get up at seven then, I'll see what I can do. He arranged it, the writing group could sleep in. I felt guilty, he was nice and well-meaning and allowed himself to be used, but, on the other hand, I hadn't asked to come up here and it wasn't my fault they were so hugely well-disposed toward us.

He even organized a writer's visit for us. Arild Nyquist was flown up from Oslo to teach us for a day. He sat there with his sorrowful eyes and asked how many of us wrote seriously, who wanted to become writers. No one raised a hand. We're doing this to make life easier for ourselves here, someone said. I see, said Nyquist, that may not be the best criterion, but we'll have to make the best of it. I felt even guiltier then, for all I knew he had left his family to come up here and teach the ardent young conscientious objectors at Hustad Camp, he had once been ardent himself, and then he came face-to-face with us. But they probably paid him well, so it didn't matter.

One day we had a role-play session in the gym. We were given different world roles, someone represented America, someone Russia, someone China, someone India, someone the EU, someone the Scandinavian countries, someone Africa, and then we were handed booklets describing our roles. The teacher in charge suggested I should be the General Secretary of the UN and lead the international conference. Why her choice fell on me I had no idea, but such things happened, people did sometimes pick me out and credit me with certain qualities. When I was a Literature student one of the lecturers had made a mental note of me and in his lessons he could suddenly point to me and say, what does Karl Ove think about this?

So there I sat in the gymnasium trying to prevent a world war from breaking out, organizing meetings with various parties, mediating, and suggesting compromises. The only person I knew in Hustad from before, Johs, represented Russia. Johs was what Grandpa would have called a wizard, he studied Sociology and had been given the best grades they had given for many years, well, perhaps ever, it was said; he had studied in Paris and was at a level other students could only dream about. However, he carried this talent very lightly, he was a modest man, sometimes bordering on self-effacing, he was genuinely good and friendly, no one had a bad word to say about him, considerate and empathetic, and therefore also vulnerable, it had struck me many times, he also had good friends, they seemed to form a protective ring around him, they were his guardians. His parents were farmers in Jølster, only a few kilometers down from where Mom lived. He was strong but strength was in a way secondary with him, something you hardly noticed. What you did notice was his sensitivity. In his own eyes he was perhaps a very ordinary guy, what did I know, but he wasn't, I had never met anyone with precisely the mix of qualities he had.

He represented Russia in our role play, and he tactically outmaneuvered everyone, not least me, such that he, that is Russia, by the end of the day had made huge territorial gains in Europe and Asia and become the dominant major power, on the brink of total world control.

He had a good laugh at that.

In the evening, in the homey lounge where music blared and people sat around playing games or reading magazines, smoking and drinking beer, one of the semicriminal layabouts from Bergen came over to me, I was leaning against the railings over the floor below and he stood so close it felt threatening.

"You think you're someone, don't you," he said. "Like the UN General Secretary. Sitting there with your books. But you're nothing."

"I've never said I'm someone," I said.

"Shut your mouth," he said, and left.

Stories about him were circulating, one was that he had shouted *Fuck you and your family!* in the camp director's office, and the way he had added the family was funny. There were two or three of his kind there, they were hard nuts and could easily have beaten me to pulp if they'd had a mind to, but they were also completely off their rockers and ignorant, an immense ignorance that could have quite bizarre effects on the teaching when they attended classes, which was seldom.

It was of course ironic that such violent types should be here of all places, in a camp where the peace and pacifist flag flew aloft, but it was also typical because in some way or other they were the "alternatives," they lived half inside, half outside the bounds of society, and it was there the most important part of the seventies' alternative movement could be found. If you took away their ideology, all that was left was an outsider status and drugs.

There was another gang from Bergen and they were musicians. They came from Loddefjord, Fyllingsdalen, and Åsane, and hung around together all the time, slumped on the sofas reading comics or watching TV, but when they jammed together they went through a total transformation, they stood there like demons and conjured up complex soundscapes from nothing, they had mastered their instruments to perfection, but then, after these explosions, they reverted to type, chewing the cud, slumped somewhere. The exception was Calle, one of Bergen's stars, his band had released records, gone on tour, and now he was playing with Lasse Myrvold, the legend from the Aller Værste!, in a band he called Kong Klang. He was different from the other musicians, his curiosity stretched beyond the sphere of music, he was open, very much so, and basically brilliant, but when he touched on areas I knew something about, such as literature, he was also naïve, and I found that moving, somehow, as I did all chinks of weakness in the armor of others.

As far as possible, I stayed in the background in Hustad, spent all of the time on my own, did some reading, importantly *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, which I had bought in Danish as the Norwegian edition was abridged. It was the best novel I had read in many years, there was something about the relationship between sickness and health that was appealing, it made its first appearance when Hans Castorp left the sanatorium to go for a walk, up the beautiful mountainsides, and suddenly his nose began to bleed uncontrollably, and he continued his infatuations with women, in whom it is the illness Mann focuses on, the feverishness, the shining eyes, the coughing, the bent backs and poor physiques, all framed by green valleys and gleaming alpine peaks. The long ensuing discussions, between the Jesuit and the Humanist, which could almost be considered life-and-death duels, where everything really was at stake, were also captivating. They were bound up with descriptions of life at the sanatorium, I assumed, it was part of the same, although I couldn't explain it, I was unfamiliar with the frames of reference within which the discussions unfolded.

I had read *Doctor Faustus* when I was eighteen. All I could remember from it was Adrian Leverkühn's breakdown, when his greatest achievements in art coincided with his reduction to an infantile state, and the magnificent opening when Zeitblom and Leverkühn are children and the composer's father performs simple experiments for them, he manipulates dead material in such a way that it behaves as if it were alive. And then I had read *Death in Venice*, the old man at death's door who makes himself up and dyes his hair to impress the beautiful youth.

Everything took place in the proximity of death in these books, which were otherwise full of thoughts and theories about art and philosophy, they were at the heart of the great European tradition, but they weren't experimental like Joyce's or Musil's novels, they lacked a certain independence of form, and I wondered why they did, couldn't he do that? He wrote *about* the avant-garde, but allowed it to be written by a traditionalist like Zeitblom. Espen, my best friend, had no time for Thomas Mann, presumably because of the traditional and bourgeois character of his novels, this lay outside his sphere of interests. Espen was a poet and actually omnivorous when it came to literature, irredeemably curious and thirsty for knowledge, but more often than not with an eye for the most progressive literature, and that did not include the predominantly realistic novel. Espen kept his French and American poets to himself, I kept my mainstream novels to myself and then we met in the middle, with authors such as Thomas Bernhard, Tor Ulven, Claude Simon, Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, Marguerite Duras, Stig Larsson, Tomas Tranströmer. I could talk about Thomas Mann and Espen would listen, but I could never get him to spend time reading him, nor did I dare try, in case he would think it was poor literature, which would definitely have rebounded on me and my taste. I saw our relationship as parallel to the one between Leverkühn and Zeitblom in *Doctor Faustus* – Espen was the artist, bent over his apocryphal books in his study, the poet, the genius, I was the plain, ordinary man, by chance his friend, who watched him at work and knew enough about it to understand he was unique, but not enough, never enough, to produce the same himself. I could write about literature, as Zeitblom wrote about music, I couldn't create it. If I had said something like this to Espen he would have objected violently, he didn't see himself like that, I knew, but there *was* an enormous difference between us: he could read Ekelöf, Celan, Akhmatova, Montale, Ashbery, Mandelstam, poets I had barely heard about, as the most natural thing in the world and there was no posturing about his reading, as unfortunately there was about mine, I brandished authors' names the way medieval knights brandished flags and banners, but not him, not Espen, he was genuine.

We had both taken the Lit course in the autumn of 1989 and the spring of 1990. At first I knew no one there and made no attempt at contact either, so it was the *gymnas* all over again, sitting alone in the canteen drinking coffee and pretending I was reading, standing outside the lecture room in the breaks smoking, sitting in the reading room in the afternoon and evenings, all the while with a slow panic in my body, my mouth open in my consciousness, as I wandered around acting as if everything was as it should be. When I closed my books for the evening, I sometimes went down to see Yngve, he had moved in with Asbjørn in Hans Tanks Gate just below the science building, watched TV with them or just drank coffee in their living room. I had taken a room in the same property as Yngve's previous collective, it was big and cost much more than I could afford, but I had gone for it anyway, I could always earn some money when the semester was drawing to an end and my student loan was all gone. When I had been broke the spring before, and was still at the Writing Academy, I had moved up to Sørbøvåg and worked for a few weeks with Kjartan. I painted one barn wall, he stood under the ladder watching me and said there was nothing better than watching others work for you. He collected manure from the muck cellar with his tractor, dumped it in great heaps around the farm, which I then spread with a fork. The job was hard work, my arms and upper body ached as I went to bed at night, but it was also satisfying, the physicality of the work, sticking the three prongs into the muck, which was partly caked, partly still wet, grabbing a chunk of it and scattering it, it gave me a good feeling, I could see I was making progress, pile after pile disappeared, and it was wonderful to put the fork down in the afternoon and go in and have a snack with Grandma and Grandpa. I got up at seven, had breakfast, worked till twelve, had lunch, worked till four, it was a purge, a penance, none of my terrible life in Bergen existed here, I was a different person here, someone who could not be criticized. I cooked, I walked Grandma across the floor, sometimes I massaged her legs as well, as I had seen Mom and Kjartan do, I kept Grandpa company, and Kjartan, who came home from work at about five, presumably had a little more time for himself than he usually did. Grandma wasn't doing well, and when I left them to work it was as if her shaking and convulsions lived on in me outside, something that had to be subdued and suppressed, but lay beyond my control. It was barely possible to speak to her, her voice was so weak, just a whisper, it was difficult to distinguish words. One afternoon Grandpa was talking about Hamsun, whom he had read with such pleasure, and Grandma whispered something from her chair, I leaned forward to listen, couldn't understand until the coin finally dropped: Duun! Olav Duun, the writer. Another afternoon I could see she was upset, she was trying to catch my attention, I went over and bent down, she pointed to Grandpa and whispered something I didn't understand, say it again, Grandma, I can't hear what you're saying, one more time, just . . .

I thought she said that Grandpa had killed someone.

"Has Grandpa killed someone?" I said.

Then she laughed! A quiet breathy, barely audible laugh, but her chest shook and her eyes gleamed.

So that wasn't what she had said, I thought, and laughed as well. But it wasn't so strange that I had heard it, a paranoid shadow sometimes lay between her and the world, if she could say Grandpa was a thief in her deepest confusion, couldn't she say that he had killed someone as well?

It was fantastic to see her laugh. Normally her days were so humdrum and full of suffering that it was painful to witness. One night I woke up to Grandpa calling for Kjartan, I hurried downstairs, both of them were waiting for me in the double bed in the dining room, Grandma shaking, eyes wide open, Grandpa sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Kjartan has to help her go to the bathroom," he said. "Go and get him."

"I can do it," I said.

She wore diapers at night, I understood, but I kept away from this part of the nursing, anything to do with intimate areas, dressing and undressing, it wasn't right, I was her grandchild, Mom or Kjartan had to do that. But in this situation I would have to do whatever was required.

I put one hand behind her back, the other under her arm, and began to lift. She was so stiff that it took a long time, but eventually she was sitting on the edge of the bed. She whispered something. Her jaws trembled, but she looked straight at me with her clear blue eyes. I leaned forward.

"Kjartan," she said.

"I can take you," I said. "Then we won't have to wake him. I'm already awake."

I took her arm and raised her into a standing position. But this was too quick, she was too stiff and fell back. I did it again, more slowly, and pulled the walker over with one hand, placed it in front of her, watched her gently, almost imperceptibly, move her hands down to the handles.

Finally she was holding it with both hands and her balance was good enough for her to be able to walk. She was wearing only a thin white nightdress, the bottom of her arms and legs were bare, her gray and white hair was loose, and I didn't like what I had walked into, I was much too close to her, in the wrong way. When we were in the bathroom I would have to help her to sit down on the toilet seat and undress her. No, no, no. No, no, no. But we were on the way, tiny step by tiny step she shuffled across the floor, first in the dining room where they slept, then the sitting room where the TV was. Her hands shook, her head shook, slowly and laboriously she put one foot in front of the other, they too shook. A lamp shone in the corner, otherwise everything was dark inside. I strode forward and opened the door to the hall. Beyond it was the bathroom.

"Soon be there," I said.

She moved a trembling foot forward. And then pee began to run down her thigh, and then it came in a stream and splashed on the floor. She stood perfectly still as it happened. Leaning forward, stock still, the pee splashing down, she looked like an animal, I thought. Standing in front of her, I met her eyes and they were anguished.

"It doesn't matter, Grandma," I said. "It happens. It doesn't matter. Just stay here and I'll get Kjartan."

I ran out, rang the bell twice in quick succession, opened the door and shouted up. He came steaming downstairs a few seconds later, prepared for the worst.

"You've got to help Grandma," I said. "It's nothing serious. She only wants to go to the bathroom."

He said nothing, went with me, took Grandma and led her into the bathroom with firm, resolute movements and closed the door behind them. I filled a bucket with water, wet the cloth, and wiped the floor.

I went back to Bergen with enough money to manage for the rest of the semester. I didn't tell anyone about what I had experienced, slipped into depressing Bergen life leaving Sørbøvåg as a closed room, a sealed experience, alongside all the other experiences I'd had that were incompatible with my life now or irrelevant to it. Especially after I had thrown the glass at Yngve's head it seemed like that, it was impossible to reconcile the person I was then, someone trying to inflict damage, destroy, preferably blind his brother, with the person when I was with them or with Mom, who knew nothing of all this. This was all I thought about, and the power in it was immense, it dragged me down to a place inside myself I hadn't been and hadn't known existed. If I could throw a glass at Yngve's face what else was I capable of? There was something in me I couldn't control, and it was terrible: if I couldn't trust myself who could I trust?

This wasn't a matter I could discuss with anyone else either. The afternoon in Yngve's collective, when I understood what I had done, I sat crying and begging for forgiveness, so upset that I couldn't go home, I slept there, on the sofa in the collective, surrounded by other students who didn't quite know where to look or what to do when I was there. One of them I hadn't seen before, he came in when I was on the sofa with my head bowed, so you're Karl Ove, he said, you live in the room above Morten, don't you? Yes, I said.

I'll pop by to see you one day, he said. I live in an apartment just opposite you two. I raised my eyes and looked at him. He was smiling so much his face seemed to split into two. My name's Geir, he said.

Two days later he knocked at my door. I was writing, shouted, come in, thinking it was Morten as the front doorbell hadn't rung.

"Are you writing?" he said. "I don't want to disturb you."

"No, no, come in. You're not disturbing me," I said.

He sat down, we spoke tentatively about common acquaintances, it transpired we were the same age and that he came from Hisøya and had gone to *gymnas* with several of the kids I had been at school with and whom I hadn't seen since then. He had gone to a military academy, dropped out, moved to Bergen, and started studying Social Anthropology. At first he wanted to talk about how happy he was and how good it was being in Bergen. He had his own money, his own place, and the university was overflowing with girls, could life be any better?

"No, perhaps it couldn't," I said.

He laughed and said he had never met a gloomier person. Anyone would think Job had taken up lodgings in Bergen! Come on, let's go for a walk to put you in a better frame of mind!

Why not! I said, and we headed downhill to the town center. We stood at the bar in Fekterloftet, ordered a carafe of white wine, and the embarrassment I always felt with people I didn't know – the thought that I was boring and of no interest and that actually they didn't want to be here – was completely absent. There was something about him I trusted. What I discussed with Geir that evening I couldn't have discussed with anyone else I had met in Bergen, not even Yngve. You carried your inner thoughts and passions within you, and perhaps shared them with a partner, what did I know about such matters, at any rate it wasn't something you brought up when you were on the town, it would have killed everything, caused others to shy away. Because it was all about having a good time, laughing, telling stories, or arguing till the sparks flew, but about matters that were outside your inner life, about what was between people, about what they shared. Bands, films, books, other students, lecturers, girls, various experiences remodeled as entertaining anecdotes or jokes.

There was nothing of that on this evening.

I talked about my year in Northern Norway, how I had been slightly in love with a thirteen-year-old and I had kissed another, how I had been completely crazy about a sixteen-year-old and had almost gone out with her, how I had drifted around and got drunk, been out of control, and it had continued down here, and I was scared of myself, not in some make-believe way, not to make myself interesting, but in reality, scared of what I might do. If I could try to destroy my brother anything was possible. If I'd had a knife would I have stabbed him? I also talked about my grandmother, the dignity she possessed in all the misery in which she was trapped. But most of all I talked about Ingvild. I told him about all our meetings, I went on about how fantastic she was but admitted I had done everything wrong from the very beginning. I said I was like Lieutenant Glahn, I could also shoot myself in the foot to make her look at me and perhaps think about me. Yes, I've got a scar on my foot, I said, and put my leg on a rung of the bar stool, look here, I got that trying to kick away a rocket on the ground near Hanne. Who on earth is Hanne? he said, someone I was in love with, I said, another one, he said, and laughed. What he told me about himself was not only different, it was diametrically opposite.

He was actually a militarist, he said, he had loved life at the military academy, the sound of reveille in the morning, the smell of leather and weapon grease, the uniforms, the guns and the discipline, he had dreamed about it all his life, he had joined the Cadet Force at home in Arendal and had never been in any doubt about his career path after finishing *gymnas*.

"Why did you leave then? If you liked it so much?"

"I don't know. It might have been because I discovered that I could do it, I knew it, and I wanted to do something I couldn't do. And then there was the lack of individuality. I spoke to the commander about that, I said I didn't want to be some sheep with a bell around its neck, he said that being led wasn't the problem, but where you were led. Basically he was right. But the moment of truth was when I saw the regulations. Then I realized that someone would always know where I was. And that wouldn't work. So I stopped and became a conscientious objector."

"Are you a *conscientious objector*?"

"Yes. Nevertheless I still love the sound of marching boots."

I hadn't even considered the possibility of liking the military; it stood for everything I was against. War, violence, authority, power. I was a pacifist but unhappy, he was a militarist and happy. It wasn't easy to say who was right. He also told me about one morning he had walked home with a girl he had been interested in for a long time, the sun was up, the town was deserted, they strolled hand in hand through the park and were heading for his apartment and the huge water bed he had there, how perfect the moment had been in every respect. He told me about everything he was learning in Social Anthropology and laughed at some of the bizarre rituals people had. He also laughed at me, but not in a way that annoyed me, quite the contrary, suddenly I could laugh at it too. I thought, I've got a new friend here. I had as well, but not for long because soon afterward he said he was moving to Uppsala after the summer. I was sorry, but said nothing. Fekterloftet closed its doors, we were drunk and made the rounds of the nightclubs, ending up in Slakteriet, as always Bergen's last late-night stop, and stirred by the light sky and all the happy people on the street now at the beginning of June, I suggested dropping in on Ingvild so that he could see her with his own eyes and so that I could say some of the many things that I had thought about her. He was up for it, we made our way toward Nygårdsgaten, I remembered that as visitors we ought to have something to take with us, ran over to the flower beds by the Grieg Hall, tugged at a rhododendron bush, it had just blossomed and was beautiful, pulled it free and stood there with it in one hand while Geir struggled with his. Then we crossed the street, I found some pebbles and started throwing them at her window. It must have been around four or half past. She opened the window, at first she didn't want to let us in, but I begged, she said OK, I'll be right down. As she opened the front door a police car came down the street and stopped next to us. A policeman stepped out, Ingvild closed the door and disappeared, the officer asked us what we were doing, I said we were going to give the young lady some flowers, I realized this was wrong, we had taken them from in front of the Grieg Hall, but, look, the roots are intact, we can run back now and replant them, it'll be fine. OK, said the policeman, and when we went to put the bushes back the car followed us and waited in the middle of the road until we had finished before driving on.

"That was lucky," I said.

"Lucky? The police came."

"Yes, but they could have fined us or thrown us into the drunk tank. Come on."

"I'm beginning to get the idea," Geir said. "You want to go back to Ingvild, don't you?"

"Yes, come on."

He shook his head, but came along. I threw pebbles at the window, this time she didn't open, and Geir tugged at me, he wanted to go home, I told him he could go, I didn't feel like going to bed yet. When he left I went over Høyden and down to Møhlenpris, felt some car door handles, sneaked into some backyards looking for unlocked bikes, sat down on a step and smoked, it would soon be morning, the sun was already shining at the edge of the sky. I went to the telephone booth behind the soccer field and called Ingvild's collective. One of the men answered the phone, I said I wanted to speak to Ingvild, he said, do you know what time it is, she's asleep, everyone's asleep, you can't call in the middle of the night, now I'm hanging up. I smacked the receiver a few times against the top of the coin box, but it didn't break and I opened the door and kicked the glass side.

Then another godforsaken police car came!

It stopped in front of me, a policeman rolled down the window and asked me what I was doing. I said I was fed up, my girlfriend had broken up with me that evening, and so I had kicked the telephone box, I'm sorry, I said, I won't do it again.

"OK, you'd better go home to bed."

"Alright," I said.

"Yes, and now. Let's see you on your way!"

And so I walked up toward Hulen while they sat in the car watching me. As I rounded the bend they followed me and only left when I turned up toward the park.

The fear and shame when I awoke were so great that I felt I was going to split open. I could have stood up and screamed, I hadn't learned anything, I had been there again, where there was no control and there were no limits, where anything could happen. Something shrieked inside me, but it would pass. Either simply by gritting my teeth, or talking to others. That had a mitigating and deadening effect. I went downstairs to Morten, he leaned back against the sofa and listened, his appearance had changed completely, he no longer wore deck shoes and red leather jackets, and he no longer studied Law, he had done a volte-face and was now an Arts student, with all that that implied in terms of black jeans, black T-shirts, black shoes, ring in the ear, and Raga Rockers on the stereo. He was already well-versed and often finished his arguments with, We're machines in Nirvana, Karl Ove, we're machines in Nirvana.

The next day a letter arrived from Cappelen. At first I didn't do anything, thinking it was like Schrödinger's cat: until the moment the envelope was open and I had read the letter it could equally well have been an acceptance as a rejection. It lay on the table all morning, I gazed at it every now and then, when I was shopping I thought of nothing else, and eventually, at around four, I could stand it no longer and opened it.

Yes, indeed. It was a rejection.

It was as expected, but I was still disappointed, so deeply in fact that I couldn't bear to be alone. I went downstairs to see Morten, he wasn't at home. I thought of Jon Olav, but didn't want to flag up my defeat to him. Nor Yngve. Remembered Geir, he lived only a few minutes away, and I went up to see him. He had already packed, some removal chests were still on the floor, but he whipped up two cups of instant coffee, we sat down on the floor and I recited my rejection to him.

"We have read your novel with interest, but I am sorry to say we cannot undertake to publish it. It is at times both entertaining and engagingly written, but as a whole we consider you have too little to say and it lacks pace. Accordingly, we would like to thank you for allowing us to read the manuscript, which you will find enclosed," I said.

Geir laughed.

"First of all, I'm impressed that you can already reel it off by heart," he said. "Secondly, that you've written a novel at all. I don't know anyone who would even entertain the idea."

"That doesn't help much," I said.

He snorted.

"Write another one!"

"Easy for you to say," I said.

"I suppose so. I'm basically dyslexic. I'd hardly read a novel before I came here. What would you recommend, by the way, if I were to get the idea in my head?"

"*Dead Heat* by Erling Gjelsvik perhaps?"

"Is that the best novel you've ever read?"

"No, no. I thought it would be a good start for you."

"Now don't you underestimate me. Come on. What's the best novel you've read?"

"*Lasso Round the Moon* by Mykle maybe? Or *Pan* by Hamsun. Or *Novel with Cocaine* by Ageyev."

"Then I'll read Mykle as he was the first one you said. You've already told me the whole plot of *Pan*."

"Yes, except for the fact that he takes his own life at the end. I didn't say that."

"Ha ha."

"He does!"

"Are you going to spoil all my reading pleasure?" he said.

"Everyone knows he does," I said.

"I didn't."

"You do now."

"Is there anything else you think I should know, Mr. Literature?"

"In fact, there is," I said. "I discovered it a couple of weeks ago. I was lying in bed and glanced at the bookshelf. And I read some of the writers' names backward."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Do you know what T. Eliot becomes?"

"No."

"Toilet. Such a shame about the S though. If it had been before the T it would have been Toilets."

"And you're about to start a Literature course, did you say?"

"Yes?"

There was a pause.

"What a pity you're going to move," I said.

"I've done Bergen. I know what it's like here. Now I have to try something else."

"I was thinking of going to Istanbul this autumn," I said. "Just renting a room and writing for a year."

"Why don't you?"

I shrugged.

"It feels as if I've got stuff to sort out here. And I have nothing to write about. Or everything to do with writing is just depressing. I have to learn. And I might as well do that here."

"Come to Uppsala then!"

"No. What the hell would I do there?"

"What the hell am *I* going to do? That's the whole idea. Go somewhere you know nothing about and see what happens."

"But I don't want anything to happen," I said. "Seriously. I don't."

I put my coffee cup down on one of the chests and got to my feet. There was a view of the park and the road down to the house where I lived from his window, and the fjord and the islands beyond. The sun was out now, a dark orange against the deep blue sky, and the trees in the park cast long narrow shadows.

"I wish you all the best then. You write first and I'll answer, OK?"

"OK."

We shook hands and I walked back downhill to my room. Of course I didn't know as I was unlocking my door that fourteen years would pass before I saw him again, the memory of him was only a few minutes old, and I assumed he would return to Bergen after a year in Uppsala; the thought that it was possible to leave everything for good was one I toyed with now and then, I didn't consider it a real possibility. For my part, I had decided to commit to another year in Bergen and then do something else, move elsewhere.

I reread the rejection letter. Then I sat down in front of the fire, scrunched up a few sheets, lit them, and started to place sheet after sheet in the flames. I had three copies of the novel and burned two. I would give the third to Ingvild. That would be my last act with her. No more visits, no more telephone conversations, no more nonsense, nothing. The novel would be a final farewell.

I burned my diaries while I was at it, and then I put the manuscript in a bag and walked downhill toward town.

The bottom door was open, I went up to the first floor and buzzed, she answered.

"Hi," she said. "Nice to see you."

"Likewise," I said.

"We're having dinner," she said. "I don't know. Would you like to come in anyway?"

"Yes. Thanks," I said.

I went in, took off my shoes, put the bag in the corridor, and followed her into the living room. Eight people were sitting around the table. Residents in the collective and some of their friends. I knew who everyone was. But they had been invited, I had only dropped by, and as they looked at me there was a strained atmosphere.

"Would you like to eat with us?" Ingvild said.

I shook my head.

It was humiliating, getting an extra little plate on the corner, the unbidden guest's extra little plate.

"No, I only wanted to talk, but we can do that another time."

"We can," she said.

My face was red, everything was wrong. I had come, made an entrance, now I would go again without anything happening.

"Bye," I said, and could hear how stupid that must have sounded.

"Bye," they said.

Ingvild accompanied me out.

"I just need the bathroom," I said, and made for the toilet. She went into the kitchen, I nipped out, grabbed the plastic bag containing the manuscript, dashed into her room, placed it on her bed, went back out, and was putting on my shoes when she reappeared.

Now it definitely would be a surprise, I thought, as I ran down the stairs and emerged into the warm summer evening, the streets suffused with sunlight, and that was actually the whole point.

The university was a new start. And, not least, it was something to hold on to. The lectures were a fixed point, the reading room was a fixed point, the books were a fixed point. Irrespective of what happened, irrespective of how dreadful I felt, I could always go up to the reading room and find myself a seat and sit there and read for as long as I wanted, no one could object to that, no one could say there was anything odd about it, it was the very essence of university life. I bought a two-volume encyclopedia of world literature and plowed my way through, writer by writer, from Homer to the 1960s, tried to remember a line or two about each one, about what they did. I went to the lectures, Kittang on classical poetry, Buvik on classical epics, Linneberg on classical drama. Among all the names and figures were some great emotional insights. Odysseus who tricked the Cyclops by saying his name was "No one." He was lost, but he gained life. The song of the Sirens. Those who heard it were also lost, felt themselves being drawn to them, did everything in their power to get close, and perished. The Sirens were both Eros and Thanatos, desire and death, the most desirable and the most dangerous. Orpheus, who sang so beautifully that everyone who heard him became spellbound and was lost, he descended into the underworld to retrieve Eurydice and this was within his power so long as he didn't turn and look at her, but he did, and so she was lost forever. A French philosopher by the name of Blanchot had written about this, and I read his essay about Orpheus, in which he wrote that art was the force that caused the night to open, but that it is Eurydice he wants and she was the utmost that art could attain. Eurydice was the second night, Blanchot wrote.

These ideas were too grandiose for me, but I was drawn to them and tried to get my head around them, to capture them, to assimilate them, unsuccessfully, I saw them from the outside, knowing that their full meaning escaped me. Give the sacred back to the sacred? The night of the night? I recognized the main figure, that which appears and disappears at the same moment or the simultaneous presence of the one and the other, which cancels out the one, this was a figure I had seen in many poems from that period, and I also felt a particular attraction to the ideas about the night, the second night, and death, but as soon as I attempted to think independently about it, in other words, beyond the form in which the ideas were presented, it became banal and stupid. It was the same as mountaineering, you have to place your foot exactly there, or there, your hand has to grip exactly there, or there, if not, you were left standing still, or you lost your grip and fell.

The utmost is that which disappears when it is seen or recognized. It was the core of the Orpheus myth. But what is *that*?

When I sat in the reading room, which was old and had a kind of somber atmosphere, and read Blanchot in the afternoon, a completely new feeling arose in me, something I had never felt before, a sort of extreme excitement, as though I found myself in the proximity of something unique, mixed with an equally extreme impatience, I *had* to go there, and these two feelings were so incompatible that I wanted to jump up and run and shout and sit perfectly still and read on all at the same time. What was strange was that the restlessness began to course through me at the moment when I read something good that I had understood and absorbed, it was as though it was simply impossible to bear. Often I stood up and took a break then, and while I walked along the corridors and up the stairs to the first floor of the canteen, the excitement and the impatience mingled with the dropped jaw of my consciousness, which was to do with my pursuing these paths alone, and so on, my soul in an inexplicable turmoil, I bought myself a coffee and sat down at a table and tried to appear as calm as possible.

There was also something panicked about my desire to acquire knowledge, in sudden terrible insights I saw that actually I didn't know anything and it was urgent, I didn't have a second to lose. It was almost impossible to adapt this urgency to the slowness that reading required.

In the middle of September I went to Florence with Yngve, we took the train down and spent four days at Pensione Palmer, not so far from the cathedral, where I had stayed the previous summer during the hitchhiking trip with Lars. We didn't talk about what had happened between us, we simply skipped over it, we were brothers, this bond was stronger than everything else, yet something had changed, perhaps most of all in me where the final remnants of naturalness had disappeared, I was conscious of everything that was said and done when we were together. The silences that sprang up were painful, we were brothers after all, we ought to be able to talk in a lighthearted, unforced way, but then there was a silence and I sat thinking about something natural I could say to break it. About a band? About Asbjørn or some of his other friends? About soccer? About what was around us, a town the train passed through, an incident outside the window on the street, a beautiful woman entering the bar where we were? Sometimes this worked well, for example, we could discuss the difference between the girls at home and the ones we saw here, the incredible elegance they had, not just the dresses with their tight jackets and narrow coats, their long boots and small neat scarves, but also the way they walked, studied and genteel, so glaringly different from our girls' earthy Fjällräven gait, which suggested nothing other than forward motion, slightly bent over, eternally prepared for a cloudburst, jogging, strolling, no more, no less, we're on the go! Yet the sight of the Italian women, girls would be the wrong word for them, was also depressing, they were in a different league, out of reach for us, who were of course of the same unsophisticated material as Norwegian girls, you just had to cast a glance at young Italian men, who were as sharply dressed and elegant as their female counterparts, who knew all the tricks in the book and who, what was more, courted them with an urbanity we couldn't have achieved if we'd practiced every day for the next year, in fact, if we had studied elegance and manners at university for six years, we wouldn't have got near them.

"I was twenty-two when I ate a steak for the first time," Yngve said, as we sat in a terrazza, each with an espresso, which we knew we should drink standing, but drank sitting anyway. Being Norwegian, we might just as well have drunk it standing on our heads as standing at the bar.

"I thought steaks and chops were the same thing," he said.

"Aren't they?" I said.

He laughed, thinking I was joking.

"So, I've never eaten a steak," I said. "But then I'm only twenty."

"Is that right?" he said. "We'll definitely have a steak tonight then."

While autumn had arrived in Bergen it was still hot and summery in Florence. In the middle of the day the sun was boiling even when it was behind a veil of clouds and the only yellow in the vegetation was caused by the aridity. We went to the Uffizi Gallery, wandered through the endless corridors looking at the paintings, all identical, we saw Michelangelo's statue of David and some of his unfinished works, the figures looked as if they were trying to break out of the marble blocks that entombed them. We strolled around the large cathedral, went up the stairs and stood right under the roof, continued along a narrow corridor and emerged at the top with all of Florence beneath us, we drank coffee in tiny cafés, ate ice cream, and took pictures of each other, Yngve was especially keen, I posed in front of every conceivable kind of wall in my black Ray-Bans, wearing black baggy pants and shirts with a variety of patterns. Now it was all happening in Manchester, and if this had gone unremarked in Italy, it hadn't in Bergen. First of all I had read about the Stone Roses, then I had gone to listen to them in a record shop, but the sound had been a bit weird, I'd thought, I wasn't sure it was good, but Yngve had bought it, he said it was great, and I bought it too and agreed. It grew and grew on you. The strange thing was that exactly the same had happened with the Smiths, I had heard their debut record in Kristiansand after reading about them in the NME, thought it was too odd, but then the hype reached Norway and it no longer sounded odd but right.

And so we wandered around the town, as beautiful as it was lively, full of people and small scenes, mopeds and palaces; in the evening we walked home and got dressed and went to a restaurant. It was a more refined eatery, I was ill at ease, didn't like to talk to the waiters, didn't like being served, didn't like being seen, didn't know what to do in the situations that arose, from how to taste wine to what to do with the napkin on the plate, but fortunately Yngve handled everything and soon we were eating our steaks and drinking red wine.

Afterward we smoked, drank grappa, which tasted like poor quality moonshine, and talked about Dad. We often did this, told each other about minor incidents we remembered with him and discussed recent events, his life in Northern Norway, which wasn't distant to us even though we met him only a couple of times a year and perhaps talked to him on the phone once a month, because he loomed large in our consciousnesses. Yngve hated him or, at least, was completely unreconciled, didn't want to hear about how he had changed and wanted a different relationship with us, that wasn't true, he was the same person, he didn't lift a finger for us, he wasn't in the slightest bit interested in us, if he showed a different face it was because he had convinced himself that was how it should be, not that it actually was. I agreed with Yngve, but I was much weaker; if I spoke with Dad on the phone I ingratiated myself with him and I had sent him a letter with photos of the Writing Academy although *really* I wished he didn't exist, indeed, that he was dead.

Weak, that was the word.

I was also weak with respect to Yngve. If there was a silence it was my fault and my responsibility. I knew Yngve didn't think like that, didn't care about silences, didn't feel a need to fill them at all costs, he was sure of himself. It was for the same reason that he had friends and I didn't. He was relaxed, didn't give any importance to what he said or did, went out with Asbjørn one Saturday morning, for example, and just wandered around town, perhaps sitting in a café for a few hours, it was no big deal, whereas if I did the same the whole time was so enormously significant that any jarring tone, any discordance, was potentially fatal, and so I was forced into, or I forced myself into, a kind of unnatural silence. So was it *that* silence that distinguished this situation and who would want it around them? Who could stand such stiff and forced behavior? And I didn't mean any harm to anyone, so it was better to keep my distance or stay under Yngve's wing, under his cloak of affability.

The same lack of ease characterized my behavior with him, but here there was a decisive difference, the link between us was not dependent on fluctuating situations; however stupidly I behaved I was his brother, he could never get past that and might never want to. The glass-throwing incident gave him a hold over me, it meant that I would always be beneath him, which I basically considered reasonable and felt I deserved.

We paid and went out into the Italian night, I was cheerful, we looked for a suitable bar, found one, it was new and completely empty, but they played good music and we didn't know a soul in Florence anyway. We had envisaged having one drink there, but the bar staff were effusive, wanted to talk and hear about Norway and Bergen, asked what kind of music we liked and immediately afterward the Stone Roses was throbbing through the building. We sat there, getting more and more drunk, and all my inhibitions, all the ties, all the silence and all the stiffness in me dissolved, I was sitting with my brother and we talked about whatever occurred to us and laughed and were happy.

"None of the people you know do anything *themselves*," I said. "But *you* can. You can play the guitar and write music. I don't understand why you don't start a band and play seriously. You make great songs."

"Do you think so?" he said.

"Of course," I said. "The others *talk* about music and bands. Surely that's not enough for you."

"No, I want to play of course. But you have to find people to play with."

"Pål's good, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. That's two. If you play the drums, that's three. Then we need a vocalist."

"There are twenty thousand students in Bergen. One of them must be able to sing."

"I'll see what I can come up with."

We didn't need to go to the bar anymore to order, they came to us with more drinks the moment we had finished the last, joked with us and asked what other records they should play. When we got up to go it was with a lurch. But we managed to get out and home, talked more about the new band, switched off the light, and slept through till late the next day.

In the evening we went back to this fantastic bar. But this time it was crowded and the staff didn't recognize us. It was impossible to believe that they actually didn't remember us because no one else had been there and it was only the previous night, so they must have been putting on an act. But why? We ordered a beer each, drank up, and left, we headed for a discotheque recommended in a travel guide, it was by the river, which we followed, along a broad avenue, with less and less traffic the farther we went. It started raining, the streets shone in the light, beside us the river flowed slowly in the darkness, not a soul in sight. We should have seen it ages ago, Yngve said. Perhaps we've walked past it, I said. We must have been walking for three-quarters of an hour, and so we turned back. The effect of the beer was long gone. The rain was falling thick and fast. The lights from the hills across the river seemed to be hovering in the air. We didn't talk anymore, walking was enough. After half an hour Yngve stopped. Below us lay a kind of wooden platform, above it hung cables bedecked with light-bulbs, unlit, chairs stacked around the edge. Is it here? Yngve said. Here? I repeated. Well, we have come in the off-season. Come on, let's go back and get some sleep.

Two days later we got out of the train at the station in Bergen, this funnel of a town, and it was good to step into it, everything seemed homey and familiar, my place on earth. It was early evening, I knew being alone in my room after a week with company would be an anticlimax, so I went to Yngve and Asbjørn's, where we cracked open the bottle of whiskey we had brought with us and started drinking. Asbjørn said that unfortunately he had some bad news for us. Oh? We said, looking at him. Yes, your grandmother has died. What? Died? Yes, your mother phoned when you were on your way down to Italy. Did she say when the funeral was? Yes, it's come and gone. She said it had been impossible to get hold of you.

We got drunk and went to Hulen, it was a weekday and not very full, we hung around the bar drinking, when they closed we went home and kept going. There was a good atmosphere, I felt as though I was in the eye of a storm of people and action. At some point I put on a Superman outfit, sat drinking whiskey in the red cape and the rest of the outfit or bopped around to the music. It was a party, it felt as if the apartment was packed, I swung around, banged into the fridge, drank, changed the music, sang along, chatted with Yngve and Asbjørn, all the while in this fantastic Superman costume, until suddenly everything receded, like powerful tidal waters and the bare facts were revealed: only Yngve, Asbjørn, and I were there. We were alone. The party was in my mind. And Grandma, Grandma was dead.

Even though the music was still playing it was as though there was silence.

I put my face in my hands.

Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh.

"What is it, Karl Ove?"

"Nothing," I said, but my shoulders were shaking and tears were running down my face, wetting my fingers.

They turned off the music.

"What is it?" they said again.

"I don't know," I said, looking at them. A sob escaped me, I couldn't stop it. "It's nothing."

"Do you want to sleep here? Maybe that's best," Asbjørn said.

I nodded.

"Lie on the sofa. It's late anyway."

I did as they said, lay down on the sofa and closed my eyes. One of them covered me with a blanket and I fell asleep.

The next morning everything was fine again, apart from my embarrassment at what had happened, crying in front of them. It didn't matter too much about Yngve, even though that wasn't good either, but Asbjørn?!

And the idiotic Superman outfit!

I took it off, had a cup of coffee with them in the living room, where Asbjørn told Yngve off for never putting the milk back in the fridge, it was just great looking forward to a glass of milk and coming home and finding out it was piss-warm.

I smiled and said they were like a married couple. They didn't like hearing that. I went down to Møhlenpris with my old suitcase, let myself in, and had a shower. With my hair wet, my shirt sticking to my shoulders and chest, I sat down to read. I had got to the end of the eighteenth century, which was bursting with English poets and novelists, and French dramatists, of whom I knew Racine was the most important, and some philosophers and letter writers. I closed my eyes and tried to remember the names and one work by each of them, continued into the nineteenth century, put down the book, took out the sheets showing the lecture program, there was one in the afternoon, I decided to go. It was about modern literary theory and I found the selection of texts for it and browsed through them before leaving. Stanley Fish. What a name. And Harold Bloom. My name's Fish. You don't say. Mine's Bloom. And over there's Paul de Man. Do you know him? Yes, I'm a fan of Paul the Man.

That was a text!

I'm a fan of Paul the Man.

When I had finished the text, I put a few books and a writing pad in a bag and walked up to the university. The grass in the park was dry, the sky gray, the leaves on the trees were pale green and yellow. A group of druggies sat under a tree, I took a detour so as not to see them or be accosted, everything about them filled me with unease, from their loud voices and aggressive actions when they weren't doped up to total apathy, which was inhuman, sitting or lying there disconnected from the world, yet with their eyes open, eyes in which you could read nothing. Then there were the syringes, the leather straps, the cartons of milk shake or chocolate milk, the food containers and plastic bags strewn around them, and their clothes, filthy, ragged, as if they hadn't been in contact with humans for several years but had spent the winter in the middle of a forest, after a plane crash maybe, with only one set of clothes. They drifted, they didn't live. And that was what they wanted to do, drift, not live.

Past them and out through the gate, past the Student Center, up the hill and onto the gravel path alongside the botanical garden, over to the passage between the Maritime Museum and the University Library, past the Faculty of Arts and through the gates of Sydneshaugen School, where I stopped, put the bag on the ground between my feet, and lit up a cigarette.

Farther ahead, beside the steps, someone from my department was smoking. He looked up at me at that moment, then shifted his gaze elsewhere. His name was Espen, I knew, fresh from *gymnas*, and although he hadn't said much in the contexts I had been with him I knew he was frighteningly well read. He had spoken about Beckett once with Ole, another student in our department, and I had been deeply impressed despite being two years older than him. He had long dark hair, sometimes gathered in a ponytail, brown eyes, glasses, he was thin, wore a brown leather jacket, often with a wool sweater underneath, he'd come to lectures on his bike and often sat for hours in the reading room. He seemed shy, on his guard, though not suspicious, more like a wary animal.

I picked up the bag and walked toward him.

"Are you going to the lecture?" I said.

He smiled, as if to himself.

"I guess so," he said. "Are you?"

"That was the plan. But as I was coming here I lost interest. Think I might go and read instead."

"What are you reading?"

"This and that. Nothing special. Stanley Fish."

"Oh."

"And you?"

"Dante at the moment. Have you read any Dante?"

"Not yet. But I will. Is it good?"

"It's very good," he said.

"OK."

"Mandelstam's written a really great essay about *The Divine Comedy*."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Well, perhaps I should take a look. Mandelstam?"

"Yes, you should. It might be tricky to get hold of, but I can copy it for you if you'd like?"

"Yes, I would," I said. "That'd be great!"

I smiled, tossed my cigarette to the ground and crushed it.

"See you," I said, and went into the old school building.

On my way home I called Mom. Fortunately she was at home. I asked her how she was, she said fine, but it was incomprehensible that Grandma had gone. It had been quick. She had caught a lung infection and only a few days later she'd breathed her last. It happened at the care home where she had been moved at the end of the summer, when she could no longer live on the farm, her condition required more nursing and supervision than she could get there. Perhaps that was the reason she went so quickly, there was nothing to hold her, like her intimate surroundings at home, where she had lived for more than forty years. But Kjartan had been present when she died, and she hadn't been afraid.

I could hear that Mom was upset, but I didn't know how to react. She wanted to talk about how it had been in Italy, I said only that it had been good, I couldn't go into detail, after all we had been drinking and staggering around while Grandma was dying, that in itself was unseemly and nothing Mom needed to know. We arranged that I would travel up in a few weeks, go and see her grave, she was in the old cemetery across the fjord, it was nice there, Mom said, that was a nice thought.

We hung up, I walked home in the gathering dusk, lay on my bed reading Mark Twain, whom Ragnar Hovland had talked about, fell back into reality now and again, into the darkness surrounding the meager light from the reading lamp, the material of the light-blue pillow, the thought of Grandma, the first person close to me who had died. It was impossible to understand. But she was at peace now. She had been tormented, now she had peace. I read on, the thought of her lay constantly in the shadows of my consciousness, now and then it stepped out, she was dead, she was no more, Grandma, dear Grandma. I hadn't known her, but what is there to know? I had known who she was, who she was to me, ever since I had been a small boy. And that was what filled my mind now, her gentle presence, her eyes. How heartbreaking it must have been for her to depart this world, solely because her body no longer obeyed her, it refused her the most elementary support.

I had to write about this, had to write about her.

I got up, sat at my desk in just my underpants and wrote a poem:

Growing Wild

Your eyes are gone from the day
you're gently faded out
My thoughts like mirrors
I lose control
Feel you within

Soft nights fall over me
My eyes are plunged in darkness
I want to fly

Want to believe in miracles
Feel you within

I shy from light and darkness
Who knows what you see
Who knows what will happen
Silence, silence
growing wild

The days crumble, disappear
Leaving no trace
I am always awake, waiting
Feel you within
feel you within

I shy from light and darkness
Who knows what you see
Who knows what will happen
Silence, silence
growing wild

The following day Espen came over to me in the reading room and gave me the Mandelstam essay. We went for a coffee, chatted about our course, some writing that had impressed us, I asked him a few questions about himself, where he came from, what he did, and I told him I had attended the Writing Academy. He knew, he said. He held the cup with both hands, but not in an embracing kind of way, more a confirmation by his hands, here we have a cup, while he held his head slightly lowered, staring straight down at the table. Sitting like this, he seemed to be negating the situation, as though it didn't exist. There was great strength in him, it gripped my insides, have I said something tedious? Something boring? Something stupid?

Then he cast a glance up at the clock, smiled, and said he hoped I would enjoy the essay and he was looking forward to discussing it with me.

We went back to the reading room, I started Olof Lagercrantz's book about Dante and sat over it until the afternoon, when I repaired to the canteen to eat. It was Friday and they always had rice pudding.

Ann Kristin was sitting at a table on the first floor. She smiled when she saw me and I went over holding a tray of rice pudding, juice, and coffee.

"Hi, Karl Ove," she said. "It's been a long time. Take a seat. This is Rolf, by the way."

She nodded toward a man on the other side of the table.

"So you're Karl Ove," he said. "I had your father at *gymnas*. He's the best teacher I've ever had. He was fantastic."

"Really?" I said. "Where was that?"

"Vennesla."

"Right," I said, and sat down, took off the bowl of rice pudding, the cup of coffee, and the glass of juice, pushed the tray away, and started to eat.

"What's he doing now?"

"He's working in Northern Norway. He's remarried and has a child."

"Classic midlife crisis," Ann Kristin said. "Oh, I heard that you went to Italy with Yngve."

I nodded and swallowed.

"Florence."

"Shame you couldn't be at the funeral."

"Yes. How was it?"

"It was dignified and lovely."

Ann Kristin was the eldest daughter of my mother's sister Kjellaug and Jon Olav's sister. In our childhood it had always been her and Yngve and Jon Olav and me, and that had continued during our studies, at least at first when Yngve and Ann Kristin had spent a lot of time together. But they had drifted apart, unless it had been prompted by a particular event, I wasn't aware of anything, I only knew they didn't meet outside family commitments anymore.

She was a strong character and could appear a little brusque, especially with Jon Olav, but she didn't hold back with me, either, not that I was afraid of her, it was just surface, underneath it all she was nice and more than usually considerate. I liked her, I always had.

This Rolf, was he her boyfriend?

"Do you study Russian too?" I said.

He nodded.

"That was where we met," he said.

"Rolf's the department's wunderkind," Ann Kristin said.

"You weren't the boy who always got the top grade at *gymnas*, were you? Dad talked about it for a while."

"I'm afraid so." He smiled.

"You really were his favorite pupil," I said.

"Yes, what do you expect?" said Ann Kristin. "Of course the teacher likes someone who only gets top grades."

"Not Dad," I said, to flatter him.

"Give him my best regards," Rolf said.

"Will do," I said.

"How's Yngve getting on?" Ann Kristin said. "I haven't seen him for ages. Is he still with . . . what's her name . . . ?"

"Ingvild?"

"Yes."

"No, they broke up this spring," I said.

"She was so like your mother."

"Was she?"

"Didn't you notice?"

"No. Where was the resemblance?" I said.

"The eyes, Karl Ove. They had the same eyes."

She smiled and turned to Rolf, who raised his eyebrows and grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair.

"Can you manage on your own?" Ann Kristin said to me. "Or should we stay and keep an eye on you?"

"Think I'll manage," I said. "Nice to see you both. Bye!"

They went out the door on the first floor, where corridors branched off to various other parts of the building, and I ate the rice pudding alone.

The following Sunday I met Gunvor. It was a coincidence, I had gone out with Yngve for a beer, he had been working, he met some people he knew, one of them invited us to his place, candles were lit, tea was served, quiet records were played. I sat on some kind of pouffe and was itching to leave when a girl sat down beside me. She was small, fair-haired with a small retroussé nose and beautiful, gentle eyes. Her energy levels were high, her personality was winning.

"Who are you?" she said.

"I'm Yngve's brother," I said.

"Well, that leaves me none the wiser. Who's Yngve?"

"The guy standing over there flirting."

"Oh. I haven't seen him before either. But, anyhow, it's not hard to see you're brothers!"

"No," I said.

"And what are you doing in Bergen?"

"Lit."

"Do you like Ragnar Hovland? He's my all-time favorite. *Suicide in Turtle Café*, just the title."

"Yes, he's funny. What are you studying?"

"Admin and Organization Theory. But I'm going to start History after Christmas."

"History? I feel like doing that as well."

She was open, but not in a naïve way, she wasn't the type to burst out with something she didn't understand, she was just very self-confident.

The others left one by one, we kept talking, it was the kind of night you could tell each other everything about yourself, and it's meaningful because there is also a shared willingness to listen. She was from a farm in Vestland, she had two brothers and a sister, she loved riding, particularly Icelandic horses, she had worked for a year on an Icelandic farm and spoke Icelandic fluently. I asked her to say something in Icelandic, she said *Thad er ekki gott ad vita hver Karl Ove er!* It's not easy to know who Karl Ove is. I laughed, I had understood. She said Icelandic horses had two additional gaits, and I laughed again, I found it difficult to understand how you could be so passionate about animals. Try riding one yourself sometime and you'll understand, she said.

We sat there until the guy whose flat it was wanted to go to bed. Then she accompanied me home, we talked the whole way, outside my front door for maybe half an hour, then she asked if we could see each other again, and I said yes, I would like that.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, great."

"Shall we go to the movies?"

"Yes, let's."

She left, I went to bed, strangely light-headed.

Two weeks later she turned around on the steps going up to her place.

"We're going out together now, aren't we, Karl Ove?"

"Yes," I said. "I am anyway!"

By then we had spent almost every evening since we met with each other. Her place, my place, Café Opera, Fekterloftet, long walks through Bergen's streets. We talked and talked, one night we kissed, and then we spent the night together, but nothing happened, she wanted to wait, wanted to be certain about me. You can be certain about me, I said, because I was aching with desire, all the time, I was walking beside her doubled up, but no, time was on our side, time was a friend. An evil friend, I said, come on, how dangerous can it be? No, it wasn't dangerous, but she wanted to wait, she didn't know me. But I've shown you everything! There's nothing left to see! I'm so small! She laughed, shook her head, I would have to wait. Lying next to her hot naked body!

These were hard conditions, but everything else was like a fever, like a dream, she came and went, the rest was like dozing, unimportant, she gave the world shape and gravity, she, Gunvor, my girlfriend.

Jon Olav had moved into a big apartment down by the cinema, I had introduced her to him long ago, now he was going to be away for a few days, we could use his apartment if we wanted? Yes, we did. We were there for two days and nights, we only went out for food, we couldn't be without each other, but still she wouldn't, she still didn't know me well enough.

Her youngest sister and boyfriend invited us to visit them in Hardanger, where they lived in a big old house. We caught the bus there, it was dark, the countryside was white with snow lit up by the moon, and above us, glittering in the sky, countless stars. It was twenty degrees below zero, the snow creaked as we walked up the hills, the cold air burned in our lungs, the skin on our faces was rigid, and around us there was silence.

They had lit the fire, made dinner, we sat chatting and eating and drinking red wine, I was happy. We had a room up in the loft, it was freezing cold, even under the duvet, and my desire was so great that I didn't know what to do, I snuggled up to her, kissed her beautiful breasts, her beautiful stomach, her beautiful feet, but no, I had to wait, she didn't know me well enough, still didn't know who I was.

"I'm Karl Ove Knausgaard and I want you!" I said then.

She laughed and she hugged me, she was so soft and supple, and her eyes were gentle, and she was mine.

But not completely, not fully, it was still just her and me, and not us.

I didn't read much during these weeks. It felt unimportant, but she went up to university every day, and so I did too, though mostly for appearance's sake, the sentences didn't make much sense to me, for everything was churning around, everything was open and undefined, until I saw her come and make the world secure and clear again. Her, Gunvor, my girlfriend.

Espen came over during a break, he asked if I had read the Mandelstam essay yet, I hadn't, I was thinking of reading *The Divine Comedy* first, he thought that wise.

"Which edition are you reading? The nynorsk one? I started it, but it's so archaic it's pretty impossible. So I bought the Swedish version. It's very good."

"I bought the nynorsk edition," I said. "I'll have to see how I manage."

His gaze, which had been open and innocent, suddenly turned stern and introspective and he directed it at the field down in front of us.

I hurriedly revisited what had just been said. After a while, with neither of us saying anything, he glanced up at me.

"Would you like to come to Alrek one afternoon? Then we can play chess or something. Do you play chess?"

"I know the rules," I said. "But I can't exactly say I play."

"You can have a refresher," he said.

"Yes, of course," I said. "But I'd like a trip over anyway."

We arranged to meet the following afternoon. In the reading room I took out the translation of *Divina Commedia*, started reading without taking notes, whatever stuck would stick of its own accord. I knew a little of what it was about, I had read a third of Lagercrantz's Dante book and formed a clear impression of what it was like. Still, however, I wasn't prepared for the feeling of time I got from the first pages, for the book not being *about* the fourteenth century but actually *dating* from that century, it was a part of that century, and I was able to experience it now.

Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate.

The gates of Hell, Easter 1300. Dante, who has lost his way, in midlife, and who will find redemption by seeing all there is to see.

He will see everything and he will be redeemed.

But at the beginning of the first canto it wasn't in life where he had lost his way but in a forest, and the animals that attacked him were not sins or treachery, they were beasts of flesh and blood, baring their teeth and snarling. Hell wasn't an internal state, the entrance to it lay there, in the middle of the world, at the bottom of a precipice, surrounded by forest and wilderness on all sides.

I understood of course that the contents of the explanatory footnotes, about what the individual animals and places and occurrences represented, were real enough, but what was exceptional about the opening, which I felt in every cell of my body like a gnawing hunger, was the concrete physical and material nature of it, not the shadows cast into the world of ideas. Something was compared with the building of a ship in a yard in Venice, and suddenly, with immense force, I realized that Dante must have been sitting somewhere and writing this, perhaps peering into the air and pondering what comparison he could draw, and then he remembered a shipyard he had seen once, in Venice, *which was still there as he wrote*.

I was supposed to meet Gunvor in the afternoon, I packed up my things and walked through the corridors dangling a plastic bag from my hand and into the courtyard between the buildings, I had stopped to have a smoke when I saw her coming toward me. She smiled with her whole body, she stretched up onto her toes and kissed me on the lips. We walked hand in hand, down the hills and over to Nøstet, where her apartment was. She shared it with a girlfriend called Arnhild. Her best friend was Karoline, and on paper, with their ponderous unfashionable names, they were an intimidating trio – Gunvor, Arnhild, and Karoline – but in reality they were happy and cheerful and wonderfully normal. Arnhild was at the Business School and would wear lamb's wool sweaters and a pearl necklace, Karoline studied at university and was a few notches tougher, she was closer to Gunvor, they had the same sense of humor, they followed in each other's footsteps in the way that I gathered girlfriends did. Once she told us about the time a boy had tried to pick her up, he had come up to her and asked her if she wanted to go back to his place, she had asked why, he had said so that he could fuck her senseless. They laughed at that! They were dutiful and sensible, would never fritter away their lives, and the security of that meant that everything else around us had no effect on them. Going out on the town for them, for example, was enjoyable and there was absolutely nothing demonic about it.

Even though I lived alone in a relatively spacious apartment we preferred to be at Gunvor's; my place was dark and gloomy and there was almost no furniture, hers was light, it was in good condition and moreover there was something girly and feminine about the furnishings that I liked to be surrounded by, it was so clear that she was my girlfriend then, in all its soft frilly unfamiliarity. Waking up there, more often than not with the rain pelting down in the street, so early that it was still dark, having breakfast with them and going off to the reading room with her, was something I hadn't experienced before and I loved it with the whole of my black heart.

I introduced Gunvor to Yngve and Asbjørn and his other friends, who in a way had become mine, too, or not friends exactly but at any rate people I was often with, by dint of being Yngve's younger brother, my safeguard in Bergen, and she was a great hit with them. That wasn't so strange, it was impossible not to like Gunvor, she always laughed at what others said, was sociable and affable, didn't take herself seriously, but nor was she frivolous, she worked hard at what she did and was no stranger to high seriousness, she also had a strong work ethic, you had to work, you had to go to lectures, you had to read, only then did you deserve time off. But this sense of moral duty, which I also knew and regarded as an enemy, something I had to oppose, something that stood for the opposite of what I wanted to be, this sense of moral duty didn't weigh heavy on her, it didn't affect her personality, it was more like a kind of guiding line, thin and straight and strong, a sinew in her soul, not visible but important, it gave her strength and security, meant that she never doubted that where she was and what she was doing were right.

When I was with her it was as though something was being drawn out of me. The darkness became lighter, the crippled straighter, and the strange thing was that it didn't come from outside, it wasn't that she lit the darkness, no, it was something that happened inside me because I saw myself with her eyes, and not just my own, and in her eyes there was nothing wrong with me, quite the contrary. In this way the balance shifted. When I was with Gunvor I no longer wished to do myself any harm.

As arranged I headed over to Espen's the day after, up the hills behind the railway station, over the long flat stretch there, to Alrek, where I had been only once before, when as a sixteen-year-old I visited Yngve four years ago.

Espen was cooking in the shared kitchen when I arrived. Chicken casserole with tomato, he said, want some?

It was heavily seasoned, but good, he lit up when I said that.

Afterward he made coffee in a strange shiny, almost sculpted, jug, it was shaped like a little man with a hat on, and Espen dismantled it first, poured water into one part, then poured fine-grained specialist coffee of some kind into a funnel-like contraption which he dropped into the water part, before screwing on the top half, which had a lid with a black ball in the center, and put it on the hotplate. I had no intention of asking what kind of coffee it made, I would accept everything he served with a worldly air.

Each carrying a cup, we went to his room.

Oh, how strong it was, it tasted a bit like espresso.

Espen looked through his records.

“Do you like jazz?” he said.

“Ye-es,” I said. “I don’t listen to so much, but it’s OK.”

“Let’s take a classic then . . . *Kind of Blue*?”

“Fine by me,” I said, trying to read the cover to see who had made the recording. Miles Davis.

Espen sat down on the bed.

“I went to see him at a concert in Oslo. I didn’t have a ticket, so I snuck in.”

“You snuck in? How did you manage that?”

“I went into the building next door, down to the cellar, where I found some chairs. I carried them to make it look as if I was working there. Then I opened a door, and there I was, in the middle of the auditorium.”

He laughed.

“Is that true?”

“Yes. It was a great concert.”

Pale melancholic music began to float through the room. Espen took out his chess set, placed the board between us, grasped one black and one white pawn in each hand, moved them around behind his back and then held his fists in front of me.

“That one,” I said.

He opened his fist. Black.

"I'm not quite sure how to set out the pieces," I said. "It's pawns first, isn't it?"

"Yes," he said, laying out his pieces in an instant. I copied him.

I hated chess, losing at chess felt to me much more significant and revealing and humiliating than a game of tennis, for example. I wasn't that intelligent, wasn't that calculating, even if I strained my brain so much that smoke came out of my ears, I could never work it out, could never plan more than two moves ahead, at least not when I was small and played with Dad or Yngve, who beat me every time. I hadn't played since then, however, I was an adult now, I thought. Maybe the experience I had acquired would benefit me in some way or other. It was only problem solving really.

"No stopwatch?" he said.

"No," I said.

We started and three minutes later I was checkmate.

"How about another game?"

"OK."

Three minutes later I was checkmate again.

"Best of five. Then you've got a chance of turning things around."

"It's possible."

He crushed me for the third time. But I couldn't see a hint of gloating in him as he packed away the set and silently set about rolling a cigarette.

"Are you an active player then?" I said.

"Me? No. No, no. I just like it."

"Do you read chess columns in the paper?"

"Sometimes, yes. It can be incredibly interesting to follow the moves in old games between the masters."

"Oh yes," I said.

"But there are some standard moves you can learn. Openings and so on. I can show you if you'd like."

I nodded.

"Shall we do it next time?"

"Yes."

Outside, the sun was shining through the clouds. The light that fell diagonally through the air made the colors in the countryside beneath seem shrill in comparison with the matte gray surroundings.

"What books do you actually like reading? In modern Norwegian literature?" he said.

"A bit of everything," I said. "Kjærstad, Fløgstad, Jon Fosse. All sorts of books really. What about you?"

"A broad range, too. But Øyvind Berg is good. Tor Ulven is fantastically good. Ole Robert Sunde, have you read anything by him? A whole novel about the main character, who walks to a kiosk and back. Odyssey, right? His language goes in all directions. It's enormously digressive, almost essayistic. You should read it."

"I've heard about it," I said. "Think there was something in *Vinduet* once."

"Then there's Ekelöf of course. And Jan Erik Vold! *Enthusiastic Essays*. I think that's my favorite book. It's so unbelievably rich. Have you seen it?"

I shook my head. He jumped up and went through one of the piles of books on his desk, passed me a fat blue book with a picture on the cover of Vold swimming.

"There," he said. "He writes about all sorts of things. Not just literature. A lot about jazz and . . . well."

"Great," I said, leafing through it.

The music had stopped, he took the record off the deck.

"What shall we play now?" he said.

"I don't know," I said.

"Flip through and see if there's anything you like."

"OK," I said, kneeling down.

Would you believe it, he had *Heaven Up Here*!

"Do you like Echo and the Bunnymen?" I said.

"Yes, certainly do. Ian McCulloch has a wonderful voice. And he's so fantastically arrogant."

"Can we play that one? Perhaps it's a bit pathetic. After all I've got it myself, but it's so good."

"Yes, go on. It's a long time since I've listened to it."

When I left an hour later, down the hills shining in the wan November light, I was full of tensions. Espen was the kind of person you noticed. He had a strong presence, and as I was so weak I picked up all the different moods he radiated and probably didn't register himself. There was also something introspective about him, sometimes it was as if his gaze didn't leave his eyes, it stayed where it was, inside, making it seem hard and irreconcilable, but when it let go he was openness in person, friendliness itself, in a way that I wasn't sure he registered either, because his enthusiasm seemed to take over and actually he was just following the currents inside him.

I was impressed by him, not least because he was two years younger than me. What I couldn't figure out though, as I walked along, was why he had invited me of all people to his place. Our department was full of interesting and well-read students and he had turned to the one person who had no depth and no insight into literature.

But I was glad he had. If I couldn't live up to expectations right now, I might be able to eventually.

At home there was a letter protruding from the door crack. I opened it. It was notice to move. Owing to renovation work I would have to be out before the middle of December.

Was that legal?

Oh shit. I was living way beyond my means anyway. It was just as well. But I would have to get out and look for new accommodation.

I went to bed early, but woke to the sound of someone banging on the window. I got up and went over. It was Gunvor. She smiled and pointed to the door, I nodded and went to open up.

Five minutes later she crawled into the narrow bed beside me and the fullness of her breasts against my hands made my body explode with desire.

"Not yet," she said. "But soon."

I was more than lucky with the accommodation problem. It turned out that Jon Olav's friend Ben had just moved out of a large four-room apartment by Danmarksplass and no one had moved in yet. It had formerly belonged to the shipyard in Solheimsviken, it was an extension of the office buildings there, and was now owned by a bank. I called them, yes, the apartment was free, I could move in, but I ought to know that the whole building was due to be demolished soon and I would have to be able to move out at a month's notice. When would that be? Well, she didn't know, not in the immediate future at any rate. I accepted, and one evening Gunvor and I went there, we were met by Ben and he showed us around the four rooms. There had been a whole gang of them living there, but the rent was so low that two could easily make ends meet. Originally there had been two apartments: one with two rooms behind the kitchen and one with two rooms behind the bathroom. There were wall-to-wall carpets on the floors, they could be removed, apparently there were attractive wooden boards underneath, the windows were single-glazed, filthy from car fumes and the traffic noise from the overpass was tangible, but according to Ben you got used to it. The general condition of the place wasn't good, the kitchen was old, the stove looked to be from the early 1960s, but there was a shower stall in the bathroom and the rent, as Ben reminded me, was low.

I was given the keys and he left.

Together with Gunvor I walked around the rooms once more. We hugged in the middle of the floor of what I had just decided would be the living room in my part.

"Don't you want to move in with me?" I said.

"No," she said. "Absolutely not! But perhaps one day. Who knows what might happen!"

"Then I'll have to get hold of someone to live here. Do you know anyone who needs somewhere to live?"

"No. But I can keep my ear to the ground. No girls, that's all. I don't dare take any risks."

"You? You've got nothing to fear. Is that how you think? Is that true?"

She went over to the window. I followed her, stood behind her, kissed her neck and gently fondled her breasts.

"What's your favorite?" she said.

"Huh?"

"Food. What's your favorite food?"

"Shrimp, I think. Why?"

"I was just wondering."

I pulled up the carpet in one room, cleaned away all the remnants of glue, leveled any uneven bits and painted it green like a ship's deck. The few pieces of furniture I possessed Yngve brought in a van we rented, I would buy anything else I needed from IKEA when my student loan came in. He told me he had organized a rehearsal room, it was at Verftet, we could use it two nights a week. Fired up with enthusiasm, we talked about songs, lyrics, and tracking down a vocalist. The following day we met in a café at Verftet. Me with two pairs of drumsticks, him with a guitar case, Pål with a bass gig bag. I was nervous, I hadn't played the drums since the early days at *gymnas*, and I couldn't do much except for the absolute basics. Yngve was aware of this, it was less easy with Pål, he was probably expecting a serious jam session with three musicians.

"Actually, I can't play," I said. "Did Yngve tell you? I only fiddled around on the drums when I was at *gymnas*. I'm pretty hopeless. But I can learn."

"Relax, Yngve Junior," Pål said. "It'll be fine."

Pål was tall and thin and pale with dark hair and a slightly childish attitude to life. He wasn't exactly afraid to show his little quirks, it was more like he cultivated them. He was an eccentric and in Bergen he was famous for having read poems during the student demos with bells in his hair. He read a little, shook his head to make the bells ring, then read a bit more. Explosion of cheering. He played in an experimental band that emerged from the Shit Tape cassette label in Arendal, they were called the Coalmine Five after the politician Kullmann Five presumably, he loved everything that was odd, weird, way out. Yngve and he had been in the same class at their first school, I'd heard his name all my life but had only met him in the last year. He had published two collections of poetry at his own publishing house and was studying Marine Biology. In his early youth he had played with the

Salvation Army, and as a bass player, Yngve said, he wasn't your steady plodder but melodious, inventive, an improviser. It was obvious from the very first moment we started to play that he knew his stuff. That is, from the first moment they started to play. I was fazed. I sat on the chair with the drumsticks in my hand, behind the set, all the drums and cymbals, the two of them standing on either side playing, and I didn't dare make a move, I was too afraid of messing up.

They played "You Sway So Sweetly." Pål tried various fingerings, he was searching for something and once he had it, it stayed while he went off on other forays, came back with new lines and then was off again until he was happy and the song was in place.

Yngve stopped and looked at me.

"Come on then," he said.

"Play yourselves in," I said. "Then I can hear how it goes."

They did. When they were about halfway I tentatively started to play. I should be able to keep the beat anyway, even if not much else was right.

"That was good, Karl Ove," Pål said. "But try to get the bass drum to fall in with the bass. I can mark it for you. DUM dum DUM DUM dum. OK?"

"And play a bit louder," Yngve said. "We can hardly hear you."

I blushed and played and hoped this would soon be over. Pål looked at me and his whole upper body rose whenever the beat on the bass drum was imminent. After a while he turned away and just played, but then there was eye contact and raised shoulders again.

We continued for two hours with the same song, over and over again. It was all about getting me on board, of course they had it off pat. After we had finished for the day and they were starting to roll up the cables and pack the boxes and straps, my shirt was drenched.

"You'd better find someone else," I said.

"Not at all," said Yngve. "It'll be great."

"That went really well," Pål said. "I don't know what you're talking about. All we need now is a vocalist and a name for the band. I suggest Misc M. Then we'll always have our own section in record shops."

"I was thinking of Odd & Bent," Yngve said. "That works in both English and Norwegian."

"Sounds like the description of a dick," I said.

"Speak for yourself," Yngve said.

"He is. He's talking about his own syphilitic dick," Pål laughed.

"What about Mao?" I said. "I was toying with that. Short and sweet."

"Troubled Waters," Pål said. "That's good too. Now we have to pour oil on troubled waters! Either of you know what troubled waters are actually?"

"No," I said. "Beside me in the reading room is someone with a great name. I wondered about this. He's called Finn Iunker. We could just use the name of someone we don't know, couldn't we? Finn Iunker and something or other. Finn Iunker and the Seaplanes, for example?"

"Not bad," Yngve said. "I wondered about Smith and the Smudgers."

"Or what about Ethnic Cleansing Cream?" said Pål.

Yngve laughed so much he had to walk around the room to recover.

"Or Holocaustic Soda?" I said.

"Kafkatrakterne?" Pål said, wriggling his shoulders to get the bass strap to sit better. "Kafkatrakterne!"

"Mm," Yngve said. "Not Coffee Machines but Kafka Machines. Yes, I like it."

"Kafkatrakterne it is," I said. "It's great!"

The last two places I'd had were at street level and all I had seen from them was passing heads and umbrellas. The new apartment was quite different. It was at the top of the old brick building, and from the living room there was a view of the big overpass in Danmarksplass, the offices behind, the big old cinema, the new REMA 1000 supermarket, and on the opposite side of the road the bookshop where I had in my, now incomprehensible, naïveté and immaturity bought *Hunger*. A crowd of drunks used to sit on the benches by the little parking lot outside the supermarket, there was a taxi stand – it took me a couple of nights to realize that was where the low ringing sound I heard came from, the phone was going almost all the time – and the road was one everyone used to get in and out of the town center, so there was always something happening. In addition, the hospital was close by and a regular stream of ambulances, with and without sirens and blue lights, weaved through the traffic day and night. For me this was a rewarding sight, I often stood looking out the windows, like a cow out of a stall, because I was empty inside then, I registered movements and followed what was happening, that was all. Look, a pickup carrying a long plank on the back with a white handkerchief tied around the end! A truck full of braying sheep, what on earth was this, was I in Yugoslavia all of a sudden? A lady with a fox stole around her neck, the kind where the head is intact, obviously insane, her stiff, rigid movements were unmistakable, she strode first down one side of the street, then back up the other. A group of at first three, then four and five, men gathering by the end of the hill up from the subway at half past three in the morning, what skulduggery were they up to? Woman gives man an ear bashing, man gives woman an ear bashing, countless variations on that theme. I also saw quite a number of swaying figures, sometimes in such a dire state that I couldn't believe my own eyes, people staggering along the middle of the three-lane highway, people losing their balance and running to one side, stopping when they regained it, running to the other side, just like we had done when we were children pretending to be drunks, copying what we had seen in silent films we were shown at parties.

Another improvement on my previous accommodation was the telephone that had been installed. I had the line connected and now I had my very own number.

Gunvor was the first to call.

"Will you be at home tomorrow?" she asked after we had been talking for a while.

"If you come I will be."

We agreed she would come by around noon. At twelve sharp she rang the bell. She had a plastic bag in her hand.

"I've bought some shrimp," she said. "They didn't have any fresh ones, I'm afraid, so these are frozen."

She took them out, a plastic bag of frozen Greenland shrimp, which I put on a dish so that they would thaw faster. She had also bought some butter, mayonnaise, a loaf of bread, and a lemon.

"Is this a special day or what?" I said.

She smiled and looked down, and I suddenly caught on. Today was the day. We hugged, went into the bedroom, I slowly undressed her, we lay down on the mattress by the wall. One leg kept trembling. The light from the overcast sky filled the room, fell over our white bodies, her face, her eyes constantly watching me.

Afterward we showered together and then we went to see how the shrimp were doing, we were strangely shy with each other, as though we had suddenly become two strangers. But this didn't last long, the gap closed, soon we were chatting as if nothing had happened, until our eyes met and once again the atmosphere became charged with seriousness. It was as though we were seeing each other for the first time. We were the same, but the noncommittal nature of our relationship had become committal in a way that changed everything. We gazed at each other in an intense, serious way, then her face dissolved into a smile, shall we eat your shrimp now?

This was the first time a glimpse of the future had shown itself in our relationship. Now it really was us, and what did that mean?

I was twenty years old, she was twenty-two, of course we would just continue as before. There was nothing to plan, everything came of its own accord. So far we had spent almost all of our time together, we were discovering each other, there was so much we had to tell each other about our lives, as well as everything else going on around us, while also doing things. We weren't conscious of what we were doing or why, at least I wasn't, hardly any of the others I knew were, either. Everyone went to the movies now and then, and to the Film Club, everyone went to Café Opera or Hulen, everyone went around visiting everyone else, everyone bought records and everyone went to the odd gig. Everyone slept with everyone else, or wanted to, either casually after a night out or on a regular basis. Occasionally a child was born, but that was an absolute rarity, a peculiarity, becoming a parent in our twenties as so many of our parents' generation had done was a no-no. Many students went up Mount Fløyen or Mount Ulriken on weekends, I didn't, I drew the line there, I would never be one for the outdoor life, and Gunvor wasn't either, or at least she restricted that part of her life to a minimum. Not much more than that happened, yet I experienced it as rich and meaningful in the sense that I never questioned it, there were no alternatives, in more or less the same way that people never questioned a horse and cart in the centuries before the car was invented. And somehow it was rich too, and full of significance, because every one of the tiny arenas of interest contained an unending wealth of nuances and distinctions, a band was not just a band, for example, it carried with it a multitude of other details, and there were thousands of them. A Literature student was not only a Literature student, although it probably looked like that from a distance, once you got closer to one, as I did with Espen, each and every one of them was his own complete world, there were hundreds of them, and of students, thousands. Then there were all the books that existed and all the knowledge they contained, as well as their interconnections. There were millions of them. Bergen was a tract of land and it wasn't just rain that fell into it, there was also everything that was thought and done throughout the world that found its way here, to the foundations of this town in whose streets we walked. 808 State released *808:90*, the Pixies *Doolittle*, Neneh Cherry *Raw Like Sushi*, the Golden Palaminos *A Dead Horse*, Raga Rockers *Blaff*. People were beginning to buy their own computers. There was talk of a new commercial Norwegian TV channel which might be based in Bergen. Raga Rockers played at Maxine, Arvid shouted, "Hey, that's Yngve," as a guy ran onto the stage and threw himself into the audience. It was so unlike him and everyone laughed. I read *The Divine Comedy* in the nynorsk translation, wrote an assignment on it, which I presented in Buvik's course, held a forty-five-minute talk, which I had been dreading for several weeks, but it went well, at least according to Espen. Buvik said that I used Lagercrantz as a crutch, but that was allowed, and after that he would sometimes pick on me during lectures, apparently keen to hear my opinion on this or that. I blushed and mumbled and was so uncomfortable it must have been glaringly obvious, but I was also proud, it was me he had asked. I liked Buvik, I liked his style, the easily kindled enthusiasm, despite the fact that he had been a lecturer for many years and we were on the bottom rung of the hierarchy. He had short blond hair, round glasses, always dressed elegantly, was a good-looking man with a tinge of effeminacy about his gestures and body language, but he had obtained his doctorate in France, as far as I was led to believe, and I suspected it was predominantly an expression of his refinement, manners that were so perfect they were reflected in his body language. Linneberg was his opposite in so many ways: he spoke a kind of self-constructed working-class Oslo dialect, made a great point of it, had a ring in his ear, a great big head, his smile was often sardonic, and he liked to wear guises, such as the time he gave a lecture wearing a clown's red nose or when he held forth wearing a monkey mask. If he had to talk about Brecht he did it puffing on a huge cigar. Both of them had immense power over us, they were important figures and if they went to one of the first-year parties they could pick up any girl they wanted, I often thought about that, there was always an energy in the room when they lectured and it wasn't just intellectual curiosity and a thirst for knowledge from the students' side. They had such high status it was as if the gods had descended from Mount Olympus to sit among us in the canteen. Which, of course, they never did. That Buvik had asked me a question twice during a lecture was a sign of favor from the Sun God in my eyes. I didn't know what the others thought, with them I exchanged very few words, apart from Espen and Ole. But I was beginning to get a hold on the subject, I wrote another assignment, about Fløgstad's aesthetics, and reckoned in fact I had cracked the code. Academic writing was actually about hiding what you didn't know. There was a language, a technique, and I had mastered it. In everything there were gaps, which language could cover over, so long as you had acquired the know-how. I had, for instance, never read Adorno, knew practically nothing about the Frankfurt School, just the snippets I had picked up here and there, but in an assignment I could maneuver the little knowledge I actually had in such a way as to make it appear greater and more comprehensive. Another technique that was held in high regard was the ability to transfer knowledge from one field to another, preferably in a surprising way, this too was simple, all you had to do was build a bridge between them and then your work seemed to have a new original element, even though actually there was nothing new or original in it. It didn't have to be brilliant, not even particularly good, because all it was intended to do was provide evidence that you thought for yourself, had your own opinions, besides of course showing that you had knowledge of the topic.

These practice assignments on Dante and Fløgstad I called "essays" when I talked about them. I've just written an essay about Fløgstad by the way. In the essay about Dante, you know, I wrote about . . .

One day I was smoking under the Arts Block roof with Espen, as the rain poured down from the leaden sky, there was something about him, a kind of heightened wariness, and it was on the tip of my tongue to ask him directly what it was when he suddenly glanced at me.

"I was thinking of applying to the Writing Academy," he said.

"Oh?" I said. "That's great! I didn't even know you wrote. Though I did have a suspicion."

"I was wondering if you would mind casting an eye over something I've written. I'm not quite sure what I should send in. Or if there's any point."

"Not at all," I said.

"I've got some texts with me today actually. You can have them afterward if you want."

When he gave me the pieces later that day it was with the utmost discretion. We were like spies and the texts were secret documents concerning not only the security of our own country but all the countries in the NATO pact. A plastic folder came out of his bag, it was passed behind our backs, half hidden, we were standing next to each other, then popped into my shopping bag with the same fleetness of hand. Once the transfer was complete we talked about something else.

Being a writer was no great disgrace, quite the opposite, in literature it represented the supreme, the highest pinnacle of achievement, but it was shameful to boast about it because almost everyone wrote and until your writing had appeared in a journal or, oh bliss, had been published, it was basically nothing, nonexistent, and if you needlessly revealed this fact, you lost face, you showed you didn't want to be here but somewhere else, that you had a dream which, and this was the crux of the matter, probably wouldn't come to fruition. Until there was any evidence to the contrary, what Literature students wrote was for the desk drawer. The situation was a little different for me, I had been to the Writing Academy and had "a right to write," but if I displayed my work, and it was poor, I would immediately lose all credibility.

So it was important to be cautious. What Espen gave me in deepest secrecy was, on the one hand, "nothing," that is, invisible and had to be treated as such; on the other hand, for Espen it was probably more important, actually, *much* more important than a document regarding the security of NATO-pact countries.

I treated it with the respect and dignity it warranted. I didn't open the folder until I got home and was completely alone. After I had read the texts, which were poems, I regretted not having said to Espen that I was no good even if I had attended the Writing Academy course, actually I was a fraud because I could immediately see that the poems were good, I recognized the mark of quality from the first line, but I was incapable of saying a word about them. About why they were good, about how they could be better. I could only say they were good.

But he didn't notice, didn't ask for farther comment, he was happy I had liked them.

One weekend I took Gunvor home to meet Mom, who had moved to a house in Jølster, fifteen kilometers outside Førde. It was old and nice, situated on a small plain below some big farms on slopes leading up to high mountains. On the other side of the road was the River Jølstra. We caught a bus which stopped only a hundred meters from her house, freezing mist hung over the river as we walked up, Mom was waiting with a hot meal, she came into the hall as we tramped in, they shook hands and smiled, I was a little tense, but not as tense as Gunvor, she had been dreading this meeting for ages and talked a lot about it on the journey here. She was the first girlfriend I had brought home since I was sixteen, the first real girlfriend since I had grown up and, for all we knew, the last. It was important that Mom liked her for both Gunvor and me.

She did, of course. There were no signs of tension or nervousness to be seen in Gunvor, she was herself, as always, and they soon warmed to each other, I noticed their mutual regard and was happy about that and about being able to show Gunvor the easy relationship Mom and I had, and always had had, Gunvor witnessed me having long conversations, and in this way, in this context – in which I was also somehow closer to Gunvor – she saw the person I was when Mom and I were together, more real, less ambivalent.

The fire crackled, we sat around the table talking. Outside, in the freezing cold river landscape, cars rushed past in the distance.

“What a fantastic mother you have,” she said when we went to bed.

“She likes you,” I said.

“Do you think so?”

“Yes, it’s easy to see.”

The following day we went up to see Borghild, Grandma’s sister. She had curly white hair, a plump body with big upper arms, and wore thick glasses which made her eyes look frighteningly large. A longtime widow, she had a mind as sharp as a razor, latched on to the most surprising stories from all over the world and was always quick to condemn whatever she didn’t like.

She stared shamelessly at Gunvor for a few seconds when they met.

“So this is a visit from the young students!” she said. We sat down in her little living room, there were piles of magazines on the table with a large magnifying glass on top, she went into the kitchen and saw to some crepes and coffee, which were served five minutes later with a long list of apologies for the paucity of the offering.

"Borghild's responsible for the catering at weddings in this district," Mom told Gunvor.

"Well, I was once," she said.

"The last time was no more than six months ago, wasn't it?" Mom said with a smile.

"Yes, but that was nothing," she said. "Weddings now are not what they used to be. They used to last three days!"

Mom asked about various relatives, and Borghild replied.

"Grandma came from the farm down there," I said to Gunvor, and she stood up to see. I stood behind her. I controlled the impulse to cup my hands around her breasts, which always announced itself when I was standing behind her, and placed my hand on her shoulder instead.

"When I was growing up we still had sixteenth-century buildings there," Borghild said.

I glanced at her and my spine froze.

The sixteenth century, that wasn't long after Dante.

"But they were demolished, all of them."

"Has the same family lived there all that time?" I said.

"Yes, I rather think they have," she said.

I hadn't been there often and I didn't even know the names of all Grandma's sisters, knew nothing about their parents except that he, my great-grandfather that is, had been an avid Bible reader and had not only worked long, hard hours but also enjoyed the toil more than anything else. My great-grandmother, Borghild's mother and Mom's grandmother, I knew nothing about. She had given birth to eleven children, she had lived down below, that was the extent of my knowledge. I had a bad conscience about knowing so little, it felt as if it was my responsibility, if I was so ignorant I didn't deserve to be called a relative.

I determined that one day I would go up to see Borghild on my own and write down whatever she told me, not just for my sake, that is, getting to know more about my family, but because all the knowledge she possessed was interesting in itself.

We drove home alongside the big silent deep lake where Borghild told us fishermen used to sweep the waters with cocks; wherever the cocks crowed they got out their fishing tackle. Outside, it was pitch black. Apart from the road and the trees or the water beside them, which all lay beneath the yellow light of the street lamps, only the snow-clad mountain peaks were visible. It was a starry sky, everything felt open and spacious.

The bus back to Bergen left at four in the morning, we stayed awake till then, and were waiting at the stop, stamping our feet to keep warm, when it arrived, thundering around the bends above us. We slept leaning against each other for the four and a half hours the journey lasted, surrounded by the thrum of the heater, the drone of the engine, the occasional cough from other passengers, the door opening and closing, all in a distant dream, the characteristic sounds of vehicles boarding ferries, the silence afterward, when the monotony of the road takes over.

We walked straight up to the university from the bus station, said goodbye, I read for a few hours, then Yngve came and asked me to join him in the canteen, he had good news. Over the weekend he had been staying in a cabin in the mountains with some people from Student Radio, one of them had sung and played the guitar, Yngve said he had such a good voice that he had asked him straight out if he wanted to be in a band. He did. We would go out one night, all four of us, and get to know one another, they had agreed. His name was Hans and he came from Geiranger, studied History, and liked Neil Young, that was all Yngve knew.

We met him at Garage, the new rock scene which consisted of a small room and a long bar on the ground floor and a big dark basement beneath with a stage. They had started booking a number of good English and American bands as well as many from Bergen, where bands were springing up everywhere, Mona Lisa Overdrive was indisputably the best, Pogo Pops came a good second.

From Yngve's brief description I had expected a rough-looking guy with a lumberjack shirt, torn jeans, sturdy boots, tousled hair, and wild eyes, it was the Neil Young reference that did it, but the young man who came in through the door holding a dripping closed umbrella in one hand and whose eyes immediately sought Yngve's had nothing in common with the phantom I had conjured up and it disappeared the instant he came over to our table.

"Hans," he said, offering his hand. "You must be Yngve's younger brother and the drummer."

"That's me," I said.

He removed his glasses and wiped off the moisture.

"We're waiting for Pål," Yngve said.

"I'll get myself a beer in the meantime," he said, and went toward the bar. Someone put the Clash's *London Calling* on the jukebox and my spine tingled, that was a good sign.

"This has all the potential for being a legendary moment," Yngve said when he returned. "The night the vocalist met the rest of Kafkatrakterne for the first time."

"We'd seen each other at art school but didn't like what we saw," Hans said. "Perhaps we even got into a fight. But then the guitarist heard me sing and had a vision that would redefine the course of rock history."

"While the drummer said nothing and the bassist arrived late," Yngve said.

"Drummers don't have to say anything," Hans said. "Theirs is the most important function in the band. They're supposed to be silent and tough. To drink a lot, say little, and fuck all the time."

"Actually I'm silent and soft," I said. "Hope you can still use me."

"You don't look soft," Hans said. "But if you insist, OK. It's good to have variations on this theme. Tiny unexpected details which make it that much more exciting. On the other hand, there is the Charlie Watts type. The gentleman who stays with his wife and plays jazz in his spare time. A little gardening and so on."

"I can't play, either," I said. "Yngve probably didn't tell you, but I'm afraid it's true."

"This could be interesting," Hans said.

"*Skål*," Yngve said. "To the Kafkatrakterne!"

We raised our glasses, drank up, went downstairs and watched the band playing for a while, Pål eventually turned up and we hung around the bar chatting. I said nothing, it was the others who did the chatting, but I was still part of it, I didn't feel I was on the outside.

Hans had played in bands all his life from what I could understand. He wrote in the student newspaper *Studvest*, made programs for Student Radio, was interested in politics, against the EU, wrote in nynorsk, was confident but not in the least bit boastful, that lay as far from his character as it was possible to be. He had a strong sense of irony, liked to make jokes, often with a dangerous sting in the tail, but his presence was usually so friendly that the danger was somehow neutralized. I really liked him, he was a good person. Whether he liked me or not was a different matter. The little I said came from the bottom of a deep well, dark and somehow quaking.

When Garage closed and the evening was over I didn't go home but to Gunvor's. She had moved to one of the apartment buildings near Bystasjonen and rented a room in the loft. I let myself in with the key I had been given, she lifted her head a fraction and smiled through the hair covering half her face and asked if I'd had a good time. Yes, I said, and lay down beside her. She went back to sleep at once, I lay awake studying the ceiling and listening to the occasional traffic in the streets, the rain falling on the roof and the skylights. There was little I enjoyed more than coming here after I had been out on the town, having a place that wasn't mine but where I was welcome, where I could cuddle up to her and feel her bare skin against mine. Now and then I wondered if she felt the same, if she lay awake feeling my bare skin against hers with her soul at peace. The notion was alien, almost scary, because then I was viewing myself with her eyes while knowing who I was myself.

The clock radio came on, I opened my eyes drowsily, Gunvor got up and went to the bathroom in the hall, I closed my eyes, heard the faint hiss of the shower, the rumble of the traffic on the road past Bystasjonen, fell asleep, woke up to her standing there putting on first her bra, then a blouse and a pair of trousers.

"Are you going to have breakfast?" she said.

"No," I said. "I'm going to sleep a bit more."

Then, apparently the next moment, she leaned over and kissed me on the cheek in her waterproof trousers and jacket.

"I'm off. See you this afternoon?"

"OK," I said. "Can you come to my place?"

"Yes. Bye!"

She vanished as if in a dream, into the wet streets of Bergen, beneath its gray sky, while I stayed in bed until eleven. Instead of going to the reading room I spent the day in town. Went into all the secondhand shops and bookstores, bought some records and some old paperbacks as well as a brand-new novel that Else Karin from the Academy had just brought out. It was called *Out*, the cover was white with a picture of a woman kneeling, half of her was naked and the other dressed in a harlequin costume. I had no expectations, I had only bought it because I knew the author and was curious to see how her style compared with what I had written.

On the back, it said JEALOUSY – ILLNESS – INSANITY?

My goodness.

I went into the café with all the old people and sat down to read. On the second page, no less, came the bombshell. It was about me!

> *You never came near, Karl Ove.*
> *The jury agrees with me.*
> *Your fingers were absent, just ask us.*
> *You didn't get my juices on you*
> *unless you lied.*

I read on, plowed through the pages scanning for my name. Ay, yay, yay.

> *Karl Ove, you'll have to come and love me.*

> *Karl Ove, you didn't come near me.*

You were a disaster, Karl Ove –
and I was already so thin.

Lots about dicks and wombs, I noticed. Screams and ovaries being injected. Whipping and burning. Nothing short of a cabinet of horrors. *One day you might understand, Karl Ove*, I read. *Hell, Karl Ove*, I read. Then suddenly in lowercase, *why, karl ove, why did you have to love me?*

I put the book to the side and gazed down at Torgalmenningen. I realized of course this wasn't about me, yet I was shaken, it was impossible to read my name with complete neutrality, and it certainly wasn't neutral either, because she had chosen it, the name of someone she had attended a course with last year, and not another name, one that wouldn't have been a problem, there was no shortage of names.

On the other hand, I thought, this was a good story, one I could tell people. I went to the Writing Academy and although I might not have made my debut afterward at least I became a character in a book. *Karl Ove has tossed and turned and been afraid. It's beautiful outside – Karl Ove knows – and he grabs the rod and closes the blinds tight, so tight, and the sun and the spruce trees are gone. Today he won't touch a drop of alcohol.*

That evening we practiced with Hans. The first thing he did was to translate my lyrics into nynorsk. They sounded good, better than before. He also had a couple of songs with him, we began to work on one of them, "Home Father Nation." Afterward we went into the hall at the back of the factory where there was a stage and a couple of local bands were going to play. As the lights were lowered and the first band was about to start, to my astonishment, I saw Morten walk across the stage and take the mike.

Morten!

Thin and dressed in black, he stood there holding the microphone stand with both hands as he sang. I couldn't believe my eyes. The last time I saw him, when we were living in the same house only six months ago, he was a conventional, though unusually open and sensitive, Østlander; now there he was singing on the stage, his body language not unlike Michael Krohn's, full of devil-may-care assurance. He sang like Michael Krohn as well, and the band played like the Raga Rockers, so that wasn't good, they had no originality of their own, but from where I was standing that wasn't the point, it was the metamorphosis Morten had undergone.

He was studying History, he said when I met him afterward. Though mostly he was playing with his band. And you? he said. Have you made your debut yet? No, I said, I can't say I have, everything went to pot. But now I'm playing in a band, too. The Kafkatrakterne.

He laughed at that and disappeared into the enormous space that had arisen between us now that we were no longer neighbors.

At the beginning of January I finally managed to find someone to move into the second apartment, which I had been paying for until then. His name was Jone, he came from Stavanger and was the ex of Kari, Asbjørn's new girlfriend. He worked for an oil company, had his own little record enterprise on the side, organized record fairs, now he had been given a leave of absence to study at the Business School and was more than happy to live with me. I was pleased about that, didn't give the poor state of the apartment a thought until the evening when he parked a white van outside and I went down to help him carry up the furniture.

"Hi, Karl Ove!" he said, although we had never seen each other before, and I realized he was the extrovert type.

Red hair, pale skin, somewhat torpid movements.

"Hi," I mumbled back. I wouldn't have dreamed of using his first name until I actually knew him.

"What sort of a hovel is this?" he said, looking up at the filthy, decaying brick facade.

"Cheap," I said.

"I'm only teasing," he laughed. "Come on. Can you give me a hand with the heavier stuff?"

He opened the doors, put on some gloves, and climbed into the back of the van. Everything was top quality, I could see. A decent water bed, a decent living-room table, a decent sofa, a large TV, and a fantastic stereo. We started with the bed. After we had maneuverd it upstairs and into his room I had such a bad conscience I could barely look him in the eye. The two drafty rooms with the old kitchen and the old bathroom would be no good for him, I should have spelled out what sort of place it was he was moving into, but now it was too late, now he was here and looking around. But he said nothing, we carried up one piece of furniture after the other, one box after the other, he joked and laughed, which it soon became clear was how he was, and he didn't appear to be bothered by the poor standard of the accommodation, which was all I could think about. By the next day he had unpacked and organized everything, and what his part of the apartment said was, there is something off kilter here: an elderly man in a spanking new discotheque, an old biddy dressed and made up like a young woman, a rotten tooth with a new white cap.

But he liked where he was. And I liked him, knowing he was there on the other side of the hall was good, and bumping into him in the morning and evening was good too, I was never alone somehow, although we had little to do with each other beyond that.

A few weeks later I discovered that the apartment beneath mine was free. I told Espen, with whom I had spent more and more time that winter, and suggested he phone the landlord, the bank, that is, and ask them if he could move in. They said yes and only a few days later we were "neighbors." He was the frugal type, he wandered around town searching for skips full of old furniture, used whatever he found to furnish his whole apartment, which was identical to mine, except that it was totally separate from the adjacent one and his toilet was in the hall and as cold and drafty as all the other student toilets in this town, where not one apartment or room could have been done up since the early 1940s. His coffee table consisted of concrete blocks with a board across, the rest of the furniture was old but fully functional and the overall impression when you entered was brilliant, what with all the books he had accumulated.

This was my life now. I was twenty-one years old, doing the first year of a Literature course, I had a stranger living next door to me, I had a friend I still didn't really know on the floor beneath, and a girlfriend. I knew nothing but I was getting better and better at pretending I did. I had a brother who allowed me into his world. And then there were Jon Olav and Ann Kristin, whom I met occasionally, and Kjartan, who had moved to Bergen and started studying when Grandma died. I saw him now and then in the canteen at the Student Center, where he stuck out, forty years old and gray-haired as he was, alone at a table, surrounded by youth on all sides. I also saw him in the canteen at Sydneshaugen, he was often sitting with others from his course then, all young, of course, and the glint he'd had in his eyes when he pontificated on all his philosophers at home in Sørbøvåg was gone. It was still Heidegger and Nietzsche, the Pre-Socratics and Hölderlin, at least when he talked to me, but for him they were no longer the future, as they had been when everything in his life gathered around this burning point.

I had no future either, not because it existed somewhere else but because I couldn't imagine it. That I might control my future and try to make it turn out the way I wanted was completely beyond my horizon. Everything was of the moment, I took everything as it came and acted on the basis of premises I didn't even know myself, and without realizing this is what I did. I tried to write, but it didn't work, everything went to pieces after a few sentences, I didn't have it in me. Espen, however, was a poet to the very core of his soul. There was no doubt that he would be accepted into the course at the Writing Academy, and rightly so, there was nothing false about what he did, I saw nothing other than entirely pure and genuine motives as far as literature was concerned.

After he moved in below we spent a lot of time together. If he wanted company or if he had made something he thought I ought to taste, which he often did, he was as experimental and ingredient-conscious in the kitchen as he was in poetry, he banged a broomstick on the ceiling and I went down. We played chess, listened sometimes to jazz and sometimes to bands I introduced because, when it came to pop and rock, our preferences were relatively similar, both influenced by having lived our early teenage years in the mid-1980s, which included a lot of post-punk but also more rhythmical stuff like

Happy Mondays, Talking Heads, Beastie Boys, he liked dancing, which was not entirely apparent at first glance, however there was little that excited him as much as driving music, and most of all, and above all else, we talked. We both read a lot, each in our own area, and that was what we discussed or took as a springboard for discussion because our own experiences were also woven into the conversations, which were endless, we could sit late into the night and continue in the afternoon of the next day, there was nothing forced or constrained about it, both he and I were hungry for knowledge, beating in our hearts we both had a desire to learn, we both felt the pleasure of moving forward, for this was what was happening, we were pushing each other forward, one leading the other, suddenly I could hear myself talking about something I had never thought of before, and where did that come from?

We were nobodies, two young Lit students chatting away in a rickety old house in a small town at the edge of the world, a place where nothing of any significance had ever happened and presumably never would, we had barely started out on our lives and knew nothing about anything, but what we read was not nothing, it concerned matters of the utmost significance and was written by the greatest thinkers and writers in Western culture, and that was basically a miracle, all you had to do was fill in a library lending slip and you had access to what Plato, Sappho, or Aristophanes had written in the incomprehensibly distant mists of time, or Homer, Sophocles, Ovid, Lucullus, Lucretius or Dante, Vasari, da Vinci, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cervantes or Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Lukács, Arendt, or those who wrote in the modern day, Foucault, Barthes, Lévi-Strauss, Deleuze, Serres. Not to mention the millions of novels, plays, and collections of poetry which were available. All one lending slip and a few days away. We didn't read any of these to be able to summarize the contents, as we did with the literature on the syllabus, but because they could give us something.

What was this "something"?

For my part, it was something being opened up. My whole world consisted of entities I took for granted and which were unshakable, like rocks and mountains of the mind. The Holocaust was one such entity, the Age of Enlightenment another. I could account for them, I had a clear image of them, as everyone did, but I had never *thought* about them, never asked myself what circumstances had made them possible, why they happened when they did, and definitely not whether there was any connection between them. As soon as I started to read Horkheimer and Adorno's book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, of which I understood very little, something opened, in that things which could be viewed in one way could also be viewed in another, words lost their force, there was no such thing as the Holocaust, for what the term indicated was so incredibly complicated, right down to the comb in the pocket of the jacket in the pile of jackets in the warehouse, it had belonged to a little girl, the whole of her life exists in the term "the Holocaust," and up again to the big concepts like evil, indifference, guilt, collective guilt, individual responsibility, mass man, mass production, mass extinction. In this way the world was relativized, but also more real: lies or misunderstandings or deceit were inherent in notions of reality, not in reality, which was inaccessible to language.

Espen could read a passage aloud that Leonardo da Vinci had written about the movement of a hand, and the simplest of the simple, the most obvious of the obvious, was no longer simple and obvious, it appeared as the mystery it really was.

Yes, we read to each other. Mostly Espen, he could jump up in the middle of a conversation, return with a book and start reading from it, and me too, on rare occasions I found something I considered had value for him too. There was an imbalance in our relationship, Espen led, he was the dominant partner, I followed and was always happy when his face lit up at something I had said or he found interesting, that spurred me on, the ensuing conversation was always good because I was freer, but if he didn't respond, which also happened, I retreated, held back, forever controlled by his moods, while he, for his part, never placed much weight on what I thought or felt; if he didn't agree he said so at once, took it as a challenge, but he didn't draw any link with his own capacities, he never doubted his own abilities as I did.

This was the only thing we couldn't discuss, what went on between us. He never heard me say that I couldn't say any more about this matter, as his lack of response had made me too unsure about myself, that I was a mere Zeitblom while he was a Leverkühn, that I was doomed to become a literary critic or a cultural correspondent, he to become what he was: a poet, a writer, an author.

No two people in Bergen were farther apart than Espen and Gunvor. At any rate I couldn't think of any. Having them in the same room was an exercise in futility, they never got beyond hi, how are you, they had nothing to say to each other, weren't the slightest bit interested in each other. So I lived two completely separate lives, one with Gunvor, which was all about closeness, being and doing things together, such as making love, having breakfast, visiting her friends, watching films, going for a walk, chatting about whatever entered our heads, all closely related to our bodies, the smell of her hair, for example, the taste of her skin, the feeling of lying hip to hip in bed smoking, in other words, sharing life. We talked about brothers and sisters, parents and friends, never about theoreticians or theories, and if we moved on to the university in our conversations, it would be to talk about the guy who fell asleep in the reading room, which Gunvor also did once, he had woken up with a start and when he'd stood up to leave he'd collapsed in a heap. I'm paralyzed! I'm paralyzed! he had shouted, but then the feeling in his legs returned, they had gone to sleep too, and he got to his feet with a sheepish, ashamed expression while everyone around him was laughing, not least Gunvor, judging by her mirth as she told me the story.

Yngve and Espen had nothing to say to each other, they weren't types I wanted to bring together either, and this rift was harder to reconcile myself to because while the differences between Espen and Gunvor also had something to do with being man and woman, friend and girlfriend, and were therefore quite natural and acceptable, the differences between Yngve and Espen were based on something else. Sometimes I saw what Espen and I did through Yngve's eyes, then we were transformed into two nerds sitting alone and reading aloud and playing chess and listening to jazz, as far from the social, sociable world of bands and girls and nights out as it was possible to be. Yngve saw that it wasn't me, and I carried that view with me, I was the guy in the street who liked soccer and pop music, what was I doing with all this modernist elitist literature? However, it worked the other way too because what Yngve said didn't always sound as convincing in my ears anymore, but these were such painful thoughts that I suppressed them the instant they appeared.

I met Kjartan a couple of times that spring, and something had happened to him, I could see that. Although he spoke as he always had, the fire was gone, and in his eyes there was a dejection I hadn't seen in him before. One evening Mom phoned to say he had been admitted to the psychiatric ward at the hospital. He had become psychotic, it was serious, he had wrecked his whole apartment, smashed everything in it, thrown the TV out the window, and then he had been led away. Now he was in Førde, at the hospital there, where Mom, Ingunn, and Kjellaug, his three sisters, were moving heaven and earth for him to be given the best possible treatment. Mom was beside herself with worry. A psychosis could last a long time and he was still unapproachable.

In the May exam we got Dante. Several students turned around and looked at me as the papers were being distributed, I had marketed myself as a Dante fan, I had become a little Dante expert and you could hardly get luckier than this.

But I hadn't read anything about the canto in the question, so instead of writing about this specific passage, which was about two lovers moving back and forth in the mass of sinners drifting like a flock of birds in the wind and who can never come close to each other, I reconstructed the essay I had written about Dante as well as I could, almost verbatim, and referred vaguely to the passage at the start and the end. Espen had also chosen Dante, didn't think it went particularly well, but it hadn't been a catastrophe either.

When the results were pinned up on the board outside the Institute it turned out I had only a 2.4. It was a cum laude, and perfectly acceptable, but a far cry from what I had hoped for and expected. I wanted to be at least the best in the year. Espen, however, got a 2.2, one of the best grades that had been given this semester. I understood why: he had written about that particular canto, read it, and extracted something from it on the spot while I had sewn a finished product onto the text and rendered it invisible.

I got what I deserved, but it was hard to swallow; the sole reason for taking this subject, in my view, was to be the best. What was the point of being a mediocre Lit student? It was absolutely meaningless.

I decided to drop Philosophy and concentrate on Literature to make up for lost ground at once. Espen was going to start at the Writing Academy and wouldn't be a threat there, which pleased me. He wasn't competitive, but he won anyway, and there was no safeguard against that.

The summer lay before me and as usual I didn't know what to do or where to go. The only certainty was that I had to earn some money. Gunvor, who was working at an old people's home all summer, suggested I apply for a job at a mental health institution situated between Haugesund and her home, and known to students as a place where they always needed people. Two colleagues from her department would be working there all summer, she knew, and they weren't from the district either, they would be staying in some rooms the local council used in a school.

I called up, said I had worked at a similar institution before, I had also taught in a school for a year, and the woman I spoke to said I could have a temporary post for six weeks. So in the middle of June I packed a bag and took a bus south. Gunvor was leaning against her father's car and smiling as, a few hours later, I alighted in the town center. She took off her sunglasses and we hugged.

"I've missed you so much," she said in her local dialect, stretching up to kiss me.

"I've missed you too," I said.

The houses around us were white, the sea behind us was blue, the forest on all sides green and bathed in sun. We got into the car, it was the first time she had driven me and for a moment I suffered the subordination which that entailed, she had the skills, I didn't. I was the eternal passenger. Now I was also the passenger in my girlfriend's car.

"Is it far?" I said, pushing the seat back to make room for my legs.

"Three kilometers," she said. "They're waiting for you with dinner. Are you nervous?"

"No," I said. "It'll be fine, I'm sure."

She sent me a smile before looking straight ahead again. She had so much happiness in her, expressed not only by her lips and eyes but her whole body. Even when she was concentrating on her driving, it radiated from her.

On the way she described what we could see around us. There was the school, that was where her best friend lived, there was a ski slope over there, that was where she had her first kiss. . . After some minutes she slowed down and turned into a gravel road, we drove past some fields, some big old white houses, and at the bottom of the gentle slope, by the forest, with the fjord beneath, was their house.

"Here it is!" she said. "Isn't it lovely?"

"Beautiful," I said.

She parked, we got out, I followed her to the door, which was instantly opened by a woman who must have been her mother.

"Hi, and welcome to our house," she said with a smile. I shook her outstretched hand.

"Thank you," I said.

"How nice to have you here at last!"

"It's nice to be invited," I said. "I've heard so much about this place."

"Is Dad out?" Gunvor said.

"Yes," she said. "I was thinking we'd eat when he gets back."

"Then I'll show you where you'll be sleeping," she said, and grabbed my hand. "Come on!"

We went into the hall and through the house, dark and cool, to the farthest room, where I put down my bag and looked at her. She sat down on the tightly made bed and dragged me down toward her. Before coming here she had warned me there would be no chance of us sharing a room.

"Can't you come to my room during the night?" I said. "Just sneak in?"

She shook her head.

"Not when they're in the house. But they're going early tomorrow morning. I'll come then."

When we had sat down at the table her father folded his hands and said a short prayer. Gunvor and her mother did the same. Ill at ease, I laid my hands on my lap so that no one could see whether they were folded or not and lowered my eyes as they had done.

"Amen," they said, and as if with the wave of a magic wand we were somewhere else, hands helping themselves, questions being asked and answered, food being chewed and swallowed, laughter and merriment. As always when I was with people I didn't know, I was completely open to them. The mother, who was cheerful but still scrutinizing me, the father, who was more serious and somber, clean-cut and solid, Gunvor, halfway between them and me, as uneasy about what I might be thinking about them as what they might be thinking about me. I answered the questions they asked, tried to appear polite and friendly, to give them what I imagined they wanted. If the atmosphere flagged, with a sudden lull in conversation or a facial expression I interpreted as disapproval, for instance, I poured more of myself into their silences.

After the meal we walked down to the fjord for a swim.

"Well?" Gunvor said, grabbing my hand. "Did it give you a shock when grace was said?"

"Not at all," I said. "But it was a bit unexpected. I had the feeling they belong to an earlier generation than my parents."

"They probably do too," she said. "So what do you think of them?"

"They're nice," I said. "They have very different temperaments, it seems, but they seem to be on the same wavelength, if you know what I mean."

"I think so," she said, looking at me. "It's strange having you here."

"It's strange being here, too," I said.

We brushed our teeth together in the bathroom, kissed each other goodnight, and went to our separate rooms. Outside, it had begun to rain. I lay listening to the light pitter-patter, which ceased whenever the wind gusted through the forest. From inside the living room a clock ticked, every hour a mechanism was activated and it rang its delicate chime. This was a house where everything functioned as it should and where lives were lived in an orderly manner, I thought. I understood more about Gunvor when I saw her at home. She was a student, lived her life in Bergen, but was also a part of this, she was loyal to her parents, to whom she was both close and distant. I assumed the feeling I had while I was there, that I was false and bad, that I was duping them, was alien to her nature.

The clock chimed twelve. Someone was up and in the hallway, a door was opened and closed, the toilet flushed. I liked being in other people's homes so much, I thought, I always had, although what I saw there could seem unbearable to me, perhaps because I saw things I wasn't intended to see. The personal life that was peculiar to them. The love, the helplessness that resided in that, which was usually hidden from others' eyes. Oh, trifles, trivialities, a family's habits, their exchanged glances. The vulnerability in this was so immense. Not for them, they lived inside it, and then there was no vulnerability, but when it was seen by someone who didn't belong. When I saw it I felt like an intruder, I had no right to be there. At the same time I was filled with tenderness for them.

The clock readied itself to chime again. I opened my eyes, there was no question of me being able to sleep right away. The trees outside the window were black, the darkness between them pale. It wasn't raining anymore, but the wind was still rising and falling in the forest like billowing breakers of the air.

One o'clock.

I thought about the one time I had been to the hospital in my childhood. I had broken my collarbone, it hurt so much I was crying but didn't realize anything was wrong until I complained to Mom in the evening and she drove me to see the doctor in Kokkeplassen, where she worked, a red-haired freckled young man, who said the bone was probably broken and we would have to go to the hospital to have an X-ray. After it had been done the doctor there said I could sleep in the hospital that night. There was nothing I would rather have done, it was an adventure, something to tell the others, but if I said yes perhaps Mom might think I preferred to sleep in the hospital than at home, she would be sad about that, and so I shook my head to the doctor's suggestion, said I wanted to sleep at home if that was all right. Yes, of course, he understood, wound a bandage tightly around my shoulders in a figure eight and wished me all the best as we left.

Even then I had felt I was being false, someone who carried thoughts no one else had and which no one must ever know. What emerged from this was *myself*, *this* was what was *me*. In other words, that which in me knew something the others didn't, that which in me I could never share with anyone else. And the loneliness, which I still felt, was something I had clung to ever since, as it was all I had. So long as I had that no one could harm me, for what they harmed then was something else. No one could take loneliness away from me. The world was a space I moved in, where anything could happen, but in the space I had inside me, which was me, everything was always the same. All my strength lay there. The only person who could find his way in was Dad, and he did too, when I was dreaming and he seemed to be in my soul and shouting at me.

For everyone else I was unreachable. Well, in my thoughts they could reach me, anyone at all could stir them up, but what were thoughts worth? What was consciousness other than the surface of the soul's ocean? Other than small, brightly colored boats, floating plastic bottles, and driftwood, waves and currents, whatever the day might bring, over a depth of several thousand meters.

Or depth was the wrong word.

What was consciousness other than the cone of light from a torch in the middle of a dark forest?

I closed my eyes and rolled over onto my side. In six or seven hours she would come to me and I longed to feel her body against mine, after holding her in my arms. It was so long since we had been together I was aching for this. If only I could sleep now, I thought, then when I awoke she would be here. But I couldn't. I slipped into a kind of semiconscious state of desire and expectation, it was absolutely unbearable, I wanted her, and I kept registering the chimes of the clock, oh, it is only two, only three, only four . . . When the door finally did open and she crawled down to me, in the enthusiastic-tentative way that was so typical of her, the sleep I rose from was so deep that everything that happened was in a dream.

We had breakfast, she behaved like her mother, washed the dishes when the meal was over, I stood in the yard smoking with a cup of coffee in my hand, she came out, sat down on the step, squinted into the sun, which was already high.

"You haven't seen me ride yet," she said. "That's a scandal, if you ask me."

"I think I just did, didn't I?" I said.

She blushed and looked down. Then she eyed me and smiled.

"That was a cheap shot, Karl Ove," she said.

"Couldn't resist it," I said.

"In fact I was serious," she said. "Come up with me now. You can even have a ride yourself if you want."

"Not on your life. But I'm happy to watch."

Half an hour later we walked up the hill, Gunvor carrying a saddle. We stopped in front of an enclosure, a Fjord pony trotted down to us, she stretched out a hand and said something, it lowered its muzzle to her hand, she patted it, fitted the saddle, swung herself up, and soon she was riding back and forth across the green pasture in the full sunshine while I watched and took pictures. Sometimes I clapped to make her laugh, there was something forced about the situation, she actually wanted to show me this, her riding a horse, but at the same time she was uncomfortable, she wasn't the type to show off, but it went well, it was a happy moment, she was beaming when she had finished and jumped down in front of me.

"You should join a circus," I said, and took a picture of her with the reins in one hand and a carrot in the other.

"You should come with me to a gymkhana one day," she said. "With Icelandic ponies. Preferably in Iceland."

"Don't let it go to your head," I said. "Be happy I came here."

"It's just a start," she said. "When I've finished with you, you'll be a real *hestamadur*!"

"What's that? A horseman?"

"Yes, more or less. It's a term of distinction in Iceland."

"I don't doubt it."

"I had an idea some time ago," she said. "I was thinking of doing my year abroad at the university in Reykavik. If I did would you come with me?"

"Yes."

"Would you? Seriously?"

"Yes."

In the evening she drove me to the town where I would be living for the next six weeks. We went first to the institution, which was situated just outside the town center and picked up the key for my room, then we drove down to the hall of residence, if that was what it was, which stood on a slope a few hundred meters from the quay. A room with bare plaster, a shiny linoleum floor, a bed, a cupboard, and a pine table, a kitchenette, a small toilet with a shower.

"I think I'd better be getting back now," Gunvor said, standing in the doorway with the car keys in her hand.

"Of course," I said. "See you next weekend."

We kissed fleetingly, her car started up soon afterward, the sound reverberated against the wall, disappeared down the hill, and was gone.

After I had slipped the cover on the duvet I had borrowed from them, put the sheet on the bed, clothes in the cupboard, and books on the desk, I went out for a walk, drifted down to the quay area, which apart from some teenagers' cars parked by a snack bar and a little crowd sitting around the wooden tables was empty. They had long hair, jean jackets and vests, one of them even wore wooden clogs, and they stared at me as I walked by. I stopped at the edge of the quay and looked down into the water, which, close to the harbor wall, was cold and black. Music blared from one of the cars, the door was open, I saw. "Forever Young." I walked past them again, strolled down to the little town center, which apart from a large cooperative store and a Narvesen kiosk also had a small mall, a Chinese restaurant, and a handful of shops along the main street. There wasn't a soul around, but that wasn't so surprising, it was Sunday, ten o'clock in the evening.

On the hill up to the building where I was staying I turned and stared across at my workplace-to-be, which from here was visible as dots of light in the forest, beneath a steep mountainside. I could feel I was dreading starting, not so much because of the job itself as all the people I would meet, all the situations where the counter was on zero and I would have to make a good impression.

Freshly showered, I went out the door the next morning, down the hill, through the town center, out the other side, across a river and up toward the forest, where there were around ten buildings among the trees. The sky was overcast, the air warm and still. A bus passed me and stopped by the turnaround at the end of the road, a line of people got off and made for the buildings. I followed them. Two of the patients, clearly with disabilities, stood watching us, which I could imagine them doing every morning. No one spoke; the sound of footsteps and people on the move, slowly making their way forward, surrounded by the stillness of the forest on both sides.

A large brick building came first, this was the administration block where I had picked up the key the previous evening. No one went there. We fanned out heading for the other blocks in a circle around it. Lawns, dry and discolored, had been laid between the narrow paved paths. An asphalt handball court nestled in a hollow surrounded by embankments. Scattered here and there were islets of trees, once part of the forest around them, which now began a few meters behind the various buildings.

I had no idea what lay in store for me and was nervous as I entered. I had to report to Department E, the block to the left and it was, I soon established, like the other constructions, long, made of brick and painted white, two stories. I would be working on the top one. The entrance was at the back, by a small semifull parking lot. I opened the door and went down a corridor with stairs at the end. I recognized the smell, it was the same as at Eg Hospital when I had worked there three years before and the same as at the school I had attended in the 1970s, a mixture of green soap and a faint odor reminiscent of cellars and sewage, something dark and damp and subterranean in all the assiduously maintained hygiene.

There was a bench by the wall, above it a line of hooks from which hung jackets and overalls. Two wheelchairs stood by the wall opposite, beneath the small narrow windows that had been positioned at the top of the wall, 1950s-like.

I went up the stairs, opened the door, and came into a long corridor with doors on either side. By the wall sat a man in a chair staring at me with fierce eyes. His legs were stumps, cut short at the knee, from what I could see. Otherwise he looked normal. High forehead, red hair, white freckled skin, powerful upper body. He was wearing red jogging pants and a white T-shirt with a Dole bananas logo.

"Hi!" I said.

The look he sent me was full of contempt. He put his hands on the floor, swung his lower body down between them, fell forward with his hands, swung his lower body between them again, and in this unusual but deft way he moved down the corridor.

A woman stuck her head out of the nearest door. She was probably in her midthirties, had dark curly hair and a slight overbite.

"Karl Ove?" she said.

"Yes. Hello," I said.

"Marianne," she said. "Come in here. This is where we hang out!"

I went into the little room where a man with a mustache, a perm, colorful baggy pants and an undershirt was sitting with a cup of coffee in front of him, next to a slumped podgy woman with glasses and slightly messy blond hair, wearing jeans and a denim jacket, twenty-five, more or less, also with a cup of coffee in front of her.

"Hi," said the man. "My name's Ove. This is Ellen, and that's Marianne. Marianne's finished her shift now, so it'll be us three today."

The woman called Ellen lit a cigarette.

I took off my jacket, rummaged for my tobacco pouch, and sat down.

"Have you worked here before?" Ove said.

I shook my head.

"Just copy what we do and you won't go far wrong," he said. "Isn't that right, Marianne?"

He looked up at her – she was putting on her jacket – and winked. She smiled.

"Have a nice day," she said, and went out the door.

"When you've had a smoke we'll start," Ove said.

The man without any legs came into the room, sat up at the table like a dog, and stared at Ove.

"This is Ørnulf," he told me. "Would you like a cup of coffee, Ørnulf?"

Ørnulf didn't answer; he sucked in air through clenched teeth. His eyes glowed. He smelled awful. I lit a cigarette and leaned back against the sofa. Ove placed a cup under the thermos spout and filled it in two pumps, added milk, and set the cup in front of Ørnulf, who grabbed it with both hands and drained it in three long gulps. He then put it down on the table, gave a wheezy belch, picked it up again, and held it in front of Ove imploringly.

"No, no, you've already had two," Ove said. "Now you'll have to wait for breakfast."

Ørnulf put down the cup and swung out of the room, to the wall on the opposite side of the corridor, where he sat with his hands under his stumps, staring in at us.

Couldn't he talk? Or didn't he want to?

"Breakfast's at eight," Ove said. "Then four of the residents go to the workshop. Three are left here. One of them, Are, needs care. The other two manage fine, but you have to keep an eye on them. The crew in the workshop come back here for lunch. Anything else you need to know we'll deal with as it crops up. OK?"

"Sounds good," I said.

He took a green book from the table beside him, opened it, and from the lined pages and compact writing I assumed this was where they logged their reports.

"You can have a flip through this later," he said, looking at me.

I nodded.

He didn't like me, I had noticed at once. What he said was well-meaning enough, but the friendliness in his voice was somehow forced, and something about his attitude, I didn't know whether it was his eyes or his body language, told me he had already formed an opinion about me and it didn't do me any favors.

Ellen, for her part, was indifferent.

Could she be a lesbian?

"Well," Ove said, getting to his feet. "We'd better go and wake them up. Come along so that you can meet the residents."

I followed him along the corridor. At the end on the left was the kitchen, on the right a little dining room, and inside it, a door to an office where half the wall was glass.

Ørnulf, who had followed us, stopped outside the swing doors to the kitchen.

"He always sits there until the food comes," Ove said. "Don't you, Ørnulf?"

Ørnulf grimaced, bared his teeth, and sucked in deeply, and a kind of eerie hissing sound issued.

Was that a yes?

"Ørnulf sits in his wheelchair when we go out. But inside he can move around really well. Can't you, Ørnulf?" Ove said, without looking at him. "You see the swing door to the kitchen? It's important we keep it closed when we're not in there ourselves. Have you got that?"

"Yes," I said.

"So let's start with Hans Olav. He's got his own little ward to himself in here," he said, opening the door at the end of the corridor. "He can be a bit unruly at times, if I can put it like that, that's why he lives on his own. But he's a good boy."

Inside, there was a little hall with a dining table, and in the continuing corridor, three doors. The closest was open, and at the back of the room there was a man, in his forties maybe, lying in bed masturbating. His dick was fat and limp. Ove stopped in the doorway.

"Hi, Hans Olav," he said.

"Wan!" Hans Olav said.

"No, no playing with yourself now," Ove said. "You have to get up and put on your clothes for breakfast."

"Wan, wan," said Hans Olav. He had a big flattish nose, deep furrows down his cheeks, and he was almost completely bald. His head was round, his eyes were brown, and I gave a start when I saw him, he was the spitting image of pictures I had seen of Picasso in his later years.

"This is Karl Ove," Ove said. "He's going to be working here this summer."

"Hi," I said.

"Shall I help you up?" Ove said.

Without waiting for an answer, he went over to Hans Olav, grasped one arm with both hands and hauled him into a sitting position. Annoyed, Hans Olav struck out, not aggressively, more the way you swat a fly, slowly struggled to his feet, grabbed his trousers, and pulled them on. He was taller than me, almost two meters, but seemed weak and unable to stand.

"Hans Olav has breakfast here with a member of the staff," Ove said. "I'll do it today, but tomorrow it's your turn."

"That's fine," I said.

We went back into the main ward, Hans Olav moved quickly, stooped and with a swaying gait, his fingers constantly fidgeting beneath his chin, and three times I saw one arm shoot out and hit the wall as he laughed his low chuckle. He walked past Ørnulf, keeping well clear of him, and disappeared into the ward.

Ove opened the next door, inside was an elderly man sitting on his bed and getting dressed. He wore glasses, had a gentle face and full lips, a bald pate with hair growing all the way around the side, and from his appearance and style of clothing might have been a midrange accountant or perhaps a storeman in a building warehouse or even a woodwork teacher.

"You're up already!" Ove said. "Well done, Håkon!"

The man called Håkon looked down like a bashful girl. A fine blush spread across his aging cheeks.

"Thank you," he mumbled.

In the next room sat an elderly man on the edge of his bed, maybe sixty, sixty-five, with white hair in a wreath around his otherwise bald head, tearing out pictures from a pile of magazines. On his back he had a large hump, broad and so flat at the top you could have rested a tray on it.

"How's it going, Kåre?" Ove said.

"Hoo, hoo," Kåre said, pointing out of the room.

"Yes, the food will soon be here. I'll shout when it arrives."

The rooms looked more or less like those in old people's homes, a few things belonging to the institution such as blankets and tablecloths, IKEA pictures on the walls, some personal possessions, such as framed photographs on the tables, the occasional ornament, maybe a plastic flower in a vase on the windowsill.

We walked down the corridor until everyone was woken up. Some of them were still asleep, others were awake, one of them, Egil, gave us an earful because we woke him. They were all men between forty and sixty years old, apart from one needing special care, whom Ellen looked after, he couldn't have been more than twenty-five. He stood out in other ways too, he was completely paralyzed, lay back in an enormous wheelchair, used diapers and was fed, and his eyes were utterly vacant, no personality resided in them, they were only eyes. I froze with unease when I saw that. His facial features were clean-cut and would have been handsome had it not been for his permanently open mouth and the saliva running down from the corners. Sometimes hollow grunts came from him, but as far as I could see these had no particular meaning in this context, at any rate I didn't discover one or a system.

The last room was Ørnulf's. Even though he was awake and sitting in the corridor, Ove showed me in. The room was smaller than the others. Apart from a blue mattress, not dissimilar to the one we had in gym at school, the room was completely empty. No furniture, no ornaments, no pictures, nothing. Not even bed linen or a duvet.

"Why is there no furniture in *his* room?" I said.

Ove looked at me as if I were stupid.

"Well, what do you imagine? He smashes everything in his path, if he's in the mood, or else he tears it into pieces. Do you understand? He might not do anything for a few days but then it all wells up."

"OK," I said.

"One rule: we never talk about the residents when they're around. However little we think they understand. We have to be their pals. Are you with me? Of course, we're the ones who are in charge but we have to be open and chummy with them."

"I see," I said, following him back into the corridor.

"I'll help them to shower and get dressed," he said. "In the meantime, could you make breakfast?"

"Right," I said. "What do they have?"

"Bread and stuff, that's all. And coffee. They love coffee as you might have figured out."

"OK," I said, and went into the kitchen. It was a relief to do something specific and mechanical, which didn't involve the residents. Everything I had seen of them filled me with disgust.

I opened the fridge and took out anything you could put on bread. Cut up a few tomatoes, some slices of cucumber and strips of a pepper, and laid it all out on a dish, spread some salami and ham on another, put a mild white cheese and a brown cheese on a third. I kept myself busy, wanting to make a good impression for the others who worked there. Switched on the coffee machine, took out milk and juice, set the two tables. One of the residents came out of his room in just his underpants, he was athletic and had a serious, masculine face, at first glance he appeared to be a magnificent human specimen, but then there was something about the way he walked, balancing on the outer edge of the balls of his feet somehow, and you realized everything was not quite as it should be. He stopped by the doorsill to the bathroom, stepped over, stepped back, stepped over, stepped back, and I had a feeling he would have kept going all day if Ove hadn't come, put an arm around his shoulders, and taken him in. Håkon, the bashful one, waddled down the corridor, his back was crooked. Egil came with his head bent right back and his gaze directed at the ceiling the whole way to the table. Hans Olav stood still by the wall with his fingers formed into a quivering ball beneath his chin. Ørnulf sat as he had sat for the last half an hour, with his hands under his stumps. He kept drawing in air sharply between his teeth. Perhaps hyperventilating gave him a kick.

I poured coffee into a pump-action jug and stood it on the table. Sliced a loaf, searched for a toaster, but they didn't appear to have one. Cast a glance through the window, a group of residents was coming across the gray asphalt, most seemed to be in their forties, and among them were two caregivers in conversation, one with a lit cigarette in his hand. The sky above them was light but sunless.

Ove took a tray of food into Hans Olav's room, Ellen shouted that breakfast was ready, we sat down at our respective tables, and the residents made their way along the corridor. The athletic man, whose name was Alf, was now walking with some strange robotic jerks. Right behind him came Håkon, the girlish-looking older man, with an apologetic nervous smile on his lips. Kåre, the hair-wreath man with the magazines walked bent forward with the hump on his shoulders like a sack and he kept shaking one hand back and forth in the air, just under his face.

"And where are you from?" Egil said, leaning forward and staring right into my face.

"Arendal," I said.

"And how old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"And what kind of car do you drive?"

"I'm afraid I don't have a car."

"And why not? Why don't you have a car? Eh?"

"Now don't pester him, Egil," Ellen said.

Egil sat back instantly.

"No," he said. "No, I won't. No, no, no."

He looked up at the ceiling for a while, then began to eat. The whole time he was breathing heavily and when he had food in his mouth it was like sitting next to a small steam engine. His shirt hung outside his trousers, on top he wore a red pullover, slightly stained, and his hair, which was thick and curly, stood up at the back. His cheeks were reddish, perhaps because of some burst blood vessels, and his eyes were bloodshot too. He made a confused absent-minded impression and reminded me of a scientist or a *gymnas* teacher who had lived alone for too long and perhaps thought he hadn't had all the success he felt was his due but actually enjoyed teaching and therefore couldn't give a damn about his appearance. Egil was like that. But added to this were the sudden lunges he made, a hand shot into the air and waved as though he had suddenly caught sight of a colleague down the corridor, or he might jerk forward so abruptly that everyone around him recoiled. Then there was this staring at the ceiling.

He could also burst into laughter for no apparent reason.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!" he might go, as if he had heard a joke and wanted to reward whoever had told it.

"And do you have a girlfriend?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"And what's her name?"

"Gunvor."

"And is she nice?"

"Egil," Ellen said.

"And are you going for a swim today?" he said, looking at her.

"No," she said.

"Why not?" he said.

"The weather's not so good today," she said.

"Why?" he said with a heavy sigh, and sank back into his chair. All his questions had been mechanical, without a trace of any curiosity in his voice. He was like a child who has learned something off by heart but without understanding what it meant.

"Was that good, Håkon?" Ellen said.

"Yes," Håkon mumbled from a lowered chin. "Thank you very much. Thank you very much."

Ellen was sitting beside Are, feeding him. He half lay in his chair with his mouth open. Porridge trickled down from the corners. Kåre often emitted tiny sounds, he obviously couldn't speak, but he communicated with sounds, gestures, and looks. Ørnulf sat rocking in his chair baring his teeth and staring at me.

"Are we friends?" Egil said. "Us two. Are we friends?"

What was I supposed to say to that? We obviously weren't friends. But to say no might create a terrible agitation in him.

"Yes, we are, aren't we?" I said.

"Then you can come and see my pictures of the king," he said.

"OK, I'd like that," I said.

"Good," he said. "That's a deal."

The door to the corridor opened and Hans Olav ran out. He looked behind him with a laugh, his hands under his chin, his mouth in constant motion, at full speed down the corridor, staggering beneath his heavy body. Ove set off after him with a tray in his hands. The similarity with Picasso was disturbing, it upset the whole balance of the world, I thought. But the others didn't seem bothered and I supposed I would probably get used to it, given time.

"If you clear up after us, Karl Ove, I'll take the boys to the workshop."

I nodded.

The four who were going to work got up and went to their rooms. Ørnulf swung down from his chair and occupied his customary position in the corridor. Ellen wiped Are's mouth and trundled him into his room. I put the food into the fridge, the plates and glasses into the dishwasher, wiped the tables clean with a cloth, and swept the floor with a dustpan and brush.

After finishing I went to see Ellen. She was washing Are, he was lying naked on the bed, rigid and white, she ran the cloth over him while making small talk. There we are, she said, it's important to wash down here, you know. Now I'll pour a bit more water over you, it's nice and warm.

He stared at the ceiling with vacant eyes.

"Is there anything I can do?" I said.

She peered at me through her thick lenses.

"Nope," she said. "Sit down and have a cup of coffee while you're waiting. He's had constipation for a few days now, so I was thinking of administering an enema later. You could give me a hand with that."

"OK," I said.

"Otherwise you could go for a walk with Ørnulf this morning. Just round and about."

I nodded, she wrung the cloth and continued washing Are.

On one thigh and buttock he had a large scarred area.

"What's that?" I said. "Is it a birthmark or what?"

She shook her head.

"It's a burn. Someone left him in front of a heater. Happened many years ago now."

"Is that true?"

"Unfortunately. He can't move, you know. And he never says anything. So he just lies there."

"How awful," I said.

"Yes," she said. "But it's a long time ago. His unit is closed down now. He's got his own apartment, the new reform, you know. But until it's fully finished he's here with us. Aren't you, Are?"

Not a single expression crossed his face as she talked. I hung around so as not to seem unsympathetic, then I went into the lounge and poured myself a coffee. From the corridor I heard the sound of hands smacking and clothes rubbing against the floor. It was Ørnulf, he stopped by the table and sent me an imploring look. It must have been the sound of the coffee jug that had spurred him into action.

"Do you want some coffee?" I said.

Without batting an eyelid, he took a cup and raised it toward me.

"You had a cup for breakfast," I said. "That'll have to do."

I started rolling a cigarette. For a long time he sat in exactly the same position with his cup held out. Then, as if a spell had been broken, as though the hundred-year sleep was over, he suddenly swung down and began to hyperventilate.

"I think it's best if you sit in the corridor," I said. "Then we two can go for a walk afterward."

Was that *contempt* in his eyes?

At any rate he didn't budge.

I ran my tongue over the glue, stuck the edge to the paper, put the cigarette in my mouth, and lit up. A protruding flake of tobacco burned up at once and fell glowing to the floor, the rest caught the next moment and I inhaled a cloud of smoke into my lungs as I looked out the window in the balcony door. A group of three caregivers, each pushing a wheelchair, was coming toward us. A car parked in front of the admin building at the other end. From the floor beneath came a protracted roar, a sound that was hard to associate with anything human, while Ørnulf sucked and hissed only half a meter away from me.

I turned back toward him.

He immediately took the cup and held it up to me, begging.

"No," I said.

He continued to hold it outstretched, another hundred-year sleep.

"Do you want some coffee, Ørnulf?" Ellen said as she came in the door. "Here, I'll give you some."

She took his cup, filled it with equal parts of coffee and milk, he gulped it down and then dragged himself out of the room and across the corridor. Ellen sighed and sat down on the sofa on the other side of the table, lit a cigarette, and closed her eyes.

I sorted through the residents in my head. There were seven in the ward. Four of them looked more or less normal, and of those two could speak. Two were badly deformed, but could move, one was a vegetable. By mentally handicapped I had imagined some Down syndrome residents and some vegetables. I hadn't known that every shade in between existed, but of course it was obvious and had been no surprise to me once I had seen them.

Hans Olav and Ove came walking along the road.

"Where's Are now?" I said.

"He's in bed in his room," Ellen said. "I'll get him up soon and we'll go for a walk."

"Is he asleep?"

"No, no. He just lounges around in bed."

The roars from the ground floor resounded again. From the corridor I could hear Ørnulf's hissing. Otherwise there was silence. I was dreading the walk with Ørnulf. It would be the first time I had been alone with one of them and I knew nothing about how to behave, what I would say to him, what might happen. What would I do if he wanted to go to the bathroom? Could he go himself or did he need help? Should I lift him into the wheelchair or could he manage by himself? Could he get dressed? Should I push the wheelchair? Where would we go? He couldn't talk, what if I didn't understand what he wanted?

On top of all that, I was afraid. The look he sent me was filled with hatred, and his room had no furniture or objects, only a mattress, because he either smashed everything that came into his path or tore it to pieces, as Ove had said.

What would I do if he had a similar fit when we were outside? Would I be able to stop him? And what if he attacked me? Of course he didn't have any legs, but his biceps were strong.

The door in the corridor banged open. The next moment Hans Olav trotted past, bent forward, his hands fidgeting under his chin. Ove, who was following, stopped in the doorway.

"I'll stay with him for a while," he said. "Then perhaps he'll sleep."

I got up, it was probably best to see to Ørnulf. I watched Ove walking down the corridor, quite small but so powerful that his arms couldn't quite rest against his body, they always stuck out, which meant he walked with a little wiggle. He must spend a lot of time training, I thought.

Ørnulf was squatting in his room, facing the wall.

"Hi, Ørnulf," I said. "Up for a walk?"

Without looking at me he turned and shot out to the door in the corridor, which he opened with a stretch. The steps he took one arm at a time, like a kind of large insect, also deftly and at speed. By the time I reached the end of the corridor he was sitting with his arms around his legs beside the wheelchair.

I hated this.

I looked for his name above the hooks, found it, took a jacket.

"You'll have to wear a jacket," I said. "Shall I help you?"

He didn't react, his face was blank, there was nothing to tell me what he was thinking.

I leaned down and carefully took his arm to insert it in the sleeve. He yanked it away.

"If we're going for a walk you'll have to wear a jacket," I said. "Otherwise there's no walk."

He didn't move.

"OK," I said. "Let's go back up."

I started to walk. I turned, he was sitting in the same position. Went up the stairs, stopped to listen whether he was following, nothing.

Ellen looked up at me from the sofa.

"I can't put his jacket on," I said. "He doesn't want it."

"Does he need to wear a jacket? It's quite warm outside."

"OK," I said. "Is there anything else I ought to know?"

She shook her head, I hurried back down, for all I knew he could have taken advantage of the short time I had left him alone to escape.

But he was sitting beside the wheelchair, arms around his short legs and chin resting on his chest.

"Shall we go then?" I said.

He clambered up onto the chair, turned the wheels with seasoned dexterity, rolled down to the door and glanced up at me. The moment I opened the door, he set off at a furious pace. I had to walk as fast as I could to stay with him. He had found a rhythm, moving along with quick regular thrusts, hands on the wheels, off, on, off. We passed the admin building. Farther ahead, a group was walking toward us, I saw at once it was two workers and four residents, their body movements were unmistakable.

The two workers looked at me.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," they said. "Hi, Ørnulf."

He ignored them, and soon we had put them and all the buildings far behind us. His face had stiffened into a sort of grimace with bared teeth. It was red with the exertion. Deciduous trees lined the road, dense and green, occasional spruces towered up, heavier and darker. Ahead of us was the main road, alongside it ran a cycle path, which I had decided we would follow.

Ørnulf didn't want to. He pointed to the left, where the road looped around a little housing project. I couldn't let him rule me totally, I thought, and grabbed the handles of the wheelchair and began to push. He tried to brake me with his hands. His eyes were panic-stricken. What an idiot he was.

"It's no good protesting," I said. "We're going *this* way."

He jumped off and headed up toward the end of the road under his own steam. This was very dangerous, he was crossing the main road, not much taller than a dog, if a car came this could end really badly, I ran after him with the wheelchair, shouting for him to get back on.

He stopped on the other side and stared at me. Dragging his legs over asphalt didn't seem to affect him.

I placed the wheelchair in front of him. He swung himself up. I wasn't going to give in and pushed him down the slope. He jumped off again and went the other way, his palms on the asphalt, his lower torso swinging between his arms. I followed, but now he wouldn't get back onto the chair, now he was moving on his own, and that was how we entered the housing estate, him on the ground, which was dry and covered with sand and gravel, staring straight ahead, me walking behind pushing the wheelchair. This was no good, if anyone met us now I would be given the boot, but I was fuming with anger, couldn't he just sit on the chair and do as I wanted? What was it about this estate that was so incredibly important for him? It was just stupid, I was his caregiver, we were out on a morning walk, one route was as good as another, and if it wasn't, it definitely wasn't worth sacrificing the comfortable wheelchair for.

I ran a few steps, overtook him, and placed the chair in his path. He turned and tried to get past, I moved, he grabbed a wheel and tried to shove it away.

"We're going *this* way," I said. "I'm telling you. *This* way. Sit up on your wheelchair and then we can go."

He dragged himself up, and when he was in position his hands began to turn the wheels at a furious pace again. I walked beside him through the estate, which consisted of relatively new houses with gardens that were not yet established. A bus stopped in the road, a couple of passengers got out and started walking. We reached the crossroads and Ørnulf, who had been frenetically pumping his arms, suddenly stopped.

"Shall I push you?" I said.

He didn't react to my question, so it was impossible to read an answer from his face, but when I grabbed the handles and pushed he didn't object. I walked as quickly as I could and soon we were back near the institution.

As we passed the admin building he suddenly jumped down from the wheelchair and sat on the ground, a few meters from the steps to the main entrance.

"You can't sit here," I said. "Come on now. The unit's over there!"

He didn't look at me, he ignored me, his arms firmly planted on the ground, hyperventilating.

"Don't you want to go back to the ward, is that it?" I said.

No reaction.

I tried to lift him, but he held the chair so firmly that it was impossible.

"Do you want to sit here? While the others are having a nice time drinking coffee?"

No reaction.

"Fine by me," I said. "I get paid the same money anyway. I can stand here, no problem."

I took shelter under the projecting roof and lit a cigarette, but after a couple of minutes I realized this didn't look very good, a resident in the road, his caregiver ten meters away, smoking, so I stubbed out the cigarette and went back to him.

"Come on now," I said. "You've made your point. You don't need to be belligerent anymore. Jump up and we'll be off."

No reaction.

Hands around his knees, a grin on his lips, sucking through his teeth.

"Alright, alright," I said. "As you wish."

I folded my arms and scanned the area trying to find a way out of the situation I found myself in. He might be defiant and strong-willed, but he had met his match in me. I could stay there until darkness fell, I could stay there all night and into the next day if I had to. The trick was to think about something else. Not about him or time dragging.

But it was hard, there was something about him, the aggression I could feel in him, his presence cast a shadow over my thoughts. He couldn't have much in his head, almost all his movements were conditioned by reflex, such as when he rushed in after hearing the sound of the pump-action coffee jug and mechanically held out a cup. He didn't enjoy the taste of the coffee, drinking it was just something that had to be done, something that had to be expedited, something that had to happen. If it did he would want it to happen again. Outside, there was only one route that counted. Not the walk as such, because then he could equally well have taken the other route.

I looked down at him. I disliked him intensely, everything about him, but especially his doglike traits and his stupidity. *He* was the one losing out, not me. I was paid a wage, it made no difference to me whether we sat here or up a tree, I was ready for anything.

He met my eyes for an instant and when he looked back down he smiled.

It was the first time I had seen him smile.

He really thought he was punishing me. That it was him who had the whip hand.

I walked away and sat down on a curb in the parking lot. There was something crablike about the way he moved, the lightning-quick pendulum movement across the ground or floor. What I found confusing was that his face, if you could forget about the rest, was completely normal. A red-haired freckled man in his late forties. Had it been the case that he was *only* misshapen, that he was *only* deformed, I wouldn't have reacted in the same way. But the fact was his thoughts were obviously also deformed and misshapen. His soul was also crippled. What did that make him?

Oh, sweet Jesus.

Here he was, the lowest of the low, the weakest of the weak, and there I was, filled with contempt for him.

It was me who was the monster. But I couldn't help myself. His stupidity infuriated me, sitting there, not wanting to go anywhere, thinking he was punishing me, the sweat running down his forehead and breathing in and out through his clenched yellow teeth.

The cloud cover had slowly and, almost imperceptibly, cleared. The sun shining on us now came from a pale blue sky. Vehicles in the parking lot were opened and started, they drove down the road, others arrived, were parked, engines were switched off, doors opened. Everyone saw us sitting there, no one said anything. I had no idea whether this was normal or not, whether it was just me or it happened to Ørnulf's caregivers every day.

"Get up now and we'll go," I said every so often. He didn't react. If I walked toward him he would grab the wheelchair so tightly that I couldn't lift him into it.

He sat there for an hour and a half. Then Ellen came along, pushing Are, she had given him some sunglasses to wear. They stopped beside us.

"It's lunchtime," she said. "Come on, Ørnulf, up onto your chair!"

Ørnulf jumped up onto the chair, sat with his hands in his lap. Was I supposed to push him now?

Yes, apparently I was.

Walking alongside Ellen, I pushed the wheelchair back. The air was warm, the sunshine boiling hot. I hated myself and the whole of my being.

Sleep came that night, empty and meaningless, for a long time I was merely a body with a slow beating heart and slow respiration which, together with the blood circulating, kept it alive, no more than that, until the dreams began to emerge, these flickerings of atmosphere and images that rule the brain when we are asleep and which for me were always the same, I was alone, I had my back to the wall, I was terrified or humiliated. There were people laughing at me, there were people after me, and above them all, in his many and various forms and guises, loomed Dad. In my most common nightmares we were still living in Tybakken and he was in the house with me, but in the worst ones of all he came back while I was visiting Mom and it turned out he lived there, because at Mom's I took liberties, I did as I wanted, and if there was one thing that enraged him it was that.

Every morning a feeling of humiliation sat deep in my body, that was how I started the day, and if it gradually dissolved as routines anchored me in another world, the real world, the feeling of being humiliated and debased was a continuous presence, and it took nothing, nothing, for it to flare up again and burn through me, yes, burn up the whole of my miserable self.

That morning I woke up half an hour before the alarm clock went off, dreaming I was dead, and the relief when I came to and discovered I wasn't was so great that I let out a chuckle.

I got out of bed, ate a piece of bread, dressed, locked the door, and walked toward the institution again.

Ørnulf was sitting by the wall with his arms around his legs rocking back and forth when I opened the door. He sent me a fleeting glance, lowered his eyes again, utterly indifferent. In the lounge Ellen was with another girl my age. She stood up and shook my hand. Her name was Irene, she said. She was tall and slim, had short blond hair, blue eyes, high cheekbones. She was beautiful in that cool way I had always found myself drawn toward. Her presence there complicated everything, I knew that as soon as I sat down and poured myself a cup of coffee. I would be aware of her at all times, and therefore of myself, of how I appeared in her eyes.

She suggested that she attend to Ørnulf, Ellen attend to Are, and I attend to Hans Olav. That meant I would have breakfast with him, relax a little afterward, clean his "apartment," and then perhaps be with him in the ward until midday, unless he wanted to sleep instead. He seemed to sleep a lot.

I buttered some slices of bread for him, some for me, poured juice into two glasses and coffee into two cups, one of which was half milk, and carried everything in on a tray, placed it on his dining table, closed the door to the main ward, knocked on his bedroom door, and went in.

He was lying in bed and pulling at his dick, which was flaccid.

"Hi, Hans Olav," I said. "Time to get up. I've brought you some breakfast!"

He looked at me while continuing to jerk off.

"I'll wait a bit then," I said. "Get up when you're ready!"

I closed the door and sat down on the chair at the table, which was positioned next to the entrance to a little balcony. It was gray and worn and the paint was peeling, and beneath it was the handball court; behind it, beyond the embankment, were several buildings identical to the one I was sitting in. Behind and between them, pines and isolated deciduous trees.

Some residents came walking toward us and slightly behind them two women, both pushing a wheelchair. I got up and walked round. In the living room there was a Monet picture, the kind you can buy framed in big chain stores. The furniture was made of pine and consisted of a large red-patterned sofa, a low coffee table with turned feet, and a bookcase. The shelves of the bookcase were empty, apart from an ornamental dog, a small candlestick, and a glass tea light. The room was decorated to look like home, but of course it didn't.

I knocked on the bedroom door and opened it again. He was lying as before.

"You've got to come now," I said. "I've got breakfast for you. Your coffee's getting cold!"

I stood beside him.

"Come on now, Hans Olav. You can do that afterward."

He waved me away with one hand.

I put a hand on his shoulder.

He screamed, a loud rasping scream, I took fright and stepped back.

But I couldn't give in, I had to show him who was boss, if not I would have problems later, so I took his arm and tried to pull him up. While he tried to get rid of me with one hand he kept at it with the other.

"OK," I said. "Shall I take your breakfast back? Is that what you want?"

He screamed again, an equally hoarse rasping scream, but swung his legs down, supported himself with his hands on the mattress and slowly and stiffly pushed himself into a standing position. As he stood up his trousers fell down. He pulled them up and started to walk out of the room, holding them up with one hand. He sat down on his chair and drank his coffee in one swig. I ate my bread and tried to act as if nothing had happened while my heart was hammering behind my ribs and all my senses were focused on him. With one sweeping movement of his hand he sent the glass of juice, the empty coffee cup, and the plate of bread flying to the ground. It was all plastic, Irene had made sure of that, and didn't break.

"What are you doing?" I said. "You shouldn't do that!"

He stood up. Then he grabbed hold of the table, hoisted it onto the two far legs and pushed it over.

I didn't know what to do. I was terrified of him, perhaps he had noticed. Fortunately he left the room at once, into the adjacent toilet, and I put the table back and was picking up the food when the ward door opened and Irene poked her head around.

"Having problems?" she said.

"He tipped up the table," I said.

"Do you want me to take over?"

"No," I said, although that was exactly what I wanted. "It'll be fine. We just have to get used to each other. It probably takes a bit of time."

"OK," she said. "If you need anything we're here. He isn't dangerous, you know. Imagine he's really a one-year-old!"

She closed the door, I put the last slice of bread on his plate and went to find something to wipe up the pool of yellow juice.

He was standing by the little window in the bathroom peering out when I went in.

"I'll just have to get something to wipe up with," I said. Suddenly he wasn't aware of me, but I didn't care so long as he left me in peace.

I would have to wash the floors in the morning anyway, might as well do it now, I thought, ran water into the red bucket, added a dash of green soap, took a cloth and scrubbing brush, set about cleaning the living room, then the hall, the bedroom and the little kitchenette. While I was busy doing this he approached, stood a few meters away and watched me. After a while he came closer, carefully poked the bucket with his foot, as if to tell me he could kick it over if he wanted.

He laughed his gurgling laugh and was suddenly overcome with a sense of purpose, he quickly left the room laughing out loud as he fidgeted beneath his chin. When I went into his room with the bucket and brush he was lying on his bed playing with himself again, with an equally flaccid dick.

"Wan! Wan!" he said.

I ignored him, finished cleaning up, hung the cloth over the rim of the bucket, and slumped down in the living room. I was tired and closed my eyes, ready to jump to my feet if a door opened or a sound came from him.

I sat there for half an hour and slept. When I awoke the food was gone and Hans Olav was back in bed.

I stood in front of the window in the little room looking out. There was a small mountain crag, bare in some places, covered with grass and bushes and thicket in others. The forest stretched up high behind.

From inside the room, the bed creaked, I heard him mumbling something to himself and I went in. He was on the floor, still holding his trousers up with his hand, as he had done all morning.

"Shall we go for a walk, Hans Olav?" I said. "A bit of fresh air would be good, wouldn't it?"

He looked at me.

"Shall I do up your trousers?"

No reaction.

I walked over to him, leaned forward, and held the waistband of his trousers, he at once poked two fingers at my face, one went in my eye, it swelled with pain.

"Hey! Cut that out!" I shouted.

At first I couldn't see a thing, only darkness filled with luminous dots, but after a few seconds my eye started working again. I stood there blinking, he went into the hall and banged on the door to the main ward with both fists.

He obviously didn't like me and now he wanted to be with the others or have me changed. But it takes two to tango.

"Come on," I said. "Let's go outside. Get your jacket on and we can go."

He continued banging. Then he turned to me, but instead of going for me, which I had expected, and perhaps trying to poke out my eyes again, he walked around me and into his room.

"Now you come here!" I shouted. "Come on. Do you hear me!"

He lay down on the bed, but his eyes seemed nervous and I took his hand and pulled as hard as I could to get him on his feet. Although he didn't offer any resistance, in fact he tried to meet my attempts halfway, he slid off the bed to the floor, slowly, like a boat listing.

This was hell.

He lay on his side with tears in his eyes. He tried to push himself up with one hand, all I could do was watch, hoping no one would choose this precise moment to come in. Once he was in a sitting position I took his hands again and he, no longer struggling, pushed off with his legs and was finally upright.

He looked at me and hissed, not unlike a cat, and then he slunk into the hall. I went in and sat down on the chair in the living room. Listened to him shuffling around.

It was ten minutes to nine.

Something fell to the floor, I hurried out, it was the plate and cup. He was standing and pissing in the corner.

I said nothing, fetched the cloth and bucket, put on gloves and wiped it up. He seemed less stressed, paced back and forth around me as I worked.

"Shall we go for a walk?" I said.

He went over and took his jacket, stuffed his feet in his large shoes. He couldn't manage the zip, I moved toward him, he twisted away, opened the door to the corridor, and with small, cautious tripping movements he walked down the steps and waited for me by the front door. I opened it and we were outside. He stayed ten strides ahead of me as we walked. After a few minutes he turned, I tried to make him go on, but he said no! no! and we walked back, up to his room, he lay down on the bed and started jerking off. I sat down on the chair. Not even a third of the day had gone.

Life in the institution was not only different from outside, time was too. Standing by the window and looking into the forest, I knew that if I had been there, sitting under a tree and looking over at these buildings, time would have been barely noticeable, I would have drifted as lightly through the day as the clouds across the sky, whereas inside the institution and looking out, time was much heavier, almost claylike, as though here it met obstacles and was always being forced to take detours, like a river traversing a plain before joining the sea, one might imagine, winding its way in countless labyrinthine, meandering bends.

When my shift was finally over it always came as a surprise and was an experience I used to help me endure the strain: everything passes. On the way to work in the morning I dreaded it, but now it was over and at this point, free again, it was as though the interim didn't exist, had never existed, it was quite palpably gone.

It was no surprise that time went more slowly there, it was a place where nothing was supposed to happen, where no progress was possible, you noticed that as soon as you entered, this was storage, a warehouse for unwanted people, and the notion was so awful that you did whatever was in your power to act as if this were not the case. The residents had their own rooms with their own possessions, which were identical to the rooms and possessions of people outside, they had meals together with their wardmates and caregivers, which was supposed to represent their family, and every day they went to "work." What they created there had no intrinsic value, the value lay in the fact that the work gave their lives a semblance of the meaning lives outside had. And it was the same with everything in their world. What they were surrounded by looked like something, and it was in that outward semblance that its value lay. This became clearest to me on the first Friday when I was doing the afternoon shift and the whole ward was going to a "disco" after dinner. It was to take place in a function hall in the district, a large room with tables and chairs in one half and a dance floor in the other. The lighting was muted, the windows were covered with curtains. Pop music blared out of the speakers, some Down syndrome residents moved back and forth on the dance floor. The place was full of wheelchairs everywhere, gaping mouths, rolling eyes. The residents of my ward sat around a table by the windows, each with a Coke. I sat beside Ellen, who every so often sent me tired looks. Egil was wearing a creased white shirt with ketchup stains on the front. His hair stood on end. He stared up at the ceiling as his mouth moved. Håkon sipped cautiously at his soft drink. Alf stared somberly down at the table. Next to us a caregiver stood up and pushed a resident in a wheelchair onto the floor, jiggled him to and fro in time to the music. His mouth hung open and emitted hollow happy noises as he drooled. The other caregivers at the tables were smoking and chatting about their own lives, from what I could see. Now and then they shouted, no, don't do that, or, sit still, or, you know what we say about that. Hans Olav was standing in the corner with his Picasso face, screwing and unscrewing a wall lamp. This was deeply disturbing. Disturbing because all these misshapen bodies and crippled souls who had been trundled into the discotheque – the most important space for youth culture, created for dreams about romantic love, charged with the future and potential – didn't experience any dreams, any yearnings, any electric charges, all they saw was hot dogs and soft drinks. And the music, which was meant to fill the body with joy and happiness, was only noise. When they danced it was just movements and when they smiled it was because it was a charade, now they were doing what normal people did. Everything was like the world as it was, but all the meaning had been stripped from it, and what was left was a parody, a travesty, grotesque and painful.

"They've got coffee over there if you want some," Ellen said.

"Thanks," I said, and went to the table with the thermos, pumped myself a cup, watched the happy Down syndrome patients, who must have been in their forties. It was hard to watch them, their faces were always young, had a youthful shape, didn't seem to get older, except for the wrinkles that spread across them and made them look like children suffering from progeria.

I sat back down with the residents from my ward, lit a cigarette, glanced at Hans Olav, who had now started ripping down the curtains.

Alf looked up and stared into my eyes. My spine froze. It was as though he knew all about me, he knew my innermost thoughts and hated me from the bottom of his heart.

"Hans Olav!" Ellen shouted, and stood up. Alf stared back down at the table. Ellen stopped in front of Hans Olav, he lowered his eyes to the floor as she spoke to him. Suddenly he glanced to the side and walked off as though he hadn't noticed Ellen at all or that they were in conversation. Kåre, bent beneath his hump, which it was difficult to believe was part of him, moved to another table. The caregivers there welcomed him, he ignored them, lowered his head and shook his hand close to his ear, the way you do with a tin to hear if there is anything inside. Irene and Ørnulf came in through the door. I was relieved when I saw her, in some way or other she had an effect on me. We had chatted in the breaks during the past few days, she had asked me what had made me apply for a job here as I neither came from the area nor lived here, I had said my girlfriend lived nearby, she asked what her name was, I told her. Gunvor! she said. We went to *gymnas* together! This information made me feel uncomfortable, I had been looking at her and thinking about her, nothing she noticed, I hoped, but you never knew with such matters. It made me feel I had been unfaithful. I had betrayed Gunvor. I had glanced at her when she was putting on a clean sheet and a duvet cover in one of the rooms, the old ones were in a pile in the corridor, outside each and every door, all the way down. A fleeting glance was no crime, after all we worked in the same ward, but the thoughts were there, I liked her a little too much. Or when she pushed the food trolley to the tables and began to set them and met my gaze and sent me an ingenuous professional smile, absolutely uninterested in me as anything except a colleague. That was also humiliating. So there I was, caught between two minor humiliations: on the one hand, I liked her too much given the fact that I was going out with Gunvor, and on the other, she was completely uninterested in me or who I was. Of course, I kept all this hidden, I did nothing, said nothing, behaved appropriately in all ways, indeed I was discouraging rather than encouraging, whatever took place was unseen to anyone except myself, and so it didn't really exist, did it?

She went to get a Coke and hot dog for Ørnulf, who immediately leaned over and sucked at the yellow straw. When he thought there wasn't enough coming out he yanked it out and threw it on the floor, put the bottle to his mouth, and drained it in one long swig.

She looked at me and smiled sweetly.

"What are you doing this weekend?" she said.

"I'm going to Gunvor's, I imagine. She's picking me up after work."

"Say hi from me."

"I will. And you?"

"Well, I'll probably go to Stavanger. Or I'll stay here. Depends on the weather."

"Doesn't look too good," I said, because it was raining and had been all day.

"No," she said.

The Beach Boys' "Good Vibrations" came on. The Down syndrome residents waggled from side to side, some with a smile on their faces, others in deep concentration. Roars and groans from all sides. Ellen wiped Are's dribble, he sat with his mouth agape staring at the ceiling.

"Lovely summer music," Irene said.

"Mm," I said.

The mist hung over the trees, the rain was heavy and pummeled the ground, which glinted in the light from windows and lamps. I stood outside the admin building waiting for Gunvor, who was coming to pick me up. The evening sky was gray and shambling, seeming to sink into the countryside. It was beautiful. The pavement was damp, the grass was damp, the trees were damp, and their greenery muted the gray but was still strong and bright. The forest of twisted limbs and disordered minds. With the lights from the windows and the silence among the trees it was as disturbing a place as it was appealing. Everything aroused ambivalence, nothing was clear cut: if all the routines and the slow rhythm in which everything happened occasionally caused me to collapse into a semi-apathetic tedium, it was still always mentally agonizing to be there as well. It was as though I was running and sitting still at the same time, my breathing was accelerated and my heart hammered wildly while the rest of my body was motionless. I wanted to be a good person, full of empathy for those worse off than me, but if they came too close, what I felt for them was contempt or anger, as if their deficiencies touched something deeper inside me.

When Gunvor and I stepped out onto the driveway in front of their house after the long car journey I still had the institution in my body, standing in me like stagnant marsh water. Any feelings I had were colored by it, even when I filled my lungs with pure clean air. Her parents had gone to bed, we had supper alone in the kitchen, she made some tea, we sat in the sitting room and chatted for a long time, kissed each other goodnight and went to bed in separate rooms, though not without a few quips about it. I felt like I was in a fin-de-siècle novel when I was there, the young couple living in a morality different from their own, surrounded by prohibition, denial, nonlife, while we were in the midst of pulsating life, full of repressed desires which occasionally forced their way to the surface. I liked that feeling, it was the most romantic feeling I could imagine.

The next morning I borrowed some boots and waterproofs, went onto the slippery quay with Gunvor and her brother, got into a boat, which measured fourteen, perhaps sixteen, feet, and sat on the front thwart while Gunvor's brother pulled the starter rope of the outboard motor and slowly reversed until he could turn and accelerate. The rain was pelting down. The forest on the shore stood like a green wall to the completely flat light-gray surface of the water, the prow plowed through it, converting it into swirls of white, with some almost transparent, almost glasslike layers below, and I had a distinct sense of depth, of being on the surface of an immense depth, which was reinforced when we stopped by the fishing net and the boat was rolling on its own waves and the net was drawn closer and closer together, then the spine of a fish appeared far below. It swam round and round, came higher and higher, and it was enormous. It was as big as a child and as shiny as silver. It came higher and higher and when at last it lay in the boat and Gunvor's brother hit it repeatedly on the head with a wooden mallet, the resistance it put up was so great he had to sit astraddle it while we did what we could to hold it down. The power in its slender body was frightening.

On the way home, as it lay still between our feet, with only the occasional twitch running through it, inside my head I had the image of it rising through the water. It was as though it came from another era than ours, up and up it came from the depths of time, a beast, a monster, an ur-force, yet there was something so clear and simple about it. Just water, the glint of silver in the depths, the immense power it possessed, surging through it in its dying throes.

The rain beating down now on the dead fish and coursing down its scales and perfectly white belly.

Gunvor was on the evening shift that Sunday, so I caught the bus early in the afternoon and arrived at my accommodation block at about five. I had thought I might be able to do some writing in the hours before I went to bed, but gave up after thirty minutes, nothing new could be activated in such an alien place as this, it seemed to me. Instead I went for a walk down to the town center, followed a whim and entered a Chinese restaurant, had a meal there, alone in a room full of families eating their Sunday dinner. Afterward I lay on my bed reading a novel by V. S. Naipaul I had found on sale a few days earlier, it had been in a box outside the bookshop and was called *The Enigma of Arrival*. I liked it even though there was no plot, just a description of a man who has moved to a house in a remote village in England, everything is alien to him, but slowly he conquers the countryside, or the countryside conquers him. It struck me that you could find rest in the prose, the way you can rest under a tree or in a chair in the garden, and that had a value in itself. Why actually should you write about actions? X loves Y, Z kills W, F commits embezzlement and is caught by G. . . . His son A is deeply ashamed and moves to another town where he meets B, they live together and have two children, C and D . . . What was the description of a father compared with that of a tree in a meadow? The description of a childhood compared with that of a forest seen from above?

If only I were able to describe a forest seen from above! The openness and freedom of deciduous trees, the way their crowns rippled as one, seen from a distance, green and magnificent and alive, though not alive in our way, no, alive in their own simple, secretive way. The sheerness and verticality of spruces, the frugality and loftiness of pines, the paleness and greed of birches and the aspen, the trembling of aspens as the wind whistles up the mountainside!

Green, gray, black. Forest lakes and fields, fallen trees and bogs, clearings and copses, stone walls so old they seem to have grown into the landscape. Meres with water lilies and muddy bottoms full of tree carcasses. Meadows and pastures, crevices and cliffs, pine moors and heaths, rivers and streams, waterfalls and deep pools. Ash, aspen, beech, oak, rowan, birch, willow, alder, elm, pine, spruce. All with their own characteristic individual shapes, yet representative of the same.

But I couldn't write about that, it was completely beyond me, both because my language was insufficient, that is, I didn't know how to approach the subject, how to express it, and because I lacked the knowledge. The last time I found myself in the heart of a forest I was in the ninth grade. I couldn't tell the difference between an elder tree and an ash, barely knew the names of any flowers apart from a wood anemone and a blue anemone and what we called a buttercup, but it probably had a completely different name.

I couldn't describe a forest, neither seen from above nor from within.

No, the composure he possessed I didn't have in me, and the self-assurance and serenity, which all great prose writers had, I couldn't even achieve as a pastiche.

Such was my experience of reading Naipaul, like reading almost all the other good writers, enjoyment and jealousy, happiness and despair, in equal portions.

But it took my mind off the institution at any rate, and on the eve of a new working week, that was all I really wanted. The thought of the place, that is, all the days that stood before me was worse and more unbearable than the days themselves, which of course always passed in the end. Tramping around in there, back and forth between the kitchen and the lounge, the washroom and the ward, it was as though nothing else existed, the whole unit with its harsh light and linoleum floor, its rank odors and heaps of frustration and compulsions was an existence all of its own, which I descended into, it engulfed me, crossing the threshold to the corridor was like stepping into a zone. It wasn't without problems, but the problems were bound to the life there, the people there, both the caregivers and the residents. It had something to do with the fact that we were locked in, that we moved in such restricted space, where every little displacement in one direction or another had an immeasurable effect, while the slow advance of time and the lack of anything to distract us lulled life there into a kind of calm, a kind of standstill.

Most weekends I was at Gunvor's, we went swimming and relaxed, walked in the forest, watched TV, drove somewhere in the car when she wanted to smoke, as she couldn't do that at home. I loved her, but without life in Bergen, where there was so much happening, it became clear to me that this was not enough, that just her was not enough, and this was a painful thought, not least when we were having lunch with her parents, who loved her so much, or when we were watching TV or playing Trivial Pursuit in the evening, because if Gunvor couldn't or didn't want to see it, her mother did, of that I was very sure. So who was I?

One evening we went for a swim down by the rocks in the sea. The air was warm and full of insects, the blazing sun hung just above the treetops. Afterward we sat next to each other gazing at the water. Gunvor got up, went behind me, and covered my eyes with her hands.

"What color are my eyes?" she said.

I went cold.

"What is this? Are you testing me?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "Tell me. What color?"

"Stop that," I said. "You don't need to test me. Of course I know what color your eyes are!"

"Tell me then!"

"No. I won't. I don't want to be tested."

"You don't know."

"Of course I know."

"Then tell me. It's simple."

"No."

She removed her hands and began to walk back up. I rose and followed her. I said I loved her, she told me to stop saying that, I said it was true, it came from the bottom of my heart. And added that I was self-centered and inattentive, distant and absent, but that had nothing to do with her.

The weekends I spent with her I took lots of photographs, which I would develop in a photo shop on Monday. I sent some of them in a letter to Dad. Here is my new girlfriend, Gunvor, I wrote, and this is me standing beside her horse on the farm where she lives. As you can see, I haven't changed much. I was thinking of visiting you this summer, if I do, I'll call first, take care, Karl Ove.

When the six weeks at the institution were over, I caught the boat to Stavanger and the train from there to Kristiansand. For the first few days

I stayed with Jan Vidar, who had moved into a terraced house on one of the estates outside town with his girlfriend, Ellen. We sat in the garden drinking beer and talking about the old days, about what we were all doing now. He'd gotten his diving certificate, my old dream, and he did quite a bit of diving, he told me, otherwise it was mostly work. It had always been like that with him, right from his time at vocational school when he had got up in the middle of the night to start work as a confectioner and baker. Going with him to the movies had been hopeless, I remembered, after a couple of minutes in the darkness his eyelids closed, irrespective of what was showing on the screen.

The house was on a hill, from his backyard there was a view of the fjord, the sky was blue and the wind whispered through the trees on the slope beneath us, as always in the afternoon. They had a cat and he told me about the time she had given birth to kittens. She had been much too small, or there was something else wrong, because one afternoon Ellen had come home and the young mother had killed all her young. There had been nothing short of a bloodbath in the house. Jan Vidar laughed as he told me, I was shaken, I imagined how it must have been, all the squeaking and snarling and crawling on the carpet.

The next day I woke to an empty house and caught the bus down to Kristiansand, filled with the old feeling of panic, it was such a fantastic day, not a cloud to be seen anywhere, and I didn't leave town, I stayed in the hot, narrow streets sweating while everyone else was sailing their boats around the islands, swimming and drinking beer and having a good time. I had never managed that, I had never been invited, and you don't do that kind of thing on your own. What was a record shop on a baking hot day in Kristiansand? What was the library, who was that sitting there gawping?

I visited Grandma and Grandpa, they were surprised to see me, I told them a little about life in Bergen, that I had a girlfriend and I saw a lot of Yngve and he was doing very well. Nothing had changed with them, everything was as before, it was as though they had reached their final age, I thought, as I caught the bus back up to Jan Vidar's, and from now on they wouldn't be a day older.

I had no connection with Kristiansand, it was no longer my "home." Bergen wasn't either, the thought of returning there and starting a new semester was not a happy one, but what alternative did I have?

On the last day of my short Sørland holiday I visited Dad and Unni. I was in a good mood as I left the bus stop on the E18 and walked through the streets of the estate where they lived, although a slight stab of fear with regard to Dad always made itself felt as I approached him. He was sitting on the sofa when I came up the stairs and I didn't know where to look, he had become so fat. He sat there like a barrel, staring at me. As brown as a berry, wearing shorts and a voluminous shirt, his eyes black.

"Ah, there you are," he said. "It's been a while."

"Thanks for your letter!" Unni said. "How exciting to hear about Gunvor. We were kind of hoping you'd bring her with you!"

"But what a name!" Dad said.

"She's working all summer," I said. "She'd like to meet you though, of course."

"Is it History she's studying?" Unni said.

"Yes," I said.

"And she rides horses, does she? Or was that any old horse you took the photo of?"

"No, she's a big horseback-riding fan. She went to Iceland for a year just because of the ponies," I said.

Dad and Unni exchanged long glances.

"Actually, we're thinking of going there for a little while. Next year maybe."

"That sounds good, Karl Ove," Unni said.

I sat down on the chair across the table from Dad. He took a sip of the beer he had in front of him. Unni went into the kitchen. I said nothing, he said nothing.

"How's it going up north then?" I said after a while, and started to roll a cigarette.

"It's going pretty well," he said.

He looked at me.

"Would you like a beer?"

"Yes, maybe," I said.

"You'll find one in the kitchen."

I got up, went in, Unni was sitting at the table reading a newspaper, opened the fridge and took out a beer. She smiled at me.

"Gunvor's pretty," she said.

"Yes, she is," I said, and smiled back, then went back in to Dad.

"There you go," he said.

"*Skål*," I said.

He didn't answer, though he raised his bottle and drank.

"How's your scribbling going?" he said eventually.

"It's mostly my studies now," I said.

"You should find yourself a course with better prospects than Literature," he said.

"Yes," I said. "I will eventually."

"What course is Yngve doing?"

"Media Studies."

"Well, that's not such a stupid idea," he said, looking at me. "Are you hungry?"

"A bit maybe."

"I'll make something soon. But it's so hot. It's not so good to eat now. I don't have much of an appetite in the heat, you know. That's why they eat so late in Southern Europe."

There was a confidentiality in his reasoning that made me happy. I finished the bottle, went to get another, felt a desire to get drunk creep up on me. It had been a long time.

And I did get drunk. Dad fried chops and boiled potatoes, we ate, Unni went to bed early, we sat drinking in the twilight. He couldn't be bothered to turn on any lights and so I didn't either. He said he and Unni were always together, they couldn't be apart, after only a few hours they began to miss each other, that was what had happened that day he'd been an external examiner in Kristiansand and we were supposed to visit him, he hadn't been able to cope with being away from Unni and had drunk on his own and fallen asleep, do you remember that time, Karl Ove? Hotel Caledonien burned down two days later, that could have been me, I could have been there. Yes, I did remember, I'd thought the same thing, I said.

He withdrew into himself, I fetched another beer, went for a pee, came back, he got up and went to the toilet, drank more. I told him Grandma had died in the autumn, yes, he said, she had been ill. I finished my bottle, he finished his, I fetched two more, thinking this was fine, it was perfectly all right being together with him. I felt strong. If he had a go at me now I would be able to defend myself. But he didn't have have a go at me, why would he, he was too deep inside himself, and at length he stood up in front of me in the semidarkness, the fat, bearded drunken man who was my father and had once been the very symbol of correctness – well dressed, slim and good-looking, a young respected teacher and politician – and he said well, that's it for me for tonight, there'll be another day tomorrow, you know.

Unni had made a bed for me in the room downstairs, and with my head buzzing with thoughts and feelings I got into bed and enjoyed the feeling of cool clean linen and lying in an unfamiliar room, one which wasn't mine but where I still belonged, at least in a way. The wind soughed in the trees, the floorboards creaked upstairs, and outside, the flaxen summer darkness became paler and paler as I lay in bed asleep, until the first blue patch in the sky slowly broke through and a new day dawned.

I spent the last weeks of the summer at Mom's. It was like my refuge, where everything I usually struggled with didn't exist. Kjartan, whom Mom had visited almost every day since he had been admitted, had finally been discharged, and I met him at her place. He seemed tired and low on energy, a touch stiffer in his demeanor, but otherwise healthy. He showed me some new poems, which were fantastic. He said he was going to move back to Bergen and resume his studies. I didn't ask him any questions about what had happened, that belonged to those topics you couldn't mention directly, but after some time had elapsed he told me unbidden. After he had trashed the apartment, he started shouting. I'm forty years old, he'd shouted, and destroyed everything around him. By the time he arrived at the hospital in Førde he had deluded himself into thinking he was in Japan, that those receiving him were Japanese, and made a deep bow to them, as was the custom in Japan. When he had psychosis he also heard voices, he received constant directives from a god, and to me it seemed as if there was some good in that, being taken care of by something else, while it was also extremely scary as this something else was him, a part of him.

Back home in Bergen I started on a new novel. The plot took place in a fjord landscape, it was the 1920s, the main protagonist in the first chapter was playing cards in a cabin up in the mountains, he was about to get married and didn't want to spend money he had won gambling on the wedding, so he put everything in the kitty and leaned back in bed and watched with immense pleasure as the others got very excited about the large sum of money that might come their way. The main protagonist in the second chapter was a young man in Bergen, it was the 1980s, he stood browsing through the titles on his bookshelf waiting for his girlfriend, in the kitchen the cafetière was chugging way, he thought about his grandparents on the farm by the fjord, they were old, she was ill, their lives would soon be over. That was as far as I got when the semester started again because every sentence had been written and crossed out and rewritten countless times, everything had been laboriously worked through, it was a time-consuming process, and since I had to hand in an important assignment in only a few months I put it to one side.

"Intertextuality in James Joyce's *Ulysses*" was the working title of the assignment. It was ambitious, I knew that, but I had an aim and an intention with it, I wanted a sensationally good grade and so I had to go for it.

As Julia Kristeva had coined the term "intertextuality," at first I concentrated on her and read *Revolution in Poetic Language*, but I was unable to understand, it was simply too hard. She wrote a lot about Lacan, I wanted to go to the source and I read a book by him in a Swedish translation, which if this were possible was equally difficult, especially because both his and her ideas originated from a kind of basic structuralist stance, which was new to me. In some ways it made me feel proud, as I was dealing with material at such a high level, in some ways it made me feel desperate and angry, as I could never quite grasp it. Almost but not quite. Farthermore, it was problematic that so many of their references were unfamiliar; if any were familiar at all they were always vague, and that was no good, accuracy was the very premise of this activity at literature's particle level. The novel itself, *Ulysses*, was, however, not difficult to understand, it was about one day in three people's lives, told in chapters with widely varying styles. I got hold of a book that went through all the references to Dante in *Ulysses*, I doubted any of the lecturers had it, so I could use it freely, perhaps let Dante's presence in Joyce be the principal example of the book's intertextuality.

I bought a secondhand computer when my study loan came, an Olivetti, from one of Yngve's friends, Borghild, whom I had met the first time I went to Café Opera, she had become an editor at *Syn og Segn* and hung around with Asbjørn for a short period. She wanted five thousand kroner for it, a quarter of my study loan, but this was my future we were talking about, so I agreed and for the first time in my life I wrote letters on a screen and not a sheet of paper. Green luminous futuristic letters, which were stored on one of those tiny floppy disks, as they were called, and could be summoned up whenever I wished. There was also a game of Yahtzee on the computer, I could sit throwing dice for hours on end, they were green and luminous as well. Sometimes this was how I started the day, an hour's Yahtzee before breakfast. Yngve and Asbjørn did the same, and if I set a new record I always told them when we met.

Gunvor had also bought a computer, occasionally I took my floppy disks with me and wrote on hers, either after she had gone to bed, only a few meters away, and lay asleep, breathing, tossing and turning, the way sleepers do, in a completely different world from the one I was in, or after she had gone to the reading room for the day. I didn't show my face at the university, everything was about the assignment this semester, so I might as well read and write at home, I had thought. In practice, I often ended up doing nothing, the days passed doing shopping, having breakfast, and reading a newspaper, looking out the window, perhaps going to some record shops or secondhand bookshops in town, returning home for lunch, spending the evening with Espen or Gunvor, unless I went out drinking with my fast-dwindling money. If I went with Espen or Gunvor and her friends things always turned out fine, I got back home without having lost control, but if it was anyone else, that is, Yngve and his friends, it was a much riskier venture. Once, at five in the morning, I came home without a key and rang the bell, fortunately Gunvor had been sleeping at my place, she opened the door, in her eyes I could read fear, I walked past her, wanting only to sleep, remembered nothing of the way home or any of the night, only the moment I stood at the door unable to find my key remained.

"Whose jacket's this?" Gunvor said.

"It's mine of course," I said.

"No, it isn't," she said. "You've never had a jacket like this. And what's this? There's blood on it! What happened?"

I examined it. It was a blue denim jacket. There was blood on the lapel.

"It's my jacket. I've had it for years. I don't know what you're going on about. I'm off to bed. I've had it."

When I woke it was one o'clock and the bed was empty, she had gone to her lecture at nine as always.

I remembered nothing from when I was at Garage until I was standing outside the door.

Freezing cold and frightened, I went into the hallway and reexamined the jacket hanging there. I had never seen it before.

It didn't have to mean much. I had probably been to a party and picked up the wrong jacket from the heap, I had been drunk and that wasn't so strange.

But the blood?

I went into the bathroom to look at my face. Nothing, not so much as a nosebleed.

So the jacket must have been bloodstained from before.

I rinsed my face in cold water and went into the kitchen. I could hear Jone's radio, I knocked on his door and poked my head in. He was sitting in his armchair with a record cover between his hands.

"Want some coffee? I'm making some now."

He laughed.

"What a sight! Did you go out last night?"

I nodded.

"Yes, I'd like some coffee," he said.

"I don't remember a thing," I said.

"Have you got the shakes?"

"Yes."

"It'll go. I'm sure nothing happened. Can you smell any perfume?"

"No."

He laughed.

"That's alright then. I don't suppose you killed anyone, either."

But that was precisely what was worrying me.

I put on the cafetière and heated a little saucepan of milk. Jone came in when it had finished hissing, took a cup from the cupboard, poured some coffee, placed a foot on the chair, and blew at the steam coming from the top.

"The police were here when I was leaving this morning," he said.

"Ha ha," I said.

"It's true! I was on my way downstairs, and there, you know, by the mailboxes, were two policemen. They were opening the door with a crowbar. They didn't say anything, they were silent, didn't even look at me. Just yanked open the door. Surreal."

"Was it a raid or what?"

He shrugged.

Some immigrants lived on the ground floor, it was always packed with people there, Espen thought they might have been selling dope, and the fact the police were there suggested he was right. On the other hand, they might not have had a residence permit. Jone, who chatted to everyone, had also tried to chat to these neighbors of ours, but without much luck.

"How's it going with the band? Kafkatrakterne?"

He laughed again. The name was too studenty for his taste.

"It's going well," I said. "We're playing tonight."

"By the way, found a few bargains up north," he said. "Do you want to see them?"

He had taken the bus all the way up to Trondheim and back again over the weekend just to go to a record fair.

Anything that could make me forget the night was good and I followed him into his room. He dug up a few singles, all furnished with a plastic cover, mostly Norwegian punk and new wave.

"Do you remember this one?" he said, passing me Blaupunkt, "Let Me Be Young."

"Yes, I do!"

Betong Hysteria, Kjøtt, Wannskrækk, Lumbago, The Cut, and some De Press singles followed.

"This is one for you," he said, and took out a completely round XTC cover, it was *The Big Express* in the shape of a train wheel.

"How much do you want for it?"

"Not that much. A hundred and fifty? Two hundred?"

"Why not two hundred and fifty?" I said.

He laughed.

"I'll give it a miss," I said. "I've got it."

I smacked my forehead.

"I *used to have* it." I had forgotten my stupid stand at the fair.

At the end of last semester I had been so hard up and had borrowed so much money that I'd succumbed to the temptation and bought a few meters of sales space at a record fair Jone was going to in Bergen and I'd sold all my records. Every single one. I got a few thousand for them, which I had drunk my way through a week later, that had been the days when Bergen was really buzzing and everyone was out – and that had been that. Six years' worth of collecting out the window. My whole soul had been in those records. And that was partly why I had done it, I wanted to purge myself of everything, it was shit, all of it, anyway.

"If you're interested in collecting, it's CDs that count now," Jone said. "It was wise to sell them off! Don't give it another thought!"

He laughed again.

"There was some blood on my jacket when I came home this morning," I said. "It wasn't my jacket either. And I can't remember a thing. Nothing."

"You're as decent as the day is long, Karl Ove. Calm down. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I feel as if I've killed someone."

"It's always like that. I'm sure you just went around saying how fantastic everyone was."

"Yes."

"I'm off to class. I've got a late lecture today."

"OK. I have to go too. See you."

We didn't practice at Verftet anymore, Pål had found us a place in the basement of the HIB, the technology center, which was on the other side of the bridge to my apartment, a gray building with blue lines and a blue logo, it looked more like a gray plastic bottle of shower gel than anything else, with grooves and a blue cap. Pål's laboratory was in the building, I had been up there once, walked wonder-struck through the small rooms with all the instruments, I loved "science," that is, the aura that surrounds this work, not science in itself, which I despised, it was technical, instrument-based, nonhuman, restrictively rational. But "'science," that was everything from Captain Nemo's submarine to Darwin's *Beagle* diary, Bruno, who was burned at the stake, and Galileo, who gave the church all the concessions they wanted, Marie Curie's frightening, in retrospect, experiments with radiation, Oppenheimer and his circle's splitting of the atom, there was the man who had an iron rod blown through his head in the 1880s and underwent a complete personality change, before: nice/after: evil, allowing medical science to take a step forward because now they knew that certain functions were housed in certain parts of the brain and, thanks to this accident, they had localized one of them to develop theories that made lobotomy possible. Was there anything more desperate or crazier than a lobotomy? If so, it must have been the same people who strapped down their patients and sent enormous electric shocks through them to shake them out of their depressions. It did help though, they were on the right track, and that was what I liked, that someone learned how to control, in this case, electricity, tame and store it, thus enabling something new to enter the world. At the same time there was something crazy about it, all this speed that was being released or all this light being transmitted everywhere. Human bodies being viewed as an arena, being treated with electric shocks, to see how they would react, or cutting into, for instance, connections in the brain, to produce a more harmonious type of personality, you wouldn't believe this could be true or you thought it was something they did in prebiblical times, but it was true, this was what we were doing, and the aura of total insanity existed here too, in these small rooms, with their microscopes and all manner of underwater specimens, collected at the bottom of the sea by their research ship. Not that I understood what they were doing, or that I cared, all I saw was "science," the romance of blue rubber gloves.

I could never see Pål fitting in there, he was the most unscientific person I had ever met, but that was perhaps exactly why he was so successful at what he was doing.

I met Yngve and Hans down at reception, Pål was late as always, we took the elevator up and went to his department, he was standing over his desk, his long hair covering his face like a minicurtain.

"Oh, that's right!" he said. "It's music time."

His bass was in the corner, he grabbed it and we took the lift down to the basement, where Pål unlocked the door and let us in. The room was big, the concrete floor covered with a yellow felt carpet, a drum set was already there, plus some amplifiers and a sound system.

The mere sight of it, the three musicians immediately unpacking their cases and taking out their instruments, the cables, the straps, the picks, the speakers, plugging in and switching on their amps, tuning their guitars, adjusting the sound, excited me, this was what I had always dreamed of, being in a band, doing band things. I gave the snare drum a few exploratory taps and tightened it, although I had no idea how to tune it, I couldn't hear when it sounded good, banged the bass drum, tightened the screw on the crash cymbal and pulled it closer in a – for me – reasonable imitation of a genuine drummer.

"I've spoken to someone planning a big party for New Year's Eve today," Yngve said.

I looked at him, he was sporting that secretive expression of his, he was holding something back, like a child, and he smiled.

"Someone's been pulling your leg," Pål said. "It's not New Year's Eve today."

"Did they give you some money to stay away?" Hans said.

"Ha ha," Yngve said. "They wanted us to play."

"Are we going to play at a New Year's dance then?" I said.

"Absolutely," Yngve said. "It's at Ricks and there'll be tons of people, so we've got to practice."

"What shall we play then?" Hans said.

"I don't know," Yngve said. "Can't we just do all the songs we've got?"

We had been playing together for almost a year, we were getting better and better, especially me, because although I was still a lousy drummer, and always would be, I had with the others' help managed to produce a variety of beats for a variety of songs, a fixed pattern for each, which I clung to when we played. At home I went through every single song in meticulous detail several times a day, I knew them inside out, right down to every last touch of the cymbals, I sat drumming on my thighs and tapping my feet on the floor, all to sustain the minimum of rhythm and drive the band needed. Half a rehearsal had been spent getting me to achieve syncopation. A full hour, the same theme again and again, me unable to find the beat in one place, more and more embarrassing, it was eating away at everyone's patience, was I a complete idiot or what, it was so bloody *easy*, until it clicked. The whole time I was scared I would be thrown out because Yngve, Pål, and Hans were competent musicians and they would, in one fell swoop, be so much better if they got rid of me, which I told them often enough, but no, stop talking nonsense, you're the drummer, that's it.

After the rehearsal Yngve, Hans, and I went into town while Pål caught the bus home. I was still haunted by that night's drinking, the most terrible thoughts and imaginings constantly lay beneath the surface, and my stomach ached with fear, for which in fact there was only one remedy and cure, Gunvor, an evening with her. But when Yngve suggested going out and celebrating there still wasn't a suggestion of a "no" on my lips.

"I just have to run back home first," Hans said. "I'll come out later. Are you going to Garage?"

"Yes, aren't we?" Yngve said, looking at me.

"Sure," I nodded.

It started to rain, not much, just a few drops on my face, but the sky above us darkened quickly, an entire wall of black was on its way across the mountains.

"Well, think I'd better get going," Hans said. "See you later."

He disappeared up the hill to the left and we continued on our way to Garage. Hans lived on the other side of the Dragefjellet District, in a place he shared with Tone, his girlfriend. Before that he had lived in a little collective in Sandviken with Ingar and Kjetil, two of his best friends, both active in Student Radio and *Studvest*, as he was. I had been there once, to a party with Yngve, that was the night he got together with Gunnhild, with whom he had moved into an apartment in Marken only a few weeks ago. She was good-looking in a gentle retiring way, studied Biology, came from a farm in Hardanger and was everything Yngve, or for that matter any other young man, could dream about. I was there that night, the place had been packed, and then I was there a few days later, alone, I'd been walking around town not knowing what to do, and I had thought, I'll go and visit Hans. I didn't know him, but we played in a band together, so it wouldn't seem that strange. Uphill from Bryggen, along the main Sandviken road, down the narrow passages to the crooked old house, where they rented the first floor. I rang the bell, no one answered. I rang again, but they obviously weren't at home, so I turned and was about to go back up. At the end of the alleyway I saw Ingar. He had seen me because our eyes met, but he pretended he hadn't and kept going.

Why did he keep going?

Wasn't he going home?

He was probably going shopping, I thought, walking up the hill. At the same time I had a nagging suspicion it was me he was avoiding, me he didn't want to meet, perhaps feel obliged to invite in. So instead of walking down to the town center I went up the next street and waited for him.

He appeared only a few seconds later, scanned both sides of the street before walking the last bit to the entrance of the house, took out his keys and, after glancing up the hill, unlocked the door.

My heart was heavy as I left, it was me he had been avoiding, there was no doubt about it, but why, what was it about me?

Oh, I knew of course, I felt it all the time, there was something about me people didn't want to know, something they tried to avoid if they could. Something I had, something about the way I behaved.

But what was it?

I didn't know.

I didn't say a lot, of course, I could safely assume that this was noticed and commented on unfavorably. Perhaps also that what I did say tended to be about inappropriate topics. What I said was often heartfelt, at least as soon as I was alone with someone, and people shied away from that like the plague. The alternative was to say nothing at all. These were my only modi vivendi, it was my entire register.

Well, not with Gunvor. She knew who I was.

The rain increased as Yngve and I hurried down Nygårdsgaten.

"I'll just have to call Gunvor," I said. "She might be waiting for me at her place."

"That's OK," Yngve said. "I'd better tell Gunnhild."

"Is there a phone booth anywhere near here?"

"There's definitely one in Festplassen. On the corner, down from Garage."

"Want to go there first then?"

"Yes."

"What about swapping?" Yngve said, when we stopped by the phone booth rummaging through our pockets for coins. "You call Gunnhild and I'll call Gunvor? See if they notice the difference?"

We were alike, Yngve and I, but only at first glance, we shared a kind of general resemblance, which meant that I could be mistaken for Yngve by people who didn't know him that well. But our voices were almost identical. Often when I had rung up Yngve's old collective they had thought it was Yngve messing with them.

"OK," I said. "Shall I ring Gunnhild first?"

"Yes, tell her I'm going to Garage with you and I don't know when I'll be back."

I lifted the receiver and dialed the number.

"Hello?" Gunnhild said at the other end.

"Hi, it's me," I said.

"Hi!" she said.

"Gunnhild, I'm going to Garage for a bit with Karl Ove," I said. "I don't know when I'll be home, so don't wait up!"

"Maybe I will anyway," she said. "But have a good time! And say hello to Karl Ove."

"Will do," I said. "Bye."

"Bye."

Yngve laughed.

"You've only been together a few months," I said. "Gunvor and I have been together for more than a year. She'll notice."

"Want to bet?"

"No, I don't dare."

Yngve picked up the receiver, inserted the money, and dialed the number.

"Hi, it's Karl Ove," he said.

Silence.

"I'm going out with Yngve and Hans. But I'll come back to your place afterward, is that alright? I don't know how long we'll be, but . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . I love you too. Bye!"

He hung up and turned to me with a smile.

"Did you say you loved her?" I said.

"Yes, she said she loved me!"

"Shit. You shouldn't have done that," I said.

He laughed.

"We don't have to say anything. Then she'll never know."

"But I know."

He snorted.

"You're so sensitive," he said. "It's just a joke!"

"Yeah, yeah," I said, and set off toward Garage.

Six hours later I was at a party in Fosswinckels Gate, thinking how talented I was, writing actually wasn't a problem, I was full of energy, I *really* did own the world. That wasn't how things were, as I would have been the first to admit, but *really* they were. A couple of girls had given me the once-over in the basement of Garage, they had been long, hungry looks, but of course I did nothing, I had a girlfriend, didn't I, Gunvor, asleep at home waiting for me. But this felt like a missed opportunity, a regret, and while Bendik, who owned the flat, put on "Happy Mondays" and people around me were shouting and laughing excitedly, I sat staring at the ceiling thinking, it was fine, all

I had to do was finish the relationship, then I would be free, and there would be nothing to stop me from doing anything I wanted.

It was close to half past four, people were starting to leave, again there was only the hard core left, Bendik, Arvid, Erling, Atle, and when all hope of any more fun had gone I drained my glass, got up and went downstairs without saying good-bye, made a beeline for the backyard next door, where I went round pulling at the bikes, but they were all locked, I would have to walk, unless there was one left unlocked in the adjacent yard.

No, there wasn't.

The rain was teeming down as I trudged down the hills. In front of Garage, which now lay dark and empty, with raindrops running slowly and ornately down the windows and one taxi after another racing out of the tunnel beneath Høyden, I stood wondering what to do. I didn't want to go home, no question about that. I went down toward Slakteriet, but that was closed too. I lit a cigarette, cupped my hand over it against the rain, walked up the gentle incline ending at the theater. What I wanted was to sleep with someone, a girl I hadn't slept with before, one of the two who had been looking at me. Why hadn't I grasped the opportunity, how could I have been so incredibly stupid? Gunvor would never find out, and I wasn't doing it to spite her, I just wanted it so much I hadn't thought about anything else all evening. A woman's soft body, downcast eyes, new breasts, a new backside, she bends forward for me, on all fours for me, doggie position and I, and I, well, I ram it in. That was basically all I wanted, but it was impossible here, in a town where the rain fell remorselessly, deserted apart from the occasional darkened taxi, at half past four in the morning, how could it happen?

There was someone in Nøstet, she might have been in love with me once, she would probably receive me with open arms.

I went there. My hair plastered flat against my skull, jacket and trousers soaked, the streets empty, the only sound the squelch of my shoes.

I felt the front door. Locked.

She lived on the first floor, and I knelt down to gather some pebbles, threw them at the three windows of her room.

No reaction.

I stood around wondering what to do. Shout? That wouldn't work, the whole neighborhood would hear.

I grabbed the door frame, got a foot on it, and swung myself up. There were narrow ledges and projections at various places on the wall, windows with protruding sills, and it should have been easily possible to do it, climb up to her floor and knock on the windows or if I had the unimaginable good luck to find one of them unlocked, simply open it and step inside and give her a real surprise.

I was perhaps three meters up when I lost my grip and slipped down, fortunately in a relatively controlled manner, I didn't hit myself very hard, just a bit on one knee, which throbbed with unabated pain as I began to climb back. But I fell once again, this time badly, I landed on my chest and the fall knocked the wind out of me. It was as though I was drowning, I couldn't breathe, and the pain radiated up into my brain from a thousand different places. The pain was incandescent, like a star.

OOOOOHHHHH, I said.

OOOOOHHHHH.

OOOOOHHHH.

I lay still, breathing. Feeling the water in the puddle soaking into my clothes. My legs and arms and chest were freezing cold. Nevertheless it struck me that I could close my eyes and sleep there. Just for a moment. . .

The very next, Christ how it hurt!

I struggled into a kneeling position, lifted my head to the sky, from where all the rain was falling. I stood up straight and slowly began to walk, stiffly at first, then more and more easily. For some reason I walked uphill to the Klosteret Square, and on the way a police car glided alongside and stopped and the window slid down and a policeman asked me what I was doing.

"I've been to a party," I said. "And I saw a guy down there as I was passing. He was trying to climb up the front of a house. Don't know what the hell he was after, but it didn't look good."

I must have appeared lucid enough for them to let me continue, not only that, they turned down the hill to follow up on my tip-off.

Ha ha ha, I laughed as I walked down to Torgalmenningen.

Ha ha ha.

Ha ha ha.

I couldn't go to Gunvor's, not after all this mess, so I turned right and walked to the taxi stand instead. Five or six minutes later I got out of the car and went through the entrance, saw that the door to the immigrants had been nailed up and sealed with a strip of plastic, rested my shoulder against the row of mailboxes, struggled up the next two floors, unlocked the door, and stopped.

There was a scratching noise coming from the cabinet in the kitchen.

Was I finally going to see them? I was sick of finding evidence of their activities but not them, and as nimbly as a cat I ran into the kitchen and tore open the cabinet door. Nothing. Empty.

But the plastic rubbish bag had bite marks on it and coffee grounds and eggshells had spilled out.

It had to be rats, couldn't be anything else, no mouse would behave like this, would it? The following day I would buy a rattrap or poison, I thought, and pulled off my clothes and a moment later I was asleep in bed.

I woke up to the telephone ringing. It's Gunvor, I thought, I'd better not answer it, I'll have to think of an excuse first, but the ringing wouldn't stop and in the end I answered it, with a pounding heart in an aching body.

"Yngve here."

"Hi."

"Heard you lost it after the party."

"*Heard?* Who from? Who said that?"

"Bendik. They'd seen you from the window. You ran into the backyard looking for a bike. Then you came out and went straight into the next one. 'He's trouble, your brother,' Bendik said. How was it? Did you do anything else?"

"No. It was fine. I went home. But I'm a little worried."

"You can't take your drink. That's what's wrong. It's not good for you. You can't take it."

"No."

"Well, I don't want to moralize. You have to live your own life."

"Yes, exactly."

"You can come over if you want. It's only us. Then we can watch TV or something."

"No, I don't think so. I have to work. It's only a short semester, isn't it?"

"OK. Talk to you later then."

"Yes, alright. Bye."

"Bye."

Usually it took a day or so for the fear to subside after a night out; if something special had happened, two, maybe three. But it always did. I didn't understand why it came, why the shame and fear were so great, actually they got worse and worse each time, and it wasn't that I had killed someone or hurt anyone. Nor had I been unfaithful. I had felt like sex, and I had done some stupid things to get it, but nothing had happened, I had climbed up a brick wall, for Christ's sake, should I be afraid for three days because of that? Should I pace the flat and start at every tiny noise, jump every time a siren sounded in the streets, my insides aching all the while with an intensity that was unbearable, except that I did bear it, every time, all the time.

I was a cheat, a traitor, I was a bad person. And I could deal with that, it wasn't a problem, so long as it was only me involved. But now I was with Gunvor, and it affected her because she became someone who was going out with a cheat, a traitor, a bad person. She didn't think that, on the contrary, in her eyes I was a lovely person, someone who meant well, who showed her consideration and love, but that was exactly where the pain lay because I *wasn't* like that.

I switched on my computer and while I was waiting for it to warm up I skimmed through what I had written so far. I didn't give a shit about the assignment, I couldn't read about proto-language in the state I was in, my priority was the novel, which was now approaching fifty pages and had spread in so many directions, some of them promising, at the very least. But

I couldn't get a grip on the 1920s, which I wrote a good deal about, there was so much I didn't know about the era, and this ignorance hindered me, I could barely write a sentence for fear it wouldn't be accurate. Farthermore, the 1920s were much too far away for me to pump full with my own life, with what was coursing through my veins now. So the writing became wooden and lifeless, I could see that, but at the same time it was all I had, I was clutching at my last straw.

There was a thump on the living-room floor. I saved my work, put on my shoes, and went down to Espen. He met me at the door, placed a finger on his lips and beckoned me to follow him into the kitchen. There was a stool in the middle of the floor, he pointed up at the ceiling, where there was a crack he wanted me to look through.

I clambered onto the stool, leaned back, and peered in.

A big black rat met my gaze.

"Can you see it? Is it still there?" Espen said in a low voice.

"Ugh, Jesus," I said, and got down. "How revolting!"

"Now at least we know what it is," he said.

"We'll have to buy poison tomorrow then."

"Or traps. They can lie rotting between the walls, I've heard, impossible to get rid of."

"What I've heard," I said, "is that there's something in the poison that makes them want water and so they run out of the house."

I could hear how odd that sounded and smiled tentatively and shrugged. "The problem with traps is that the rats lie there and you have to physically throw them away. I don't feel like doing that."

"Me neither," Espen said. "But if we have to, we have to."

"A rat is a rat is a rat is a rat is a rat," I said.

"Eh?" Espen said, looking at me. "A cup of coffee?"

I nodded.

"I can hear you when you're working upstairs. The noise comes right down here. For a while I thought you were drumming your fingers. Then it suddenly hit me, aha, he's writing!"

"I've done fifty pages now," I said. "So you'll have to read it soon. If it's crap I don't want to waste a whole year on it."

"I'd love to read it right away," Espen said.

"What? Now, do you mean?"

"Why not?"

"A cup of coffee first, then I'll go and print it. OK?"

Espen nodded, and we went in and sat down in the sitting room.

"I was sure it was rats," Espen said. "I could hear them scrabbling along the ceiling boards. And then there was your garbage bag. It couldn't have been anything else."

"In which case, they're some smart rats. When Gunvor slept here a few days ago she made a packed lunch in the evening to avoid having to do it in the morning. She had to get up early . . . "

"And?" Espen said.

I looked at him. Was he getting impatient?

Seemed like it.

"Well, she put her lunch in her bag. Then when she was about to eat it later in the day it was empty. But the waxed paper was intact. So they'd snuck into her bag, unpacked the paper, taken the food, and scampered off. Well, there were a few bites left, but nevertheless. Sounds to me more like a whole army of them had been at work. It must have required comprehensive planning. Perhaps the one we saw was the brains behind it? In the hole?"

"The demiurge itself?"

"Yes, what do I know? But anyway we've got to flush them out. Gunvor can't stay here if the place is crawling with rats."

"Is she so pampered?"

"Ha ha."

"Is that your phone ringing?" he said.

I sat still for a few seconds, listening. Yes, it was.

"I'll run up and get it. And do the printing while I'm at it!" I said, hurrying out and up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, it's me," Gunvor said. "You are at home then? I was just about to give up."

"I was downstairs with Espen."

"I thought you were coming to my place last night?"

"Yes, I was. But it got late and I was so drunk I thought I would spare you."

"I like you coming here. It doesn't matter if you're drunk."

"Sometimes it does," I said. "I'm really frightened now. That's two nights in a row. Can't you come over? Then we can make waffles or something? I'm dying for something ordinary and normal."

"OK. Now or what?"

"Yes, that'd be good. Will you buy some milk on the way?"

"Yes. See you. I'll bring some dirty laundry as well. Is that alright?"

"Of course."

I attached the holes at the side of the roll of paper to the wheels on the printer, quickly read the last sentences I had written, I knew the first part almost by heart, checked the codes on the note I'd stuck to the desk, and pressed print. Immediately the printer head began to buzz back and forth and I, still unused to this invention, watched with fascination as my words, sentences, and pages appeared as if from a secret source somewhere inside the machine.

What the connection between the floppy disk and the screen was I had no idea; something had to "tell" the machine that an "n" on the keyboard would become an "n" on the screen, but how do you get dead matter to "tell" anything? Not to mention what went on when the same letters on the screen were saved onto the thin little disk and could be brought back to life with one tap of a finger, like the seeds that had been trapped in ice for hundreds of years and then, under certain conditions, could suddenly reveal what they had contained all this time, and germinate and blossom. Surely the letters I saved would be reawakened as easily in a hundred years' time as they could be now?

I tore off the perforated edges, stacked the sheets in order, and went down to Espen.

"Gunvor's coming," I said. "So I'll be upstairs tonight. Here's the manuscript. When do you think you can read it by?"

"Day after tomorrow maybe? I'll tell you when I've finished!"

I went back upstairs, and when Gunvor arrived I made the waffle mixture while she sat on the kitchen chair and watched, cooked them in the iron, brewed up some tea, and took everything into the sitting room. Perhaps it was the homeliness of the waffle aroma that did it, but anyhow we started talking about having children. It was an outlandish notion for us and everyone we knew, but when I was in Kristiansand Jan Vidar had told me about a couple of the girls from the *ungdomsskole* where we went, they had children now, one didn't even know who the father was.

The idea that we could have children and thus determine our entire future was both a thrilling and a terrible thought.

"It has such enormous repercussions," I said. "It molds the rest of your life. It's not the same with anything else we do. For example, whether you study History or Social Anthropology doesn't really matter."

"No, that's not true, is it?"

"It is, given a little perspective. Whether we get a cum laude or not makes little difference. But, Christ, how we strive for those little differences. There are so few things that are *truly* all-decisive, that make a difference."

"I see what you mean."

"When I write, you know, for me it has to be life or death. But of course it isn't! It's just me sitting down and puttering around."

"Yes," she said. "But not everything can be like that. Not everything can be either-or. We've got to have fun as well."

She laughed.

"Can I quote you on that?" I said.

"Yes, but that's how it is, isn't it? Let's say we had a child now. That would be a major event. It would determine the rest of our lives, as you said. But our lives would be much the same nevertheless. We'd have to change diapers and push a baby carriage and so on, and we'd do that, but that's not exactly momentous, is it?"

"No, you're right there."

She opened her mouth and bit off a piece of the waffle.

"Is it good?" I said.

She had her mouth full, and nodded.

I sprinkled sugar over mine, folded it and took a big bite.

"Yes, they're pretty good," I said after swallowing.

"Fantastic," she said. "Have you made tea as well?"

I poured some in her cup.

"Tell me about yesterday!" she said. "Who was there?"

I laid my head on her chest. She ran her hand through my hair, I could hear her heart beating. There was something so girlish about her, a huge innocence that moved me, while I, from the way I was lying, was as submissive as a dog, I seemed to be relinquishing something, not unknowingly, I both liked and disliked being comforted like this, it was nice and degrading at the same time.

After a while we got up and had a smoke in the sitting room, Gunvor with the duvet wrapped around her. We talked about Robert, her sister's husband, he was five or six years older than me and exuded masculinity, at a party where I had met him a few weeks earlier he had told me about an incident when a whole gang of men had been after him. He had grabbed a pole and shouted and gone ballistic, in the end they had cleared off, he had dropped the pole and continued on his way. If you want something, he said, you've just got to go for it. There's nothing to be scared of. You have to cross a kind of threshold where nothing matters, get into a zone where you're not afraid. Then you can do whatever you want. He had been a painter before, but stopped, he said he'd been frightened of going mad.

"Did he say that to you?" Gunvor said.

"Yes, those were his precise words. I don't know if I believe him. It sounds a bit arch. I stopped painting because I was scared of going mad. At the same time it didn't seem completely unbelievable when you met him. It's like you know where he's coming from."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, he's not exactly the student type. University isn't where it starts for him, as it does for us. It's more like the end of something, a place of calm after the storm."

"It's funny with you and Robert, how we've ended up with you two. You have something in common, don't you?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. I'm a boy, he's a man."

"He's older than you, that's all."

"There's more to it than that."

Robert was proud of the girl he was with, Gunvor's sister, and he knew what he was doing with her. He was always respectful toward her and seemed to cultivate the differences between them. I wasn't proud of Gunvor, not in that way, I didn't know exactly what I was doing with her, and I didn't always behave respectfully toward her. He was clear in his language, in an unambiguous, plain masculine way; I was unclear, vague, cowardly in mine. Not when it was just us two, but as soon as others joined us. Then it was a question of listening to where they were going and playing up to their collective will.

We looked at each other and smiled.

"Shall we put the washing machine on?" I said. "You brought some dirty laundry with you, didn't you?"

She nodded and got up.

"I can do it," I said.

She shook her head and smiled.

"No way. I have to do it."

"I see," I said.

I searched until I found a shop that stocked rattraps. I bought a few, as well as rat poison, and wandered home with everything in a little bag. There was only a couple of hundred kroner in my account, so I worried about it as I walked, the problem returned every autumn and spring, the study loan was spent, it would be several months before the next, in spring sometimes six months. The first spring I worked for Kjartan, the next one I sold all my records, while in the autumn I borrowed money from people here and there or went home and lived off Mom. But in the long term that was no good, it was an endemic problem, ad hoc solutions only postponed finding a real solution. In other words, I had to get a job. Which you did either through contacts or qualifications. I had neither. That is, I had worked for a year as a teacher, which might conceivably make temping at a primary school a possibility, but not in the town center, I doubted that very much, applications would be flooding in there, so it would have to be out of town. Another option was the health service. I had no desire to do what I had done before, but if it came to that, it came to that. There were two big institutions in town, one for the crazies, Sandviken Hospital, and one for the mentally handicapped, Vestlandsheim, and both had a high turnover of untrained staff, I had heard. If I had to choose, it would be Sandviken: better mentally ill than mentally handicapped.

I made some calls when I got home. I started with the schools, was given some phone numbers by a woman at the local council, most had supply staff already in place, and I was a bit too young, as someone said, but a couple of them did take my name and telephone number, without promising anything, their list of temps was long. At Sandviken they probably needed someone, but they wanted to talk to me first, could I drop by during the week and bring my qualifications with me?

Yes, of course I could.

Was Thursday convenient?

Thursday was fine.

Before I went to bed I put two rattraps in the cabinet under the sink, knocked on Jone's door, he went to bed late, and told him what I had done so that he wouldn't touch anything. He laughed in his cheery way and said he thought the rats were in my head and nowhere else. But he would keep away from the cabinet.

I couldn't take responsibility for the rats on Jone's behalf, I thought, lying in bed trying to sleep, my pulse thumping in my ears, but I did anyway, I thought about them all the time, I couldn't help myself, that was just how I was made.

Rats, we had rats.

I put off checking the traps the following morning, made some coffee first and drank it in the sitting room while smoking a cigarette and flicking through a collection of Swedish essays about Jacques Lacan, gazed out the window, the queue of cars that formed so quickly after the lights had turned red, dwindled and reformed. The cars were in constant flux, and the people in them, but the patterns they were part of remained the same. Death also made patterns. The raindrops running down windshields, the sand blown into heaps, the waves beating against the shore and retreating. If you took a closer look, inside a grain of sand, for example, patterns were there too. Electrons moving round atomic nuclei. If you went outside there were planets orbiting round suns. Everything was in flux, everything was inside and outside everything. What we didn't know, and never would, was what size really was. Think of the universe, how we considered the universe, infinity, imagine if it were small. Teeny-weeny. Imagine if, in fact, it was inside a grain of sand in another world. And that this world was also small and inside another grain of sand.

This was my great idea. And actually it could be right, at least, there was nothing to disprove it. But if it was, then everything was meaningless. We were completely dependent on there not being another world, on this being the only one, for what we were doing here to be meaningful. So it was important therefore to keep making literature. But if there was another world, a greater context, literature was simply nonsense, babble in the universe.

I went into the kitchen, put down my cup and opened the cabinet door, crouched down and looked straight at a rat caught in one of the traps. The metal bar had hit it in the back. I felt sick. I pulled out the lowest drawer, took a plastic bag and carefully pulled the trap toward me holding the little wooden base between my thumb and first finger. The plan was to put it in the plastic bag and chuck out the whole thing, rat and trap and everything, instead of fiddling around trying to release the rat.

Its rear part twitched.

I dropped the trap and withdrew my arm like a shot. Stood up.

Was it alive?

No, it had to be a convulsion. A muscle spasm.

I crouched down again, nudged the trap with my finger so that it was facing me.

It was as though the rat was looking at me with its little black eyes.

Another spasm went through one apparently bare leg.

Was it alive?

Oh no.

It was.

I slammed the door and paced up and down the kitchen floor.

It was important to act quickly, get rid of it, not to think any more about it.

I opened the door, grabbed the trap, slung it into the plastic bag, dashed downstairs, hurried over to the garbage cans, opened one and threw the bag in, jogged back up, washed my hands in the bathroom, sat down in the sitting room, and smoked a cigarette.

Job done.

At around seven Mom phoned, she reminded me that Grandpa was coming to town on Monday, he was going to the hospital and would be there a few weeks. Mom asked if I would mind meeting him off the ferry and taking a taxi up to the hospital with him. I said that was fine. Then we, the grandchildren in Bergen, would have to agree on visiting times so that we could spread out the duty. She might come over herself too, in which case it would be the last weekend he was there.

I had hardly hung up the phone and turned to go into the sitting room when there was a knock at the door. It was Espen.

"Come in," I said. "Like some coffee?"

"Please," he said. "If you've got any brewing."

"Oh yes."

I grabbed cups and we sat down. He wasn't quite himself, perhaps lost in his own thoughts.

"I've read your manuscript," he said.

"That's good," I said. "Have you got time to talk about it now?"

He nodded.

"But perhaps we should go out for a walk? It's easier to talk then. Sitting still soon gets a bit claustrophobic."

"Yes, I've been indoors all day, that sounds good."

Espen stood up.

"And the coffee?"

"We can have it when we're back."

I put on my raincoat and boots, waited for a moment in the hall below for Espen, who appeared shortly afterward in his thick old waterproof jacket and locked up.

"The toilet paper disappeared again last night," he said, turning to me as he stuffed his bundle of keys into his pocket. His toilet was in the hallway. Anyone could use it.

"I know who it is. I heard him and so I looked out the window afterward. You know that little Sunnmøre guy who lives across the yard?"

I shook my head, started to walk downstairs.

"Well, anyway, it was him. He ran down the road with a toilet roll in each hand. Imagine sinking so low as to steal toilet paper!"

"Yes," I said.

"It's very irritating. What do you think I should do? Take the matter up with him? Tell him I know it's him?"

"No, are you out of your mind? Just drop it."

"But it's so unbelievably rude!" Espen said.

"He's a criminal," I said. "If you start messing with him you know what can happen."

"You're probably right," Espen said. "But he's so loathsome. I think he's a pervert. He doesn't flush after he's been either, you know. His shit's in the bowl when I go in there."

"Ooh, Jesus," I said.

We arrived at the lowest hallway and emerged onto the worn, cracked brick steps. Rain was falling and had been for a long time. Both the building we exited and the one rising before us, three meters away, were dark and gleamed with moisture in the street lighting, and all the protruding sills, ledges, and gutters dripped. The narrow passage in front of us was overgrown and full of old refuse; the path between the two buildings was covered over and looked more like a tunnel or a grotto with its green stains and cracks.

When I saw the trash cans I remembered the rat, a memory I had succeeded in repressing, because I hadn't thought about it all day.

Perhaps it was still alive. Crawling around and gorging on all the delicious garbage. What did it matter that it was caught in a trap? If it used its rear feet it could paddle alongside the bulging plastic bags, gnaw at them and they would open and all sorts of splendors would fall out, straight into its mouth. If there was nothing? Well, keep paddling.

We walked up, alongside the other brick buildings, where our sister apartments were, all identical, and down the underpass to the left. Water ran and dripped everywhere, graffiti and unintelligible symbols covered the walls, some of the lamps on the ceiling were smashed, and no one ever stopped here unless they wanted something from the Narvesen kiosk, which was in the middle, where I used to buy newspapers every morning. We walked past and up the other side, following the road to town.

"Shall we turn right here and walk to the center? It's a nice area," Espen said.

"Why not," I said.

The road came out by the hospital, which now towered over the mist, like a fully illuminated castle, under the mountains. One of the town's big cemeteries lay just below, strategically placed, to ensure the sick would not be allowed to forget they wouldn't be living forever.

We walked side by side into town. Espen said nothing, I said nothing.

"I don't know how to start," Espen said at length. "I was wondering at first whether this was a young adult novel you'd written."

Everything inside me sank.

"A young adult novel?" I said. "What makes you think that?"

"Something about the tone," he said. "The way they speak. Young adult novels are good!"

I said nothing, studied the ground in front of us, the light gleamed on the wet asphalt.

"There's a lot of wonderful material in it, really," he continued. "I loved some of the descriptions of nature."

"But?" I said.

Espen glanced at me.

"In my opinion, it doesn't work as a whole," he said. "Somehow, it's not enough. It's difficult to understand why this story of all stories is being told. There's no spark in it, to be blunt."

"What about the language?" I said.

"Sorry," he said. "But it's a bit bland. A bit impersonal. It hurts me to say this. I'd have loved to say something else. But I can't. I have to be honest."

"I'm really glad you've been honest," I said. "Not many people would have been. Most would have played along and said they liked it. You're very brave to say what you think. Thank you."

"But it isn't *bad*," Espen said. "I mean, that's not what we're talking about. I just don't think you make the most of the material you have."

"Do you think I could? That I could keep working on it and raise it somehow?"

"Maybe," he said. "But it'd be a major job. It might be better if you started afresh."

"That difficult?" I said.

"I'm afraid so," he said. "I don't like saying this, believe me. I've been on edge all day."

"But it's good you did. I'm pleased you did. I know you're right. I've known it deep down the entire time. In fact, it's a relief to have this feeling confirmed. It doesn't matter."

"I'm happy you're taking it like this," he said.

"Not at all. Why shoot the messenger," I said.

"It's one thing to say that and another to mean it. Most people take it very personally. It's perceived as an insult. Well, you know that, you were at the Academy for a year."

"Yes," I said. "But we're friends. If you can be so sincere I know there's nothing behind it."

We walked on in silence.

I really meant what I had said. He was courageous and I could trust him. But it didn't prevent me from being upset. That had been my last hope and now it was over. I couldn't write any better than that.

Back home, I threw the copy Espen had read into the wastepaper basket and wiped the document on the disk. Now there was just the assignment left to do. "The Concept of Intertextuality with Special Reference to James Joyce's *Ulysses*," as it was now called.

Sandviken Hospital wasn't far from the town center, set back beneath the mountain. The buildings were massive, like a monument, as all the institutions from that time were. I jumped off the bus and walked up the hill. Above me, the windows shone in the mist. After having wandered around for a few minutes between the blocks I eventually found the right one and went in.

The interview consisted largely of a woman entering my details into the system, checking which department was in the most urgent need of help, phoning them and giving them my name, putting the receiver down and looking at me, could you do a shift tomorrow? Afternoon?

"Yes, I can manage that," I said.

"If everything goes alright, and I'm sure it will, you'll get more shifts. If you want them, that is."

"Thank you very much," I said, and stood up.

"Not at all," she said, and turned her attention to the pile of papers she had lying in front of her.

The next day, in the afternoon, I got off the bus at the same stop and walked with a palpitating heart up the stairs to the ward I had been assigned. A thin woman with red hair and a slightly childlike expression, thirty-five or so, said hello and shook my hand as I stepped into the duty room. Her name was Eva. Another woman, blond-haired, blue-eyed, with a Mediterranean complexion and gentle curves, maybe thirty, stood up behind her. Fantastic breasts, as far as I could judge from the corner of my eye. A fresh personality, and presumably fresh in the other sense, for what was she not saying as she regarded me through the narrow glasses on the tip of her nose?

"My goodness, they've sent us an attractive man this time."

I blushed and tried to hide it in my subsequent actions, take off raincoat, put cup under the big thermos, a couple of creaking pumps, raise it to my mouth, sip the coffee, full of bubbles and froth, sit down, little smile.

"Did I embarrass you?" she said. "I didn't mean to. It's just the way I am. Straight to the point. My name's Mary, by the way."

She looked at me without smiling.

"Poor thing. Now he's all flummoxed," Eva said.

"Not at all," I said. "I'm used to whatever comes my way."

"That's good," she said. "We need all the temps we can get. I'm the ward manager, you see. And we've had quite a turnover here. Well, we have a strong core, but weekend staff have a tendency to be thin on the ground."

"Really," I said, and took another sip. A bearded man came in, he must have been in his late twenties, thin arms and legs, glasses, leftie type. His name was Åge and he sat down next to me.

"Student?" he said.

I nodded.

"What are you studying?"

"Literature," I said.

"Well, you won't need that here," Mary said.

"We've had geologists, architects, historians, social scientists, artists, sociologists, social anthropologists here, yep, the whole kit and caboodle. Most stop when they find something better. But some hang around. Isn't that right, Åge?"

"Yes," Åge said.

"When you've had a smoke come with me and I'll show you around and take you through the routines," Eva said. "I'll go and get the medicines ready in the meantime."

It didn't look good, I supposed, that the first thing I had done was to light up. On the other hand, there were still ten minutes to go before my shift started.

Mary made an entry in the logbook. Åge got up and went out. I followed him, I didn't dare sit on my own with Mary, her presence was electric.

I recognized a great deal in the ward from my summer job, the only real difference was the residents, who were patients here and closer to the caregivers than they had been there. But the atmosphere was more pressurized, the silence more threatening. People stood rocking backward and forward by the windows, sat chain-smoking on the sofas, and lay apathetically in their beds. Most had been here a long time. Hardly anyone noticed me, or noticed that I was new, they were probably used to change. I kept a low profile, did as many practical jobs as I could, tried to take the initiative but not with the patients, hoping that this would be seen and appreciated, I knew my place. I washed floors, served food, cleared up, and put cups and plates in the dishwasher, kept asking the others if there was anything I could do. Time passed infinitely slowly, but it did pass. At the end of the day, when Åge and Eva had gone off duty and the patients were in their rooms, I was alone with Mary in the lounge. She lit a cigarette with little tense movements that I couldn't make tally with what she had already revealed of herself, but then, as she inhaled the smoke deep into her lungs and blew it out, waving it away from her eyes, her self-assured expression returned.

I asked her where she lived, she answered that she had a flat not very far away, near the Business School. The flirtatious tone she had used at first was completely gone. But there *was* something about her, the way she didn't look at me, her sudden smiles, which were charged to a much greater degree, presumably because the flirtatious tone had been so open and self-assured, while this only existed as something that was being avoided and left unsaid.

She told me she was a psychiatric nurse and had worked there for five years. Her words fell like confidences.

"Well," she said eventually, and got up. "I'll have to make my rounds. You can go if you like."

"But there's half an hour left."

"Just go. I can manage on my own. And you'll have some time for your girlfriend this evening."

I turned and put on my jacket, my cheeks lightly flushed.

"How did you know I had a girlfriend?"

She paused in the doorway.

"Hard to imagine such a handsome man as you being on his own," she said, and continued up the corridor.

I sat at the back of the bus and put on my Walkman, played Sonic Youth, a band I had tried to like for ages, without any success, until that autumn when *Goo* came out. One night I had been listening to it, downstairs with Espen, we had been smoking hash, and I was lost in the music, literally, I saw it as rooms and corridors, floors and walls, ditches and slopes, small forests between apartment blocks and railway lines, and didn't emerge from it until the song stopped, it was like drawing breath because the next minute a new song started and I was caught again. The exception was the second song, "Tunic," it just kept moving forward, I sat with my eyes closed and drifted with it. Strange, I thought now as it started in my headset, because the lyrics, or at least the chorus, explicitly stated the opposite.

You aren't never going anywhere
You aren't never going anywhere
I ain't never going anywhere
I ain't never going anywhere

As Gunvor lived so close to the bus station and the next shift started at seven in the morning, I slept at her place that night. I told her a little of what it was like up there, but halfheartedly, the essence of the job was atmospheres, the despair locked in these people's bodies, and it was impossible to communicate that. Her eyes suddenly serious, she snuggled up to me, fixed them on me, and then, for a few minutes, it was just us two, there in the room with the sloping windows, the rain running down their length, high above the streets where people walked up and down, but then, as we extricated ourselves and lay on our own sides to sleep, I was alone again until sleep came and released me from everything.

I woke up before the alarm clock, almost ripped asunder by what I had been dreaming, which disappeared the instant I opened my eyes. But the mood lasted. I got up, ate a slice of bread in her cold kitchen, dressed as quietly as I could, closed the door carefully behind me, and went out into the darkness and rain.

"Sit yourself down and have a smoke," Mary said when I arrived. "Sunday is a long day here. We don't need to exert ourselves before we have to."

"Sounds good," I said. "I was a little lost yesterday. I didn't really know what to do. So could you give me a few tasks, basically?"

She smiled.

"You can always wash some clothes. But first tell me a little about yourself."

"There's nothing to tell," I said. "At least not this early in the morning."

"Do you know what Eva said about you yesterday?"

"No."

"'Still waters run deep.'"

"That was a charitable interpretation," I said with a blush.

"If there's one thing we learn here, it's to be judges of character." She winked at me. "Go and put a load in the wash. Then you can start on the breakfast afterward."

I did as she said. The first patients were already up and sitting around the tables in the "communal area," smoking with nicotine-stained fingers. Some of them were mumbling to themselves. They were the chronically ill, Eva had told me the night before, they had been here for many years and were outwardly calm, but if something were to happen and the alarm went off, I had to drop everything and run to the action. This was the sole instruction I had been given with regard to the patients. No one had said anything at the previous institution either, but here it seemed more striking because it was possible to talk to these patients in a very different way. What should I do if they approached me and wanted to discuss something important? Play along? Say what I thought? Contact someone who had been trained to deal with this?

I emptied the fridge of all the cheese, milk, and juice, took out a pile of plates, butter knives, glasses, and cups, put everything on the trolley and started to set the tables. As it was Sunday, I boiled some eggs and lit a tea light on every table. A lean dark-haired man with trembling hands who resembled Ludwig Wittgenstein had already sat down. He looked straight ahead as though praying.

I put a plate in front of him.

"I'm no fucking homo!" he said.

I put out a cheese board and cartons of milk and juice. He didn't say anything else; he didn't seem to have noticed me at all. Mary came in and gave him a small cylinder of pills, poured juice into his glass, stood there until he had swallowed them, continued through the room. I took out the eggs, rinsed them in cold water, switched on the coffee machine, dampened a cloth, and wiped the counter and cutting board. There was an empty car outside in the parking lot with its lights on. Åge came into the hall, he raised a hand in greeting, I waved back.

"Well?" he said, standing next to me after leaving his jacket and bag in the lounge. "Did you have a good Saturday night?"

"Yes," I said. "Nice and quiet. Went to bed early."

"You seem like a responsible guy," he said.

"Maybe," I said.

"I thought we could take a trip with them this morning," he said. "What do you say to that?"

"OK with me," I said. "But I don't have a driver's license. Do you?"

"Yes. Then we can get away from the biddies for a bit."

This was an idiotic comment, but I didn't want him to know I thought that and feel rejected, so I hung around before I went in to fetch the eggs and egg cups.

He requisitioned a car after breakfast, gathered four of the patients, then we got in and drove off. Through the center of Bergen and up the other side, where he stopped on a large gravel parking area under the mountain, this was Lake Svartediket, he said, and it lived up to its name, the black dyke, at any rate now in late autumn, because there was barely any color in the countryside. We piled out of the car and walked up a gentle mountain ridge, he talked nonstop, his voice was a whine and he rolled out a whole litany of complaints about the conditions at Sandviken Hospital. He was particularly dissatisfied with the atmosphere among the nurses in the ward, they were conspiratorial, he said, talked behind one another's backs, he said, and I nodded and nodded while thinking, what an idiot this man is, won't he shut up soon, what the hell has this got to do with me?

We stopped, looked around us, at a lake some distance away, as black as the blackest asphalt, and at the mountain that rose almost vertically behind it, and then we walked back to the car. He drove on, turned off by Nesttun and went back. The whole time he played Bob Dylan on the stereo, and I thought, that fits, they're crabby, both of them.

"Ta-da, three hours gone," he said as we drove uphill on the Sandviken side of town.

"That's true," I said.

"It was nice talking to you," he said. "I can see you understand what it's all about."

"Thanks, and the same to you," I said.

What a jerk.

Mary, on the other hand, I thought, was a different kettle of fish, and a tingle spread through my stomach. Yes, she was thirty years old, yes, she was a nurse, yes, I had only spoken five sentences to her, tops, but none of that was important because nothing else was going to happen. Did it matter that I was full of tension when I was in the same room as her?

As I was about to leave some hours later, Eva asked me if I was interested in any more work. I nodded, she put my name on the internal temporary staff list. At the bus stop, in the pouring rain, I tallied up the monthly salaries in my head. I went to bed as soon as I got home, slept deeply, was woken by the telephone, everything was pitch black around me and at first I thought I had slept through the night, but it was no more than half past five. It was Yngve, he was working at the hotel and wondered if I felt like going out when he had finished. I said yes, of course, and we agreed to meet at Café Opera just after ten.

I had promised him a song, I had one started, and after eating I put on the music and got down to work. Jone was in Stavanger and Espen must have been out, judging by the silence from below, so I cranked up the volume and enjoyed myself; when I composed lyrics for Yngve, I felt no restrictions, I just wrote.

An hour later it was done.

Love Her, Love Her Dog

She stops the car,
she gets out,
the dog sniffs out a corpse,
your eyes see what happens,

an eye for detail,
the movement between two words,
a little farther every time

He lies at her feet
pretending to sleep,
the dog runs round in rings,
she gets up, puts on her things,
walks out without a word

She stops the car,
she gets out,
the dog sniffs out a corpse
that's not been eaten yet

The first word, little man,
A little farther away every time
A little farther from your control

The first word, little man,
A little closer every time
A little closer than you think is right

He lies at her feet
pretending to sleep,
the dog runs round in rings,
she gets up, puts on her things,
walks out without a word

Out in the streets, walks,
the lights go off and on, walks,
down the streets, walks,

off and on, walks down the streets, walks,
off and on, walks down the streets,
walks

I took a shower, and because I was going out I masturbated, it was a way of reducing the risk of being unfaithful, I really didn't want to end up where I had been before, at the mercy of my desires. I couldn't trust myself, I could drink one beer, but if I had two I wanted more, and if I had more anything could happen.

Standing there in the shower, dick in hand, the image of Hans Olav sprang to mind at regular intervals, him lying there jerking off in bed, it was as if I had been contaminated, and it removed all my desire. But I managed anyway. I stood in the shower for almost half an hour afterward. Had the water not been cold I would have been there for another half an hour, there was no energy in me, no willpower, I wanted to stand there with the water pouring down me for all eternity.

I barely had the energy to dry myself and get dressed, I had to pull myself together and mobilize all the strength I had. After I had finished I felt better. It would be good to have a drink, relax, have something completely different to think about.

With the darkness outside the windows like an ocean and the rooms sparsely illuminated, I saw them as I had when I was a small boy. Everything in them was somehow turned away from me, into itself. It was alien, essentially alien. Everything was, I thought, and stood by the window in an attempt to extend this perception and see if everything out there was also essentially alien, turned away from me, from us, the humans who wandered the earth.

Oh, this was a scary perception. We were surrounded by death, we wandered in death, but we didn't see it, on the contrary we adapted it to our own advantage and used death for our own purposes. We were islands of life. The trees and the vegetation were related to us, and the animals, but that was all. The rest was, if not hostile, then turned away.

I got dressed and went downstairs, death, out of the door, death, up the hill, death, through the underpass, death, down the road, death, along the fjord, death, and into the park, which wrapped itself around me with its living yet sleeping darkness.

I had a couple of beers on my own while waiting for Yngve, it felt good, both because there were so few people around, there was a very special atmosphere with the darkness outside, the light inside, and all the space between people, and because the alcohol was slowly having an effect on me, it was promising, I was on the way up and when I reached the top of the arc that was waiting, anything could happen.

Besides I had earned some money recently and my prospects for earning more were good.

"Hello," said Yngve from behind me.

"Hello," I said. "How's it going?"

"Great. Have you been here long?"

"Half an hour. I've been enjoying the feeling of not working."

"That's the best thing about working," he said. "It's great when you stop."

He stowed his umbrella and small backpack, went for a beer, and sat down.

"How is it? At Sandviken, I mean?"

"Pretty awful really. But it brings in something."

"I've worked there," he said, wiping the froth from his top lip.

"Oh, that's right."

"It's different when you've done a few shifts and you're used to everything."

"I'm sure it is," I said.

"Have you thought about the Kafkatrakterne at all?"

"Yes, I've written some lyrics. The song's called 'Love Her, Love Her Dog.'"

"Have you got it with you?"

"As it happens I have," I said, and took it from my back pocket. Yngve unfolded and read it.

"Very good," he said. "Two more songs and we've got a whole set for New Year's Eve."

We chatted about it for a while, then there was silence. Yngve glanced around, a few more people had trickled in since he came, but there were still big empty spaces.

"Want to go to Christian?" he said. "There might be a few more people there."

"We could," I said.

As we walked he said that Sunday was the day everyone who worked in bars and restaurants hit the town and that Christian was the place where most of them hung out. We paid, sat at a table close to the dance floor, he brought back a couple of gin and tonics, I drank it as if it were juice. One more, and one more.

We got into conversation with two women, one was nice with crooked teeth and reddish hair, maybe thirty, she worked at the post office, she told me, and she laughed every time I said anything to her. I was much too young, she said, besides she had a boyfriend, he was big and strong and jealous, she added, although that didn't frighten me, I was attracted by her laughter. But they eventually got up to go, and Yngve held me back when I wanted to follow them.

Death was in there too, the whole room we were sitting in was dead, and everything in it, apart from those dancing. They were dancing in the realm of death, I thought. They were dancing in the realm of death, they were dancing in the realm of death.

We drank more, we even got on the dance floor for some songs, otherwise we talked about the band, how exciting it was becoming and what the chances were if we made a go of it. I said I would rather play in a band than write. Yngve sent me a look of surprise, he hadn't expected this. But it was true. Writing was a defeat, it was a humiliation, it was coming face-to-face with yourself and seeing you weren't good enough. Playing in a band was very different, that was giving yourself utterly, together with a few other people, and letting things develop from there. I was a lousy drummer, yet despite that something had developed around us a few times, suddenly we were in midstream, it swung, we weren't controlling it, we went with the flow, and that feeling of finding yourself in the middle of this was a high.

I had a tingling sensation running down my spine and I was smiling. The moment soared and soared, and then it was over. In the next song we were back to where none of the instruments and riffs and drumbeats blended in.

"We've just got to go for it," I said to Yngve that night. "That's what we need to do. No safety net. Give up our studies and play music full-time. Practice every day for two years. Shit, how great would that be!"

"Yes, but we'll never get Hans and Pål on board."

"No, but that's what we have to do. That's the only way!"

At that point I was seriously drunk, but as always there were few outer signs, I didn't stagger when I walked, I didn't slur my words when I spoke. But inside me there was no doubt, I had started following every impulse I felt and scorned any objections that arose. So when they closed Christian and we went down to Slakteriet to squeeze the last seconds out of the evening there was only one goal I had in mind: a girl I could go home with or who would come home with me.

We sat down at a table, some girls looked at us, I caught sight of them in the corner of my eye and turned, met the gaze of a girl with big lips and shining eyes, she smiled when our eyes met, and I got a hard-on. She was plump and no one would have called her beautiful, but what did it matter, all I wanted was a roll around on a bed with her somewhere.

I looked at her a couple more times, always brief glances, just to check if she was up for it, and she was. After a while she came over and asked if they could sit at our table. I let Yngve answer, he said yes, of course, have a seat. We're on our way home now but . . .

"Are you?" she said.

"Yes, soon," he said.

She sent me a teasing glance.

"You too?"

"It depends," I said. My voice was almost choking with excitement.

"Depends on what?" she said.

"Well, if anything special was going to happen."

"Special?" she said.

My heart was pounding wildly because her eyes were begging me, she wanted it too.

"Yes," I said.

"Like what?"

"Like, a party. Where do you live?"

"In Nøstet. But there's no party."

"Oh," I said.

"And where do you live?"

"In Danmarksplass," I said, lighting a cigarette.

"Oh, right over there," she said. "Do you live alone?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to have a party there?" she said.

Yngve eyed me.

"No, I don't think so," I said.

"You've got to take Grandpa to the hospital tomorrow, remember," Yngve said.

"Of course," I said. "I'll be on my way soon."

Then Yngve got up to go to the bathroom.

"Can I have a little chat with you?" I said. "Outside? I'm going now. I want to say something to you in private."

"What could that be?" she said, and smiled. Looked at her friend, who was chatting to a guy crouching down in front of her chair.

I stood up, she stood up.

"Come home with me," I said. "Would you like to?"

"Yes, it might be interesting," she said.

"Let's take a taxi," I said. "Now."

She nodded, put on her jacket, hung her bag over her shoulder.

"I'm off," she said to her friend. "Talk tomorrow, OK?"

Her friend nodded, we left, a taxi came down the cobbled street, I waved a hand and thirty seconds later we were on our way through the town.

"What about your brother?" she said.

"He'll be alright," I said, putting my hand on her thigh.

Jesus.

I swallowed, ran my hand up her thigh, as far as it could go, she smiled, I leaned over and kissed her. She put her arms around me. She smelled of perfume and her body was heavy against mine. I wanted her so much I didn't know what to do in the taxi, minutes away from my apartment now, and the bed.

I wriggled my hand in under her jacket, stroked one breast. She kissed my ear. Her breathing was heavy.

Across Danmarksplass.

"Left here," I said to the driver. "And then left again. Second door."

I pulled out a hundred-krone note from my pocket, gave it to him when he stopped, scrambled out, grabbed her hand and dragged her to the front entrance. She laughed. We stumbled up the stairs with our arms around each other, I clung to her as hard as I could, unlocked the door, and in the bedroom, where we were only seconds later, I first pulled off her sweater, then undid her bra, unbuttoned her trousers, slipped down the zip and pulled them off. She was wearing black panties, I pressed my face against them as I wrapped my arms around her legs. She fell back, I pulled down her panties as well and pressed my face against her again and then, yes, then we did what I had pictured we would do when our eyes met.

The instant I woke I knew what I had done and was filled with horror.

She was sleeping peacefully at my side.

I had to save whatever could be saved. I couldn't take any account of her.

I woke her up.

"You've got to go," I said. "And you can't say anything about this to anyone. If I meet you in town you must act as if nothing happened. I actually have a girlfriend. What happened should never have happened."

She sat up.

"You said nothing about that," she said, raising her arms to do her bra up at the back.

"I was drunk," I said.

"The old, old story," she said. "And there was me thinking I had met my knight in shining armor."

We stood side by side dressing in silence. I said good-bye when she left, she said nothing. But I didn't care about that.

It was ten o'clock, soon Grandpa would be arriving on the boat. I put the bed linen in the washing machine and showered at full speed. I was still drunk and so drained that I had to summon every ounce of willpower to do what was awaiting me.

As I was about to leave Jone came out of his apartment.

"Did you have company last night?" he said.

"No," I said. "Why?"

He laughed.

"We heard you, Karl Ove," he said. "Your voice and a girl's voice. And it wasn't Gunvor, was it?"

"No, it wasn't. I've been a fool. I don't understand what got into me."

I met his eyes.

"Please do me a favor and don't mention this to Gunvor. Or to anyone."

"Naturally," he said. "I've neither heard nor seen anything. You didn't either, did you, Siren?"

The last part he shouted into his apartment.

"Is Siren here too?"

"Yes, but it's OK. This'll stay between us. No worries."

"Thank you, Jone," I said. "Now I need to get going though."

I dragged myself down the stairs, sped up when I was outside, nauseous and with an aching head, but that wasn't a problem, what was a problem was that I was so tired I didn't really have the energy for this. I just caught a bus at the Forum stop and jumped off at Fisketorget ten minutes later as the express boat from Sogn was slowly entering the harbor.

There was radiant sunshine, not a cloud in the sky, all the colors around me shone bright and clear.

I had to act as if nothing had happened. Whenever I thought about it I had to tell myself it hadn't.

That *actually* it hadn't happened.

It hadn't happened.

I stood outside the ferry terminal with a throbbing head and watched the Sogn boat docking, thinking what happened last night hadn't happened.

The gangway was lowered, a few passengers stood in the doorway impatiently waiting for the signal to disembark.

There it was, at the dockside.

They were starting to come ashore.

Nothing had happened.

I was innocent.

I hadn't been unfaithful.

I hadn't.

Passenger after passenger came down the gangway, most carrying a suitcase or two. Grandpa was nowhere to be seen.

The wind made the flags flutter, the water ripple. The drone of the engine resounded against the rocks in the harbor, the exhaust fumes fluttered upward the length of the white hull.

There he was. Small, wearing a dark suit and a black hat, walking slowly toward the gangway. He was holding a suitcase in one hand. The other was on the railing, and he shuffled ashore. I took a few steps forward.

"Hi, Grandpa," I said.

He stopped and looked up at me.

"There you are," he said. "Do you think we can take a taxi?"

"We certainly can," I said. "I'll ask them to radio one."

I walked over to a taxi driver putting some luggage in the trunk. He said there would be lots of taxis along any minute and closed the trunk.

"We'll have to wait a bit," I told Grandpa. "There'll be more taxis coming soon."

"Well, we've got plenty of time," he said.

Grandpa didn't say a word in the taxi. That was unlike him, but it must have had something to do with the unfamiliar surroundings, I supposed. I didn't say anything either. As we passed Danmarksplass I avoided looking at the apartment so as not to be reminded of what had happened, so as not to see how we had run for the door when the taxi stopped. It hadn't happened, it didn't exist, I thought, and we turned left, uphill toward Haukeland Hospital, Grandpa and me. Slowly, he took his wallet out of his inside pocket and began to flick through the notes in it. I should have paid for him, but I had very little money and I let him pay.

The sun was reflected in all the windows above us as we got out of the taxi and crossed the area in front of the main entrance. It was dark inside after all the sunshine outside. We walked to the elevator, I pressed a button, we rose up the building. The elevator stopped, a woman came in, she had a tube attached to her arm, it led to a bag on a kind of stand with wheels. When she stood still and grabbed the rail with her other hand a cloud of blood appeared in the lower part of the tube.

I felt like vomiting and turned my back. Grandpa stared down at the floor.

Was he afraid?

It was impossible to say. But all his authority had ebbed away. I had seen that once before, when he visited us in Tybakken many, many years ago. It must have been something to do with not being on home territory. In his own house he was a changed man, he radiated calm and security in a very different way.

"Here we are," I said, as the door opened.

We went out, I read the signs, we had to go left. There was a bell, I rang it, a nurse came and opened the door.

I stated his name, she nodded, shook hands with him, I said good-bye to him, promised I would visit him as soon as possible, he answered, good, and then he walked in side by side with her as the door in front of me slid shut.

I was deeply ashamed. My life was unworthy, I was unworthy and that became so evident when I met Grandpa, in his situation, ill, at the hospital, getting toward the end of his life. He was more than eighty years old and, if he was lucky, had ten years left, maybe fifteen, but also maybe only two or three, it was impossible to say.

He had a little tumor in his throat, for the moment it wasn't life threatening, but it had to be removed, that was why he was here.

Grandma was dead and soon Grandpa would die. They had toiled and striven all their lives, in the same way that their parents had toiled and striven all their lives. To eat, to keep their heads above water. It was the great struggle, they had fought it and now it was over or approaching the end. What I was doing, what I had done, it was unworthy, an evil deed, abject and utterly wretched. I had a girlfriend, she was wonderful, indeed fantastic, and then I had done this to her.

Why?

Oh, there was no reason. I didn't want to do it. Not now, not when I knew what I was doing, now I didn't want to do it.

I emerged in front of the hospital, stood on the gray asphalt looking around while I smoked. Nothing had happened, that was the point, nothing, absolutely nothing, I had been out with Yngve, gone home alone, slept, picked up Grandpa.

If I was going to meet Gunvor, if I was going to be able to look her in the eye, I had to stick to this version of events.

Nothing had happened.

An hour later I was sitting in the third-floor café in the Sundt Department Store drinking coffee while watching the people in Torgalmenningen. This was where I usually sat when I was alone in town, here, surrounded by older Bergen men and women, no one wanted anything from me, I was completely at peace and even though there was a vaguely cloying odor in the air, which the aroma of the cakes and pastries could not dull, in a strange way I liked being there. Sitting and reading, writing in my notebook if I had an idea, every now and then looking down at all the people moving to and fro, the pigeons living their lives in their shadow, with similar movements, just on an enormously smaller scale, always after food that had been dropped or thrown into a garbage can. An ice cream, a bit of a hot dog, half a roll. Often they were chased by children, then they strutted off in the jerky way they did, in a semicircle, and if that wasn't enough they took to the air and glided for five or six meters before landing and resuming their search for food.

I didn't want to go back to the apartment, but I couldn't sit here forever either, particularly not in my present state of torment. The best option would be to go to the reading room, take the bull by the horns, meet Gunvor and get it over with. If the first few minutes went well, if she didn't notice anything, the rest would go well too, I knew that. I just had to take the plunge.

I went out, put on my sunglasses, and set off on the heavy road up to Høyden.

She was reading, one arm resting on the desk by the book, the other supporting her head.

I came to a halt in front of her.

She looked up and smiled, beamed with her whole body.

"Hi!" she said.

"Hi," I said. "Feel like a coffee?"

She nodded, got up, and followed me.

"Why don't we sit outside?" she said. "It's such fantastic weather!"

"We could," I said. "I need a coffee anyway. Can I get you one too? Will you be sitting here?"

"Yes, please," she said, and sat down on the brick wall, her eyes squinting into the sun.

"I went out last night, you know," I said when I returned, passed her a coffee, and took off my sunglasses so that she wouldn't get the impression I was hiding.

"I can see that," she said. "You look a bit the worse for wear."

"Yes, we stayed out late."

"Who was we?"

"Yngve and me."

I sat down beside her. I hated myself for it, but the danger had passed, she didn't suspect anything.

"You don't feel like taking the rest of the day off, do you?" I said. "We can walk into town. I feel like an ice cream!"

"Yes, what the heck, let's do that."

Three days later we caught the bus to the hospital together to visit Grandpa. We got off at the little flower shop, which was in a kind of shack by the road, just below the hospital, and was so macabre, it sold funeral wreaths as well as the bunches of flowers many hospital visitors would probably buy. It was raining and the wind was blowing, we walked up the hill hand in hand, I was black inside, the thought of my hypocrisy was like an abyss, but I had no choice, she mustn't find out, and sooner or later the memory of the dreadful deed I had committed would pale and become like all other memories, something that had happened in another world.

Grandpa was in the TV lounge when we arrived. He brightened up, struggled to his feet, and shook hands with Gunvor, said we could go to his room, where he had chairs and a table. He sat up on his bed. In the bed beside him lay an emaciated, sallow old man with his eyes closed.

Grandpa stared at us.

"You two should be in a movie," he said. "You're so attractive you should be in a film. That's where your future lies."

Gunvor smiled and looked at me. Her eyes were gleaming.

"It was nice of you to come all this way to visit me," he said.

"Our pleasure," I said.

In the nearby bed the thin man sat up and coughed, at first a bark, then a clearing of the throat, finally a rattle.

He can't have long left, I thought.

Against the darkness and the window he looked like someone from a horror film. Eventually he lay down and closed his eyes.

"He keeps me awake at night," Grandpa said in a low voice. "He wants to talk. He's sure he's going to die. But I don't want to be drawn in."

He chuckled. Then he told us a string of stories. One after the other, and both Gunvor and I were spellbound, there was something about the surroundings that endowed what he said with a special intensity, or else it was just that his storytelling was better than it used to be. But it was hypnotic. He talked about pioneers in America who had been close to Indians and had also lived through a raid by them. He talked about his youth, when he had traveled around to dances in the district and when he had met Grandma, on a farm in Dike, not far from Sørbøvåg, where she worked with her sister Johanna. He went there with a friend one night. Grandma and Johanna slept in a loft, Grandpa climbed up the ladder, felt something pulling at his trousers, it was his friend, he had got the heebie-jeebies and wanted to go home. The following night he had gone on his own and climbed to the top. His friend had become an organist, he told us. He wasn't too good at playing, to put it mildly, and remained a bachelor. Grandpa laughed at the memory, tears rolled down his cheeks. But it was also as though he had forgotten his own situation, as though he no longer knew where he was or who he was talking to but had disappeared into his stories, because out of the blue he said he didn't get her at first, then it had just been a no, but the second time he had got her, he said, and can't have realized he was telling this to their grandchild and his girlfriend. Or perhaps he did. At any rate, I didn't want to know about any of this and asked him a question about something quite different to get his mind on another track. He listened to what I said and answered with a new story. And it wasn't just him who was forgetting his present situation, I was too, everything was beginning to merge, what I had done a few nights ago, unknown to Gunvor, her sitting there now, attentive, rapt, there was the darkness and the wind, there was the thin man with the wild eyes and his death-rattle coughs, there was Grandpa telling us about house building in the 1920s when he traveled around with his father erecting houses for people, about the time he wandered around with a rucksack full of books that he sold in the district, about herring fishing in the 1930s, when they had lain off the Bulandet Archipelago the whole winter, about building roads in the mountains in the 1940s, when he had been a blaster, about the war, about the plane crash on Mount Lihesten, about his brother's life in America. Back and forth in his life he went, and it felt like an event, as if we were listening to something unique. Happy and excited, we left the hospital, went past the cemetery and through the residential area, down to Danmarksplass, into the building and up to my apartment where all the horrors returned, but I didn't let them affect me, nothing had happened that evening, I had been out with Yngve and caught a taxi home, alone, if anyone said anything to the contrary, he was a liar.

When I woke up the next morning Gunvor had gone to her lectures. I started work on my assignment, there were just a few weeks left to the deadline and I had only written a couple of pages. What was worse was that I had no idea how to do it. Everything grew and expanded, but not in a coherent way, the threads ran in all directions and the certain knowledge that I not only had to keep a perspective on them but also gather them into one single strand made me panic. At twelve the phone rang, it was Sandviken, they wondered whether I could do an extra shift that night. I said yes, I needed the money and getting away from everything to do with intertextuality seemed like a good idea. I had a nap in the early evening and caught the bus there at half past ten. The shift was in a different ward from the one I had worked on over the weekend, but although the building may have been different, the atmosphere was the same. A man of around fifty received me and told me what

I had to do. It was simple, I was to "mark," in soccer parlance, a patient, he was suicidal and had to be kept under surveillance twenty-four hours a day. Now he was asleep, heavily medicated, and would probably continue sleeping all night.

He was lying on his back in bed, by the wall. The only light came from a wall lamp at the other end of the room. The supervisor closed the door behind him and I sat down on a chair a couple of meters from the bed. The patient was young, perhaps eighteen or nineteen. He lay there motionless and it was impossible to see from his face that he was so tormented he wanted to take his own life. His complexion was wan, his features delicate. There was a little stubble on his chin.

I knew nothing about him, not even his name.

But there I sat and I was his guard.

At long last, that night passed too and I was able to walk downhill to the bus in the black morning murk, sit with all the others going to work in town, get off at Danmarksplass, trudge through the dripping underpass, down past the dilapidated brick buildings, in through the crooked grottolike passageway, and up to the apartment. It felt wrong to go to bed now that the darkness was lifting and the day beginning, but I slept like a log and didn't wake until four in the afternoon, when the light had almost gone.

I fried some fish cakes and ate them with onions and slices of bread. Studied the assignment, decided to open with a description of *Ulysses* and then introduce the concept of intertextuality and discuss that, and not vice versa, which had been my plan. Pleased that I was beginning to shape my material, I got dressed and went up to the hospital again. Grandpa was all alone there and, being the sociable person he was, he would probably welcome a little visit.

As I approached the brow of the hill and could see the hospital ahead of me, a helicopter slowly descended and landed on one of the roofs. I saw a team standing at the ready, waiting, perhaps for an organ in a box, a heart that had just been removed from a body in another town, perhaps a patient who'd had a stroke or been seriously injured in a car accident, and it would now be inserted into a waiting chest.

In the spacious entrance hall, where there was a Narvesen kiosk as well as a bank and a hairdresser's, the reception area had none of the frenetic activity of the roof or of the garage, where ambulances were continually arriving with the sick, open to view, naturally, nor did any of the activity spread to the large operating rooms on the floors above, but the knowledge of it left its mark on these rooms nevertheless. The atmosphere in them was curiously somber.

I took the elevator up to the floor where his ward was, walked through the gleaming corridor, past the metal beds where patients, half hidden behind temporary screens, still subject to prying gazes, lay staring at the ceiling and at the door, where I stopped and rang the bell. A nurse opened, I said who I was visiting, she said this wasn't visiting time but I could have a word anyway now that I had made it this far.

He was sitting in the TV lounge.

"Hi, Grandpa," I said.

The state of mind he had been in was still on his face a moment after he had turned to me, and what I saw then, a hard, almost hostile, expression, made me think he actually despised me. Then he brightened up and I dismissed the thought.

"We can go into my room," he said. "Feel like a cup of coffee? I can order it, you know. They're nice to me here."

"No, thanks," I said, and followed him in.

The thin man was lying in bed as on the previous occasion, darkness pressed against the windows as on the previous occasion, and Grandpa's face was as rosy and childlike as it had been when Gunvor and I were here two days ago, but the atmosphere had changed, I was alone, I felt uncomfortable, I asked a few mechanical questions and actually just wanted to get out.

I stayed for half an hour before leaving. He spoke about the millennium, and from the way he was talking I had the impression he thought there would come a time when humans would live for a thousand years. Medical science was advancing so fast, people were living for longer, nearly all the illnesses people died from when he was young there were cures for now. His optimism about progress was immense, but not without reason; once I had gone with Mom and him up to Ålesund to visit Ingunn, his youngest daughter, and he had told us what it had been like when he was young. There had been enormous poverty, living conditions were tough, but look now, he said, extending his arms, it's incomprehensible how affluence has spread. Then I saw it through his eyes, everyone had a car, a big showy house, a nice garden, and the shopping centers outside the towns and villages we passed were crammed to bursting with goods and wealth.

With his talk of people living for a thousand years, it was hard to imagine anything else than that he was afraid to die. I decided to visit him again in the not too distant future, it was important he had something else to think about. He thanked me for coming, struggled up and made his way into the TV lounge while I took the elevator back down. I bought some Stimorol in the kiosk, glanced at the headlines in *Verdens Gang* and *Dagbladet*, stopped in the middle of the floor to open the packet of chewing gum, put two pieces into my mouth, and the sharp fresh taste gave me a sort of relief.

Some men in taxi driver uniforms were sitting in chairs below the row of windows at the other end. TV monitors behind the reception desk flickered. Beside it there was a stand with a sign. Clinical Biochemistry Laboratory, Neurosurgery Ward, Pathology Ward, I read. The words filled me with unease, there was something unpleasant about all of this. Everything I saw reminded me of one thing, my own body, and how little power I had over it. Perhaps it was as simple as that. The network of veins spread so delicately across my body, these tiny vessels, if the blood pressure surging through them became too high one day, would a wall burst and blood seep into the brain fluid? The beating heart, would it just stop?

I left the parking lot. Exhaust fumes floated on the air under the protruding roof. Heavy rain was falling in the glow of the street lamps, like tiny flashes of light. The black trees beyond extended like fingers, the darkness above them was dense. I walked down the hill, crossed the heavy traffic, passed the cemetery, and came into the residential area, the rain a constant patter on the hood of my raincoat.

Hospitals were strange. It was first and foremost a strange idea: why collect all physical suffering in one place? Not just for a few years, as an experiment, no, here there were no time limits, the gathering of the sick and ill was a continuous process. If someone was cured and discharged, or they died and were buried, the ambulance was sent out to bring in another patient. They had called Grandpa right from the mouth of the fjord, and it was like that throughout the region, patients were brought in from islands and small communities, from towns and villages, as part of a system that had already lasted three generations. Hospitals existed to make us well, that was how it seemed from an individual's standpoint, but if you flipped the coin and looked at it from the hospital's angle, it was as though they were feeding on us. Take, for example, the idea that they had allocated the floors according to organs. Lungs on the sixth, hearts on the fifth, heads on the fourth, legs and arms on the third, ears, nose, and throat on the second. There was some criticism of this, those who said that specialization meant that the whole person was forgotten and it was only as a whole person that we could be cured. They hadn't understood that hospitals were organized on the same principle as a body. Did the kidney know its neighbor, the spleen? Did the heart know in whose chest it was beating? Did the blood know in whose veins it flowed? Oh, no, no. For the blood, we were just a system of channels. And for us, blood was just something that appeared the few times there was an accident and the body was cut open. The call goes out, a helicopter takes off and thwumps above the town to pick you up, it lands like a bird of prey on the road by the scene of the accident, you are taken on board and whisked away, placed on an operating table and anesthetized, to wake up several hours later to the thought that those gloved fingers have been inside you, those eyes had shamelessly stared at your naked organs glittering under the surgical lights without once thinking they belonged to you.

For hospitals all hearts are the same.

Toward the end of Grandpa's time in the hospital Mom came to Bergen. She stayed one night with me, one night with Yngve, and the day after she left, Gunvor came over. We were sitting on the sofa, chatting about everything under the sun, when she suddenly got up and walked across the floor.

"What's this?" she said.

"What's what?" I said.

"There's a hair on the floor."

She took it and lifted it up. I watched her, my cheeks getting warm.

"This isn't yours," she said. "And it's definitely not mine."

She eyed me.

"Whose is it? Has anyone been here?"

"I have no idea," I said. "Are you insinuating I've been unfaithful or something?"

She didn't say a word, just stared at me.

"Let me have a look," I said, unusually conscious of my own movements.

She passed me the hair. It was gray. Of course. Oh, thank God!

"That's Mom's," I said as calmly as I could. "She was brushing her hair here. It's gray, see."

"Sorry," Gunvor said. "I thought it was someone else's. I promise not to be so suspicious from now on."

"OK," I said. "That's the second time. You opened my letter in the autumn as well."

"I did apologize," she said.

She had come by one evening and confessed she had read a letter I received from Cecilie, my girlfriend in my second year at *gymnas*. She was so jealous, she said.

She suspected that something had been going on, that was certain. If not, it wouldn't have occurred to her that there could be anything suspicious about the hair. Mom had been here, that would have been her first reaction. But it wasn't.

"I'm sorry, Karl Ove," she repeated, and put her arms around me. "Can you forgive me? I don't mean to be so suspicious."

"That's alright," I said. "Just remember for another time."

The night before the assignment was due to be handed in I was only halfway through. I had worked the entire weekend at Sandviken Hospital and when I sat down at my desk to start on it I was tempted to give up. Go to bed and sleep, not give a damn. But then I noticed how easily it flowed, it was as if the pressure was sharpening my focus, all I had to do was write, and I did, all night and into the morning, but then I touched a key by mistake and everything I had written was gone. I ran up to the university, explained my plight to Buvik, who accompanied me to a special computer data section, they took the diskette and would see if they could retrieve what I had lost. They asked me for the password, I hesitated, for some reason it was "pineapple," and I found it unbearably embarrassing to have a smidgen of my private life revealed here, in front of what was presumably one of the country's foremost computer experts, with one of the country's leading literary academics at my side.

"Pineapple," I said, feeling my cheeks flush.

"Pineapple?" he said.

I nodded, he opened the document, but failed to find the missing pages, and I, weary with despair, this had been my last chance, now the whole semester had been spoiled, walked beside Buvik into the institute, where he asked me to take a seat, he would just have to discuss the matter with some colleagues. On his return he informed me I had been granted a twenty-four hour extension. I thanked him with shiny eyes, hurried home, slept for a couple of hours and embarked on another hellish night with Joyce and intertextuality. Morning dawned, I hadn't finished, everything in the assignment was leading up to a major discussion, which never came, I was forced to write a conclusion in two lines, run downstairs and knock on Espen's door to borrow his bike, pedal like a maniac to the university, and hand in my assignment on the dot of nine o'clock.

When the grades were pinned on the board outside the institute a few weeks later and I saw that once again I had a 2.4, I wasn't disappointed, I had expected worse, and it was still possible to bluff your way up two-tenths at the oral exam. That is, if I had done the reading. But I hadn't and was forced to improvise, in front of Kittang of all people. He was kind to me, whenever he noticed I was struggling, he gave me a pointer, but not even he could extricate me from the mess I was in when he asked what Kittang wrote about this problem. I had several articles by him on the reading list, and hadn't read them, but with him present in the room it wasn't possible to wriggle our way out of these situations, clear unambiguous answers were required, which I didn't have.

But it didn't matter. It had never been my intention to become an academic. I wanted to write, that was all I wanted, and I couldn't understand those who didn't, how they could be happy with an ordinary job, whatever it was, whether teacher, camera operator, bureaucrat, academic, farmer, TV host, journalist, designer, publicist, fisherman, truck driver, gardener, nurse, or astronomer. How could that be enough? I understood it was the norm, most people had ordinary jobs, some put all their energy into them, others didn't, but to me it seemed pointless. If I were to take such a job my life would feel meaningless however good I was at it and however high I rose. It would never be enough. I mentioned this to Gunvor a couple of times, and she was in total agreement, only in reverse: she understood how I felt but was unable to identify with it herself.

What was this feeling?

I didn't know. It was beyond investigation, beyond explanation or justification, there was no rationality in it at all, yet it was self-evident, all-eclipsing: anything other than writing was meaningless for me. Nothing else would be enough, would quench my thirst.

But thirst for what?

How could it be so strong? Writing a few words on paper? And, yes, that wasn't a dissertation, research, a report, or that sort of thing, but literary?

It was madness, for this was precisely what I couldn't do. I was good at academic assignments, and I was good at articles, reviews, and interviews. But as soon as I sat down to write literature, which was the only way I wanted to spend my life, the sole occupation I perceived as meaningful enough, then I fell short.

I wrote letters, they just flowed, sentence after sentence, page after page. Often they consisted of stories about my life, what I'd experienced and what I'd thought. Had I only been able to transfer that feeling, that state of mind, that flow into literary prose, everything would have been fine. But I couldn't. I sat at my desk, wrote a line, then stop. I wrote another line, stop.

I wondered whether I should go to a hypnotist who could hypnotize me, transport me into a state where sentences and words poured out of me, the same as when I wrote letters, that should work, I had heard about people who gave up smoking thanks to hypnosis, so why couldn't you be hypnotized into writing light, flowing Norwegian?

I looked up hypnotists in the Yellow Pages, this professional category wasn't there, and I didn't dare ask anyone else, it would spread like wildfire, Yngve's brother wants to use hypnosis to become a writer, I dismissed the idea.

On the afternoon of New Year's Eve we carried our instruments and amplifiers up to the music venue, which was the top floor of Ricks. While the organizers were decorating and arranging the place, we did our sound check. This wasn't going to be a real concert, we didn't have a PA, the drums weren't miked up, and we had to perform on the floor, there was no stage, but I was still queasy with nerves.

Hans stood at the other end of the room and listened to us playing, he said it was good, we all went home to change.

Had I not been playing in the band, I would never have been invited to this. It was a fiftieth birthday party, in the sense that two twenty-fifth birthdays had been rolled into one, and everyone present had a connection with what I considered to be the Vestland mafia, students with links to the periodical *Syn og Segn*, the magazine *Dag og Tid*, *Mållaget*, an organization to promote nynorsk, and *No to the EU*. Even though they were only a few years older than me, they had already made it. Ragnar Hovland was also going to attend, it was rumored, as the conclusive seal of approval, this is the place to be, these are the people to know.

I returned to Ricks alone, walked up the broad majestic stairs, entered the room, which was now full of young women in their party frocks and young men in dark suits, urbane and worldly and self-assured Vestlanders. The buzz of conversation, peals of laughter, the expectant atmosphere that only precedes a celebration. I stepped back and searched for Yngve.

Yngve, Yngve, where are you when I need you?

There was Hans anyway. But he was also one of them, urbane and worldly and self-assured, always with an ironic riposte on his tongue. I was proud of being in the same band as him, but not of being in the same band as Yngve, because everyone realized it was thanks to him that I had the chance to play and be here.

I slowly mingled in the crowd. Many of the faces were familiar, I had seen them at Høyden and Café Opera, Garage and Hulen, I could put a name to less than a handful.

I caught sight of Ragnar Hovland and wondered whether to approach him. Being seen in conversation with him would do wonders for my status.

I moved toward him. He was talking to a woman in her midthirties and didn't see me until I was next to them.

"Hi," he said. "It's the man himself!"

"Yes," I said. "We're going to play later."

"You're in a band! Well, I'm pleased to hear that."

His eyes were smiling but also shifty.

"How's it going at the Academy?"

"It's good. We had to introduce compulsory attendance after you left. But they're behaving well."

"I know Espen," I said. "He's a good friend of mine."

"Is that right?" he said.

There was a silence. Both he and I scanned the room.

"Any books in progress?" I said at length.

"There's one I'm messing about with," he said.

The natural response would have been to ask me how my writing was going, if I was working on anything, but he didn't. I could understand why, and I didn't blame him, but it still rankled with me.

"Perhaps we can talk later," I said. "I'm just going for a walk."

He smiled and turned back to the woman. I noticed Yngve arrive, moved toward the entrance area, where he was standing and looking around. I raised my hand and went over to him.

"Butterflies?" he said.

"Yes, terrible," I said. "And you?"

"Not so bad. They'll come soon enough."

I lit a cigarette, we joined Hans, chatted for a bit until a girl clapped her hands and silence spread like a flock of pigeons startled into the air. She welcomed everyone. There was a dinner, there were speeches, there was entertainment, and last of all a gig with the Kafkatrakterne.

My stomach knotted so hard it hurt.

We went to the table, there were name cards, I found mine and sat down, a long way from Yngve and Hans unfortunately.

Each card bore a sentence about the bearer, a personal characteristic. Mine said, *Twenty years on the outside, a thousand on the inside.*

Was that how they saw me? Was that how I was seen?

In the last year I had spoken less and less, become more and more reticent, that was probably what the card was alluding to.

The girl beside me, who was wearing a short black skirt with some net trimming below, dark stockings, and red high-heeled shoes, unfolded her napkin and laid it on her lap. I followed suit.

She looked at me.

"Who do you know here? I mean, of those who organized the party."

"No one," I said with a blush. "I'm playing in the band."

"Oh," she said. "What do you play?"

"The drums," I said.

"Oh," she said.

I looked the other way for a while and that was the end of her questions.

I ate without saying a word to anyone, occasionally casting a glance at Yngve or Hans, who were both chatting away with their neighbors.

The dinner lasted an eternity.

There was a storm outside. The wind was so strong that trash cans were sent rolling through the streets, I could hear the clatter below, and now and then windowpanes tinkled.

The moment the dinner was over I joined Yngve and Hans and stayed at the front until we were due to play.

We were introduced, I could barely stand up straight, people clapped, we went over to our instruments, I sat down on the little drum stool, put on the NFK cap I had brought along as a little gesture to the audience, NFK was an agricultural co-op, they might be on their way to glittering academic success, but they had grown up with tractors, combine harvesters, and cans of formic acid, the whole bunch of them, wiped my hands on the towel, grabbed the sticks. People stood watching us. It was my job to count, but I didn't dare in case Pål or Yngve weren't ready.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

Yngve nodded.

"You ready, Pål?"

"Count, Karl Ove," he said.

I hummed the first riff of "Over My Head" sotto voce.

OK.

I counted and we started to play. To my horror, I discovered that the bass drum was sliding away with every beat. Not much, but enough for me to be sitting with my leg fully outstretched by the end of the song, and as I had to hit the hi-hat and the snare drum at the same time I must have looked like some kind of elongated monster spider.

They clapped, I pulled the bass drum back, counted for the next song and slipped back into my spider pose. People started dancing, it was going well, especially Hans made sure of that, he was the showman, undaunted, and, luckily, uncritical.

When I got home, after crossing the windblown deserted town in the early hours, I cried. For no reason, everything was great, the concert had been a success, at least as far as we could judge, but it didn't help, the moment my head touched the bed the tears came.

In the New Year I was offered a regular weekend temporary post, which I accepted. In addition, I put my name on the temping list, and so gradually that I hardly noticed, I found myself working there full-time. I put my studies on hold and said yes to everything, I had an appetite for it, almost an urge, I wanted to work as much as possible and did so all the following year. Some days I did double shifts, started in one ward in the morning, transferred to another in the evening and in this way worked sixteen hours in succession. Some weeks I took shifts in the hardest ward, those who worked there were to a large degree bouncers, and I was ill at ease, in fact I was scared the whole time, a couple of the residents I considered extremely dangerous, although the bouncers just laughed at them and sometimes even put them on their laps and patted them while they watched TV, as if they were cats.

One in particular was terrifying. His name was Knut, he was in his late thirties but had the physique of a teenager. Slim, muscular body, an attractive shaven head. He'd had his head shaved because otherwise he would pull out his hair and eat it. He also ate dust balls if he found any, and one afternoon I saw him open the fridge and take out an onion. He sank his teeth in, tears began to roll, but he took another bite and another and soon he had eaten the whole onion, the outer layer and everything, still crying. He could be aggressive. More often than not he hurt himself, once he had rammed his head against the wall so hard that he cracked his skull. What he liked best was walking. If no one had been there to stop him he would have walked to Siberia, he was like a machine, he just walked and walked and walked. When he came toward me in the ward with those dark eyes of his, which expressed exactly that, darkness, I was always afraid. Once I was supposed to shave him while he was in the bathtub, he must have sensed my fear because he grabbed my hand, I couldn't move it, and then he bit. I had to have a tetanus shot afterward. They told me I could go home, but I went back to work, I was afraid of course, but I didn't want anyone to know that.

I was often on suicide watch with patients, many of them were more communicative than those in the difficult wards for chronic patients, many had drug problems, some of them were seriously psychotic or paranoid, others manic or depressed, most were young.

In the ward where I worked normally I got to know the other staff well and gradually began to go out with them. Some lived close by or next to Åsane Shopping Center, there would often be drinks on a Friday or Saturday night, I went, got drunk with all of them, these women who were all between twenty-five and forty, and later caught the bus into town to go out. Whereas students went to places south of the center, near Høyden, the hospital crowd went to places in the north, around Bryggen, where students, at least the Arts students, never set foot unless they were being ironic. There were piano bars, sing-a-long bars, Bergensians and Striler – people from the coastal region north of Bergen – of all shades and hues. They liked me, I didn't shirk on my shifts, and the fact that I didn't say much was interpreted charitably by them, from what I gathered. They were friendly and nice, and I was too when I drank, I met them halfway, once I carried one of them up the stairs to shouting and cheering and laughter, another time I expressed my admiration for them and said exactly what I thought, my eyes moist and shining with affection. I got on especially well with one called Vibeke, she and I could sit and talk for a whole morning if the ward was quiet, and she often confided in me, for some reason she trusted me. Then there were others who were more challenging. Åge in particular was wearing. He was one of the students who had abandoned his studies and now worked at Sandviken full-time. He tried to get close to me, clung to me like a rash, he got involved in countless arguments, now he wanted me, first, to listen to his complaints and backbiting and, second, to support him, and I nodded and said yes, you're right, to this, and, oh really, to that, in a way that made him think he was actually my friend. We were often out with patients, he moaned and groaned and stared at me with those insanely intense eyes of his, he was also bearded and pale, a wimp, a poor wretch, a loser, who in his own mind was a student, someone far better than the housewifely assistant nurses in the hospital or the superior psychiatric nurses who were after him, always after him, and then all of a sudden he wanted me to visit him, we were supposed to go out together, and then, for the first time since I was a boy, I answered someone who wanted something from me with a clear and resounding no.

"No, I don't think so," I said.

He withdrew and began to avoid me.

Then he turned and began to accuse me of betraying him.

What sort of a creep was this?

A terrible thought occurred to me as I was on my way home that night: Was he actually me? Would I become like him? An ex-student drifting around for years taking shifts until it is too late, all the options are gone and *this becomes life*?

Would I be stuck there, forty years old, telling the young students who come and go on temp contracts, actually I was going to be a writer? Would you like to read a short story? It was rejected, but that's only because the publishers are so damned conventional and don't dare take a risk with someone who takes risks. They wouldn't recognize a genius if they had one stuffed up their backside. Look, by pure chance, I happen to have a copy in my bag. Yes, it's about my life and you'll probably recognize the odd detail about the institution I describe, but it's not *this* one, actually. What was it you were studying again? Philosophy? Yes, I had a sniff at that, too. But then I went for Literature. I wrote about Joyce, you know. Something about intertextuality and the like. I was told it was brilliant. But I don't know. Feels a bit dated in some ways, yet there's something universal about literature which . . . well, shines *through* its epoch. But take it and tell me what you think during the shift tomorrow. OK?

I wasn't forty but twenty-two, otherwise the image fitted pretty well. I was working there for money to live on, and I lived to write, which I couldn't do, I just talked about it. But if I couldn't write at least I could read. For that reason I took quite a few night shifts, then I could read until four, usually undisturbed, and then clean the ward for the two last hours when I was so sleepy anyway that it was hard to concentrate. I read Stig Larsson's *The Autists* and *The Comedy 1*, and admired the realism that was so natural, while there was always an underlying sense of menace. This menace was the capriciousness of futile existence. I read Flaubert, his *Three Tales*, they were by far the best thing I had read, the stories hit the bull's-eye, they touched on the essential core, particularly the one about bloodlust, the hunter who slaughters all the animals that cross his path, I understood it, it resonated with something I felt inside and knew was important, but not in a way that could be explained in rational terms, for there was nothing to explain, the narrative was everything. I read his historical novel *Salammbô*, it failed totally, though in a creditable way, he had invested everything into that book, used all his skill and the whole gamut of his talent, but to no avail, there was no life in it, everything was dead, the characters were wooden, the setting felt theatrical, although this artifice also had an appeal, it also brought something, not only in the way that the time it portrayed was in fact dead, forever, but also in the way the novel in its own right, as an artifact, as an artistic product, made its mark. And then I read his novel about stupidity, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, which was brilliant because he didn't find stupidity at the bottom of society, in the lower classes, but in the middle class, and showed it off in all its complacent splendor. I read Tor Ulven and relished every sentence he wrote, the unprecedented, almost inhuman, precision to them, the way he managed to make everything equally important. I talked a lot to Espen about it, about what it was that made Tor Ulven's prose so good, what actually made it tick. There was a kind of parity between material and man, where psychology had no place, and that meant the existential drama was being played out the whole time, not only during a crisis, such as people separating or losing their father or mother or falling in love or having children, but all the time, while they drank a glass of water or cycled with a flickering light along a road in the darkness or you simply weren't even there, in the empty room he described with such mastery. And this wasn't something that was said or written, it didn't exist *in* the text, it *was* the text. The language brought it out, as we liked to say, through its modulation and figures of speech, not through direct expression but in its form. I read Jon Fosse, and it was as though a door had been opened into his books when *The Boat House* came out, because of its simplicity, its dynamism. I read *The Georgics* by Claude Simon and, with Espen, admired the complexity of his style and the absence of any overriding perspective, everything was somehow at the same level, and chaotic, echoing the confusion that the world *really* was. But the best writing I read during this period was still Borges, I was attracted by both the adventure in it, which I knew from my childhood and didn't know I had been longing for until I had read him, and the way the images, all simple, carried significances almost endless in their complexity.

I wrote next to nothing. I played around with a story about a man who was tied to a chair in an apartment in Danmarksplass, he was tortured and in the end shot through the head, and when that happened I tried to slow time down to almost nothing, describe how the bullet penetrated the skin and bone, cartilage and fluid, into the brain and the various parts there because I loved the Latin terms, they sounded like names in the countryside, valleys and plains, but it was just nonsense, there was no point to any of it, and I deleted it. Two pages, six months' work. We went with the band to Gjøvik and recorded a demo, two of the songs were played on NRK, and we got a warm-up spot at Hulen during the Bergen International Festival. It went well, *Studvest* wrote that even though we weren't on the poster, we were the hit of the evening and were given another gig there, this time a whole evening on our own. It was packed, we were too nervous, little or nothing went right, on our recording a voice from the crowd yelled: *This is bloody awful!* But *Studvest* gave us a nice write-up again. This time I wasn't as flattered on the band's behalf as before because the journalist who wrote it came from the same place as Hans and had even played in several bands with him. When we started talking about taking on another guitarist, his name was suggested, no one had any objections and so he turned up at a practice session, he was withdrawn but not unassuming, and immediately got into the songs. His name was Knut Olav, he had long reddish hair, an open face, a clearly defined austere, almost connoisseur-like taste in music. He played the drums much better than me, probably the bass better than Pål, and it wouldn't have surprised me if he sang better than Hans. With him in the band we made a little more progress and I had someone new to test my mettle on. He said very little about himself, would never have dreamed of describing himself in rosy terms, not even indirectly, in the way that everyone pushes themselves forward, without wishing to give the impression that that is what they are doing. His face was open, his eyes were open, and although he wasn't considered introverted in social contexts, there was still something closed and secretive about him. He was one of the few who would drink through until day broke, one of those who would never go home if something was happening, a quality I shared with him, and so we often found ourselves sitting in an apartment somewhere in Bergen drinking coffee at eight o'clock in the morning, good and drunk, chatting about things we had both forgotten all about the next day. One of the conversations, however, did stick in my mind, I was rambling on about the universe, how it might open in the future, how we were getting to know more and more about it, and hence about ourselves, we were made of stardust, I said, I was well into the shiny, glittering, festive mode the combination of alcohol and the sight of stars in the sky could transport me to, when he said, it was quite the opposite, new discoveries would be inward, our future lay inward. Nanotechnology. Genetic engineering. Atomic power. All the power and all the explosiveness was to be found in the tiny, in the microscopic, not in the great, the macroscopic. I looked at him, of course he was right, we were on our way inward. Inward, that was the new outward.

I wrote a short story about a man who died, I told it in the first person singular, he was stretchered into the ambulance just below the underpass by Danmarksplass, his heart had stopped but his story went on, to the pathologist, in the coffin, in the cemetery, in the ground. Three months' work, two and a half pages, meaningless, deleted. One evening the police raided the apartment next door, their kitchen window faced my wall, two meters away, the following day it was in *Bergensavisen*, they had found a stash of weapons and fifty thousand kroner in cash. I took the newspaper down to Espen, we laughed, in shock; only a few nights ago we had come home drunk, gone into my kitchen to get a cup of coffee, shadows were moving behind the curtain on the other side, I opened the window and threw a liver-paste can in their direction, it hit the glass pane with a clatter, we shrank out of sight, nothing happened except that the curtain was pulled aside and a guy peered out. So they were bank robbers!

Mostly though I worked at Sandviken Hospital. Sometimes it felt as if my whole life was being lived there. The people I worked with were low-level, I needed that. The money I earned, I needed. And perhaps doing something else, something practical, something outside the university, gave me a different self-image, which I needed to keep myself going: the real purpose of what I was doing was writing. Everything converged on that fact, or was supposed to.

One Saturday evening I was alone at work, Mary phoned, not long before the night shift was about to begin.

"Hi," I said. "Did you forget something?"

"No," she said. "I'm here all alone and I thought you might like to pop by after work. We could share a bottle of wine or something."

I could feel the heat rising. What was she saying?

"I don't think so," I said. "I'm afraid I have to go home."

"I'll be frank with you, Karl Ove," she said. "I want to sleep with you. I know you have a girlfriend. But no one will find out. It's absolutely safe. I promise. Once. Then never again."

"But I can't," I said. "It's impossible. I'm sorry."

"You're absolutely sure? This is absolutely definite?"

Oh, how I wanted to shout YES, PLEASE! and run down to her.

"Yes, I can't. It's impossible."

"I see," she said. "I hope you don't think I'm stupid for asking so directly. I don't want you to think I'm stupid."

"No, no, no, are you crazy?" I said. "That's the last thing I would think."

"You promise me?"

"Yes."

"See you tomorrow then. Bye."

"Bye."

The morning came, I was nervous about meeting her again, but there wasn't any indication in her behavior that anything special had happened, she was exactly as she had always been, perhaps a touch more reserved toward me, that was all.

I thought about her offer every single day for several weeks. In a way I was glad I hadn't succumbed to the temptation, I didn't want to cheat on Gunvor, and provided I was sober, that wasn't difficult. In another way, when I thought about it, I burned with regret, because if I had been totally free I would have taken her up on it. But I couldn't. Next year I would be moving to Iceland with Gunvor, she would take her History exam at the university there, I would write full-time. Until then I would work as much as I could at Sandviken. Would wipe excrement off the walls, restrain residents with psychotic fits, would be hit in the face by one, go for endless walks inside the hospital limits or just outside, when we weren't driving around the district in one of their minivans.

Hans, who had become the editor of *Studvest*, asked if I was interested in reviewing books for him. I was, and I did. I slaughtered Atle Næss's novel about Dante and wrote a whole page about *American Psycho*, which also had a connection with Dante in that the protagonist reads some graffiti on a wall traveling through the town in a taxi: *Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate*. The gates of hell here, now, Jesus, that was good. What a novel it was. What a novel. Hans asked if I would like to write a Christmas short story for them. I said yes, but I didn't manage it, I got no farther than a few lines about a guy on his way home in a bus for Christmas. I had been planning a kidnapping, someone being bound and tortured on Christmas Eve, but it was just a waste of time, like everything else I did. I read Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*, and thought, I could never do that. I made pizza for the patients one Saturday evening, it felt as though I was demeaning them as I did so. I went home to Mom's for Christmas, found a tenant for my place while I was away, one of Yngve's Arendal friends, went into Bergen and packed two full suitcases, said good-bye to Espen, caught the plane to Fornebu, then to Kastrup and from there to Keflavik, where the plane landed in the late evening. The darkness was dense and impenetrable, I saw nothing of the countryside I passed through an hour later in the airport bus, and I got no impression of the city I entered, which was Reykjavik. I jumped into a taxi, showed the driver the note Gunvor had given me with the street name, Gardastræti it was, we went past a lake, up a hill, the houses were big, like monuments, we stopped in front of one of them.

So this was where we were going to live. In an elegant townhouse in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

I paid, he took out the suitcases and passed them to me, I walked through the gates and up the path to the house. The door to the basement apartment opened, there was Gunvor, beaming. We embraced, I could feel how I had missed her. She had been here a week and showed me around our apartment, it was large and impersonally furnished, but it was ours, this is where we would live for the next six months. We went to bed and afterward we wanted to take a shower, but the water smelled like rotten eggs, I couldn't stand it, she said all the water smelled like this, it came from the volcanic soil, the terrible smell was sulfur.

A few weeks later I loved the smell, as I loved everything about Reykjavik and our life there. After she went to university in the morning, I would have a long breakfast alone before either walking into town and sitting in a café with my notebook or a novel, struck every day by the beauty of the people here, the girls were unbelievably beautiful, I had never seen girls like them, or I would take my swimming things and walk up to the local outdoor pool, where I would swim a thousand meters under the open sky, in rain as well as snow or sleet, before slowly lowering myself into a *heitapottur*, as it was called, the Icelanders' small hot pools. Afterward I went home to write. In the evenings we watched TV, I loved that, too, the language was so similar to Norwegian, it was so close in tone and sound, but completely incomprehensible. Gunvor made friends at the university, mostly other foreign students, and she acquired an Icelandic family friend, Einar, who was not only at our service twenty-four hours a day but also popped in at least four evenings a week. He had big black bags under his eyes, an incipient paunch, he worked and drank too much, but not so much that he didn't have time to drop by and ask if there was anything he could do for us. I never understood what he wanted, he never got anything back for all his exertions, at least not as far as I could see, and I wasn't too happy about that, he was like a leech, yet he was the only person I could drink with, beggars can't be choosers, I thought, and hung out in Icelandic bars with him, drunk and silent.

Through one of Gunvor's foreign friends I got to know an American about my age, he was interested in music, said he penned his own songs, was enthusiastic and naïve, we talked about forming a band, he knew an Icelander who played, one evening we went out to see him, he lived in a damp cellar, there was something nineteenth century about it, he coughed like a miner and was just as thin, and his wife smoked and carried around a baby and shouted at him, he just shrugged and took us into an even smaller room, crammed with all sorts of useless junk, where we could play, but first of all, he said in English, first we have to smoke. The joint made the rounds, he took out his guitar, Eric, as my American friend was called, took out his, and I was given a bucket to use as drums. It was a very ordinary bucket, red with a white handle, I turned it upside down, put it between my legs and started tapping and thumping on the bucket while the other two picked out a bluesy tune on their guitars and the baby screamed its lungs out next door.

Gunvor laughed so much she cried when I told her.

We visited the farm where she'd worked, they received her warmly, were shy with me, they spoke very little English, they said, but later that evening, driving to the community center to take part in a big do with all the others in the district, they thawed. I ate ram's testicles, buried shark, and other oddities, all washed down with their schnapps, and their reticence and shyness, which I had found so liberating as I was the same myself, disappeared in a heartbeat, suddenly, on all sides, the atmosphere soared to the rafters, soon I was sitting there arm in arm with my neighbors swinging from side to side belting out something similar to what they were singing. Everyone was drunk, everyone was happy, it was like me a hundred times over, and when the party was over, in the early hours, everyone drove home drunk. In our case, the cows had to be seen to, so after a whiskey in the kitchen with the farmer I followed him into the cowshed. While he staggered around with the muckrake groping for the cow fodder and straw bales, he told me to brush their teeth, a suggestion he found so amusing that he had to sit down so as not to topple over with laughter.

The wind was blowing outside. In Iceland the wind always blew, it gusted off the sea day and night. Once I was on my way to Nordens Hus to read some Norwegian newspapers when I saw an old lady blown over. I wrote three short stories and filled a whole notebook with comments on them and what I wanted to achieve in my writing. At night I dreamed about Dad, more frightened asleep than ever I was awake. Gunvor's girlfriends were boring, I avoided them as much as I could. A Swedish student, maybe ten years older than Gunvor and me, invited Einar and us to dinner, he was friendly, shy, had a big heart, lived in a fantastic apartment and served a gourmet dinner he must have spent all day preparing. We invited him back to our place, I found a recipe for lamb which looked delicious and we had lamb, Gunvor's farm had given us a bag of lamb and a bag of horsemeat. They looked the same, I took a risk, I made a mistake, and I didn't even get close to the picture of the meal the recipe showed with the bone of meat elegantly arranged with mushrooms, onions, and carrots, the meat slid off the bones, so what they got, our guests that Saturday evening, gathered around the table in our little kitchen, was horsemeat soup. Oh, it tasted absolutely dreadful, salty and horrible. But the Swede, Carl, nodded and smiled and said what I had made was very good. Einar, who was Icelandic enough to know this was horsemeat, said nothing, just smiled his inscrutable though not unfriendly smile. I began to get the picture, he had no friends. We were his friends.

We got drunk and went out. I had wondered about Carl all evening, there was something refined about him, even though he looked like a farmer, refined and perhaps a little feminine, and then there was the way he referred to his partner back home in Sweden, never by name, nevertheless something about the way he did this made me think the partner might have been a man.

I explained this to Gunvor and Einar, we were standing in a packed bar, the music was loud, I had to raise my voice to be heard.

"I think Carl might be a homo!" I shouted.

Einar stared at me with frenetic eyes. Then past me.

I turned. Oh my God, there was Carl.

He was crying.

And then he dashed out.

"Karl Ove," Gunvor said. "Run after him and apologize."

I did as she said. Out into the street into the hellish wind, a look up, nothing, a look down, there was Kallemann hurrying home.

I ran after him and caught up.

"Listen, Carl. I'm sorry," I said. "But that was what was on my mind and it just came out. I'm pretty drunk, you see. But I didn't mean to hurt you. I think you're a great guy anyway. I like you a lot. Gunvor also likes you a lot."

He looked at me and sniffled.

"I wanted to keep it a secret here," he said. "I didn't want anyone to know."

"But what does it matter!" I said. "Come on, let's go back to the others. We won't ever need to talk about it again. Come on. Let's have another gin and tonic!"

He dried his tears and joined me. This was the first gay man I had known. Afterward he began to mention his partner by name, some weeks later he came to Reykjavik, they invited us to dinner and it turned out he was fully informed about us and our lives there. Carl had talked us up, in his partner's eyes we were people of importance and I – so I understood – was a bit of an enigma. I had never told him what I was doing in Iceland, not even when Einar or Carl had asked me directly. I lazed around, swam, read, and at night, I had said once, I sat in front of the oven watching the bread I was baking slowly go golden brown and crispy. For me it was the other way around, for me Carl and his partner were the enigma, in their similarity, because how was it possible to look for the same? To want the same? To love the same?

For some reason, not long after, I ended up in a gay club. I had been boozing with Einar and, as so often, I wandered around town after we had said good-bye searching for places that were still open, wanting something to happen, anything actually, and that night I came across a cellar club, I went down, at first I didn't notice anything unusual, bought a drink and scanned the room, they were playing Bronski Beat, lots of people were dancing, I went to the toilet for a pee, and there, on the cubicle wall, was a poster of an enormous dick. I was so drunk it felt as if I was in the middle of a dream, went out, and yes, there were only men. Back on the street, my head bowed into the wind, someone called to me. I turned. A man of around thirty came running toward me.

"Sean!" he said. "Is it really you?"

"My name's not Sean," I said.

"Stop messing around," he said. "Where have you been? I never thought I'd see you again!"

"My name's Karl," I said.

"Why would you say that?" he said.

"Look," I said, taking my passport from my inside pocket. "Karl. Do you see?"

"You're Sean," he said. "You're Sean. You're Sean."

He took a few steps back as he scrutinized me, then turned on his heel and disappeared down a side street.

I shook my head, continued through the lifeless windblown streets, let myself in, got into bed beside Gunvor, who would soon have to get up, and crashed out as if I had been shot in the head.

From the first moment we decided to move to Iceland, I'd thought about writing articles there and selling them to newspapers. When it transpired that Einar knew Bragi, the bass player in the Sugarcubes, I didn't hesitate, I managed to get an interview arranged and went to his house. He'd just had a child, whom he showed me, we sat down at the kitchen table, I asked my questions, he answered, and as they had just released a new record, which perhaps wasn't as good as their debut album, although better than the follow-up, and with an incredibly catchy song as the opener, "Hit," there was no problem getting a newspaper to buy it. Bragi smiled when I told him which newspaper: *Klassekampen*. It must have sounded absolutely crazy to a foreigner's ears. As I was about to leave he said they were going to be playing in Reykjavik soon and I absolutely had to go backstage and see them afterward.

Gunvor was at the farm then, so I went alone, got so drunk on schnapps that before the gig I was rocking back and forth on one of the enormous lighting stands, it was highly dangerous, but I didn't give it a thought. A guard ran over and told me to stop, Yes, sir, I said, and left. If it had been Norway I would have been manhandled and slung onto the street, but here people were used to all sorts; because of an earlier ban on beer almost everyone drank schnapps and when beer was finally introduced the habit was so established that beer was almost exotic. Besides, half a liter cost a small fortune. Schnapps was what they drank, so it wasn't just me staggering around town. At night the lower part of the main street was packed with young people. The first time I saw it I wondered what on earth was going on, Gunvor told me it was always like this here. They stood elbow to elbow and were drunk. Iceland was full of such idiosyncrasies, which I saw but didn't understand.

The band started. They were good, and playing in front of their home audience, the gig was amazing. After the performance I went backstage. I was stopped, I claimed I was from the Norwegian newspaper *Klassekampen* and, in fact, had arranged to meet Bragi here. The guard came back, it was OK, I walked down the aisle, entered a crowded room, everyone was excited and in high spirits, the atmosphere was bordering on wild, Bragi was perched on the edge of a chair and waved me over. He introduced me to the drummer, said something to him in Icelandic, I heard the word *Klassekampen* and they both burst into laughter.

I had nothing to say, nevertheless I was happy, Bragi handed me a beer, I sat looking at the motley, outré selection of people around me, particularly at Björk of course, it was hard to take your eyes off her. The Sugarcubes were one of the best bands in the world at the moment, right now the room I was in constituted the epicenter of rock music. I was already looking forward to telling Yngve.

Bragi got up.

"We're off to a party. Want to come?"

I nodded.

"Just stick with me," he said.

I did. I stayed close to him amid the crowd of musicians and artists walking through the town, down to the harbor, where Björk had her apartment. It was on two floors with a broad staircase in the middle and was soon full. Björk herself sat on the floor by a ghetto blaster, surrounded by CDs, playing one song after the other. I was so tired that I could hardly stand. I slumped at the top of the staircase, leaned my head against the balusters, and closed my eyes. But I didn't sleep, something was rising from within, from my stomach and up through my chest, soon it would be in my throat, I jumped to my feet, took the steps to the first floor, ran to the bathroom, opened the door, bent down over the toilet bowl, and spewed up a magnificent yellow and orange cascade that splashed everywhere.

Some weeks later Mom visited us, we went to Gullfoss and Geysir and Thingvellir with her one day, another down to the south coast, where the sand was black and there were immense solitary rocks standing in the sea.

We went to an art museum together, the walls and floor were completely white, and with the sun flooding in through large skylights the light inside was almost aflame. Through the windows I could see the sea, blue with white crests of waves and breakers, a large white-clad mountain rose in the distance. In these surroundings, in this bright white room on the edge of the world, the art was lost.

Was art only an inner phenomenon? Something that moved within us and between us, all that which we couldn't see but marked us, indeed, which *was us*? Was this the function of landscape painting, portraits, sculptures, to draw the external world, so essentially alien to us, into our inner world?

When Mom went home I accompanied her to Keflavik Airport and said my good-byes there, on the way back I read *Stephen Hero* by James Joyce, the first book I had bought by him and quite evidently his weakest, it was also unfinished and not meant for publication, but there was something to learn from it, too, how he slowly transformed the autobiographical element, which was obvious here, into something else in *Ulysses*. Stephen Dedalus was a strong young character, summoned home to Dublin by his father's telegram, "Mother dying come home," but in the novel, *Ulysses*, that is, this arrogant brilliant young man was perhaps first and foremost a place where things happened. In *Stephen Hero* he was a person, distinct from the world around him, in *Ulysses* the world flowed through him and the story, Augustin, Thomas Aquinas, Dante, Shakespeare, everything moved through him and the same was true of Bloom, except that in him it wasn't the highest and the best that was in motion, that flowed, but rather the town with its people and phenomena, advertising slogans and newspaper articles, he thought about what everyone else thought about, he was Everyman. There was, however, another level above them, namely the place from where they were observed, which was the language, and all the insights and prejudices the various forms of language embraced, almost in secret.

But in *Stephen Hero* there was none of this, there was just the character, Stephen, in other words, Joyce, set apart from the world, which was described but never integrated. This development culminated, from what I could infer, in his final book, *Finnegans Wake*, which I had bought but hadn't read, where the characters had disappeared into the language, which lived its own everyman life.

I jumped off the bus at the stop between the university and the landmark building Perlan and walked the last part home through the embassy district. It was raining and misty, I felt empty, like a nobody, as a consequence of saying good-bye perhaps. In the apartment Gunvor was huddled up in the armchair reading with a cup of tea on the table beside her.

I hung up my coat and went in.

"What are you reading?" I said.

"About the famine in Ireland," she said. "The Great Famine. Did she get off OK?"

"Yes."

"It was nice having her here."

"Yes, it was."

"What are you going to do this evening?"

I shrugged.

She was wearing a shirt, with nothing underneath, and tracksuit bottoms. I wanted her and leaned over her. It had been a long time, it had bothered me, not for my part because I just wanted to have some peace, but for hers, she might have thought there was something wrong, that I didn't want her.

But there wasn't. I just wanted space around me, and I had that here, walking alone around an unfamiliar town during the day, swimming and sitting in cafés, and during the night writing at my desk while she slept in the bedroom, but even this space was too small, even there she came too close.

I was happy, therefore my desire was so great that everything else was swept away. Then I couldn't understand why I had been abstaining, there was nothing I wanted more, and afterward we were close again, as we had been when we first got together, then it had been only us two and not a word had to be said for it to be like this. Everything lay in the attraction and the pleasure, it looked after itself. But without it the distance had to be broken down or counteracted, with words or actions, and if I didn't want to or didn't have enough strength to sustain my desire, we were just two young people living together, sharing nothing more than age and culture.

She had never done anything bad to me. She had been good for me, always wanting the best for me. She had no defects, flaws, or shortcomings. She wanted only good and she did good. The defects, flaws, and shortcomings were all mine. I tried as hard as I could to hide them from her, and I was usually successful, but it was always there, inside me, a shadow I cast, and it gave me a bad conscience. I wanted to be out of this, I wanted to be alone, then it would disappear as it wouldn't affect anyone else, I would be left with it. But to be alone I would have to leave her, end what she had invested so much into and into which, in a way, I too had invested so much. She often told me she loved me, and I didn't want to hurt her, not for anything in the world, I didn't want to turn away from her, from someone who loved me so much.

Everything was good again this evening though. I had a shower, walked barefoot over the wall-to-wall carpeting, a feeling I liked very much, she watched TV, I sat down beside her, laid my legs across hers, she did simultaneous translation whenever I asked, but it didn't happen often, nearly all the pictures on the Icelandic news program were of fishing boats or fish auctions.

She went to bed, I switched on my computer and began to write. The telephone rang, I answered, there was silence at the other end.

"Who was that?" Gunvor shouted from the bedroom.

"No one," I said. "Weren't you going to sleep?"

"Yes, but the phone woke me up."

Now and then there were voices at the other end when we picked up the phone although no one had called or dialed a number. It was strange, but there were embassies everywhere and right below us, over the road, was the Russian Embassy, and it seemed to me the telephone cables in the district were under such heavy surveillance that the Icelandic authorities had lost sight of which were which. The country had a population of only two hundred fifty thousand people, it was impossible for them to maintain a high level in all the fields a modern state requires.

I switched off the lamps in the hall and the living room, making the desk with the computer a little island of light in the darkness, put on my headset, and started to write.

One short story was about a man in a swimming hall, the prosthesis made an appearance, propped up against the changing-room wall, but I was unable to develop it from there into something that wasn't vacuous. The descriptions were good, I had spent several weeks on them, but that wasn't enough. One and a half pages, one and a half months. I looked at it, put it to one side, looked at the next, a man with a camera walking around town taking photos, at the margin of one picture he sees someone he knows but hasn't seen in ten years or so and is reminded of the summer they'd spent together when the man in the photo's girlfriend had drowned. She had swum a few meters from the quay, at the bottom of the sea there were bits of masonry and reinforced steel from the work on the quay two years before, and she had dived down, perhaps three meters below the surface, and tied her hands to the metal. That was how they found her, with her hands bound, her hair drifting back and forth in the currents, all as a storm loomed over the island, with the sky black and vast.

Three pages, two months' work.

The problem with it was that I didn't believe it, a woman drowning herself, how could you make that seem realistic?

I put it aside and opened a new file, took out my notebook, and flipped through the ideas I had jotted down, decided on the following: *man with a suitcase in a train compartment.*

The next morning I had finished it. Ten pages. I was happy, not because it was good but because it was finished and because there were so many pages. Over the past two years I had written in all somewhere between fifteen and twenty pages. To write ten pages in a night was amazing. Perhaps there might be enough for a collection of short stories by summer after all?

The next weekend we went to the Vestmannaeyjar Archipelago, caught the bus down to the south coast and from there a boat over the sea. We went on deck and took pictures of each other, Gunvor with the hood of her blue raincoat over her head and raindrops on her glasses, me with one hand on the railing, the other pointing to the endless ocean like Leiv Eiriksson.

Then the islands appeared, they came out of nowhere and were a powerful sight, tall steep rocks, clad on one side with mist-shimmering grass, where sheep were grazing, up there they hung like little clouds, on the other, steep and without any vegetation, the rocks plunged vertically to the sea and birds were perched everywhere, on all the ledges and crags.

The ferry glided slowly between two of the rocks, inside, a natural harbor opened and we went ashore, left our things at the guesthouse and walked around the island, which was tiny. The houses nestled just beneath the volcano, the top ones were covered with lava after an eruption in the early 1970s. We walked up to the top of the volcano, where the ash was still hot.

"I wouldn't mind living here," I said as we strolled back down to the guesthouse. "That would be fantastic."

"What would you do?"

I shrugged.

"Just be here. On an island in the middle of the sea. What more could you ask for?"

She laughed.

"Quite a lot basically."

But I meant it. Renting a house here, in the middle of the sea, surrounded by shimmering grass, beneath a still-hot volcano. I could imagine that.

One evening Gunvor called Einar, he worked with computers, now we were having problems with ours, would he mind coming to have a look? He didn't waste any time, an hour later he was sitting in front of the computer in our sitting room working. Gunvor took him some tea, I asked him what the prognosis was, he said it wasn't a big problem, he would soon have it cracked. He stayed a while, we chatted about this and that, he was interested in everything we did, but never said much about himself. I knew he lived on his own, that he worked a lot, that he knew half of Reykjavik, at least judging by all the people he exchanged a few words with on a night out.

"When's your brother coming?" he said, standing in the hall and putting on his jacket.

"Next week," I said. "Perhaps you could take us out and show us the town?"

"Consider it done," he said. "I'll do it with pleasure. Just give me a ring."

And then he was gone.

Yngve came with his friend Bendik and Åse, Bendik's girlfriend. I met them at the airport, happy that they were actually coming to visit me, happy they were going to stay with us, and horrified at the same time, I had nothing to contribute, nothing to say, and they were going to be here for nearly a week.

I made dinner, Bendik said it was really good, I looked down and blushed, everyone noticed. They rented a car, we drove to the Geysir District, Bendik had brought some eggs with him, which he boiled in a tiny pool of hot water. The geyser itself was dead, there were no more eruptions, but jets of water could still burst forth, if you poured in enough green soap, they would spout up as in the old days. But that was something you only did on special occasions, as far as I was informed, during state visits and the like, so we had to make do with its little brother, Strokkur, which erupted every fifteen minutes or so. After the eruption the water lay still, it looked like any water, a shiny surface reflecting the grayish sky, but not long afterward the ground beneath us began to roar and soon the water rose, formed a dome, which then suddenly exploded into an enormous pillar of water. Steam and water everywhere in the air around us. Everywhere on the ground there were small simmering, bubbling springs. The terrain was a vegetationless wasteland.

I could have watched Strokkur all day, but soon we were off again, searching for a pool where we could swim. The idea of it appealed to everyone, bathing in scalding, hot steaming water outdoors in the middle of a wilderness. We saw some steam a few kilometers away, drove toward it, there was a pool, we made do with that, me silent, serious, tormented by the thought that I was silent and serious. Especially together with Bendik, who chatted and laughed nonstop and was the type to say whatever came into his mind. You're so quiet, Karl Ove, what's up, have you shit your pants or what? They were like beings possessed when they discovered how good the shops in Reykjavik were, bought running shoes, jeans, old sweatshirts, jackets, and CDs of Icelandic bands, which were the new big thing. They also liked the bars, we went out every night, to the first one with Einar, who was much more passive and reticent if Yngve, Bendik, and Åse were there than he usually was with us, when he tended to take the initiative. After a few hours we were in some bar drinking schnapps and Einar said he'd have to leave us, he had to meet someone, have a good time, see you soon, he said to me, and slipped into the night. I felt a little sorry for him, Gunvor and I were, it seemed, his arena, a place where he could be important, however I couldn't make this add up, he clearly knew lots of people in lots of places, how could he possibly need *us*? But a few minutes after he had gone I had forgotten all about him, the alcohol was having an effect, I was thawing, starting to open up, I was getting higher and higher as the night wore on, but at a certain point it turned, I felt a need to destroy something, hit someone, I hated everything, myself and my whole damned life, but I said nothing, did nothing, just stood there drinking, more and more out of my skull, and when I arrived home I got it into my head that I should tell Gunvor what I had been thinking for the last year, I was completely addle-brained, saw nothing of what I had around me, I was obsessed with one idea, suddenly and for no reason: to tell the truth.

She was asleep, I had been in the kitchen drinking, now I woke her up and said what was on my mind, everything.

"You're drunk, Karl Ove," she said. "You don't mean what you're saying. Please say you don't mean this."

"I mean it," I said. "And now I'm going."

I opened the window and jumped out. Walked down to the road, under the light May sky, and on to the town, up and down the streets, all dead and still, until I was so tired I started looking for a place to sleep. After a few blocks I found a flat-roofed garage beside a private house, clambered up, lay down, and fell asleep.

I was insanely cold when I woke up, it had rained, I was soaked through. Vaguely I remembered what had happened. But not what I had said.

Was it all over now? Was everything ruined?

I sat on the roof, dazed, climbed down a second later, so that I wouldn't be found there, and staggered homeward.

They were having breakfast when I arrived. Bendik smiled, Yngve was serious, Gunvor wouldn't meet my eye, and Åse acted as if nothing had happened.

"I'm sorry," I said, standing before them. "I got too drunk last night."

"You can say that again," Bendik said.

"Where have you been?" Gunvor said.

"I slept on a roof somewhere in town," I said.

"You're going to have to stop drinking, Karl Ove," Yngve said. "We were actually frightened for you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said. "Sorry. But now I have to go to bed. I'm on the point of collapse."

Gunvor and I went out for a talk when I woke up. I said I hadn't meant any of what I had said, I didn't know why I had said it, I was two different people, one when I drank and one when I didn't drink, she knew that, but I love you, I do love you, I said, and if what I had said, which I didn't even know, never completely vanished but lay between us, we continued to stay together, what we had was precious, especially for me. I decided to cut down on my drinking, that was where the problem lay, but the very next day I was out again, it was the last night, the following day I would be flying back to Norway with Yngve, Bendik, and Åse while Gunvor would stay on for a few more weeks, we had arranged that a long time ago, and it felt good, I had outgrown my life here, what had been wonderful before, the vast sky, the windy streets I walked alone, the swimming pools and cafés, the writing at night, our trips out of Reykjavik on weekends, everything had become infected, in a way, become entangled with the darkness of my inner life, the inadequacy of my soul, and so Bergen – with the job at Sandviken Hospital and its implicit renunciation of responsibility for my own life – appeared attractive.

Gunvor and Åse went home early, and Yngve and Bendik wanted to go too, Yngve almost dragged me, but the bars were still open, it was ridiculous to leave now, you can head on back, I'll follow you soon. What are you going to do out alone? Yngve said. I might meet someone I know, I said. Who knows what might happen?

And in fact I did. When I entered Filmbarin there was Einar at the bar. He waved and smiled when he saw me, I went over to him, we drank and chatted until the bar closed an hour later. He knew someone who was having a party, soon we were up in an attic flat somewhere with five or six others, each holding a glass of whiskey in our hands.

I lit a cigarette, he leaned forward with a little smile on his lips.

"Nice short stories," he said.

I stared at him.

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"The short stories you wrote. They're good. You've got talent."

"How the hell would you know?" I said, getting up. "Have you read them? How . . . ?"

"I copied them when I was fixing your computer," he said. "You've never wanted to say what you were doing here. I was curious. So when I saw your file I copied it."

"Jesus Christ!" I said. "You little shit!"

I turned and walked off, down the stairs, cigarette in one hand, glass in the other, outside into a backyard, where I was going to hurl the glass against the wall, but changed my mind, I wasn't that drunk, instead I put it down on a small transformer, or whatever it was, the little box that hung on the wall, went into the street, down toward the tiny Parliament building and uphill to our apartment, where everyone was fast asleep.

After six months on the desolate treeless black island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean the sight of trees below the plane seemed unreal, and when, a few hours later, we were walking through the warm crowded streets of Copenhagen, with lush green parks and avenues, there was a touch of paradise about everything, as though it was too good to be true for the world to be like this.

I had told Yngve the strange story about Einar, he just shook his head and said the little he had seen of him hadn't been very confidence-inspiring. The fact that he had read my short stories was, strictly speaking, of little importance, and I had regretted my reaction by the time I was leaving, perhaps I should have asked him a few questions and got a more comprehensive evaluation of the stories. But that wasn't the main issue, the main issue was the way he had acquired them and why he had done it.

Who copies other people's files? And why did he tell me about it?

What did he want with us?

Some problems are geographical, this was one of them. When we walked through the swing doors at Flesland Airport later that evening and emerged in the square where the airport bus was, neither Einar nor Iceland was in my thoughts. Late May in Bergen, that was green mountainsides, light evenings, energized people, aquiver with life. We couldn't go home and sleep, we had to go out, the air was warm and bright, all the cafés and restaurants were full, and the first stars were twinkling in the gently darkening sky.

The next afternoon I knocked on Espen's door. I hadn't seen him for six months, it felt like a long time, before then we had generally spoken every single day.

I told him a bit about Iceland, he told me a bit about what had happened here: he had taken Philosophy this year and done some writing.

"How's it going with the manuscript then?" I said.

"It's finished," he said.

"Terrific!" I said. "Have you sent it around?"

He nodded.

"It's been accepted as well."

"Accepted? Are you going to make your debut?"

Green with envy, I stared at him as I squeezed out a smile.

He nodded again.

"How fantastic!" I said.

He smiled, fidgeted with the lighter on the wooden board he used as a table.

"Which publisher?"

"Oktober. I've got a really good editor there. Torleiv Grue."

"What's the title going to be?"

"*Slow Dance from a Burning House*, I think."

"Good. That's a great title. When will it come out? In the autumn?"

"Yes, probably. There's still a bit of work to do."

"Yes, I'm not at all surprised," I said.

In the kitchen the cafetière stopped hissing. Espen got up and went out, returning with two cups of steaming coffee.

"What about you?" he said. "Did you get anything written in Iceland?"

"A little. Some short stories. They're not that good, but . . . at least I was working."

"*Vinduet* is going to have a debutant issue this autumn," he said. "I thought of you when I heard. Perhaps you could send one in? I've already sent one."

"It can't hurt anyway," I said. "A rejection in the hand is worth ten publications in the bush."

"Ha ha."

My jealousy burned for an hour, in which time I felt little goodwill, but then it passed, he had always been in a different place from me, had written brilliant things from the first moment I met him, and if there was anyone I knew who deserved this, it was him.

He was twenty-one years old and was going to make his debut. It was fantastic. And he had opened up literature for me. He had been so selfless, he never kept anything to himself, he didn't carefully guard his writings, he didn't hold back any insights, Espen was never like that, he had always shared everything and it wasn't to be generous, to create a good impression, to do a good deed, but because he was like that, he bubbled over with enthusiasm he wanted to share with me.

Was I going to begrudge *him* his debut?

I wished it for him with the whole of my heart. If it rankled it was because it threw me and my life into such stark relief.

"How does your summer look?" he said.

"I'm working at Sandviken Hospital. Then I might go to Kristiansand and visit my dad. Yes, and I suppose I might spend a few weeks in Jølster. And you?"

"I'm definitely going to Oslo. And then I'll have to find myself somewhere to live."

"Why?"

"Haven't you heard? We've been given notice. They're going to demolish the building."

"What?"

"Yes, we've got to be out by the summer."

"Oh, shit. That is bad news."

"Shall we look for a place together?"

"You mean share an apartment?"

"Yes."

"Why not?" I said.

I had been given a month's contracted work at Sandviken and they seemed to be pleased to see me on the ward, well, not the patients, they were as indifferent as ever, but those working there, and I slipped back into institutional life as though I had never been away. I printed the short story about the man with the suitcase and sent it to *Vinduet*, without much optimism, and stopped writing because the job was taking too much of my energy and because I didn't feel like it. Gunvor was working in her village, so on my free evenings I mostly sat at home reading. I went on the town a few times with Yngve, we also had a couple of sessions with the band, but it was all halfhearted. In the two years we had been together we'd played Hulen twice, Garage once, we had recorded a demo and performed one song in a proper studio, which appeared on a record of selected Bergen bands, and that was good, but if we wanted to go any farther we had to invest more time, that is, go all out, and no one really wanted to do that, it appeared.

One night I couldn't stay in, the summer weather was too overpowering, staying in and reading seemed unhealthy, so I went out, through the park, and down to Café Opera. Yngve's friend Geir, whom I didn't know, but who had rented my flat while I was in Iceland, was there, I bought myself a beer and joined him and his friends. It was a weekday, not very busy, but a couple of girls I half knew from the first year at university came in, I chatted with them, one was blond and good-looking, I'd had my eye on her before, she was one of those who gladdened my heart when I looked around the reading room, for no other reason than that she was lovely, so when Café Opera closed and I was in my most upbeat mood, I invited almost everyone there to a party at my place, I still had some tax-free booze left: Geir, one of his friends, the two girls, and six Africans. I didn't know the six, but I had spoken to them in the café and thought they might not know that many Norwegians, perhaps they hadn't really got into life here, and asked them if they would like to come to a party so that we could talk and drink some more. The one I spoke to nodded and smiled, yes, thank you, that's kind of you. As we drove through the warm light night, however, it wasn't the Africans who were on my mind but the blond girl, and she, sitting on the other side of the rear seat, must have been thinking about me because when we entered, after I had paid for the three taxis, and sat down to drink – the crowd at Café Opera had seemed small, but they filled my apartment, when had there last been eleven people here all at once? – she looked at me, asked me what I was doing now, how I was, what I really thought about the first year and about them.

"About you?"

"Yes? You seemed so arrogant."

"Arrogant? Me?"

"Yes. You were the one who had read Dante and had been to the Writing Academy. One of the brainy ones."

"Brainy? I didn't know a thing."

She laughed, I laughed, we went into the kitchen, she leaned against the wall, I propped up the counter, we chatted but I was hardly listening to what she said and a moment later I leaned over and kissed her. Went closer, held her, squeezed her to me, she was soft and good and not unwilling. I whispered that we could go to the room next door. It was Jone's, but he was in Stavanger, and we sank into his huge water bed. Oh, she was wonderful. I lay on top of her, she had her arms wrapped around me, then I heard a movement behind us and turned.

It was one of the Africans. He was watching us in the semidarkness.

"You have to leave," I said. "We want to be left in peace."

He didn't move.

"You can't stay here, as I'm sure you know," I said. "Will you please leave the room?"

He didn't move.

"Don't take any notice of him," she said. "Come here to me."

I did, and it was soon over. When I rolled over onto my back the African was on his way out of the room.

"That was quick," she said.

Was she being sarcastic?

No, she was smiling and stroked my cheek.

"I've wanted to do that for a long time," she said. "Shame it was so short. But I'll be off now. It's late. See you."

She left, I fell asleep, and when I woke up, with a pounding headache, the apartment was empty. The two bottles of schnapps were gone as well as the wallet I had left on the hat shelf.

That was all my money.

I sat down and rested my head in my hands.

Why had I done it? Why, why, why?

The guilt I felt was boundless. The shame burned in me from the moment I woke to the moment I fell asleep. The thought of what I had done didn't leave me. It was always there.

This was hell. Being torn into pieces by remorse, this was hell. And it was my own fault, it was me who had done it.

Why, why, why?

I didn't want this. I wanted to live a calm, quiet, warm and intimate life with Gunvor, that was what I wanted and it should have been easy to achieve, it wasn't black magic, it was something everyone was capable of and always had been. Gunvor, was she unfaithful? Had she ever been?

No, of course not.

Had she ever thought of being unfaithful?

No, of course not.

She was decent, sincere, honest, kind, good.

She must never find out what happened.

The blond girl had said she would be working at a hotel in Hardanger that summer, I called the next day and got through to her. I had dreaded this, it was degrading and humiliating, but I had to do it, there was no way around it.

She was happy to hear my voice.

"Hi!" she said. "Thanks for last night!"

"That's actually why I'm calling," I said. "I've got a girlfriend. She can't find out what happened. Can you promise me you won't tell anyone? Can you promise me it'll stay between us?"

She went quiet.

"Of course," she said. "Are you ringing to tell me that?"

"Yes."

"OK," she said.

"OK?"

"Bye."

"Bye."

I waited several hours before ringing Gunvor, I wanted the conversation with her to be as pure and uncontaminated by what had happened as possible.

Of course she was pleased to hear from me. Of course she missed me. Of course she was looking forward to us seeing each other again.

I had known I wasn't worthy of her. But I clung on. I lied, and the distance between us grew, although she was unaware of it. I hated myself, and I should have ended it, not for my sake but for hers, she deserved better.

Why didn't I do it?

I was on the verge, but I couldn't.

The next morning I caught the bus to Sandviken, and there was some comfort in that, even the smell of the institution, even the comfortless sight of people immured there provided some comfort. This was life, and what I had done was also life. I couldn't escape it, I had to accept it. What I had done, I had done. Yes, I was distraught now and would be for weeks, but time dims everything, even the worst horrors, it interposes itself, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, month by month, and it is so immense that ultimately what happened completely dissolves and is gone. It is there, but so much time, so many minutes, hours, days, and months lie in between that it can no longer be felt. And it's feelings that count, not thoughts, not memories. And slowly I came out of it, all the while cleaving to the notion, the redeeming notion, that if she doesn't know, it doesn't exist.

It didn't exist, she came back to Bergen and at first my guilt flared up again, I was a liar and a traitor, a bad person, an evil person, for some weeks that was what I thought when I was with her, but then that too dulled and lay like a constant though manageable emotion slightly beyond my consciousness.

It hurt when she smiled, it hurt when she said she loved me and I was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

Then it didn't hurt anymore.

Espen and I searched halfheartedly for an apartment over some weeks, we went and had a look at a couple, however neither was suitable, instead we moved into separate places: Espen to an apartment out of town, me to Asbjørn's former apartment in Nøstet.

One day I received a letter from *Vinduet*. I opened the envelope and read the contents at full throttle standing next to the mailboxes in the hall. There had been more than one thousand five hundred stories sent in, thirty had been selected, and they were happy to inform me that mine was one of them.

I couldn't take this in and reread it.

Yes, it really did say that. My story would be published in the debutant issue.

I walked down the steps into my new apartment, sat down with the letter in my hand and read it again.

There had to be a mistake. Or else the standard of the contributions had been exceptionally low. But fifteen hundred texts? From five hundred authors? Could they all have been that bad?

That wasn't possible.

So they must have mixed me up with someone else. Kramsgård or Knutsgård or something.

I laughed.

I had been accepted!

A few days later I was called up to do compulsory national service. I had to go to Hustad toward the end of autumn and then I would have a work placement somewhere for sixteen months. Basically that suited me fine, more than two years at Sandviken Hospital was probably enough, and I didn't want to study.

I continued working, I also continued writing book reviews for *Studvest* as well as doing interviews, which Hans suggested, mostly with writers since that was my field, but with academics too and any other people a student newspaper might be interested in presenting. I had nothing to do with the rest of the paper, I went in and picked up a tiny tape recorder, did the interview, wrote it up and delivered it, that was it. Hans liked what I did and he said many others did too.

Just before I left for Hustad two copies of the debutant issue arrived in the post. I found my contribution, it was called "Déjà Vu," beside the title there was a picture of me, a little passport photo they had blown up, and in the introduction below my name, date of birth, and profession, which I had given as "unemployed." It looked good, no posing, no boasting, in fact, as near to nothing as you could get in a brief bio.

The debutant issue was reviewed in all the big newspapers, not least because the previous one, which had come out in 1966, had contained stories by Øystein Lønn, Espen Haavardsholm, Knut Faldbakken, Kjersti Ericsson, Olav Angell, and Tor Obrestad, so when *Vinduet* did the same twenty-six years later everyone had an eye on the possibility that an equally strong generation might be in the offing. The conclusion most papers drew was that this was not the case. In all the reviews names were bandied around as more promising than others; mine was not among them. That was understandable: my story was one of the weakest contributions and perhaps should not have been there at all. By the time I caught the plane up to Molde and the bus from there to Hustadvika, I had put all this to the back of my mind. I would soon be twenty-four and in the past few years my life had stood still, I hadn't developed in any direction, hadn't done anything new, I had only continued the pattern that had formed during the first few months in Bergen. When I looked around me now, I saw no openings anywhere, just more of the same everywhere. National service came heaven sent. It gave me sixteen months to defer decisions. Everything would be decided for me for more than a year, I wouldn't have any responsibility for my life, at least not the part to do with studies, work, and career.

Early one morning one of the staff at Hustad came into my room and woke me. There was a telephone call for me. It was only six o'clock, I realized something had happened and hurried down to the phone booth at the end of the hallway, lifted the receiver to my ear.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hi, it's Mom."

"Hi."

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news, Karl Ove. It's Grandpa. He died last night."

"Oh no."

"He died on the way to the hospital. He called Kjellaug in the evening, she called for an ambulance and Jon Olav went over. He was there when Grandpa died. I don't think he suffered. It was quick."

"That's good anyway," I said.

"Yes," Mom said.

"He was old," I said.

"Yes, in the end."

The funeral was due to take place in a week, I applied for leave, was granted it, flew down to Bergen a few days later, caught the boat to Rysjedalsvika with

Gunvor, Mom picked us up, drove us through the rainy November countryside, across the small mountain district to Åfjorden, where Grandpa had lived his whole life. Born in 1908. To parents who lived in straitened circumstances. Everyone out here did. A mother who died while he was still small. A father who built houses and worked on trawlers. His father married again later in life and had a daughter. When he fell ill while fishing one winter in the early 1930s and died straight afterward in Florø Hospital, Grandpa laid claim to the house where the new wife and the little daughter were living. There was a court case, Grandpa appealed to the Norwegian Supreme Court and won. His father's wife and his half sister had to move out and Grandpa took over the house, where he had lived until now. He got married in 1940, to Kirsti Årdal, had four children between 1942 and 1954, ran the small farm with her, worked as a driver, kept mink, bees, a few cows, some chickens, and cultivated soft fruit. All the children apart from the youngest moved away, Grandpa retired, his eldest daughter was an *ungdomsskole* teacher, the next a nursing teacher, and the youngest a psychologist, while his only son was a ship's pipefitter and a poet. That was how it was, that was how things turned out, now it was over.

We drove up the hill to the house, opened the doors, and got out. It was raining, the heels of my shoes sank into the soft gravel as I opened the trunk and took out the suit bag and little suitcase.

His blue overalls hung on the hook in the hall and his black cap with the short peak. His boots were on the floor.

Voices came from the living room, I put down the luggage and went in. Kjellaug, Ingunn, Mård, and Kjartan were there, they hugged us and asked how Gunvor and I were getting on in Bergen. Ingunn asked if we were hungry. There was a happiness in the room, there always was when they met. I thought, this is what he has left behind: Kjellaug, Sissel, Ingunn, and Kjartan; their husbands: Magne, Kai Åge, and Mård; their children: Ann Kristin, Jon Olav, Ingrid, Yngve, Karl Ove, Yngvild, Odin, and Sølve. Tomorrow we would bury him. Now we would eat and talk.

The mist drifted in great sheets above the dense dark green, bordering on black, spruce trees on the hillside across the mere. It was nine o'clock, Mom asked if I would mind scattering spruce sprigs over the road by the gate. This was an old custom. I went down in the rain, laid sprigs over the gravel, looked up at the house, the windows aglow in the gray morning. I cried. Not because of death and its coldness but life and its warmth. I cried because of the goodness that existed. I cried because of the light in the mist, I cried because of the living people in the dead man's house, and I thought, I can't waste my life.

Jon Olav was supposed to hold a speech in church, he was crying so much he couldn't get out a word. He tried, failed, whenever he opened his mouth to speak another sob emerged. When the service was over we carried the coffin through the church into the waiting hearse. We joined Mom, drove slowly through the village, past the house, to the cemetery, which was situated on a hill above the fjord, where the grave stood open in readiness. We carried the coffin over. We sang, we sounded so strangely fragile in the enormous space. Beneath us lay the fjord, gray and heavy; on the opposite side, the mountain plunged vertically into the sea, wrapped in mist and cloud. The priest threw earth onto the coffin. Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. For a moment Mom stood alone in front of the open grave. She bowed her head, a fresh wave of sobs went through me, the last, for as we left to go to the community center, where hot meat broth was being served, the mood lightened, it was over, now life would continue without him.

I traveled back to Hustad, started calling around the places that employed conscientious objectors in Bergen, got an immediate nibble at Student Radio, as I had two years' experience of local radio, and after a few days of Christmas holiday at home with Mom in Jølster I went up to the Student Center for my first day as a conscientious objector. The door to the open-plan office on the first floor, where Student Radio, *Studvest*, and many other student organizations were located, was locked, so I waited downstairs for the manager to arrive, paced back and forth, reading the notices, looking at books Studia had displayed, sat down and lit a cigarette, nearly an hour had passed, what was this, had I got the wrong day?

An hour and a half after the time we had arranged he appeared.

Was that *him*?

A fat, long-haired guy with glasses approached. He was wearing a denim jacket, jeans, and a pair of the ankle-high yellow and black soccer boots with rubber studs we wore when we were small, before soccer became organized and we had real boots. One night three years ago I had been boozing and smoking hash in his studio apartment. It felt as if the gates of hell had opened. How could *he* be the manager?

"Hi, hi," he said.

"Hi," I said. "Are *you* the manager of Student Radio?"

"Yeah, baby."

"I was at a party at your place, do you remember? Long time ago."

"Yeah, you were pretty far gone, weren't you?"

"No, I wasn't. But you were!"

He laughed, a low chuckle. Laughter was an integral part of him, it seemed to flow around him, he laughed at nearly everything that was said.

Then he became serious again.

"Something happened that night. We realized ourselves we'd gone too far. I think we went out on the town a couple more nights and then packed it in. Per Roger traveled abroad and when he came back he'd cleaned up his act. And me, well, you can see what I'm doing! Come on and I'll show you around," he said, jangling a big bunch of keys.

We went up the stairs and into the office. Student Radio's rooms were at the back. Three desks, a corner sofa, some cabinets separating their section from the next.

"Here's your desk," he said, nodding to the closest. "I sit over there. And the people working here share the last one. Most of the work takes place in the studio. Have you been there?"

I shook my head.

"That's where you'll be most of the time. Your main task is to put the record archives onto the computer."

"Really?" I said.

He laughed.

"Archiving broadcasting schedules. The so-called TONO schedules. Archiving reels. Maybe playing them onto DAT if you've got time. Making coffee. Buying coffee. Let's see what else. Going to the post office. We get a hell of a lot of mail. Ha ha ha! Any other tedious chores we have? Cleaning the studio. Vacuuming. Copying flyers. Copying documentation for meetings. We're so happy to have a conchie you wouldn't believe it. You're the lowest on the ladder. You'll be our dog! That's your job description. You'll be our dog and at my beck and call! I'm in charge here."

He smiled, I smiled back.

"OK," I said. "Where shall I start?"

"Everything starts with coffee. Put a pot on, can you?"

I did, fetched water from the downstairs bathroom, sprinkled coffee into the filter, and switched on the machine while Gaute sat working in front of his computer. Apart from us two there wasn't a soul around. I sat down at my desk, opened the drawers to see what was in them, went for a walk to see what was on the shelves, looked out the windows, up at the park, the black branches stretching toward the sky. When the coffee was ready I poured two cups and put one on his desk.

"Thanks," he said.

"What are you working on?" I said.

"Wolfenstein," he said.

"Wolfenstein?"

"Yes. It all takes place in Hitler's bunker. The idea is to move up the floors. The old man's on the top floor. But it's not so easy because there are Nazis everywhere. The higher you go the harder it is."

I stood behind him.

There was a machine-gun barrel at the bottom of the screen moving forward along an empty corridor. At the end there was an elevator. Suddenly the door opened and some soldiers in white burst out.

"Oh dear," Gaute said.

They saw "him," there was an exchange of fire, they were behind a corner, a couple of them fell to the ground, but then another elevator-load of soldiers appeared, "Gaute" was hit and the screen filled with blood.

It was creepy because you saw the corridors and soldiers as if through a pair of eyes and when the blood came I thought, this is what it's like to die, your eyes filled with blood, game over.

"I've only played a couple of times," he said. "You've got the game on your computer as well. And Doom."

He stretched.

"Shall we call it a day then?"

I looked at him.

"I'm supposed to work eight hours a day. They're very strict about that. I have to fill in forms and stuff, which you have to sign."

"Who are 'they'? I can't see any 'they' here."

"Fine by me," I said. "But perhaps we should drink up our coffee first, eh?"

It soon emerged that, as far as Gaute was concerned, appearances deceived. I thought he was a slacker, a truant, and a shirker, but such was not the case. He was ambitious, had ideas in all sorts of areas for how radio could be improved, and during the time I was on national service there he reorganized the whole radio and made it more professional, from the management side to the music profile, and updated the technical equipment so that all the tapes I edited during the first months I worked there, when all the programs were analog, had gone by the time I finished after sixteen months, and everything was digital. Wolf was only played after working hours, and then I became obsessed, often leaving the office at two in the morning, having played nonstop from four in the afternoon, sometimes I was still playing when the others came in to do the morning program. We had a soccer manager game too, which was perhaps even more addictive, I spent all my free time buying and selling players and playing match after match until my team had won the European Cup, which could take several weeks. After a twelve-hour stint my head was ice cold, and utterly empty, this was systematized meaninglessness, but I couldn't stop myself, I was hooked.

Something else at Student Radio, which I hadn't seen before, was the Internet. This was also addictive. Moving from one page to the next, reading Canadian newspapers, looking at traffic reports in Los Angeles or centerfold models in *Playboy*, which were so endlessly slow to appear, first the lower part of the picture, which could be anything at all, then it rose gradually, the picture filled the frame like water in a glass, there were the thighs, there, oh, there was . . . shit, was she wearing *panties?* . . . before the breasts, shoulders, neck, and face appeared on the computer screen in the empty Student Radio office at midnight. Rachel and me. Toni and me. Susy and me. *Hustler*, did they have their own website as well? Rilke, had anyone written about his *Duino Elegies?* Were there any pictures of Tromøya?

After Christmas the outgoing conscientious objector returned, and he went through all the jobs with me. He was amazed to discover that I didn't know how to edit, didn't know the first thing about a broadcast technician's work, in fact, didn't know anything. On the radio in Kristiansand I'd had my own technician, all I needed to do was speak into the microphone, either outside, when I was interviewing someone, or in the studio, when I had my program. The technician took care of everything else. Here this was different. He was also amazed to see I wrote down everything I was going to say, even the simplest things like "Hi, welcome to Student Radio" instead of ad-libbing the way he and all the others working there did. But I learned fast. During the holidays the conscientious objector ran the programs, then I had to be able to work solo, that is, switch on the transmitter, play the radio jingle, the program jingle, introduce the program if I decided to play a repeat or sit there and play records and chat, perhaps call someone up and interview them on the air, which I enjoyed more and more, it gave me a real kick to do live radio alone, and the more complicated the schedule the bigger the kick. But usually I didn't run programs, apart from a short student news bulletin that was broadcast every day and for which I spent all morning collating, sifting through the newspapers to find anything student-related, writing, and recording. In addition, I compiled items for the culture programs, interviewed writers or taped book reviews, and every day I thanked my lucky stars I had washed up here and not, for example, at Sandviken or some other institution. Olav Angell had translated *Ulysses*, so I called him to ask him about his work. Fredrik Wandrup slated Ole Robert Sunde in a review, I called Wandrup first, then Sunde, added some comments of my own, and pieced it all together. Dag Solstad was in town, so I went down to his hotel and interviewed him. This was the first time I had worked on something I really liked. And I was not the only one who did, there was such an enthusiastic atmosphere, yet laid back, this wasn't a place for students wanting to farther their careers, on the contrary, up in the studio and down in the offices people hung around all day doing nothing special, drinking coffee, smoking, chatting, maybe looking through the new CDs that had arrived or browsing through papers or magazines. I said nothing for the first few weeks, nodded to anyone who came, worked as hard as I could, if I had fifteen minutes free I would key in a few record titles on the computer, if I had to go to the post office I would run up and down the stairs. At the meetings between managers I wouldn't say a word, however, I wrote down everything they said. But gradually I began to recognize the various faces and even remember their names. As I was the only person sitting there the whole time, everyone knew who I was and gradually I began to exchange a few words with them, perhaps even crack a joke. During one meeting Gaute suddenly eyeballed me and asked, what do you think, Karl Ove? To my astonishment, I noticed that everyone was staring at me expectantly, as though they really believed I had something to say.

At the beginning of every semester new assistants are recruited. Gaute asked me to make a flyer, it was the first real task I had been given and I was concerned I wouldn't perform it well enough, worked all evening on just the title, which ended up as Free Studio Loan, and sacrificed my favorite picture in the Dante edition I had, with the Doré illustrations, cut out the last picture, where they see God, the last and the first light, and stuck it on a sheet of paper, which I copied two hundred times and for the entire next day I stood handing them out in the Student Center concourse, which was swarming with new students. At the introductory meeting a few days later the room was jam-packed. Most sat or stood quietly listening to Gaute, but some also asked questions and among them I noticed a young guy with a shaved head and Adorno glasses, not least because he had a copy of Ole Robert Sunde's novel *Of Course She Had to Ring* on the desk in front of him. This was a statement and a signal, a code for the initiated, of whom there were not many, and therefore particularly significant. He read Sunde, he *had* to be a writer himself.

Some days after the meeting the interviews began. I sat alongside Gaute in a conference room asking successive candidates questions and jotting down brief notes. It was a peculiar role because I knew nothing, certainly no more than they did, yet they had to sit there and squirm in the chair and answer as well as they could, which no one demanded of me. Afterward we went through the list of names, discussed our impressions, and that was strange too, how much I enjoyed picking and choosing. Three of the girls had been especially attractive, one sat looking at us through anxious blue eyes under black mascara'ed eyelashes, with high cheekbones, long blond hair, probably about twenty, she had to be in. Another had her dark hair pulled into a long braid, kept moving her lips, perhaps the most beautiful mouth I had ever seen, sat with a straight back and her hands resting in her lap, elegant in every way, and when she said she played the drums, I was sold, she had to be in. Gaute laughed and added that she did in fact have experience in local radio as well and was an obvious choice anyway. The Sunde guy had to be in, the conventional Business School guy as well so that it wasn't just Arts students, and definitely the girl who was so knowledgeable about classical music . . .

After a couple of weeks' training, the various departments were in place, while I was beginning to get a handle on the job and was no longer nervous as I set foot on the steps up to the office. Now it was the opposite, I looked forward to going to work. Student Radio was the first time I had felt part of my own group in Bergen, hitherto everything in my life had gone through Yngve or Gunvor, that didn't happen here and I was pleased, although it also created problems. It felt as if something new had started in my life and it had done so outside Gunvor and me, outside our relationship, which was as before, we had been together for close to four years, we were best friends, we knew everything about each other, apart from the terrible deed I had committed, which was still there, inside me, not in her, she knew nothing, she saw me as a good person. But when she came to visit me at Student Radio, it felt wrong, I was uncomfortable, it was as though I were cheating on her merely by being there. I realized it was over, but I was unable to end it, I didn't want to hurt her, didn't want to disappoint her, didn't want to ruin something for her. Farthermore, our lives were interwoven in other ways, at home she was one of the family, especially for Mom, who had become attached to her, and for Yngve, who was very fond of her, but also for those not so close, such as Mom's brother and sisters, and the same was true on Gunvor's side. As if that weren't enough, she had got to know Ingvild last year, the two of them were friends now, and Gunvor moved into the collective where Ingvild had lived, the one with precursors going right back to Fløgstad's Bergen period, the one which in recent years had been dominated by Arendalers, in other words, Yngve's friends.

Could I cut the bonds to all this?

No.

I was too weak.

So I lived a kind of double life, I erected a wall between the various parts and hoped everything would resolve itself.

The guy who had brought Ole Robert Sunde's novel to the first meeting was called Tore, he came from Stavanger and brought a wealth of ideas to department sessions. One morning when he was in the office we got into conversation. I asked him how it was going with Sunde, he said he had thrown it at the wall in frustration and was writing an essay about precisely that right now, which he would try to sell to a journal.

"Have you read it?" he said.

"Not that one. I only got through the first twenty pages. But I read the one about O, you know, his Odyssey novel. I don't remember what it was called."

"*Contrapuntal*," he said.

"Yes, that's the one. I did my first-year assignment on Joyce, though. So I'm interested in that tradition."

"I'm more of a Beckett man myself."

"You like the secretary better than the master?"

He smiled.

"Doesn't sound so good when you put it like that. But Beckett's damn good."

"Yes, he is."

"In fact, I'm writing a sort of Beckett novel at the moment. Well, that may be overstating it. It has elements of the absurd anyway."

"You're writing a novel?"

"Yes. I'm going to send it in this spring. Then I'll get the usual rejections. Interesting blah blah blah, but I regret to say blah blah blah. I've got sixteen of them at home."

"*Sixteen* rejections?"

"Yes."

"How old are you actually?"

"Twenty. And you?"

"Twenty-four. I've had only *one* rejection."

"So you write too?"

"Yes . . . or no, not really."

"Do you write or don't you?"

"It depends what you mean . . . "

"Mean? Surely, either you write or you don't? There's no halfway house, to my knowledge."

"Then I do. But it's not very good."

"Have you had anything published?"

"A short story. In *Vinduet*'s debutant issue. Have you?"

He shook his head.

"That's sixteen nothing to me in rejections, and one nothing to you in acceptances."

"Well," I said. "The *Vinduet* acceptance might sound good, but the short story isn't."

"We've spoken for three minutes and you've already told me twice something's not very good. I detect a pattern. A personality trait."

"I'm telling you the truth. It's got nothing to do with my personality. It's an objective fact."

"OK," he said, looking at his watch. "I've got a lecture now. But what about a beer afterward? When do you finish?"

"Half past four."

"Five at Café Opera?"

"OK, why not?" I said, and watched him go down the aisle between the partitions and disappear down the stairs.

He was sitting alone at a table on the ground floor when I went into Café Opera later that afternoon. I got myself a beer and joined him.

"I've read your short story. 'Déjà Vu,'" he said with a smile. "It's good."

"You've read it. Today? Where did you get a copy?"

"It was in the university library. Influenced by Borges, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes. Or Cortázar."

I looked at him and smiled. He was the type who didn't leave a stone unturned. Would I have gone to the trouble of checking out the library for a short story written by a guy I didn't know before meeting him? Not on your life. But Tore did.

He was short and possessed immense energy, on the one hand there was something open and receptive about him – he was the kind of guy who would look around when he laughed and drop comments all over the place, completely unconcerned by how he might be interpreted – and on the other, there was something closed about him, which could manifest itself after immersing himself in one of his frequent bouts of sociability, then he might suddenly go absent, his eyes totally vacant, and he would hear nothing of what was being said, it lasted a few seconds, that was all, and wasn't very noticeable, but I noticed it at our very first editorial session, and it sparked an interest.

"Have you lived here long?" he said, looking at me over the top of his beer glass, from which he took sips.

"Four and a half years," I said. "And you?"

"Only six months."

"What are you studying?"

"Literature. I think I'll take Philosophy afterward. And you?"

"I minored in Literature. But that's a long time ago. My life has stagnated for three years now. Nothing's happened."

"I'm sure that's not true," he said.

It was as though he didn't want to know that things could go badly. But I said nothing, drank, and looked out the window, at the streets, cold and gray, passersby in coats and cloaks, the occasional puffy ski jacket.

I looked at him again. He was smiling, and it was as though the smile and the ensuing laughter lifted him and pushed him forward.

"I played in a band in Stavanger," he said. "Everyone knows everyone there. One of the guys I met while I was at *gymnas* runs his own record company and has a little shop in Stavanger. His name's Jone. And he came to Bergen to study for a year. He told me he shared an apartment with a total madman. He played the drums and read books and was going to be a writer. That was all he did. His place was overflowing with books, he was completely possessed. You know, Dostoevsky novels in the kitchen cupboard and Sandemose's collected works in the toilet. And he played in a band. A student band."

"What was it called?"

"Kafkatrakterne," he said. "Do you know them?"

I nodded.

"Yes, I played the drums with them."

He jerked backward in his chair and stared at me.

"Was that *you*? You lived with Jone?"

"Yes. I thought that was why you were telling me. You'd realized it was me."

"No, no, not at all."

He went quiet.

"What are the odds on that?" he said eventually. "On the guy being you?"

"Pretty good," I said. "Bergen's a small town. You'll find out soon enough. But say hi to Jone and tell him not to exaggerate. Everything was very normal there. I did read, that's true, but the apartment wasn't exactly overflowing with books. Though it might have seemed like that to Jone as he isn't a very literary person."

"But it's true you had rats there?"

"Yes."

I laughed. What sort of picture had Jone drawn? I could see him in his record shop encircled by *gymnas* students, *In Bergen, guys, it's the Wild West*.

But I hadn't even read much. Skimmed a few books, yes, but I hadn't read them in any depth as Espen had, for example. I had rarely played the drums. And the rats . . . yes, there had been two. One I caught in a trap and one I poisoned and it lay rotting in the wall behind the stairs.

"Does Kafkatrakterne still play then?" Tore said.

I shook my head.

"Do you?"

"No, not here."

We sat in Café Opera for two hours. We liked the same sort of music, British pop and indie, except that his taste was more defined and categorical than mine. The Kinks were his big band. XTC, a close second. He also talked a lot about the Smiths, and Japan. R.E.M., the Stone Roses, Bowie, Depeche Mode, Costello, Blur. Every time I mentioned a band he hadn't heard of I saw him make a mental note. Boo Radleys, I said, you absolutely have to check them out. And the Aller Værste!, you really don't know anything about them? Norway's greatest band!

Then we talked about literature. He was up to speed on everything that had been published. All the novels, all the poetry collections, everything.

"Do you know Espen Stueland?" I said after a while.

"*Slow Dance from a Burning House*?" Tore said.

"He's my best friend," I said.

"Is that right?" he said. "That's terrific! One of the best debut collections in a long time. Do you *know* him?"

"Yes, we studied Lit together. And he lived in the apartment beneath me for two years."

"What's he like? A prodigy, eh?"

"Yes, not far off it. At any rate extremely dedicated. And he has incredible insight into everything he reads."

Tore stared into the distance for a few seconds laughing quietly and mumbling. Then he sat up straight.

"Rune Christiansen. Have you read anything by him?" he said.

"I've heard of him. But I haven't read anything," I said.

"Then I'll bring you his latest collection of poems. What about Øyvind Berg?"

"Heard of him. *Totschweigetaktiken* and *Et foranskutt lyn*. But I'm not a great poetry reader, just so that you know. Espen's a fan of Berg, by the way. And Ulven, of course."

"Oh, my God, he is *so* good," Tore said.

We almost had tears in our eyes when we talked about how good Tor Ulven's books were. Tore also loved Jan Kjærstad and *Knife to the Throat* by Kjartan Fløgstad but not his other works, although I did. I guessed that had something to do with academia. Of Norwegian poets he put Eldrid Lunden at the pinnacle, he said.

"Haven't you read any Lunden? Jesus Christ, Karl Ove, you've got to read her. This is important! *Mammy, Blue* is the best collection of Norwegian poetry ever. After Obstfelder, of course. Obstfelder, Lunden, Ulven. But I'll bring you a copy. And *Det omvendt avhengige*. You've got to read that!"

When I returned from lunch in the canteen the next day there was a little pile of poetry books on my desk. And, on top, a note:

> *Karl Ove,*
> *TBR.*
> *from your friend Tore.*

My friend?

I took the books home, skimmed through them as I usually did, to have an overview when he talked about them, the way I had done with Espen. He dropped by the next day, we had a coffee in the canteen, he wanted to know what I had got out of the books, especially *Mammy, Blue*, which I could see meant a lot to him. Now he wanted it to mean a lot to me.

What energy he had.

For the moment it was directed at me, and I liked that, in a way it was flattering, there was an element of him looking up to me, I was four years older, had done a course at the Writing Academy, I'd had a short story published in *Vinduet* and would soon start reviewing books for them. That had materialized a few weeks before, I had interviewed Merete Morken Andersen for *Studvest*, she was about to take over as the editor of *Vinduet*, and as a former Bergen student she was an obvious target for an interview. I met her at the Arts Faculty, we talked for an hour, when I'd finished and had switched off the tape recorder she said she'd been planning to bring in some new names on her appointment as editor, it was so easy to turn to the same old people, but she wanted some serious innovation in the journal and wondered if I could envisage writing for her.

I realized how this might seem through Tore's eyes. But it would only be like this for the few weeks it would take him to actually get to know me and get a sense of what was what, I was a wannabe who was actually unable to write because I had nothing to say, who wasn't honest enough with himself to draw the appropriate conclusions and was therefore trying to get a foot in the world of literature at any cost. Not as someone who created something himself, someone who wrote and was published, but as a parasite, as someone who wrote as others wrote, a second-rater.

I was a second-rater and that was why it pained me to see Tore's interest in me. But what should I do? Say no, back off, you're wrong?

He continued to pop his head in at Student Radio every so often, we would go to the canteen and talk, now and then he would join us when we went out after the program, or on Fridays when whoever wanted would meet up in the office and drink beer and go out afterward or stop by one of the private parties thrown by the staff. But his heart wasn't in radio, I sensed that immediately, he wasn't interested in any of what went on there, wasn't gripped by any of the intrigues, had no idea about the conflicts of personality that existed, couldn't care less who had been making out with whom, set up or split up with whom, and as far as the practical sides of radio production were concerned, he didn't know a thing and didn't want to. He performed his weekly spots and did a good job with them, such as the interview with Jon Fosse which filled an entire program or the book and drama reviews he wrote, but that was it. He belonged to one category of staff that Student Radio employed, the ones who applied to gain experience before moving on. The other category was those who stayed for many years, for whom radio was a kind of leisure club, a place where you could hang out and always find a drinking partner for the evening. Among them there were several nerds and losers who otherwise wouldn't have fit in anywhere, just sat in their nerd and loser apartments with their nerd and loser friends. Having them at Student Radio made it an immensely more pleasant place to be than, for example, *Studvest*, where everyone was out to learn and move on – however, their presence also made me nervous because I was just as addicted to the social life as they were, I had just as little outside it, and in reality I was like them, I sometimes thought in my darkest hours. But there weren't quite as many of them as before, the radio station was full of good people I got to know, not least those working in the culture section, such as editor Mathilde, a witty and attractive Nordlander, or cheery Therese from Arendal, or Eirik, a tall strong Bergensian, as sharp as he was garrulous, or Ingrid from Trondheim, who didn't say a lot, Tore – he had noticed her too – and I called her Garbo. One evening I was sitting in the studio working after a program, she was around, cleaning up, and when she came into the room where I was I wrote a sentence on our new speech recognition program, which one click later was read aloud by an automaton voice.

"*Ingrid is dead*," the voice said.

Ingrid is dead.

Ingrid froze and looked at me with scared black eyes.

Ingrid is dead.

In the darkened room, where only she and I were, it sounded eerie. The voice seemed to come from beyond the grave.

"Switch it off," she said. "It's not funny. It's not funny."

I laughed. Funny was precisely what it was. But it had spooked her, and I apologized. She left, I was alone, but I didn't want to go home, I went up to the office and played Wolfenstein until three, when I walked down to the collective in Nygårdsgaten, let myself in, and slipped into bed beside Gunvor, who without waking up put her arm around me and mumbled something incomprehensible.

The following evening I was going to dinner at Tore's. He had dropped by and invited me, I accepted and was happy to be asked, he had all his friends living in Bergen, as far as I knew, so it wasn't a foregone conclusion that he would include me. I bought a bottle of wine after work, had an hour's nap, took a shower, and then walked across town and uphill to the Sandviken side, where he lived in one of the buildings at the very top. Once there I turned around and gazed across Bergen, which sparkled and glittered in the sea of darkness between the mountains.

Tore's flat was on the second floor, the downstairs door was open, so I walked up the stairs, where it was so cold you could see your breath in the harsh light, along a narrow musty corridor to a door. A piece of paper above the doorbell said Renberg/Halvorsen. Renberg, that was Tore's name, wasn't it?

I rang the bell.

He opened the door and smiled at me.

"Come in, Karl Ove!" he said.

I took off my shoes, hung up my jacket, and went into what turned out to be the living room. It was completely empty. Apart from three candles on the table, it was also completely dark.

"Am I the first to arrive?" I said.

"What do you mean?" Tore said. "You're the only guest."

"Am I?" I said, looking around apprehensively. The table was set with a cloth, two plates and two wine glasses, which reflected the flickering candlelight.

He continued to look at me with a smile.

He was wearing a black shirt and a pair of black trousers.

Was he gay?

Was that what this was about?

"The food's ready," he said. "We can eat right away if you like."

I nodded.

"I brought some red wine," I said, and passed him the bottle. "Here you are."

"Any musical requests?" he said.

I shook my head, glanced around discreetly to look for more signs.

"Is David Sylvian OK? *Secrets of the Beehive*?"

"That's a good one," I said, and walked over to the wall. A large framed poster of XTC hung there.

"It's signed, look," Tore said from behind me. "I went to Swindon one summer and rang the bell at Andy Partridge's house. He opened up and I said, hello, I'm from Norway and was wondering if you'd mind putting your signature on a few things."

Tore laughed.

"He said it had been quite a few years since a fan had last rung the bell. I think he thought it was amusing."

"And who's this?" I said, pointing to a photograph of a beautiful blond girl.

"Her? Oh that's Inger. My girlfriend."

I was so relieved I laughed.

"Isn't she lovely?" he said.

"Yes, she is," I said. "Where is she now?"

"Out with some friends. I had to clean the house for you, you know. But let's eat!"

We talked all evening, presenting our lives to each other, the way you do when you are getting to know someone. We agreed we would make a series of programs about the ten best pop albums of all times, one for each record, we would call the program *Popkarusellen*, in the best spirit of the sixties, and try to spell out pop's ten rules while we were at it. And we agreed we would start a band. Tore would sing and write songs, he already had several new ones lying around, I would play the drums, we could get Yngve on guitar, so all we needed was a bass player.

He kept moving between the chair and the stereo, playing new singles by bands he liked and wanted me to hear, drew my attention to particular details, the way a melody was phrased, for example, or to an especially good line in the lyrics. Oh, this part's just great! he would say. Listen, oh shit, isn't that fantastic? There! Did you hear?

He told me the guy who lived below them was a nut, he stood at the window in the morning, just staring at them as they passed, and howled and roared at night. He told me he had gone to *gymnas* with Inger, she irritated him then, she was one of the self-righteous Young Friends of the Earth girls, but he fell head over heels in love with her afterward. He told me he had an older brother, his parents were divorced, his mother was a wonderful person and he worshipped his grandmother, but his father was an alcoholic and off the rails. He was a teacher. I said my parents were divorced too and that my father was also a teacher and an alcoholic. We talked about them at great length. It was as if we were brothers. I felt huge warmth for him.

He got up and went into the bedroom and returned with a manuscript in his hands.

"Here it is," he said. "The novel. I finished it yesterday. But I was wondering if you'd mind reading it before I send it in."

"Not at all," I said. "I'd be more than happy to."

He passed it to me. I glanced at the title page.

Takk's Cube
Novel
Tore Renberg

At that moment the door opened and the girl from the photograph walked in. Her cheeks were red from the cold or perhaps it was the steep incline that had produced the flush.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," I said.

She came in and shook my hand, settled down in the chair beside Tore, and tucked her legs beneath her.

"So I've finally got to meet this Karl Ove!" she said. "How tall you are!"

"It's us who are so short," Tore said. "We come from short stock, the two of us."

They laughed.

"Well," she said. "I'm hungry. Is there any food left?"

"There's a little in the kitchen," Tore said.

She stood up and went in.

"What's the time actually?" I said.

"Half past twelve," Tore said.

"Then it's probably time I made my way home," I said, and got up. "Thanks for everything!"

"My pleasure," Tore said, accompanying me to the hall. "How long do you think it'll take you to read it?"

"I'll do it over the weekend. Drop by on Monday and we can talk about it."

"Great!"

Inger came to the hall, I said good-bye, closed the door behind me, and set off downhill toward town.

His novel was almost completely without action, it had no plot, everything revolved around the main character, Takk, and his lonely humdrum life in a flat. It wasn't bad, but so influenced by Beckett that it seemed unoriginal. It had nothing to do with Tore, none of his charisma and temperament was evident in the manuscript. When we met to discuss his novel I said nothing of this directly, I didn't want to offend or hurt him, but I implied it and he wasn't unfamiliar with this reaction, it turned out. He still sent the manuscript in unchanged to the publisher and received positive feedback from the reader.

My first book review came out in *Vinduet* and not long after I was contacted by *Morgenbladet*, who asked if I would be interested in reviewing books for their newspaper. I was. This was not altogether positive, for the path this was indicating was that of the critic, not the writer, and I almost felt it would have been better to do something else because as a book reviewer I looked defeat in the face every time I wrote. I could write about literature, could see whether it was good or bad, and describe in which ways, but I couldn't move beyond that. There was a wall of glass between me and literature: I saw it, but I was separate.

Kjartan came up to Student Radio a couple of times to ask if I felt like a coffee and there was something so slow about his movements, he could barely drag himself forward, that the others in the office asked who on earth *that* was. They were all young, apart from perhaps the caretakers, so this gray-haired, tousled man with such a slow gait stood out. He had an exam in May, but couldn't study any more, he said. He was considering giving up. I said he mustn't, he just had to hold on, even if he didn't study he knew so much he would be fine. The exam was important, I said, and if he didn't take it the whole year would have been wasted. He looked at me and said I might be right. He asked me if I would like to come by one afternoon, he had some poems I could have a look at if I wanted. Of course I would, I answered, and one Saturday afternoon I went there with Gunvor. Although he didn't live far away from me I hadn't been there before. The apartment was on the ground floor, but there was something cellarlike about it. The curtains were drawn, we sat drinking coffee in the semidarkness, Gunvor kept the conversation going and I saw how much Kjartan liked her and somehow became lighter in her company. But not by much, the heaviness in him was still palpable. As we left I wondered if gravitational force had a stronger effect on him or the earth had a stronger pull, and that was why his movements were so slow, he had to tug his foot free from the ground, yank the hand holding his coffee cup from the table. Kjartan, the man who wrote so much about air and skies, light and suns, the man who lived in the weightless realm of the spirit.

A few weeks later he was readmitted.

At the end of April I went to Prague with Espen. His debut book had been well received and he had joined the editorial team at *Vagant* in Oslo. He discussed literature with Henning Hagerup and Bjørn Aagenæs, Arve Kleiva and Pål Nordheim, went with them for a beer after meetings and had got to know many authors, among them the novelist Jonny Berg and the poet Rune Christiansen. Even though Espen was Espen and I had known him for more than three years I felt so inferior to him for the entire trip. He was a writer; I wasn't. If he looked left, I looked left, to see what he found so interesting. I was so puppylike I was destroying our friendship. In Berlin we had a few hours free before the train left, Espen bought a newspaper and discovered that a Romanian poet was going to be at the Romanian Embassy, his poems had just been translated into German. Although I knew no German, and a reading would therefore have been utterly meaningless to me, I didn't say no, can we do something else, as I didn't want to get between him and his poetry.

We found the embassy and went in. A waiter stood there wearing white gloves and holding a tray of aperitifs, men in suits and women in elegant attire mingled. Espen and I, who were not sweet-scented after a night on the train and a day in the streets, nor especially spruce, to put it mildly, caused a stir when we appeared. People sent us sidelong glances and, I thought, thank God Espen is a poet anyway, at least we could say that, if anyone were to inquire what we were doing here. A Norwegian poet, which would explain our clothes and the somewhat sharp odor we exuded.

We stood in the middle of the floor without saying a word to anyone.

"At least I can get a sense of the language," I said. "The tone and the timbre and the rhythm."

"Yes," Espen said.

The doors opened and we entered an auditorium full of chairs, with a stage at one end, on which stood a table with three microphones.

Espen walked along the front row, I followed, we sat down in the middle and had the best seats. The audience was small, numbering perhaps twenty. Three people, two men and a woman, took a seat behind the microphones. The woman talked. People laughed every now and then. I didn't understand a word. Then the man I assumed was the poet began to read while the other man next to him sat with his arms crossed and his eyes half closed, listening.

The poet peered down at the book lying on the table and then he looked straight at me. Not just once, though, no, he kept his eyes fixed on me. Accordingly I had to nod, as if I were deriving enormous benefit from his reading, and flash the occasional smile. Why he had picked on me was impossible to say, it might have been because of my central position, it might have been because we looked so different from the others.

To my horror, Espen let out a snore. I glanced at him. He was sitting with his arms crossed, his head at a slight angle and his eyes closed. His chest rose and sank at regular intervals.

I nudged him discreetly and he sat up with a start.

The reciter of the poem eyed us as one German word tumbled from his mouth after the other.

I smiled and nodded.

Espen went back to sleep.

I nudged him again. This time he didn't move, just opened his eyes, blinked and was gone again.

So all the responsibility rested on me. If he was asleep I would have to appear doubly interested. I opened my eyes wide, studied the ceiling pensively, narrowed my eyes, *that* was interesting, nodded to myself, stared straight at him with a look of acknowledgment.

All to a stream of unintelligible words and sounds.

At last he stopped. The woman presenter thanked him, that much I understood, and added something, then everyone stood up. I looked at Espen, who was conscious now.

"What did she say?" I said.

"It's the intermission," Espen said. "Let's go, shall we?"

"Yes," I said, and headed for the exit with determined step because the poet looked like he was interested in a chat. I turned my head, nodded, and hurried out. On the other side of the door the waiters were standing ready with their trays, which we nearly bumped into as at last we made our getaway.

I had lost all sense of proportion, that was what had happened, for the inferiority I felt became only stronger when we arrived in Prague and wandered around its beautiful streets. We didn't see the same things, we didn't even look for the same things, I was just your standard stupid guy who didn't notice anything and wasn't interested in anything. Espen wanted to see the Jewish cemetery; I didn't know there was one. We went there, strolled around, afterward he asked me if I had seen all the slips of paper on the gravestones, I shook my head, I hadn't, how could you *not* have seen them? he riposted, I don't know, I answered. He wanted to see houses some famous architects had designed in the 1920s, we went there, I just saw houses. We went into a church, he looked left, I looked left, he looked right, I looked right. He sat down on a bench and bowed his head. Why did he bow his head? I wondered, panic-stricken. Is he meditating? Why is he meditating? Is it the atmosphere here? Can he feel the presence of something hallowed or sacred? Is there anything special about this church? Has Kafka been here perhaps? No, he was a Jew. It must be the atmosphere. The sanctity. Some existential force on this very spot.

After a while Espen looked up again and we left. On the way I asked, as casually as possible, what he had been doing inside the church.

"Were you meditating or what?"

"No, I was asleep. Obviously I haven't had enough sleep over the past few days."

On our return to Oslo I stayed with him for two days, we went out both nights, on the second we went to Barbeint, I went with a girl back to her place, we made love in her room, it was just sad, I came immediately, I wasn't there for much more than half an hour. The day afterward I couldn't remember her name or what she looked like, only that she'd had a poetry book by Øyvind Berg on her bedside table. On the train the following afternoon I decided to break it off with Gunvor. It was no good anymore, nothing was any good anymore, I called her from a phone booth at the train station, said I'd done something I shouldn't have and we had to talk. I went to her place. Fortunately no one else was there. She made some tea, we went to the sitting room. I cried when I said we had grown apart, what we had belonged to the past, not the future. She cried too, four years of our lives were over. Afterward we laughed. For the first time in ages we were open to each other and chatted for several hours. I felt guilty about my behavior, as, actually, I was relieved the relationship was over and I was therefore crying crocodile tears. Yet they weren't, the situation itself, the intimacy of it, wasn't insincere, and that was what had made me cry. Gunvor couldn't have been aware of the distinction, couldn't have known the tears were masking something, and in her eyes it must have looked as if I really was sad it was over.

Late that night I got up to go. We embraced, stood in the hallway holding each other tight, and then I went down the stairs, my eyes blind with tears. I had betrayed her, but now it was over and the guilt I felt was easier to bear as it only affected myself.

In the summer nothing much happened at Student Radio, there were very few students in town, and Yngve was in Arendal, so I was mostly alone, spending my time either at the radio station or at home, I tried to write, but it didn't amount to much, a short story entitled "Zoom" about a man who met a woman, she went back to his place, her poses became more and more pornographic, and that was it, she went home, he heard her footsteps fade in the street. Oh, it was nothing, an idea, a piece of stupidity. I showed it to Tore when he came back to Bergen, he said it was good, I had created a good character, but perhaps I should develop him farther and the plot? I couldn't, I had stretched myself to the limit, it wouldn't get any better. Every sentence was meticulously constructed, which meant every word was important but only within the internal system that constituted the story, because for the reader, in this case Tore, it didn't matter whether I wrote "clutching claw-like fingers" or "scratching cloaca finger movements" or any of the sentences I had shaped with such care.

In the autumn I slaughtered Stig Sæterbakken's novel *The New Testament* over a full-page spread in *Morgenbladet*, it was all the various styles and pastiches I didn't like, when the main protagonist sits in a wing chair at a party and inwardly abuses all those present it was so like Thomas Bernhard that I couldn't see the novelty in it. It was a big novel, it had been many years since a young novelist had dared to invest such commitment, but sadly it hadn't come off. I had stayed up all night at the radio station, writing; when Tore came in the morning I read it to him. I wrote that the novel was like a giant dick, impressive at first sight but too big for the blood to create a fully functional erection, it only got semistiff. Tore screamed with laughter when I read it out.

"Are you going to write *that* in *Morgenbladet*? Ha ha ha! You *can't* do that, Karl Ove! *No way!* "

"But it's an apt image. That's exactly what the novel is. Big and ambitious, yes, but *too* big and ambitious."

"Alright, alright. It might be exactly like a giant dick, ha ha ha, but that doesn't mean you can write that, you fool!"

"Shall I delete it?"

"You have no choice."

"But that's the most precise image of the novel."

"Come on! Delete it and we'll go for a coffee."

A few weeks later Alf van der Hagen from NRK's P2 rang, he wondered if I would be willing to review a novel, the first in Thomas Mann's four-part series *Joseph and His Brothers*, for the radio program, *Kritikertorget*, I was enormously flattered, of course I would. I caught the bus to Minde, where NRK had its Broadcasting House. I was expected, my name was registered in the receptionist's book, the very idea of it, Knausgaard 1 pm, *Kritikertorget*, Studio 3. *Kritikertorget* was the most important literature program in Norway by far, all the good critics reviewed there, Hagerup as well as Linneberg, now I had a foot in the door. They would ring again, I would become a known voice, it would be heard every Saturday afternoon, my name would be one to be reckoned with. Knausgaard asserts his writing is overrated, do you agree? Knausgaard has chosen your novel as the pick of the crop this autumn, what do you say to that? Naturally I'm flattered. The man knows what he's talking about.

I was guided through the corridors in Minde by a woman, past the editorial staff at work in an open-plan office, computer screens shone, voices buzzed, and into a studio, bigger and smarter and more open than ours, where I put on a headset and spoke directly to Alf van der Hagen. Just the name, aristocratic and noble, sent shivers down my spine. He was friendly and welcoming, said the manuscript was good, all I had to do was read it. He interrupted me on occasion, asked me to repeat, but that was the way it had to be. And there I sat, the radio critic van der Knausgaard, the new voice, the new generation of critics, reading a manuscript about Thomas Mann. Reading aloud on radio was something I could do, I had been doing it every day now for close to a year, but van der Hagen was not satisfied, I had to read it again and again, and when we finally stopped I had the impression he didn't think my rendition was good enough, he was stopping because we couldn't keep on going ad infinitum without making any progress.

The review was broadcast, I got everyone I knew to listen, this was the real McCoy, this was NRK, not some poky local radio station in Sørland or Student Radio in Bergen. Everyone thought it was good, but the follow-up phone call never materialized, NRK never made a farther approach, they didn't want anything to do with me, obviously it hadn't been good enough.

Nevertheless my name was making the rounds, I received a request from *Kritikkjournalen* to review a novel by a Japanese writer, by the name of Murakami, the book was about someone hunting special sheep, and I slated it, mainly because it was so western. I slated several novels for *Vinduet*, did several interviews for *Studvest*, worked at Student Radio, went to Rica, Garage, Café Opera, the Football Pub, and drank beer with the others from the radio station, sometimes I walked home alone, sometimes I walked home with a girl, for something had happened to me too, they no longer said no to me, perhaps because I no longer cared so much that I was rendered speechless, capable only of staring at them with those wild, desperate eyes of mine, or perhaps because they knew who I was already. But I had no friends there, apart from Tore, who had moved with Inger into a big apartment below the university. I often went there, trudged over with some beer, shall we have a few and then go for a walk, so often I had to restrict my visits in case they began to form suspicions about me and realize that actually I had nowhere else to go.

Inger considered it a bit too much, I could see that in her face, she joked that Tore's personality had changed after he met me, now he wanted to go drinking all the time, there was something in that, and I knew it, both of them were rooted somewhere, they had something, whereas I had no roots and I saw myself through their eyes, a tall hapless guy with no friends, forcing himself on Tore, who was *four* years younger.

In town, sitting at a table in Garage drinking and chatting I had forgotten about all this, then what we had was good. Every Saturday morning we met and made a program in our *Popkarusell* series. So far we had done the Kinks, the Beatles, the Jam, the Smiths, Blue, and the Police. I recommended Tore to *Morgenbladet*, they were interested, he started reviewing poetry books for them, while still writing himself, now he was working on short pieces. He showed me some of them, and they were good, really good. Suddenly he had his own language. Green-eyed with jealousy, I read them with him next to me, but I kept my feelings well hidden, Christ, Tore, I said to him, this is *really good*. He shone like a little sun, put the texts on top of the disturbingly high pile and said he was beginning to find his feet. After such sessions I went straight home to the computer. I started a new short story, which I called "Blank," it was about a man who woke up in a park not knowing who he was. Walked around town, recognized nothing. Someone waved to him and called him Sean. Sean, is that me? he thought. I wrote three pages, polished every single sentence like a diamond, yet they didn't sparkle. They were like sentences in a bad detective novel or even worse, in a school literature essay. There was *nothing* of the personality Tore had managed to conjure up in his writing, the unprecedented concentration of atmosphere he had achieved, which lay not in the descriptions, not in the space where the action took place, but in the language. In other words, he wrote like a poet. Not to mention Espen, who *was* a poet. This wasn't about atmospheres but bursts of language, sudden revelations, images that were so unexpected they opened new associations.

Espen had been there ever since I first met him, so I didn't feel any envy toward him, but with Tore it was different, especially the ignominy of him being four years younger than me. I ought to have been a kind of Nestor, an older experienced student who could cautiously lead him to where he wanted to go, an older-brother figure in his life, instead I found myself left behind after six months.

We kept shifting positions with respect to each other, immature or mature, experienced or inexperienced, it was all up in the air, one moment I saw his vulnerability, which, normally, he showed no one, it appeared when you were close to him, the next he was utterly superior to everyone else I knew. It was the same with Inger. Sometimes I saw them as children and felt like the oldest twenty-four-year old in the world when I was with them, at others they laughed at me and my plastic bags and they were two independent, academically gifted students on their way to the top while I was a dropout with a second-rate university degree, three years old now, as my sole achievement.

Once when I went over, they had been in the process of frying a smoked mackerel for dinner.

Another time, sitting on the sofa, I happened to comment that I needed a haircut, Tore, never short of brainwaves, suggested Inger could do it. She cuts my hair, you know, he said. Or shaves my head with an electric razor.

"Hey, Inger. Can you cut Karl Ove's hair?"

She came out and tilted her head, a little embarrassed.

"Yes, I could," she said.

"There you are then!" Tore said. "Now it's done!"

I was skeptical, but he was so determined that I got up and went with Inger to the bathroom. She pulled out a chair, I sat down, she wrapped a towel around my shoulders, ran a comb a couple of times through my hair.

Our eyes met in the mirror.

She smiled and looked down.

"How do you want it?" she said.

"Cut it all off," I said.

"OK," she said.

She placed a hand on my head and our eyes met again.

This time it was my turn to blush.

Slowly the shaver began to buzz its way across my head, from the back of my neck all the way over. She moved around me, leaned against my side with her thigh, stretched to complete the run of the shaver, and pressed a breast against my shoulder. She tried to hide her embarrassment behind a closed professional expression, but an occasional flush flitted across her cheeks, and I could feel her enormous relief when she had finally finished and was able to take the towel off my shoulders.

"There we go," she said. "Is that OK for you?"

"It's great. Thank you very much!"

"I should produce a little mirror now so that you can see the back of your neck, but I'm afraid I haven't got one."

"I'm sure there isn't any hair there anyway," I said, and got up, running my hand through my centimeter-short hair.

I had a feeling she would give Tore the benefit of her opinion as soon as I had gone, how could he put her in such a difficult spot? Why on earth should she cut his friend's hair?

In the middle of September, I met Gunvor for the first time since we had split up. We bumped into each other in Nøstet, very close to my apartment, she was going to Verftet to meet someone in a café, it was Sunday morning, the weather was beautiful.

I asked her how things were, she said fine.

"How about you?" she said.

"Fine," I said.

"That's good!" she said. "We'll bump into each other again, I'm sure. Bye!"

"Bye," I said, and walked down the hill while she kept going straight. When I went into my room, pitch black after all the light outside, I cried. Lay down on the bed and tried to sleep, in vain, the fount of slumber had dried up. Hardly any wonder, the previous night I had slept fourteen hours. So I just had to lie there and read until it became possible again.

A few weeks later Tore and I began to play music together. Yngve had at last finished his studies and was looking for a job, he was on the dole and more than willing to come along. We got a room in a derelict factory, there was a ravaged drum kit, a PA system, and some Peavey guitar amps, the corners were heaped with junk, the concrete walls were cracked and dark with damp, it was freezing there during the autumn, this notwithstanding, we met once a week and did our best.

I visited Espen in Oslo, I tried to do that as often as possible, I could live for weeks off the train trip across the mountains, sitting in the restaurant car and alternately reading and gazing at the countryside, which was absolutely stunning in its autumn colors, and the stay itself, in his elegant, spacious flat. When we talked I could sometimes say things I had never even thought before, galvanized by the situation and Espen's enthusiasm, suddenly something in the room burst into being, it became a focus, not for me and my self-absorption, my constant sensitivity to what others thought about me, no, what we talked about detached itself from all that, the *I* disappeared, until the moment was over and we were back sitting on opposite sides of the table, which, somehow, became visible again. Traveling back home after these weekends, which were invariably eventful, whether we went out in the evening or he invited people home for dinner, I usually had a backpack full of books I had bought and which I read on the journey across the mountains. Once, Thomas Bernhard's *Extinction* was among them, it was shocking, as cold as it was clear, constantly circling around death, the parents and sister of the protagonist die in a car accident, he goes home to bury them, filled with hatred, which all Bernhard's characters are, but in this book there was an objectivity which I hadn't seen before in Bernhard, it was as though the hard facts of life came to the fore, as though they were so overriding and powerful that they took over the angry hate-filled monologues, that death crushed even the greatest hatred and fury, in a way it took residence in him, and it was so cold and so hard and pitiless, though also beautiful, everything came into existence through the insistent elaborate rhythm of Bernhard's language, which flowed into me as I read and continued even when I had put the book aside and looked out the window, at the snow that had just fallen on the heath, the wild stream that hurtled over the ravine, and I thought, I have to write like this, I can write like this, go for it, it is not an art, and I began to formulate the start of a novel in my head, in Bernhard's rhythm, and it went well, a new sentence came, and another, and the train jerked into movement again, and I thought up sentence upon sentence, which, when I sat down in front of the computer that afternoon, had completely disappeared. The sentences I'd had in my head were full of life and energy, those I saw on the screen were lifeless and hollow.

One day Yngve came up to the radio station to ask me if I wanted to go to Grillen with him for a cup of coffee. He still didn't have a job and was bored, he was ready to move on as so many of his friends had done, but nothing was happening, he was still drawing unemployment benefits and living alone in a studio apartment in Møhlenpris, no longer a student, nor anything else.

I said yes, of course, and walked beside him down the stairs.

"Who's the girl behind us?" he said. "Don't turn around."

I didn't need to, I had seen them as we left the office.

"That's Tonje and Therese," I said.

"Who is the one on the left?"

"Left as we're walking or left if we turn around?"

"Left as we're walking."

"That's Tonje."

"She's unbelievably good-looking!"

"Yes, Tonje's nice."

"What does she do?"

"Studies Media. Works as a social correspondent."

We went up the stairs on the other side and into Grillen.

"She'll probably be going to the Media party before Christmas then," he said.

"She probably will," I said. "But you won't."

"I will. And so will you."

"Me? What's that got to do with me?"

"You're playing the drums. I'll be playing a few songs in a band with Dag and Tine, and we need a drummer. I said you wouldn't mind. You don't, do you?"

"No, not at all. If we can practice a bit first."

"There are only six songs. And, by the way, our name is Di Derrida-da."

"OK."

Tonje was one of the girls I had noticed during the interviews a year earlier. Her face was both open and secretive, she dressed elegantly, often braided her long hair into a thick plait, but it was also loose sometimes. Her mouth, which was what I had noticed first, was beautiful, though also a little lopsided, and her eyes were dark, though not in any somber way, nor melancholic, there was something else, I didn't know quite what, but I noticed it. She had started working as a social correspondent, was serious and ambitious, but moved outside the circles I frequented, had her own friends in radio, Therese in particular seemed to be close, and my interest in her waned. My days were filled with work and little infatuations, a hand gesture here, a curvaceous thigh there, a dark eyebrow here or a turn of the body there. A girl with long blond hair and black mascara-ed eyes, tall and slim with full breasts, I stood talking with her at Landmark one evening, she was shy, I kept my distance, but then she got drunk and came back, wanting to provoke me, I accompanied her uphill to near the Student Center, she pulled off the ring I wore in my ear, ran away with it in her hand, I caught up with her and put my arms around her, we kissed, she lived nearby, when we arrived at her place she put Motorpsycho on full blast, cleared everything off the table with a sweep of her arm while I stood by the wall watching, she really was stunningly beautiful, and I was drawn to her, but she only wanted to smash things and cry, there would only be a little smooching then I had to go, she said, but I also had to promise to return, tomorrow at five, everything would be fine again, but of course it wasn't, when I rang the doorbell the next day after work, as horny as a billy goat, no one answered, and the next time I met her she was drunk again and claimed she had been at home but hadn't dared open the door. If I came by again, she would. OK, I said, she went onto the dance floor, I was at the bar, immediately afterward the band stopped playing, someone had thrown beer at the synthesizer, I had seen it all, it was her.

There was another girl who sometimes came to see me in the evenings, but she had started to fall in love, so on the last occasion I didn't answer the door. Then there were a couple of others I had something with, I was incredibly attracted to one of them and had opened myself up to her, and taken her home once, but she made it very clear that this was a mistake, she wasn't interested in the slightest, in fact she even went so far as to ask me not to tell anyone. At the radio station there were phone calls for her in the evening, I knew who was calling her and was out of my mind with jealousy, not that I had any right to be, I didn't even know her.

Tonje was outside all of this. I exchanged a few words with her when the opportunity arose, if, for example, she came into the studio when I was there or she needed a technician for some news item or something, but I knew nothing about who she was or what she did.

She was incredibly good-looking, as Yngve had said, but she was nothing to me.

In the first week of December I had my twenty-fifth birthday. It was an important event, a milestone, I should have had a party, but I didn't know enough people for that to be a possibility, so when I went to the radio station no one knew what a big day it was for me, which in itself I liked, it was fitting for the person I'd become, someone who kept a low profile and didn't attract unnecessary attention, someone who didn't boast and knew his place.

I arrived early, the office was empty and I cleared the table by the corner sofa, put on some coffee, began to scan the newspapers for any student-related news items I could cut out. Outside, the snow had settled, a faint shimmer extended into the darkness by the windows, that was all it took to change the whole office atmosphere.

The door by the stairs opened and I glanced over.

Ingvild!

She smiled and waved and walked up to me.

"Long time, no see," I said, and gave her a hug. "What are you doing here?"

"Happy birthday," she said.

"Thank you," I said. "How did you know?"

"I've got a memory like an elephant."

"Would you like some coffee?" I said.

"Please," she said. "I have to be going soon though."

She perched on the edge of the sofa. I took the jug from the machine and quickly poured two cups while the filter trickled and dripped onto the hotplate.

"What's it like being twenty-five then?" she said. "Does it feel good?"

"I can't notice any difference. Did you?"

"No, other than it's good not to be twenty anymore."

"Tell me about it," I said.

"I've got something for you," she said, producing a parcel from a bag and passing it to me. "Here you are."

"Have you bought me a present as well?"

"Naturally," she said, as she looked away, a little flustered.

I unwrapped it. It was a gray lamb's-wool sweater from Benetton.

I looked at her, then at the sweater.

"Don't you like it?" she said.

"Yes, I do, it's great," I said. "But a sweater? Why did you buy me a sweater?"

"I thought you needed one," she said. "But if you don't like it you can exchange it."

She sat with her hands in her lap, watching me.

"Thank you very much," I said.

I could see that she interpreted my reaction as meaning I didn't like it and there was an awkward silence until I realized I should try on the sweater. But that just made the situation even more awkward because what confused me was the sweater. Why buy me a sweater? It cost a few hundred kroner. And, in a way, it was personal. A record, a book, or a flower, if she was going to give me anything at all. But a sweater?

She stood up.

"I have to go now. My lecture's at a quarter past. But enjoy the rest of your birthday!"

She disappeared down the stairs and I went on reading the papers with a pair of scissors in my hand.

Yngve came by late in the afternoon, he just wanted to say happy birthday and that unfortunately he had no money for a present but better times were around the corner and then he would get me something really nice.

That was all that happened that day. I went home as usual, read and played records as usual, talked to Mom, who told me what had happened on this day twenty-five years ago. Dad didn't call, he never did, I wondered if he didn't actually know when we, Yngve and I, had been born or he knew but didn't care, but I was used to this, it didn't matter, he lived his life, I lived mine.

The following week was the Media party. It was being held in Uglen, Bergen's most infamous watering hole, where the most desperate and ravaged individuals hung out, typical of the jokers in Media Studies, who put Madonna on the same level as Mahler. I went there early, we were going to do a sound check and run through the songs, which we had hardly practiced, one last time. The snow had settled, it was cold in Bergen now, and for the first time in the five years I'd lived there you sensed a Christmas atmosphere in the streets.

We played five songs, among them "Forelska i Lærer'n" and "Material Girl," as well as an original which Yngve had written the music for and Marit, the vocalist, the words.

Afterward we stood by a table making a start on the beer we'd been given for performing. Yngve knew a lot of people, it was only six months since he had finished his course, for me most of the people were new faces, apart from Tonje, who came over and said hello after we had played.

"Are you here too?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "I get hired to play the drums all over town. It's especially busy at Christmas."

She smiled.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" Yngve said.

"Tonje, this is Yngve, my brother. Yngve, this is Tonje from Student Radio."

They shook hands, Yngve smiled and looked her in the eye as he asked her if she was in her first year.

They chatted for a while, had more in common than she and I had, and I looked around as I knocked back the cold beer and enjoyed the taste, perhaps not so much the slight bitterness as the promise of an eventful night and the mounting pleasure that came with it.

Tonje rejoined her friends, Yngve took a long swig, put his glass down on the table, and said something about how good-looking she was.

"Ye-ah."

I glanced over, she was talking to a guy, but looked up at once, met my gaze and smiled.

I returned her smile.

Yngve talked about the various jobs he had applied for and how difficult it was to get in anywhere if you didn't have any contacts, perhaps he had made a mistake focusing on finishing his studies instead of working on the side.

"That's what you did," he said. "And now you're writing for *Morgenbladet* and freelancing for NRK. You've had a lot more opportunities than if you'd just kept studying."

"Maybe," I said. "But writing book reviews isn't exactly lucrative."

I met Tonje's eye again. She smiled across the room and I smiled back. Yngve was oblivious.

"Not book reviews, no," he said. "But if you stick with it you'll soon have a name. Then everything'll get much easier. If you have something concrete to show. I've got just the subject and the grade."

"It'll all come out in the wash," I said with a smile, feeling light-headed. Whenever I looked at her I got a tingle in my stomach. She seemed to possess a sixth sense because however deep in conversation she was, she always looked up when I glanced over. The people she was with noticed nothing. Yngve didn't notice a thing. It was as though we were sharing a secret. Whenever she smiled, she was smiling at herself.

Hey, it's us two, isn't it? Her smile seemed to say.

Us two? said my smile. Are you joking?

No.

No?

Come over here and let's see what happens.

You look terrific.

You too.

Us two?

Yes.

Yes?

Come on. Then you'll see.

"What are you smiling at?" Yngve said.

"Nothing special," I said. "I'm just in a good mood. It all went well with the band and everything."

"Yes, it did. It was fun."

We drank a bit more, Yngve went for a walk around the room, I was alone and she came over.

"Hi," she said.

"I'm glad you've come over," I said. "I don't know anyone here."

"I was surprised to see you here. But that question was soon answered."

She looked down and pursed her lips for an instant, then looked up and smiled.

"I was hoping you would be here," I said.

"Were you?" she said. "Did you know I was in Media?"

"Yes, but that's all I know about you."

"Sounds like I have you at a disadvantage," she said. "I know quite a lot about you, actually."

Yngve came back.

"You're so like Karl Ove," Tonje said. "I guessed you were his brother as soon as I saw you."

She stayed with us for a while, Yngve did most of the talking, as on the first occasion, but all the tension was between us two.

"You're not going soon, are you?" she said, looking at me as she went back to her friends again.

"No," I said.

She left, I watched her go. Her back was straight, her neck long and elegant, half covered by hair, which was gathered in a braid. At the radio station she would often hide in big clothes, as many girls do, wear a military jacket, thick sweater, and black boots, but this evening she was wearing a plain black dress which clung to her slim waist and gave her quite a different allure.

"Hm. You're a dark horse," Yngve said.

"Huh?" I said.

"You didn't say there was anything between you when I asked you who she was."

"There wasn't. We've just exchanged a few words."

"What's going on now then?"

"You know as much as I do." I smiled.

Every time our eyes met that evening it was as though everything else was blanked out, Yngve, all the students and lecturers who were there, all the chairs and tables, and not only that, everything in my life, everything that I carried with me, and that could be such a burden, was gone. All that existed as we gazed across the room was her and me.

It was odd.

Even odder was that I was completely relaxed. There was nothing to fear, nothing to worry about, I didn't have to perform, do anything, be someone. I didn't even have to say anything.

But I did.

We sought each other that evening, she moved around, we exchanged a few words off and on, then we were suddenly standing there alone chatting, utterly immersed in each other, I saw nothing except her, she shone with such a strong radiance that everything else vanished.

All evening men had made passes at her, the way they do at parties like this, when you've seen one another for a whole semester, in reading rooms and lectures, in the canteen and library, and then you meet, dressed up and primed with drink, ready to grab your opportunity. I saw everyone who wanted to talk to her, but what did she do? She looked up and smiled at me.

When at last it was only us two, Sverre Knudsen came over to our table. He had played in the Aller Værste! and was one of my old heroes, but of course he wasn't interested in that or me, it was Tonje he had his eye on. He talked and talked, in a manic frenzy, he wanted to know all about her, he said, she hesitated, he said he knew who had shot William Nygaard, the CEO of Aschehoug and publisher of Salman Rushdie, he was going to Oslo early tomorrow morning and would reveal the truth, she had to read *Dagbladet* in two days, it would be there. He said he feared for his own life, he had been followed for several days now because he knew what he knew, but he was too smart for them, he was two steps ahead, he knew Bergen like the back of his hand.

Yngve came over, he wanted to leave. I looked around, he wasn't the only one, the party was drawing to an end.

Sverre Knudsen wanted to stay longer with Tonje, she laughed and looked at me, it was time to go, would I walk her back?

It was snowing when we came outside.

"Where do you live?" I said.

"I'm living with my mom at the moment," she said. "Next to Støletorget. Do you know where that is?"

"Yes. I lived not far from there once."

We walked down toward Hotel Norge, she was wearing a long black coat, I was wearing my old worn coat. Hands in my pockets, a couple of meters from her, the mountainside high above us, gleaming in the darkness.

"Do you live at home?" I said. "How old are you actually?"

"I'm moving out after Christmas. I've got a room by the bus station. Behind there," she said, pointing.

We walked along by the hotel and into Torgalmenningen, which was deserted and covered with a thin layer of white snow.

"They're going to Africa after Christmas. So I have to move."

"Africa?"

"Yes, Mozambique. Mom, her husband, and my sister. She's only ten. It's going to be tough for her. But she's looking forward to it."

"What about your father? Does he live in Bergen as well?"

"No, he lives in Molde. I'm going there for Christmas."

"Do you have anymore brothers and sisters?"

"Three brothers."

"Three brothers?"

"Yes, anything wrong with that?"

"Wrong? No-o. It's just a lot of brothers. And when you say it like that, three brothers, well, I had a feeling they were the kind that look after their sister. That they're skulking around here somewhere, waiting for us this minute."

"Perhaps they are," she said. "But if so, I'll tell them you have only good intentions."

She looked at me and smiled.

"I *do*!" I said.

"I know," she said.

We continued without speaking. Snow was falling. The streets around us were perfectly still. We looked at each other and smiled. Crossed Fisketorget, with the sea beside us, all black. I was happier than I had ever been. Nothing had happened, we had only chatted and now we were walking here, I was two meters from her, with my hands in my coat pockets, that was all. Nonetheless, this was bliss. The snow, the darkness, the light from the Fløibanen sign. Tonje walking beside me.

What had happened?

Nothing had happened.

I was the same person. Bergen was the same town.

Yet everything was different.

Something had opened.

What had opened?

I walked beside her in the darkness, up the hill to the funicular railway, along the walls of the old school, up Steinkjellersmauet, and everything I saw, everything I thought, everything I did, even if it was only putting one foot in front of the other, was tinged with hope.

She stopped by the door of a narrow, old, white timber house.

"Here it is," she said. "Since you've walked such a long way you could come in, if you like?"

"OK," I said.

"But we have to be quiet. They're still asleep."

She opened the door and we were in a hallway. I carefully took off my shoes, followed her up the cramped stairs. By the bend there was a kitchen, but she continued up another floor where there were two rooms, both with sloping ceilings. The rooms looked like they do in home design magazines.

"It's lovely here," I said.

"That's Mom's doing," she said. "She's got flair. Can you see that picture over there?"

She pointed to a picture made of fabrics, portraying a choir, with lots of small puppets, all with their own individual expressions.

"She's an artist. But she doesn't do much art anymore."

"It's great," I said.

"It's pretty funny," she said. "The pictures would sell like hotcakes if she put her mind to it."

I took off my jacket and sat down.

"Anything you'd like? Tea?"

"Tea would be perfect," I said.

She went down to the floor below, I sat still until she returned five minutes later, with a cup in each hand.

"Do you like jazz?" she said.

I shook my head.

"I'm afraid not. I'd be lying if I said I did. But you do, I can see."

"Oh yes. I love jazz."

"Then play some."

She got up and put a record on the old Bang & Olufsen stereo.

"What is it?"

"Bill Frisell. You have to hear it. It's fantastic."

"I only hear sounds," I said. "Slightly strained sounds."

"I work at the Molde Jazz Festival every year," she said. "I have since I was sixteen."

"What do you do?"

"I take care of the musicians. Pick them up from the airport and drive them around and try to entertain them the best I can. Last year I went fishing with them."

I imagined her wearing a chauffeur's cap and uniform and laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" she said.

"Nothing," I said. "I just like you so much."

She looked down and pursed her mouth for an instant, the way I had noticed she was wont to do, then she looked up at me and smiled.

"I hadn't anticipated I would be sitting here with Karl Ove at the crack of dawn when I left home last night," she said.

"Do you see that as positive or negative?" I said.

"What do you think?" she said.

"It would be smug to say positive. So it has to be negative."

"Do you really imagine I would have invited you up here then?"

"Who knows," I said. "I don't know you."

"And I don't know you," she said.

"No," I said.

The sense of falling snow had stayed with me; as we sat there I imagined it swirling down from on high and landing soundlessly on the roof above us, flake by flake. We talked about Student Radio and the people there, we talked about music and about playing the drums, she wanted me to teach her, I explained to her that I wasn't really any good at it. She told me she had worked in local radio ever since she went to *ungdomsskole* and for a long time she had worked at one of Bergen's most controversial stations, run by an anti-immigration MD, so controversial that even I had heard of him. She said he was a friendly, though eccentric, man, she didn't agree with his opinions, but freedom of speech was paramount and it was strange that so few people remembered that when they condemned him and his radio station. As she talked she became more and more heated and involved, I could see she was committed, committed to radio and free speech, and liked to be, however unfamiliar this was to me, because it was fringe. The milieu she was describing was right on the fringe irrespective of how matter-of-fact her tone.

"I'm chattering away here," she said after a while. "I don't usually do that."

"I believe you," I said.

Down below a door opened.

"They must be waking up now," she said.

"Yes, I should go," I said.

Up the stairs crept a little girl. As thin as a straight line, large brown eyes, wearing a white nightdress down to the floor.

"Hi, Ylva, are you out of bed?" Tonje said. "This is Karl Ove. A friend of mine."

"Hi," she said, staring at me.

"Hi," I said, and stood up. "I have to go now."

I took my jacket from the arm of the chair.

"You're so tall," she said. "How tall you are?"

"Six foot three," I said. "Would you like to try on my coat?"

She nodded. I held it out, she stuck first one arm in and then the other. Took a few steps, the lowest part hung like a train behind her. She laughed.

I was in a family house.

Tonje accompanied me to the door, we said good-bye and I walked downhill into town, which during the time I had been at Tonje's had totally changed character: big buses were driving through the streets now, people got on and off, hurried up and down the streets, most with umbrellas because the weather had turned milder and the snow that fell was wet and heavy. It was past seven o'clock, there was no point going home, so I headed for the Student Center, let myself in, and went up to the office.

Someone was sleeping on the floor of the conference room.

It was Sverre Knudsen.

Beside him was a kind of board, and I immediately recognized it, it was the same color as the door. I stepped back and checked: that was it, the top piece, over the lintel, had been removed. So that was how he'd got in. How he had circumvented the front doors, however, was a mystery.

I went into the room, crouched down beside him, and placed my hand on his shoulder.

"You can't sleep here," I said.

"Whazzat?" he said, sitting up.

"You can't sleep here," I said. "People'll be here soon."

"You," he said. "I remember you. You were with that Tonje."

I got up.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" I said.

He nodded and went in with me, sat down on the sofa, and rubbed his face with his hands. Then he jumped up, went over to the window, and peered down at the road.

"You didn't notice a green Beetle when you got here, did you?" he said.

"No," I said.

"They're after me," he said. "But I don't think they know I'm here. Perhaps they're waiting for me in Oslo. I know who shot Nygaard."

"So you said last night," I said.

He didn't answer, sat down on the sofa.

"You probably think I'm paranoid," he said.

"Not at all," I said. "But why did you sleep here?"

"That Tonje said she worked for Student Radio. I thought she might be here."

"I've been a fan of the Aller Værste! ever since I was a kid," I said. "It's great to meet you. I've also read one of your books. *Butterfly Petrol*."

He waved his hand dismissively.

"How about we do an interview now that you're here?" I said. "About the Aller Værste! days?"

"Alright," he said.

I passed him a cup of coffee, drank mine standing beside the desk. On the stairs I saw Johannes coming up.

"Early start today?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"See you later," he said, and went down the other end, where he was doing his national service.

I put the radio on to hear what was being broadcast and who was there.

Sverre Knudsen studied me.

"This is going to be a sensation," he said. "Just wait."

Half an hour later we went up to the studio. I put on a reel, raised a knob on the mixing console, and went back to him. I was really exhausted, at the same time full to the brim with the events of the night, and found it difficult to concentrate, but that was nothing compared with Sverre Knudsen. Sweat was pouring down his face as he sat there trying to recall the events of fifteen years ago, which, even with the best will in the world, he was unable to summon any interest in now. After twenty minutes I said stop, he seemed relieved, I shook his hand, he stumbled down the steep stairs and hurried into town while I went back to the office and tried to kill time so that I could . . . well, could do what?

Be alone and think about Tonje.

All day flashes of happiness swept through me. Something fantastic had happened.

But what?

Nothing had happened. We had talked a little, that was all.

For a year she had worked here, for a year I had seen her coming and going, and she had seen me. I had never felt any of what I felt now. Not once, not even close.

Then we had met at a party, smiled at each other – and that was that?

Yes, that was that.

How was it possible? How could it change everything?

Because everything was changed, I knew that. My heart told me. And the heart is never wrong.

The heart is never ever wrong.

I went home, slept for a couple of hours, had a shower, sat down by the phone, had to call her and thank her, ask if we could meet again. I hesitated, suddenly afraid to ruin anything. But I had to.

I forced myself to dial the number, stopped before the last digit, then dialed. A woman, it must have been her mother, answered.

"This is Karl Ove," I said. "Is Tonje at home?"

"No, she isn't. She's out at the moment. Can I give her a message?"

"Please tell her I called. I'll try again later perhaps."

I lay down on my bed, my whole body aching.

I stood by the window, looked down at the enormous aerials on the TV 2 building, felt the allure of the darkness above them.

I dressed and went out. I ached. I walked toward Nordnes, a snowplow thundered past with flashing lights. I passed the aquarium and went on toward the park, reached the point of the headland, stood there with the wind blowing against me and watched the sea washing ashore below, the vast darkness where everything was at rest now.

I looked around. Not a soul.

OOOOOHHHH, I shouted.

Then I walked to the totem pole and examined it, thought of the continent where it originated, the Indians who had once lived there knowing nothing of us, us knowing nothing of them. It was such an incredible thought, the freedom of not knowing, just living, believing they were the only humans alive, their surroundings the only world.

I saw her in front of me and a wave of happiness and sorrow rose within me.

How was this going to turn out?

How was it going to turn out?

On my return I waited for another hour before calling.

This time she answered.

"Hi!" she said. Her voice was warm and very near.

"Thank you for last night," I said.

"Likewise," she said. "My sister has been talking about you all day. I've just been out with her now."

"Say hello from me," I said.

"I will."

Pause.

"When my mom told me you'd called I had to lie down on the floor," she said.

"On the floor?"

"Yes, I had such pains in my stomach."

"Hm," I said.

Pause.

"I was wondering . . . actually . . . well . . . if . . . ," I said.

"What were you wondering?"

"If you . . . or we, um, . . . or, well, if you'd like to meet me again. And go out or something?"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"Yes."

"Just a cup of coffee or something," I said. "But not at the radio station. Or in the canteen, or in Grillen. Or in Café Opera."

She laughed.

"Wessel?"

"OK, why don't we say Wessel? Tomorrow?"

The following day there was a meeting in the Social Affairs section. I had forgotten about it, but of course she would have to go.

Her gaze brushed me as she arrived, no more than that, and she seemed to be smiling to herself, otherwise we didn't exchange a word, it was as if I didn't exist.

I looked through the window of the conference room, there they sat talking and gesturing without a sound. She looked up at me, flashed a quick smile, looked away.

What did that mean?

Tore came down the corridor.

"How's it going, Karl?" he said.

"I'm up to my ears in love," I said. "My body hurts. My joints. My joints *ache*."

He laughed.

"I saw you two days ago. You didn't say anything."

"Of course I didn't. It happened the day before yesterday."

"This is like being at elementary school," he said. "Have you asked her?"

"No."

"Tell me who it is and I can ask her."

"It's Tonje."

"Tonje? Student Radio Tonje?"

"Yes."

"Her sitting in there?"

"Yes."

"Does she know?"

I shook my head.

He laughed again.

"She probably has an inkling," I said. "We're meeting later. I called last night. Come on, let's go. Feel like a coffee in the canteen?"

I hadn't eaten all day, and I couldn't get anything down at home either, I wasn't interested and food didn't seem necessary. I was burning up.

For the two hours I had to wait before I could leave, I wandered around, lay down on my bed, stared at the ceiling, got up and paced back and forth. It was terrible, I was so high that all I could possibly expect now was a fall.

What would I talk about?

It wouldn't work, I was somewhere else now, I would sit and fidget and blush and be a total idiot, I knew myself so well.

I didn't have a mirror in my apartment, at least I was able to avoid having to look at myself, but now it felt as if I urgently needed one, so after changing clothes and putting gel in my hair, I turned over a CD and held it in front of me from several different angles.

I locked the door behind me and went out.

I had pains in my stomach.

This was no fun.

Just painful, all of it.

The snow shone in the streets around me as I walked up the gentle incline to the little kiosk beside the swimming pool, past the theater and Café Opera, around the corner, and into Wesselstuen.

She wasn't there, and I thanked the Lord, now I would have a few minutes to myself. I found a table and sat down, told the waiter who came over that I was waiting for someone.

She arrived ten minutes later. I trembled when I saw her. She was carrying lots of bags, leaned them against the wall and took off her coat, then sat down, somehow she had brought with her everything that existed out there, the street lamps and the shop windows, the crowds and the snow, it was all part of her aura, the same way a cat brings the forest and the darkness indoors the first minutes it comes into the house in the morning.

"I've been buying Christmas presents," she said. "Sorry I'm late."

"No problem," I said.

"Have you ordered?"

"No. What would you like?"

"A beer maybe."

Soon after, we were sitting with our beers in front of us on the table. The room was full, there was a great atmosphere, the last Christmas dinners were being eaten, around us sat men in 1980s suits and women in dresses with broad shoulders and plunging necklines shouting *skål* and laughing. We were the only ones not saying anything.

I could have said she was a star, a shining light, my sun. I could have said I longed for her so much I was making myself ill. I could have said I had never experienced anything like this in my entire life, and I had experienced a lot. I could have said I wanted to be with her forever.

But I didn't.

I looked at her and smiled gently. She smiled back, gently.

"You've got such unbelievably beautiful ears," I said.

She smiled and looked down at the table.

"Do you think so?" she said. "I've never heard that before!"

What had I said?

That she had beautiful ears?

It was true, her ears were unusually well formed, but so was her neck, and her lips, and her hands, small and pale, and her eyes. Complimenting a woman on her ears, that was crazy.

I blushed to the roots of my hair.

"I suddenly noticed," I said. "And so I said it. I know it sounds a bit strange. But it's true! You do have beautiful ears!"

The explanation just made things worse.

I took a long swig.

"You've got a nice sister anyway," I said.

Anyway?

"I'll tell her you said that," Tonje said. "She thought it was very exciting having you there. She's at that age. She doesn't really know what *it* is, but maybe she thinks she does. And she absorbs everything she sees."

She rotated her glass, pursed her lips, looked up at me with her head at an angle.

"Are you going to have a Christmas break? Or will you send your presents?"

"I'm going to my mother's on the twenty-third. I'll stay a week."

"I'm heading north tomorrow," she said. "My brother's giving me a lift."

"Does he live in Bergen?"

"Yes."

Nothing was left of what we had between us on the first evening and night. Everything was inside me.

"When are you coming back?" I said.

"At the beginning of January."

That was a long time. Anything could happen. She might meet someone up there, some guy she hadn't seen for ages, and she might get together with him.

The longer I sat next to her, the worse my chances were. She must have started to figure something out.

We chatted about the radio, normal things, everyday life, as though we were just two Student Radio employees having a beer together.

She looked at her watch.

"I'm meeting my mother and sister soon," she said. "They're doing their Christmas shopping as well."

"You go and do that then," I said. "I'll see you after Christmas!"

We left together, stopped in Torgalmenningen, she was going left, I was going right. She stood with her bags in her hands. I should have given her a hug, there was nothing wrong in that, it was absolutely natural, we'd just had a beer together, but I didn't dare.

"Merry Christmas," I said, clumsily raising my hand in the air.

"Merry Christmas, Karl Ove," she said.

Then we each went our own way, me up over Høyden and down to Møhlenpris, to Yngve's apartment, which he shared with a girl he'd studied with. Fortunately she wasn't at home.

"How's it going?" he said. "Anything happen after the party?"

We were in the living room, he was playing My Bloody Valentine.

"I went home with her. Nothing happened, we just talked. I've just met her again now, in Wesselstuen. I'm so in love I don't know what to do."

"Is she?"

"I've no idea! I wasn't able to say a single sensible word to her. Do you know what I told her?"

He shook his head.

"I complimented her on her ears! Can you imagine that? What lovely ears you have! Of all the things I could have said, I chose that."

He laughed.

"I'm not sure that was so stupid. It's original anyway!"

"What should I do?"

"Call her again? Go out again? If something's meant to happen, it'll happen of its own accord."

"So that's your opinion: it'll happen of its own accord?"

"Yes."

"Anyway, she's going home for Christmas tomorrow. I won't see her until January. I was thinking of writing her a letter. What do you think?"

"You can do that, can't you?"

"And buying her a Christmas present. I want to surprise her. And I thought of buying something that would make an impression. Not a book or a record or anything like that, something else. Something personal. But I can't think what."

"Ear warmers, of course," Yngve said. "Then you can write that you chose them so that she would take care of her beautiful ears."

"Excellent!" I said. "I'll do that. Could you come shopping with me tomorrow afternoon? Perhaps we can buy a present together for Mom while we're at it."

And that was what we did. I wandered around town with Yngve searching for ear warmers. They weren't exactly common, but in the end I found a pair. They were dreadful, covered in a kind of green fur, but it didn't matter. I had them gift wrapped, spent the following evening writing a letter, and sent everything up to Molde.

Mom noticed something had happened the moment I stepped inside her door.

"Have you met someone?" she said.

"Is it that obvious?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

"It's nothing yet," I said.

"I've got a Christmas card from Gunvor," she said.

I looked at her.

"To be honest, that's over. You're welcome to stay in contact, but for me it's all over."

"I know," she said. "I just thought it was nice she remembered me. What's the name of the girl you've met?"

"I'll tell you if it gets off the ground."

Mom seemed tired, she was pale and didn't have the energy she usually had, I could see that, just setting and clearing the table was an effort.

On Christmas Eve she unwrapped Kjartan's present and her face went white.

"What have you got?" I said.

"A wreath," she said. "I'm sure he meant to give me a nice Christmas wreath, but he's sent me a funeral wreath. The type you give at burials."

"There's nothing symbolic in it," Yngve said. "It doesn't mean anything. He's just made a mistake. It's typical of him."

She didn't answer, but I could see it had affected her and she did think it had meaning.

After we'd opened all the presents and had eaten cookies and drunk coffee, I went up to the study and called Tonje.

"Hi!" she said. "Thank you for your present! That was really nice."

"So it did arrive?"

"Yes, it came today. I was wondering if I dared open it with all the others there. After all, I didn't know what you had bought me. But I did anyway. They all had eyes like saucers. 'Who's Karl Ove?' 'Why has he given you ear warmers?'"

We chatted for a long time. All her friends had come home for Christmas, she said, they went out or they visited each other and were still close even though it was five years since they had left *gymnas*. She also told me they'd had lots of snow there and her three brothers had been clearing the roof all morning. I could visualize it all, the house, which was at the top of a hillside with a view of the whole town and the fjord beneath and the mountains behind, from what she said, and her three brothers, who in my imagination had taken on fairy-tale roles, they looked the same, stuck together, and worshipped their little sister.

Going down to the sitting room afterward, I missed her so much it was almost unbearable. I had never imagined that happiness could hurt so much.

Between Christmas and New Year's I went back to Bergen to put together some programs. Tonje returned at the beginning of January, I called her and invited her to dinner at my place.

Yngve usually made spaghetti carbonara with bacon, leeks, blue cheese, and cream, it was simple and good, I wanted to try to make it. I didn't have a dining table, so we would have to eat it on our laps on the sofa, that would have to do. If we met in town, we would just be sitting at a table and chatting, here it felt a bit freer, I could stand up and cook, serve her wine, play my music. There was room to move here.

Yngve suggested I put some white wine in the sauce. I followed his advice, but when I tasted it, only minutes before she was due to arrive, it was sweet and tasted horrible. I called him.

"What should I do?"

"Pour in more wine. That helps."

"Hang on a minute. Don't go away."

I poured more wine into the sauce. Stirred it, tasted.

"Now it's even sweeter! Oh, hell, this is a disaster! She'll be here soon!"

"What sort of wine is that?"

I read him the name.

"Doesn't mean a thing to me. But it is dry, isn't it?"

"Dry?"

"Yes."

I scrutinized the label.

"It says it's semidry. I thought it would be good if it wasn't very sweet."

"No wonder the sauce is sweet. You'll have to pile on the salt and pepper and hope for the best. Good luck!"

He hung up, I sprinkled some salt and pepper on the sauce, tasted it with my little teaspoon again and again.

The bell rang.

I hung up my apron, made a dash for the door at the end of the stairs.

She was all hat and scarf, two big eyes and smiling mouth.

"Hi," she said, bending forward to give me a hug.

It was the first time we had touched.

"Come in," I said.

She followed me down the stairs and into the hallway, removed her outdoor clothes while she looked around. What was there to see? Brick walls, a few posters, a kitchen farther along, brick walls there too, and the adjacent room, a bed, a bookcase, an armchair, a desk, some posters, a couple of rag rugs from IKEA.

And yes: three lit candles in a candelabra on the windowsill.

“How nice it is here,” she said. Glanced at the two pans. “What are we going to eat?”

“Well, it’s just a spaghetti dish.”

I spooned some spaghetti onto the two plates, added the sauce, took the small black stool and placed it in front of her so that at least she had something reminiscent of a table, put my plate on my lap and then we ate.

“Mm, that was good!” she said.

“Come on,” I said. “It wasn’t. I poured in some white wine, but it was too sweet.”

“It was a little sweet, yes,” she said, with a smile.

I removed the plates, put on a record, *Siamese Dream* by the Smashing Pumpkins, we sat drinking sweet white wine, her in the yellow armchair, me on the sofa. I didn’t want her to think I only wanted to sleep with her and made no attempt to get close. We talked, that was all. For some reason the conversation turned to various Bergen bands. Completely out of the blue, she said the vocalist in the band we were discussing was bisexual. Our eyes happened to meet just as she said it and I blushed. I thought she might think I was bisexual. Even if she didn’t, the fact that I blushed at the very moment the word was uttered would make her suspicious. I tried to find a different topic of conversation, but failed, and the ensuing silence was awkward and unpleasant.

This wasn’t good. She would never be mine. How could I make her mine?

It would be so much easier to give up, to say a cold good-bye and not contact her again. All the problems, all the pain, all the defeats would finish there.

But I couldn’t.

She stood up, it was late, time to go home. I accompanied her to the door, said good-bye, watched her go, she walked up the hill without turning around.

When I went back down I put on *Siamese Dream* again, lay back on the bed and let my mind fill with thoughts of her.

The next time we met it was a little better, we ended up in a café just below Steinkjellersmauet, it was late and we were the only ones there. We sat by the window, snow covered all the surfaces outside, which seemed to break the fall the town found itself in when the rain deluged down in the autumn, then it was as though everything was sinking, the streets, the narrow passages, the houses, the parks. The snow held the town firm, and I loved it, loved the new light it cast all around, the moods it created. And I loved her. She talked about her family, there was a grandmother and a mother, there were brothers and a sister, a father and a father's twin brother, I said it sounded like a Bergman film. She smiled and said she was moving that weekend, could I give her a hand? Of course I could. I appeared outside her apartment between the bus terminal and the train station on Saturday afternoon, a white van was parked on the sidewalk, five people were already carrying furniture and boxes. Tonje brightened up when she saw me. I hurriedly shook hands with all the others, three boys, one of whom was her brother, and a girl, and grabbed a box. The stairway was run down and drafty, the apartment was on the third floor and big, it had two rooms, but was in a state of disrepair, and the toilet, I discovered, was on the other side of a narrow open passageway, like a bridge, on the outside of the building.

"Even Fridtjof Nansen would think twice about going to the toilet in the morning," I said. "Imagine what it's like when it's raining. Or if it's snowing!"

"It does have its charms," she said. "Don't you think?"

"Yes. You can imagine it's the bridge on a ship or something like that in the worst storms."

I placed the box on the counter and went downstairs to get another, nodded briefly to the others as they came traipsing up. My role in all this was a bit unclear. The others were obviously good friends. No one could maintain I was. So what was I?

Whatever I was, there was nowhere else I would rather have been. Carrying up her possessions to her apartment. Catching a glimpse of a mixer. A glimpse of a shoe sole in another box, imagine, that is her shoe. Her saucepans, bowls, plates, cups, glasses, cutlery, frying pans, records, cassettes, books, clothes, shoes, stereo, TV, chairs, tables, bookcases, stools, bed, plants, her whole world, I was helping to carry the whole of her life up the stairs this Saturday afternoon.

The van made two trips, and after the last load had been deposited Tonje went out for some takeaway pizzas, which we ate in the middle of the chaos. I said nothing, I didn't want to occupy space, the others knew her better, I would fit in wherever.

This was great because, sitting there on the floor, back to the wall with a slice of pizza in my hand, listening to the conversation, I knew she was mine. Occasionally she flashed me a little glance and a smile, sending shivers through me. The thought of her was light, it arched like a sky over everything, but the thought of approaching her was heavy. What if I was wrong? What if she said no? What if she laughed at me? What has got into you? Who do you think you are? Do you imagine *I* would go out with *you*? You're just a miserable wimp!

But tonight I would have to!

Tonight I had to.

Her brother said his good-byes and left. One of the others did the same. I stayed where I was. When the last two stood up to go, I followed suit.

"Are you going too?" she said.

"I thought I would," I said.

"Couldn't you stay and give me a hand with the unpacking? I have to assemble the bookcase. That's hard to do on your own."

"Sure, no problem."

We were alone.

I sat against the wall smoking and drinking Coke. She sat on a wooden box in the middle of the room swinging her legs.

I was burning up. She was making me burn up. If she looked at me my cheeks went hot.

"Are you the handyman type?" she said.

"Me? No," I said.

"That's what I thought."

"Are you?" I said.

"In fact I am. I like fixing things. My dream is to have an old house one day, do it up and design it exactly to my taste."

"What else do you like doing?" I said.

"I like sewing. And cooking. I love cooking. And playing the drums."

"Mm," I said.

"And you? What do you like?"

"I don't like sewing. I don't like cooking." *I like you. Say it now! Say it, say it!*

"I asked you what you liked doing. Not what you don't like doing!"

I like you, I like you!

"I like playing soccer," I said. "But I haven't played for years. And I like reading."

"That's not my strong suit," she said. "I prefer to see films."

"What films do you like?"

"Woody Allen. He's a favorite."

She got up. "Shall we assemble the bookcase so we can play some music?"

I nodded. When we had found all the parts I held it while she screwed the cross braces into position and slipped in the shelves. Then she started to put together the stereo.

"Isn't that the same one as at your mother's house?" I said.

"Yes. She said I could borrow it if I was careful with it."

She put a speaker on either side of the room, opened a box of CDs and flipped through.

"Jazz?" I said.

"No," she said. "This is a song I want you to hear."

"Who by?"

"The Smashing Pumpkins. It's on an album with various groups. I haven't seen it anywhere else. There it is!"

She popped in the CD.

She stood watching me as the music flowed into the room. There was something dreamy and boundless about it, as though it embodied all that went on and on and never ended.

"Isn't it great?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "Really great."

Something inside me told me it would be fine if I got up and held her in my arms. She would respond and all I dreamed of would become a reality.

But I didn't dare. I didn't move and the moment passed; she set about organizing the boxes.

I helped her carry some into the kitchen, where she opened them and started putting things in their places. I watched for a while, wondering what would happen if I leaped forward and put my hands round her waist and kissed her fantastic neck.

She leaned forward, put a pile of pans on the counter, and opened the cupboard below.

"I think I'll be off then," I said.

"OK," she said, straightening up. "Thanks for the help!"

I put on my jacket and shoes, opened the door, she went with me, I stepped out into the cold harsh light of the corridor and turned to her.

"Bye then," I said.

"Bye," she said.

And, I thought, now, now I'm going to do it.

I leaned forward to kiss her. At that very moment she moved her head to the side, the movement coincided with mine, so instead of my lips meeting hers, they met her ear.

I turned and went down the stairs as fast as I could, ran for a few blocks to put as much distance between me and the fiasco as possible.

What must she be thinking now? I was behaving like a teenager. Not only that, I also felt like one.

Soon I wouldn't have many chances left. Not if I was going to continue like this. How was she supposed to react? What good was I to her?

I decided to return the following day, just pop by, hope she would invite me in, and then be determined and resolute. No more dithering, no more fumbling, no more flushed cheeks and stuttering.

If she said no, so be it.

I was at Yngve's all Sunday afternoon and visited her at about seven, rang the bell, stepped back into the street, and looked up at the windows on the third floor.

No lights?

Oh, no, don't say she's not in.

A window opened and she stuck out her head.

"Hi!" she said. "I'll come down and open the door!"

I walked to the doorstep. My heart was pounding.

The door opened.

"Karl Ove . . . ," she said. "Come in."

She said my name in such an affectionate way that I went weak. Up the stairs, which she managed with swift light strides, my legs were trembling.

What sort of hell was this?

I went into the kitchen, which was behind the door, took off my shoes and jacket, hat and gloves.

"Would you like some tea?" she said.

"Yes, please," I said.

I went into the living room, which she had as good as finished. Sat down on the low chair, rolled a cigarette.

"Can you roll me one too?" she asked.

"Sure," I said.

I put all my concentration and expertise into it, as it would be hers, but still it was a bit hard in the middle and a touch fatter at one end than the other. She was in the kitchen, I tore it up and made a new one, which turned out better.

"Here you are," I said, passing it to her.

She put it between her lips and lit up. Inhaled slowly, the smoke drifted between us for a second, then dissolved.

"Do you like the room now?" she said.

"Yes. Very much."

"Actually you came just at the right moment," she said. "I want to move the bookcase over there. But I don't want to take it apart."

"Shall we do it right now?" I said.

"Alright," she said, putting the cigarette in the ashtray and getting up.

After we had finished she put on the same song she'd played the previous evening. We looked at each other and she took a step toward me.

"You tried to kiss me yesterday," she said with a smile.

"Yes," I said. "But you moved away."

"Not intentionally, of course. Try again."

We embraced.

We kissed.

I held her tight and whispered her name.

I would never let her go. Never ever.

I stayed at her place all night. We sought each other, were completely open with each other, everything was filled with light. I ached with happiness because I *had* her, she was *there*, all the time. All the time she was there, around me, and I ached with happiness, everything was filled with light.

Life can be so fantastic. Living can be so fantastic.

We played the same song again and again. We couldn't keep our hands off each other. At the break of dawn we slept a few hours, I had to work, but it wasn't possible. I couldn't, not with her there, and we went outside to the telephone booth. While I called she waited outside, laughing, woollen gloves on her hands, hat on her head, and a big scarf draped around her neck. No one had arrived yet, I spoke on the answering machine, said I was sick and couldn't come to work, hung up, went out, hugged her and walked beside her, as close as it is possible to be.

"I've never played hooky before," I said. "Not once. I have a bad conscience now."

"You have regrets? You can go up and tell them you suddenly felt better."

"Of course I don't have any regrets!"

"I didn't think so!"

Of all the things to do, we went to the aquarium that day. It was January, not a soul was there, and we just ambled around, laughed when the penguins rushed toward us under the water, I took pictures of her with the camera I'd rushed home to get, she talked at great length about what she would make for dinner, it had to be special, this was the first day we'd been together. Because now we were together!

Wave after wave of happiness surged through me that day.

She made beef bourguignon, I stood watching, and she dipped a spoon in the saucepan, turned to me, put it in her mouth and rolled her eyes.

"Mmm! Fantastic!" she said.

"I love you," I said.

She stiffened, glanced across at me, almost frightened. Turned, took the lid off the other saucepan and poked a little pin in a potato boiling in the bubbling water. The steam billowed out.

"Two more minutes," she said.

I went over to her and wrapped my arms around her, kissed her neck. She turned her head and kissed me.

"I had a day like this when I was little," she said. "When everything was wonderful. Mom took me out. We were going to have a duck day. We saw Donald Duck in the cinema, we fed the ducks in the park, I got a Donald Duck comic book, and finally we went to a restaurant to eat duck."

"Is that true? Wasn't that a sort of barbaric end to the day?"

She laughed.

"I love duck. It's my favorite meal. And it was then too! But the best part was that it was only Mom and me. All day. I've thought about it many times today. I've been so happy."

After we had eaten she discovered she didn't have any coffee. She said she would just run down to the gas station to buy some. I answered that she didn't need to, but she insisted and was off down the stairs at once.

I was uneasy. The day had been so endlessly happy. Now I was imagining she was going to die out there. I knew it was a delusion, that the chance of this happening was so minute it couldn't have been smaller, nonetheless I could see it in my mind's eye, the bus coming, not seeing her, the truck driver glancing up at the sun visor for an instant, he had a packet of cigarettes wedged up there, and didn't see her as she ran across the road . . .

Ten minutes passed. Twenty minutes. Thirty.

Why wasn't she back?

Something *had* happened.

Oh no, please don't say it had. Don't say it had.

I was close to throwing up.

Then came the sound of footsteps on the stairs, then she came into the kitchen wearing her broadest smile and holding a red pack of Friele coffee in one hand.

"I met someone I hadn't seen for eons," she said, unwinding her scarf. "Was I away long?"

"You won't get permission to be away from me so long again," I said.

"Come with me next time then!"

When midnight approached we walked to my apartment, Tonje had her things in her backpack. From my door handle hung a plastic bag. I opened it and looked inside. A pack of coffee and a big bar of chocolate.

"Who gave you that?" Tonje said.

"No idea," I said.

Most probably it was one of the girls at the radio station, but I couldn't say that. And I didn't know anyway.

"I can see lots of us are looking after you in Bergen," she said.

"Looks like it," I said.

We went in, she showered, came into the room with a towel swathed around her. In her hand she was holding a bottle of L'Oreal children's shampoo.

"Is that the shampoo you use?" I said, pulling her close.

"Yes, why? It's the best for my hair."

"You're full of secrets," I said.

"This is a rather small secret, isn't it?"

Yes, I'd been ill, I said at Student Radio three days later, the flu, a bit of a temperature, not so high but enough to keep me from working. Tore dropped by in the morning and the mystery of the bag on the door handle was solved, it had been him.

"Heard you were ill, so I thought I would take you something to cheer you up."

I didn't have the heart to tell him I hadn't been ill. But I told him about Tonje, I couldn't stop myself, I was so full of it.

That evening we went to the movies and saw *True Romance*. Afterward we were going to her place to make waffles, I had the waffle iron in a bag between my feet in the cinema, when we came out it struck me that I was the antithesis of what we had just seen. They had their bags full of weapons, I had a waffle iron. I couldn't stop laughing.

On Friday we went to Café Opera, it was the first time we had shown our faces to others, we crossed the street hand in hand, kissed in the queue as we waited to get in, there were lots of people from the radio station, I saw them talking about us, Tonje and Karl Ove are an item, and I didn't want to be there, I didn't want to drink, I just wanted to be with her. All the spaces we were in were transformed, they were enhanced with the most fantastic atmospheres, irrespective of their actual appearance, her apartment, my place, the small cafés we went to, the streets where we walked.

After two weeks I did something stupid. Yngve was going to see a band at Garage, he called and wanted me to go with him, I said yes, I'll ask if Tonje wants to come too, is that OK?

It was OK. We walked there hand in hand, paid, had our hands stamped, and went down to the cellar, Yngve was already there. I bought a round of beer for us, we sat at his table, made tentative conversation, they didn't know each other and for some reason I didn't have a lot to say.

The band began to play, we moved forward to see them, Yngve and Tonje chatted, he leaned over and spoke in her ear, she nodded and looked up at him, I was happy at first, they were the two most important people in my life, I bought another round, started feeling a bit drunk, squeezed Tonje's hand, she squeezed back, but wasn't quite present, wasn't quite where she had been, and something in me turned, I became more and more upset, ordered more beer and when we sat down again I had nothing to say, all the happiness had left me, I drank and stared into the air, smiled at Tonje when she smiled at me, she didn't notice that anything had changed, because Yngve was happy and chatty, and she was happy and chatty, one subject led to the next, they laughed and enjoyed each other's company.

They enjoyed each other's company. And why shouldn't they? Yngve was Yngve, charming, amusing, experienced, in all ways a better man than me.

She laughed with him. He laughed with her.

What was going on?

I felt heavy, I could barely move, I was all black inside. Every glance they exchanged was a stab in my chest.

He was better than me. She knew that now. Why should she have me when she could have him?

Yngve stood up to go to the bathroom.

"What's the matter, Karl Ove?" she said.

"Nothing," I said. "Just thoughtful. So much has happened in the past few days."

"It has," she said. "I'm so happy. You have a nice brother."

"Good," I said.

But it wouldn't stop, it just kept going, they chatted away as though I didn't exist, I drank and became more and more desperate. Eventually, I thought, fuck all this living hell. To hell with all this fucking bullshit.

I got up and went upstairs to the bathroom. I rested my head against the wall. I saw a smashed beer glass on the floor. I bent down, took a shard, looked at myself in the mirror. I ran the shard down my cheek. A red stripe appeared, some blood trickled off my chin. I wiped away the blood, no more came. I ran the shard down the other cheek, this time as hard as I could. I wiped the blood away with paper, threw it in the toilet, flushed, put the shard behind the trash can on the floor, went out, sat down at their table.

For some insane reason it was as though what I had done gave me renewed energy. I bought another round of beer, Tonje held my hand and pressed it to her thigh as she kept on chatting, she may have sensed what was on my mind and wanted to comfort me. I drew her hand to me, drank half the bottle in one swig, suddenly I felt an urge to go to the bathroom, suddenly all I wanted was to go there and I got up and went again, locked the cubicle door behind me, took the shard of glass and made two long cuts beside the previous ones, and then one across my chin, where the skin was softer and it hurt more. I wiped away the blood, a bit more came, I rinsed my face in cold water, dried it, and went back to them.

I smiled at them and said I was so happy that they seemed to like each other. All three of us *skål*-ed.

"What's that on your cheek?" Yngve said. "Did you have an accident shaving this morning or what?"

"Yes, something like that," I said.

The room was dark, the place was heaving, and both Tonje and Yngve were drinking and preoccupied with each other, so neither of them saw what I was doing, apart from when Yngve made a comment. But he didn't have enough imagination to suppose that I might be cutting myself. I did it for the rest of the evening, coldly and methodically, every part of my face was covered with cuts, and stung more and more, in the end, sitting beside them and drinking, it hurt so much I could have screamed, had it not been for the fact that, simultaneously, I enjoyed it. There was a joy in the pain, there was a joy in thinking that I could stand it, that I could stand everything, everything, everything.

"Let's go to Café Opera before they close, shall we?" Yngve said.

"Good idea," Tonje said. I had already stood up, put on my coat, wrapped the scarf round my neck ensuring that the lower part of my face was covered, pulled my hat over my forehead and went up the stairs ahead of them and into Nygårdsgaten. The air was cold and good, it seemed to bite into the cuts as we walked. I was as drunk as I could be, but my gait was steady, my voice – if I could think of anything to say – absolutely normal.

My mind was empty. Apart from the feeling of triumph at what I had done.

Tonje took my hand, Yngve slightly lowered his head as he walked, as always.

There was a queue in front of Café Opera. We joined it at the back.

Tonje looked at me.

She screamed.

"What's happened? What's happened? YOU'RE BLEEDING!" I walked across the street.

"What have you done, Karl Ove?" Yngve said, following me.

"I haven't done anything," I said. "Cut myself a little, that's all."

Tonje caught up with us.

She was crying, she was hysterical.

"What have you done?" she said. "What have you done?"

I started walking down the hill. Yngve followed me.

"I'm going home," I said. "Take care of Tonje for me."

"Are you sure? You're not going to get up to anything else?"

"Leave me in peace, for Christ's sake. Take care of her."

He stopped, I kept going without a backward glance, up the hill by the Pentecostal Church, into Skottegaten and down to where my apartment was. I unlocked the door, got into bed fully clothed, waiting for the doorbell to ring, she had to follow me, she had to, she had to leave Yngve and come down here, ring the bell, she had to, and I lay listening, and I heard nothing, and I fell into a deep sleep.

Even while I was asleep I knew I shouldn't wake up, something awful was awaiting me, and for a long time I succeeded in staying there, in the zone beneath consciousness until the well of sleep had run dry and I had to move on.

My face ached, I sat up, all that had happened returned. Now I have to take my life, I thought.

I had considered this option many times, but it was a game, I would never, not under any circumstances, do it, not even now.

Nevertheless, I hurt so much inside that this thought was my sole relief.

The pillow was bloodstained. I went into the hall, took down the CD I had hanging on a nail, and studied my face.

I had ruined it. I looked like a monster.

If there were scars, I would always look like this.

I showered. Lay down on the bed. I tried to imagine what it must have been like for Tonje. What she might be thinking now. Whether it was over or not.

This wasn't what she had anticipated when she got together with me.

I sat up and bowed my head.

Dear God, I said. Let this go well.

I went into the kitchen, looked down into the backyard.

I had to see her.

Perhaps not today though.

Perhaps best to keep my distance today.

In the evening I was supposed to play with Yngve and Tore in the abandoned factory. I went down to Yngve's a few hours before.

"You look terrible," he said when he saw me. "Why did you do it?"

"I don't know. I just did. Got too drunk. Can I come in?"

"Of course."

We sat down in the living room. I couldn't meet his eyes, stared down like a dog.

"What were you thinking about?" he said. "Not Tonje, that's for sure."

"How was she?" I said. "What happened?"

"I took her home."

"What did she say?"

"Say? Nothing. She cried the whole way home. No, she did say she didn't understand anything. She said you'd both been so happy. She said she thought you'd been happy too."

"That's true."

"It didn't look like it, you know."

"No."

There was a silence.

"You've got to stop drinking. You *mustn't* drink anymore."

"No."

Another silence.

"Do you think she'll leave me?"

"How should I know? And there's only one way to find out. You have to go and see her."

"Not now. I can't."

"But you have to."

"Can you come with me? Well, not to see her, just walk with me. I don't want to be on my own."

"OK. I need a walk anyway."

Yngve talked about other things, normal things, as soon as we got outside. I said nothing, I was happy to let him talk, it helped. In case she wasn't home I asked him to wait. I rang the bell, looked up, nothing, I went back to him. We went to the twenty-four-hour café that shift workers, truck drivers, and taxi drivers used, where the chance of bumping into anyone was minimal. When it started to get dark we picked up Yngve's guitar from home and went to meet Tore.

Tore stared at me, white faced.

"What have you done?" he said. I had to look away; he was crying.

"It looks worse than it is," I said. "They're not deep. It's just a few scratches."

"Jesus, Karl Ove," he said.

"Come on, let's make some music," I said.

After an hour in the freezing room, all wearing hats and scarves and thick jackets, the breath from our mouths like clouds, we left. Yngve had to go home, Tore and I chatted on the corner. He told me a good friend of his had once tried to commit suicide. He had gone into the forest and shot himself in the chest with a shotgun. He was found and he survived.

"I didn't know that," I said.

"No, how could you?" he said. "Don't you dare try anything like that."

"But it wasn't anything like that, Tore. Not even close. I just got drunk and it seemed like a good idea."

"Well, it wasn't."

"No, in retrospect I can see that."

We laughed and started to walk. Said good-bye at the corner by the Grieg Hall, he went uphill to his place, I walked to Tonje's apartment.

This time she opened the window. But she didn't come down, as she had done every time so far, instead she threw the key down to the street. I let myself in and went up. She had a visitor. Her best friend was there with her boyfriend.

I stopped in the doorway.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I look absolutely terrible. I got drunk and cut my face."

Tonje couldn't look at me.

"We were just leaving," the boyfriend said.

They got up, put on their coats and hats, said good-bye, and left.

"I'm so sorry for what happened," I said. "Can you forgive me?"

"Yes," she said. "But I don't know if I can be in a relationship with you. I don't know if I want that."

"No," I said. "I understand."

"Have you ever done anything like this before?"

"No. Never. And I'll never do it again."

"Why did you do it then?"

"I don't know. I have no idea. I just did it."

I sat down on the chair, looked up at her, she was staring out the window.

"Of course I want to be with you," she said, and turned. Tears were coursing down her cheeks.

One year later we moved in together. Right below the Science Building we found a two-room apartment which we tried to fit out as best we could with the little furniture we had. The bedroom was at the back, it was as small as a cabin on a boat and we had no room for much more than the bed. Outside it was the living room, also small, and to make more room we partitioned it with a bookcase. On one side I had a little place to write; on the other we put the sofa, chairs, and a table.

Here we had our first arguments, this was the practical side of living together that you had to get used to, but also our first real life together with each other, suddenly we shared everything. In this little apartment we slept together, we ate together, listened to music or watched TV together, and I liked her always being there and always returning after she had been out. She was now a manager at Student Radio and worked long hours. I had started studying again, after a four-year break, I took History of Art and was so ashamed at being much older than most of the other students that I never attempted any contact. When I wasn't attending lectures and studying slides of artworks I was poring over books in the reading room and devouring them like a maniac. After my national service had finished in March the year before I had joined Jon Olav and some of his friends in Vats, where a gigantic oil platform, Troll, was being built and they had got some work. I went along in the hope that more employees would be needed in due course, and after having slept on the sofa in an admin hut for three nights, of all the fortune hunters only Ben and I were left, and even though we, or at least I, had to be the worst qualified construction workers they had ever encountered, we got jobs in the end. I worked there for two and a half months, down one of the shafts, which when I started stretched perhaps twenty meters above the sea, but, by the time I finished, were more than a hundred meters high. At the beginning I suffered from vertigo, but the shaft grew so slowly that I eventually became used to heights and during my last days, with a sense of pride, I moved around outside the edge on scaffolding which consisted of three planks and an insubstantial rail a hundred meters above the water, without feeling the slightest fear. I was an awful laborer, but the job was so simple that I still managed. We did twelve-hour shifts, either day or night, and walking around at night, beneath the stars, amid the drone of machinery, seeing the lights of the three other shafts, in the middle of the fjord, surrounded by the vast darkness, while the wind howled around our ears, was magical, it was as though we were alone in the universe, a little colony of humans on an illuminated vessel in the great nothing. Tonje was furious with me when I returned, not because I had left her for a job only a few weeks after we had got together, but because I hadn't called her once. I explained to her that in fact I had tried once, but she hadn't been at home and apart from that one attempt there hadn't been time. I slept, ate, worked, that was it. She didn't believe me, I realized, she thought this *meant* something, was a *sign* of something. Perhaps it was, I hadn't thought about her much, I had been engrossed by the fantastically exotic nature of the work, but what did that matter so long as I could look her in the eye and say I loved her and really *mean* it? Look her in the eye and say she was the only one for me, now and forever?

The money had poured into my account and I wanted more. The work at Troll Oil was finished for my part, but I could continue at Troll Gas, which they were building at Hanøytangen, just outside Bergen. I called them, and when I said I had worked for Norwegian Contractors, the door was open. They were probably expecting an expert of some kind or other and must have been disappointed when they realized I was only a clumsy academic, but I kept the job until the work was finished. It was heavy going and monotonous, but I liked it so much I started wondering about applying for other big projects, such as the new airport they were building in Østland that I had heard talk of during the breaks.

While I worked at Hanøytangen I lived at home, and in my free weeks I was with Tonje all the time, down in my apartment, where I woke up early every morning and dashed out to buy fresh shrimp, fresh bread, freshly ground coffee, fruit and juice for our breakfast, or up in her crooked, windblown apartment, which would be eternally illuminated by love's first glow.

One day I finally met Tonje's mother and her husband, who had been living in Africa for some months. Now they were back for a few weeks, they had borrowed a house from some friends, we had dinner in the garden, I was nervous, but it all went fine, they were kind and curious to meet me, and as we were about to leave they said we should visit them in Africa, at Christmas, perhaps. We accepted the invitation. We had the money and the time.

I tried to rekindle my writing, but it didn't flow, nothing came of it, nothing serious, at least not compared with what Kjartan or Espen wrote. I thought I would have to travel for a while, write full-time, and as it was possible now to have unemployment benefits sent from Norway to EU countries I thought I might just as well live in one of them, such as England, and got in contact with Ole. He had married an English girl and lived in Norwich and said it would be a great town for me.

The morning I was due to leave I broke a mirror. Tonje didn't say anything, but I knew she was angry. In the taxi on the way to the boat I said I hadn't done it on purpose.

"It's not the mirror, you muppet," she said, crying. "It's the fact that you're leaving me."

"Are you upset about that?"

"Didn't you know?"

"No. It's only for three months. And you're going to visit me. And then we're going to Africa afterward, for Pete's sake. Besides I have to write something soon."

"I know," she said. "I'm just going to miss you terribly. But I'll be fine. You don't have to feel sorry for me, if that's what you think."

She smiled.

As I was going up the tubular gangway an hour later and turned and saw her standing there, and we waved to each other a last time, I was thinking I loved her and wanted to marry her.

This was one of those thoughts that change everything. One of the thoughts that just appear and everything else slots into place. It was a thought with future and meaning. That was what I was missing and had missed for so long. A future and meaning.

Of course we could just live together and see what happened. Actually there was no less future and meaning in that. Tonje was Tonje whether we were married or living together. Nevertheless. No one else I knew my age was married, marriage belonged to the generations before us, it was a nineteenth-century anachronism, created as a result of a rigid sexual morality and an equally rigid view of humanity, in which the woman was at home with the children and the man out at work, it was as antiquated as a top hat and a chamber pot, Esperanto and a paddleboat. The sensible option for modern men and women was not to marry, the sensible option for modern men and women was to live together, to respect each other for what we were, in ourselves, and not to be dependent on external institutions to live our lives. There was nothing to say we *had* to run around in jogging pants and watch videos in the evening, have a few kids, split up, and have custody every second week. We could organize our lives in a dignified manner with the means our era had placed at our disposal. That was the sensible and appropriate option. But love wasn't sensible, love wasn't reasonable, love wasn't appropriate, it was more than that, had to be more than that, so for Christ's sake, why not drag up marriage from the mists of time and impose its form on love again? Why not use the big words again? Why not solemnly swear that we will love each other forever? Why not insist on the profound solemnity it implied? Honor the lifelong obligation? Everything else we did was nonsense, regardless of what we were doing, it was nonsense, no one believed in it, not really. No one I knew anyway. Life was a game, a pastime, and death: it didn't exist. We laughed at everything, even at death, and that wasn't completely wrong, laughter always had the last word, the skull's grin when one day we lay there with earth in our mouths.

But I wanted to believe, I did believe, I would believe.

I picked up the cabin key from reception, dropped off my suitcase, and went up to the café. Everything lay open before me. I was going to a new country, to a town I had never seen, I had nowhere to live and no idea what was awaiting me.

I would be there for three months. Then we were going to Africa and there I would be free.

It was perfect.

The boat slid out. Tonje would probably be on her way home now, I thought, and went up on deck to see if I could catch a glimpse of her. But we were already quite far away, it was impossible to identify any of the black figures walking along Bryggen from this distance.

The sky was gray, the water we steadily made our way through, black. I held the railing and gazed toward Sandviken. The old idea of leaving everything returned for a brief instant. The worst of it was that it would be all right. I had always known that I could turn my back on everything and just leave, with no regrets. I could also leave Tonje. I didn't miss her when she wasn't there. I didn't miss anyone and never had. I never missed Mom, I never missed Yngve. I never missed Espen, I never missed Tore. I hadn't missed Gunvor when we had been together, and I didn't miss Tonje now. I knew I would wander through the streets of Norwich, sit in lodgings somewhere writing, perhaps go out for a drink with Ole, and I wouldn't miss her. I would think about her now and then, with warmth but not with longing. This was a flaw in me, a shortcoming I had, a coldness in my heart. If I got close to people I could sense what they wanted and would subordinate myself to that. If Gunvor had felt I was too distant from her I sensed that feeling and tried to meet it halfway. Not for my sake but for hers. If I said something Espen considered stupid I was ashamed and tried to make amends, his assessment of me was paramount. Couldn't I be distant and stand firm? Couldn't I be stupid and stand firm?

No, not there, not in front of them.

But, when I was alone, it meant nothing.

This coldness in my heart was terrible, sometimes I thought I wasn't human, I was a Dracula who lived off other people's emotions, but had none myself. My love affairs, what else were they but a mirror? What else were they but my own feelings?

What I felt for Tonje was genuine, however, and since a genuine feeling was more precious to me than anything else, I had to commit everything to that.

But I didn't miss her.

All day and all evening I sat reading and jotting down ideas and thoughts in my notebook. It was now or never. I couldn't be someone who wrote but wasn't published for much longer, both for purely practical reasons – one, I already lagged several years behind those I had started studying with, and two, I had to make a living – and for matters surrounding my dignity. A twenty-year-old writing full-time to become a writer is simply charming; a twenty-five-year-old doing the same is a loser.

A short story like Joyce's "The Dead," I wrote in my notebook. *A family gathering in which all the characters represent stages of life, childhood, adolescence, middle age, the declining years, but are at the same time themselves, idiosyncratic people, in the middle of life. Such a gathering, with all its conflicts, when the 1940s are present, the 1960s are present, like pockets in the here and now, the complexity, without any history, then the gathering disperses and the little nuclear family is on its way home. In the back of the car the two children, the older one is asleep, the younger awake with closed eyes listening to his parents talking about something dreadful. Either from the past, something important, or something that is going to happen. It is snowing. They arrive, the house is dark and still, they go in . . . and then? What's going to happen now? What is big enough to build on everything that has gone before?*

I closed my notebook and immersed myself in *Ulverton* by Adam Thorpe. It had been translated by Svein Jarvoll and was about a fictional place in rural England, every chapter enacted a different epoch, the first the 1600s, the last our century. The chapters were written in a variety of forms and dialects. Jarvoll had chosen the Skjåk dialect for one, and it was strange how well it fit: the gates in the fences that were opened for riders to pass through, the fields and the trees, the low crumbling houses, it all fitted the Skjåk dialect. Perhaps in a way because dialects grew from the countryside around them, the style of speaking originated just there, in that particular valley, where the pronunciation of one word, for example, had come into existence with the great oak tree, which was now almost a thousand years old, the pronunciation of another with the terrain being cleared and the ancient stone wall built. In other areas there were other words and other oak trees, fields, and stone walls.

Time flowed through this novel, whirled through human lives. The appeal was enormous.

Perhaps I was attracted to it so much because I had grown up in a place where there was only the present day and the past was in books?

I bought a beer, wrote *1600s* in my notebook, looked at my watch, it would soon be twelve, drank up, and went to bed.

The cabin was deep in the bowels of the boat, just under the engine room. This made me think about Grandpa, he always used to book a cabin above the waterline. If he couldn't, well, he would sleep in a recliner. I wasn't bothered by such concerns, the ship could sink while I was asleep for all I cared.

I undressed, read a few pages of *Ulverton*, turned off the light, and fell asleep. I awoke in the darkness a few hours later from the most fantastic dream I'd ever had.

I sat up and laughed to myself.

I had been walking down the road outside our house in Tybakken. Suddenly there was a roar from above the earth. The noise was deafening, I knew there had never been such a roar before, it rolled across the sky like thunder, though infinitely louder.

It was God's voice.

I stopped and looked at the sky.

And then I was raised up!

I was raised up to the sky!

What a feeling it was. The roar, the majesty of God's presence, and then the incredible moment when I was raised up. It was a moment of peace and perfection, joy and happiness.

I lay down again.

OK, so it was only a dream. But the feeling, that was real. I had really felt it. What a shame I had been asleep when I felt it, but now I knew it existed anyway, I thought, closed my eyes and dived into sleep, hoping something even more fantastic was in store for me.

When I was seven, we went to England on holiday, my memories of it were the best I had of my childhood, and they all returned when, the next afternoon, I stood holding the railing and gazing at the strip of land that had appeared in the distance. It was England. We passed some fishing boats on our way in, seagulls circled in the air above them, before us the land seemed to sink as we approached, I saw more and more of it until we entered what was like a canal and actually found ourselves in the middle. Run-down warehouses and factory buildings on either side with large areas of refuse-filled wasteland between them.

The grass was yellow, the sky gray, and if anything at all glowed it was the brickwork of the buildings, but of rust, the color of perishability and decay. Oh, that filled my soul, this was England; the buildings we saw probably originated from the first period of industrialization, I loved the Empire that had declined but was still proud, and those who grew up in this dismal grayness captivated us all, first the sixties' generation, pop, the Beatles and the Kinks, then the seventies' heavy rock, all the evil bands from the metalworking towns in the Midlands, filthy rich in their twenties, then punk, in the mountains of uncollected garbage in 1976, then post-punk and goth rock, the enormous seriousness they brought to their music, and then, now, Madchester, raves, colors, and beat. England, I loved England, everything about England. The soccer, what more could you want than a tired old stadium from the beginning of the twentieth century, filled with ten to twelve thousand grim-faced, fiery working-class men, the mist over the heavy muddy field and tackles so hard they echoed between the advertising billboards? The dark houses with wall-to-wall carpets everywhere, even on the stairs and in pubs.

When the boat docked I got on one of the double-decker buses going to the town center. The cries of newspaper vendors met me first as I alighted. The air was noticeably much warmer than it had been in Bergen, I was in another country again, everything was slightly unfamiliar. I walked to the train station and bought a ticket to Norwich, waited in a café there for a couple of hours, and boarded the train.

In Norwich I took a taxi to the University of East Anglia, Ole had said they rented rooms there before term started, which was correct, I was allocated one, I dropped off my luggage and walked down to the student bar I had noticed when I arrived. I sat alone for a couple of hours drinking and watching the students and trying to pretend I belonged there. The following day I went into town. It was small, surrounded by the remnants of a medieval wall, full of small churches used now for a multitude of purposes, in one I saw a pub and in another a sports shop. There were rivers with houseboats moored to the banks and there was a beautiful towering medieval cathedral. I bought a loaf of bread and some salami slices and sat down in a field nearby. Some boys were playing rugby in front of me, schoolboys, I assumed. The sight of their uniforms and the exotic game evoked strange melancholy feelings in me, I was reminded of Victorian times, the Empire, boarding schools, factories, the colonies, of which these young boys were a part. It was their history and could not be mine.

I bought two local newspapers and sat in a pub beside the river, ordered a cider and read through the accommodation ads, circled three that might be possibilities.

The first only rented a room to students, I was stupid enough to say I was unemployed and she just put down the phone. The second was more promising. She had a room in town, she said, but they lived somewhere else, could I meet her there?

Yes, I could. I jotted down the address, bought some chewing gum so that I didn't smell of alcohol, and got into a taxi.

A man in ragged clothes with a beard and earrings opened the door, shook my hand, said his name was Jim, called his wife, who came out and said hello. You come with me, he said, passing me a piss-pot–type helmet. His motorbike was in the garden. It had a sidecar, which I was supposed to get into. The sidecar was a bathtub, which he had welded on. He pushed the vehicle forward, gestured, take a seat. I climbed in and reluctantly sat down. He started up and we moved into the road and headed for the city center. People on the sidewalks and in cars stared at me. A Norwegian measuring almost two meters was sitting in a bathtub wearing a piss pot and weaving through the streets of Norwich.

The house was in a working-class district. A long row of identical brick buildings on either side up a gentle incline. He unlocked the door, I followed him in. First there was a staircase, carpeted, leading up to two rooms, of which I would have one. A bed, a wardrobe, a chair, and a desk, that was it.

He asked me what I thought.

"It's brilliant," I said. "I'll take it."

We went back down, into the living room. It was full from floor to ceiling with objects. All sorts of junk, from old car parts to stuffed birds. He said he was a collector.

This was not the only surprise. In a huge aquarium on the part of the floor that wasn't yet occupied was a boa constrictor.

He said that usually he would have let me hold it, but it was too hungry now.

I checked his expression to see if he was joking.

He was utterly serious.

Behind the living room there was a little kitchen, and behind that, a small bathroom with a tub.

"It's brilliant," I repeated, paid him two months' rent as a deposit, he showed me how the gas oven worked, said I could use anything there and he would pop by in the next few days to feed the snake.

Then he went, and I was left with the boa constrictor. It slowly coiled round the aquarium and nestled up to the glass. I was trembling as I watched and felt more and more nauseous. Even while I was unpacking upstairs in my room my body trembled with unease, the thought of it downstairs preoccupied my mind to the exclusion of everything else, also when I was asleep, I had nightmare after nightmare about snakes of all shapes and sizes.

Ole had written to say he would be in Norway when I arrived, so my immediate world during the first few days was the small carpeted room, which I left in the morning, to wander around town, and returned to in the afternoon. The noises outside were unfamiliar, children playing, shouting and screaming in English, and I never really got used to the long row of dirty terraced houses I faced, it was as though I was in an English TV series, meanwhile the snake downstairs was getting hungrier and hungrier. Sometimes it reared up and banged its head hard on the glass. A chill ran though me. But I was also fascinated, I would sit down on the floor by the aquarium and closely scrutinize this outlandish creature with which I shared my house.

At the end of the week the landlord returned. He shouted for me to come, this I had to see.

He took out some mice he had in the freezer. On the same shelf that I had put my sausages, I noticed. He warmed the mice lightly in the oven, lying on their backs with their legs sticking up. When finally they had thawed, while he'd been smoking his pipe and showing me a Norwegian tobacco blend, Eventyr, from the seventies, he had in his heap of junk, which Dad had smoked when I was a boy, he took one mouse by the tail, pushed the top of the aquarium to the side, tapped on the glass a few times, to wake the sleeping snake, and then dangled the mouse to and fro. The snake, sleepy and lethargic, slowly raised its head and then, so quickly I recoiled, launched itself at the mouse. It was given four mice. For the next four days it lay still in the aquarium with four large bulges in its otherwise slim body.

Once the world consisted of creatures like this one, deeply primitive, they slithered across the ground or thundered along on their huge taloned feet. What was life like when that was all there was? When we knew that once there had been nothing else, and actually it was still like that? Just a body and food and light and death?

One thing I had learned when I was working at the first institution: life wasn't modern. All the variants, all the deformities, all the freaks of nature, all the mental disabilities, all the insanity, all the injuries, all the illnesses, they still existed, they were as present now as they had been in the Middle Ages, but we had hidden them, we had put them in enormous buildings in the forest, created special camps for them, consistently kept them out of sight so as to give the impression the world was hale and hearty, that that was how the world and life were, but they weren't, life was also grotesque and distorted, sick and crooked, undignified and humiliated. The human race was full of fools, idiots, and freaks, either they were born like this or they became like this, but they were no longer on the streets, they no longer ran around frightening the wits out of people, they were in civilization's shadow, or night.

That was the truth.

The snake's life in the aquarium was another truth.

Once upon a time there were no creatures on earth with eyes. Then eyes developed.

After a few days in the house I realized I could forget about writing. I tried, but to no avail, what could I write about? Who did I think I was, believing I could create something that would interest anyone apart from my mother and my girlfriend?

Instead I wrote letters. To Espen, to Tore, to Yngve, to Mom, to Tonje. I described my days in detail, from the postman whistling "The Internationale" as he walked past in the morning, everything I saw on my many long walks through the town, to the strange experiences I had at the Job Center, all the poverty and misery revealed there, the seriousness of life that contrasted so starkly with my own, since nothing was at stake for me, the unemployment benefit I received was probably ten times higher than theirs, and actually was sort of a joke, something I had applied for in order to create time to write. The welfare officer I was assigned to must have been suspicious, at any rate he raised his voice with me now and then and threatened to withdraw all payments if I couldn't provide evidence soon that I was actually looking for work there in town.

Ole returned from Norway, I visited him and his wife in their apartment. It was tiny, she was very English. Ole was exactly as I remembered him, self-effacingly nice yet intense. He was still studying his subjects, but never took any exams, he was paralyzed by fear, however much he knew, however brilliant he was, he couldn't make himself take an exam. We made the rounds of all the secondhand bookshops, his favorite writer was Samuel Johnson, whom he occasionally translated on his own, for fun, and Boswell, and still Beckett, as five years ago.

I liked him a lot. But that didn't justify my stay here. I *had* to write. But what? Five days in succession could pass without me saying a word to anyone. Everything was unfamiliar, the houses, the people, the shops, the countryside, no one needed me, no one cared about me, and that was perfect, that was exactly how I wanted it, just walking around and looking, and looking at everything in existence without it looking back.

But to what end? And with what justification? What was the point of looking if you couldn't write about what you saw? What was the point of experiencing anything at all if you couldn't write about what you'd experienced?

I got drunk with Ole a few times, he always went back home when the pubs closed, I didn't want to, and he would accompany me to one of the nightclubs, say good-bye outside, and I would go in and continue drinking on my own, without talking to a soul. At four I would stagger home and to bed. Sleep in the next day, full of angst, listen to Radio 1, read all the major newspapers, that took all day, and then I would go back to bed.

Supergrass's debut single was played around the clock. I bought it. Elastica were in Norwich, I went to see them, drunk and on my own. With the money I received from Norway I bought secondhand seventies tracksuit jackets, shoes, jeans, records, and books. Caught the bus to London in the morning, trudged round the Tottenham Court Road area all day, and came back in the evening.

After I had lived like this for two and a half months, Tonje came to visit me. We went to London, bought tickets to Johannesburg and Maputo, and caught the plane home together to Bergen.

In Africa I asked her if she would marry me.

She said yes, I will.

Back in Bergen, in the new apartment, I realized I couldn't go on like this anymore. We were getting married in a few months and I couldn't let Tonje marry an idiot who thought he could be a writer, someone who was throwing his life away, I prized her too highly for that, so I went out and bought the most important art history books, borrowed the rest from the University Library, and set about reading them.

Tore, who was still studying Literature, writing a dissertation about Proust and his name, told me that an editor in Oslo had called him, he'd read Tore's reviews in *Morgenbladet* and wondered whether he would like to work as a reader for him. Tore said he would. He had also told him he was a writer, and the editor, Geir Gulliksen, wanted to read what he had done.

I had also written reviews in *Morgenbladet*. Indeed, it had been me who got Tore into *Morgenbladet*. So why hadn't Geir Gulliksen called *me*?

But then something happened for me too. I received an invitation in the mail to contribute to an anthology. The Writing Academy had some anniversary or other and they were looking for contributions from alumni. I sent them "Zoom." It wasn't a competition, the anthology was open only to alumni and I hadn't even considered the possibility of a rejection. But I was rejected. They didn't want it.

I had reacted to every other rejection with composure, they were expected, all of them. But this one crushed me. I was completely demoralized for several weeks and this led to me making the final decision to stop writing. It was simply too humiliating. I was twenty-six years old, I was getting married, I could no longer live with the dream.

Some weeks later I went up to Tore's, we were going to Verftet to practice with the new band. It consisted of Hans and Knut Olav from Kafkatrakterne plus Tore and me. Lemen, we were called, the hyperactive Norwegian lemming, after Tore, his shaven head and inexhaustible energy.

We walked downhill to the center. It was the beginning of March, one o'clock in the afternoon, the streets were dry and filled with that delicate pale spring light that came gradually and imperceptibly after the winter's endless succession of damp gray dark days.

Tore looked at me.

"I've got some good news," he said.

"Oh?" I said, fearing the worst.

"My manuscript has been accepted. It's coming out this autumn! I'm going to make my debut!"

"Is that true? But that's fantastic, Tore," I said.

All the energy I had drained away. I walked beside him, black to the core inside. It was so unfair. It was just so unfair. Why should *he*, *four* years younger than me, have the talent and not me? I had long reconciled myself to the fact that Espen had the talent, his debut was no surprise, it made sense. But *Tore?* And so young?

Shit.

Tore was beaming like a sun.

"'This has to be published,' Geir Gulliksen told me. I sat up all night thinking of titles. I've got a list of them here. Want to see?"

He took a folded sheet of paper from his inside pocket and passed it to me. I read as we walked.

Julian's Calendar
Once as Invisible as Nausea
Snowflake
Sleeping Tangle
A Liberated Blush
A Tangled Second
For Shame's Sake
Once and for All

"*Julian's Calendar*," I said. "Without any doubt."

"I like *Sleeping Tangle*," Tore said.

"No, it's too cryptic. What is a sleeping tangle?"

"It's a mood, a problem that exists but hasn't had any impact yet. There's something passive about it. Or abandoned. Above all, though, it creates a mood."

"*Julian's Calendar*," I said, giving him the sheet of paper. He put it back in his inside pocket.

"We'll see," he said. "Actually I'll soon have finished. Only have to polish it now."

"Would you like me to read it?" I said.

"Not yet. But if you wouldn't mind reading the final version."

I had already read a lot of his work and this much I knew: I couldn't help him. It was much better than anything I had written. The most disturbing feature of it was that he hadn't just taken a narrative form and filled it with what he'd learned it should be filled with, as one might be tempted to think would be the case with a debutant who was only twenty-two. He had taken a form, that was true, but the whole project, everything he wrote about was in some unclear but obvious way connected with himself, his very essence, all the fascinations he had and was almost unaware of, and he could therefore write about with the unfettered joy of discovery.

"Congratulations," I said. "That's absolutely fantastic news."

"Yes, it really is," he said. "At long last! Seventeen fucking rejections it took. But now I'm there."

At that time we practiced a lot, the band was going to play at the new Studentkvarteret in the spring and we hadn't been together that long, there was still a lot to work on. Tore, our singer, had written half the songs, Knut Olav, who played the guitar, the other half, apart from one, which Hans, now the bass player, had written. Knut Olav was prodigiously talented, he played all the instruments and composed excellent pop songs and could have gone far if he'd had better musicians around him. But he wouldn't hear of it. As a drummer, he was perhaps a thousand times better than me, but he put up with me slowing and accelerating the tempo of his songs, and when he arranged them, all he had in his head was something unfussy. With Tore on vocals as well, utterly undaunted by his high profile as he was, brazen even, everything worked out fine.

There was nothing I liked more than playing with them and then going out afterward. Maybe ringing Tonje and getting her to come along. All while the light was growing and the leaves were coming out on the trees.

The nineteenth of May was the day we were playing at Kvarteret. I turned up a few hours before the sound check, Tore met me at the door, I could see at once that something had happened.

"Have you heard?" he said.

"Heard what?"

"Tor Ulven's dead."

"Dead? Are you serious?"

"Yes. Geir Gulliksen called to tell me."

"But he was young."

"Yes. And Norway's best writer."

"Yes. Oh, Jesus. How awful."

We went into the café and discussed the news farther. Both Tore and I considered him to be quite different from and much better than the rest of Norwegian literature. I thought of Espen, it had been him who'd introduced me to Ulven and he had read him more intensely than anyone I knew.

Hans and Knut Olav came, we drifted into the auditorium, did the sound check and gradually stage fright took over, half an hour before we went on I was on the point of throwing up, but as usual the fear vanished the moment we appeared and played the first bars.

Afterward we sat backstage drinking beer and chatting about the performance – what were you actually doing there, I completely lost it there and had no idea where we were – someone poked a head in and said the Crown Prince had been in the audience, we laughed, but Tore wasn't with us, he was in shock, the sudden death, I could see it in his face, the brief moments of total absence that punctuated his otherwise sociable persona. If anyone had inspired him in the writing of his book, it had been Ulven. Nonetheless, we moved on, went to Garage, and when it closed I walked home with Tonje, the night was still, the streets spring light beneath the mountains and the sky with twinkling stars.

We spent more and more time discussing the wedding and planning it. It would be at her home in Molde, she wanted it on the island of Hjertøya, and so it was to be, I wanted it as small as possible, only family, she agreed to that so long as we had a party afterward with everyone we knew.

I called Dad and told him I was getting married. Still he had a hold over me, still not a day passed without my thinking about him, and I had long dreaded this conversation. He had separated from his wife and moved to Østland, but I managed to track him down at Grandma's.

"I've got some good news, Dad," I said.

"Oh?" he said.

"I'm getting married."

"Uh-huh. A bit young, aren't you?"

"No, I want this. You were only twenty when you got married."

"Different times. I had to, you know."

"We're getting married in Molde this summer. I'd like you to come of course."

"I can do that. Grandma and I will drive up, I imagine. What's the name of the girl you're marrying?"

"Tonje."

"Ah, so it's Tonje, is it. OK, that's good. But now I have to be off."

"Alright. Bye."

"Bye, Karl Ove."

The thought of him coming was a concern for me, not only because of his drinking but also the fact that I would see him there with Mom for the first time since I was sixteen. On the other hand, I wanted him to be present. I was getting married, he was my father, it was important. It was of less concern that Tonje's family would see the state he was in and he might cause a rumpus.

It was also important that Tonje should meet him. I had told her a lot, but meeting him was quite another matter. What I had told her would have a different meaning then.

A few days later Tore said he was moving to Oslo, he wanted to be there when the book came out, that was where it was all happening. Inger would go with him of course, otherwise he wouldn't have gone. Tore couldn't be alone.

"But what about the band?" I said. "It's finally beginning to click. You don't need to move just because your book is coming out, do you?"

"We've lived in Bergen for so long now," he said. "It feels as if the town has nothing left to offer."

"Tell me about it," I said. "I've lived here for seven long years!"

"Anyone would think you'd been forced to live here the way you're talking. Take Tonje and move to Oslo as well."

"I'll never do that. You can say what you like about Bergen, and perhaps not a lot happens here, but at least it's not the center."

"No, because the center's where it all happens!"

"Yes, and I don't want to be there."

"Oh, so you'd rather sit on the margins as the unrecognized genius?"

"Genius? Do me a favor. You go. The cemetery's full of irreplaceable people, as Einar Førde once said."

"What's up with you today?"

"I mean what I said. We've got something good going with Lemen."

Tore threw up his arms.

"*C'est la vie*," he said. "I can't sit on my hands here just because you want me to."

"No, you're right about that."

He handed in his Proust dissertation, gave me his manuscript, which was theoretically ready to be published, I read it, made a few comments which he accepted with gratitude, albeit without acquiescing to them, and one day I saw them off, Tore and Inger, on their way to their new home in Oslo. I often crossed the mountains to visit Espen, now I could visit Tore as well. My life was here, with Tonje, in Bergen.

Three weeks before the wedding, Dad phoned. He said he couldn't come after all. Grandma wasn't doing well, he said, it was a long trip, he couldn't risk her health.

"So I can't make it, Karl Ove," he said.

"But I'm getting *married*!"

"I can't make it, you have to understand that. Grandma's fragile and . . . Well, we can't drive all the way up to Molde now."

"You're my father!" I said. "I'm your son! I'm getting married. You *can't* say no."

I started crying.

"Yes, I can," he said. "I'm not coming, and that's it."

"Then you're just like your own parents," I said. "They didn't go to your wedding, either. Not to your first, or to your second. Are you going to do the same to me?"

"Well, I don't have to to listen to this," he said, and put down the phone.

I cried as I'd never cried before, completely overcome by my feelings, I stood in the middle of the floor, bent double, as wave after wave of sobs racked my body. I couldn't understand it, I hadn't realized how important it was for me that he come to the wedding, I'd had no idea, but it certainly had been, I concluded, put on my sunglasses, and went to town to walk it off. I cried all the way to the bus station, it was sunny and the streets were crowded with people, I felt excluded from them, I was deep inside myself, and when I had calmed down and was sitting in the café at Hotel Terminus, I understood nothing. Thinking coldly and calmly, I was glad he wouldn't be there. I had been worried about it, actually, in my heart of hearts, I hadn't wanted him there, neither at my wedding nor in my life. Then he said he wasn't coming to the wedding and I broke down.

Understand that if you can, I thought, worn down by all the crying, in the middle of this beautiful, spacious, almost empty 1920s café, with a little pot of coffee on the table in front of me, from whose spout at that very moment a droplet fell onto the white cloth, which greedily absorbed it.

We went to Molde a few days later. Even if the wedding wasn't a big affair there was still a lot to be done. Boats to and from the island had to be arranged, the food had to be organized and all the practical details connected with it, I had to write a speech and teach myself to waltz, the two events I dreaded most. I held my arms around a cushion and tried to practice the steps on the sitting-room floor after the others had gone to bed, to the music of Evert Taube, and I was reminded of Grandpa: it takes all sorts to make a world. Mom had bought my suit, one day we went out in Bergen and found one in olive green. Tonje's dress, which she loved, was a plain creamy yellow.

The day came, we went down to the function room where the ceremony would take place, I was nervous and thought I had everything under control, but when I met Mård and Ingunn outside and they congratulated me I realized this was not the case, I had nothing under control, because I suddenly started crying. I didn't understand why, but I summoned all the willpower at my disposal to suppress it.

When we said "I do" to each other we both had tears in our eyes. Afterward the whole company walked down to the harbor, where the boat was waiting. People snapped photos, the food was served, I made a speech, Yngve, who was my best man, made a speech, Tonje's father made a speech, and Mom made a speech. The sun shone, we danced on a terrace outside the reception room, I was both pleased and sad because Tonje was so happy and I wasn't worthy of her.

We went on our honeymoon to England, I insisted on this, she had suggested a hotel by a beach in a hot country, where everything was easy, I wouldn't have that, so there we were, on a bus from London to Cornwall, where I had been as a seven-year-old, although I recognized nothing at all, for a week we hopped from village to village along the coast, living in small dirty hotel rooms, apart from one, which was magnificent and as romantic as Tonje had hoped, with a terrace and a view across the sea, champagne waiting for us when we arrived, walks along the wild cliffs, dinner in the restaurant, me in a suit, her in a dress, we were, after all, newlyweds, which the waiters knew, they were very attentive, and I sat blushing and squirming, uncomfortable with all the attention, uncomfortable in the suit, I looked like an idiot, unable to escape the little picture and rise to the bigger one. Tonje, cool and beautiful, didn't understand this side of me, but she would.

Back home, we moved into a new apartment, in Sandviken, opposite the church, consisting of one long room with a combined kitchen and sitting room, as well as a bedroom, and, unlike all the other apartments I'd lived in over the past seven years, the building was in good condition. We couldn't afford it, but we rented it anyway. I was happy there, I especially liked the view of the church and the trees surrounding it.

At the end of August we went up to Mom's, where Yngve and I painted the house. Kjartan dropped by, he had written something, he said, but didn't have much hope, he had been refused too often for that, he was considering sending his manuscript to Oktober. What did I think?

Send it, send it, it's excellent.

Kjartan was a writer. Espen was a writer. Tore was a writer. But I wasn't, I was a student, I had come to terms with that and I used every ounce of strength I had to study. I followed the courses of lectures, went up to the reading room early in the morning and sat there until late at night. I liked the subject, especially the lectures, since so many of them were spent viewing slides, of all the greatest buildings, sculptures, and paintings in existence. All the material I had found difficult and impenetrable before, when as a twenty-year-old I had taken a stab at hard-core theory, was now easily comprehensible, and this was strange as I hadn't tackled any theory since, however I didn't waste any time pondering this, I was there to read, and read I did.

Tore's book came out, it received good reviews, he was invited to join *Vagant*, where two of my friends worked now. Tonje continued at the radio station, on weekends we visited her mother or her brother's family, unless it was just us two, either at home in front of the TV or out with friends. Life had settled down, it was good and, provided that I could pass the two subjects I needed and make a start on my main course, everything to do with job and career would sort itself out. In addition, I was also making a last desperate attempt to write again. This was against my better judgment, I no longer believed I could do it, I was running on sheer force of will. No more short stories, now it had to be a novel. It was about the slave ship *Fredensborg*, which had sunk off the island of Tromøya some time in the eighteenth century and was discovered when I was a boy, by the head teacher of my school, among others. I had always carried this story within me, had always been fascinated by it, not least when I saw objects from the ship exhibited at the Aust-Agder Museum, the world and history coincided in a point near where I grew up, and now I was going to write about it. Progress was slow, there was so much I didn't know, such as daily life on board a sailing vessel of almost three hundred years ago, I knew nothing about that, had no idea what they did or what tools they used or what they were called, only things like the sails or the masts, and that meant I had no freedom at all. I could describe the sea and the sky, but that wasn't much to base a novel on. Their thoughts? Yes, but what did a sailor think in the eighteenth century?

I didn't give up, I fought on, borrowed books from the university library, wrote a sentence or two after I returned from the reading room in the evening and for a few hours on Sunday mornings, it wasn't good, but sooner or later it had to click for me too, as it had done for Kjartan: Oktober had accepted his collection of poetry, it would be published next autumn. After twenty years of writing poems he was finally where he wanted to be and I was ecstatic on his behalf because he had resigned from his job, he had been forced to stop his studies, so writing was all he had left.

Late that autumn I got a phone call from Yngve in Balestrand, Gunnar had called him, Dad had gone missing.

"Gone missing?"

"Yes. He's not at work, not in the apartment, not with Grandma or Erling."

"Could he have caught a plane and headed south?"

"Doubtful. Something's probably happened to him. The police are searching for him. He's been reported missing."

"Really? Do you think he's dead?"

"No."

A few days later, he called again.

"Dad's been found."

"Oh? Where?"

"In a hospital. He's paralyzed. Can't walk."

"You're joking. Are you telling me the truth?"

"Yes, that's what I've been told. But it's unlikely to be permanent. It's alcohol-related in some way or other."

"What'll happen now?"

"He'll be admitted to a detox clinic."

I called Mom and told her. She asked me for the name of the clinic, I said I didn't know, but Yngve probably did.

"What are you going to do?"

"I was thinking of sending him my love."

The exam came, I wrote about Greek statues, it went well, at the oral they told me it didn't matter what I said, they couldn't give me a better grade than the one I already had. I continued with History of Art and took Philosophical Aesthetics on the side, read Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* all Easter, Tonje applied for a radio job in Volda, Tore phoned to say he would be editing an anthology and wanted a text from me. But I haven't got anything, I said. Then you'll have to write something new, he said. You're doing this. I perused the little I had, there was nothing of any value, apart perhaps from a passage in the novel that was almost finished now. *Fredensborg* is sailing between the islands of Mærdø and Tromøya on this day in the eighteenth century, from Copenhagen bound for Africa to collect slaves, one of the crew stares over at the shore, there is a farm, a woman is drawing water from a well in a bucket, he looks at the house, which is derelict. Flies are buzzing around her. In the house a man starts sleeping more and more every day, he enters a coma, everything is crumbling around him, until at last sleep encloses him, encapsulates him, and she, after fighting against everything, is set free. I turned the text into a short story, entitled it "Sleep," and sent it to him.

In late spring Eivind Røssaak phoned, he had been appointed the culture editor in *Klassekampen* and inquired whether I would like to review books for him. I said yes. The History of Art exam came, I wrote fifty pages about the concept of mimesis, a whole booklet, which I handed in to the university porters before going home. The grades I was awarded were obscenely good and more and more I was reconciling myself to the idea that I was going to be an academic.

Tonje had been accepted in Volda and was going to move up there while I would stay in Bergen, start on my main course, and join her for the last year. Tore had accepted my piece, the anthology had come out, to a deafening silence, but it did do some good, Geir Gulliksen called one day and asked if I would be in Oslo in the near future, if so, he would like me to drop in on him, so that we could talk about me and my writing.

In fact, I would be, I lied, and we arranged to meet.

In Oslo I stayed with Espen, as always. Now Tore was in Oslo too, the three of us met up, cycled over to see Vigeland's morbid chapel in the morning and in the evening met again to go for dinner. It was a *Vagant* dinner, everyone who worked on the journal was there, Kristine Næss, Ingvild Burkey, Henning Hagerup, Bjørn Aagenæs, Espen, Tore – and then me. They had asked me to interview Rune Christiansen, it was to take place the following day, so I was a kind of associate member of the editorial team for a weekend. The dinner was at Kristine Næss's place, we sat around a small table, it was all nice and intimate, my two best friends were there, I was inside the circle, I was where I wanted to be, but my respect for them was too great, I didn't dare say anything, I just listened. Henning Hagerup, the best critic of his generation, sat next to me and asked me one or two polite questions, and I *didn't answer*. I said nothing, just looked down and nodded, glanced up at him, he smiled at me and turned away. We ate, the conversation was lively, but I was mute. I didn't dare say anything. In a big room with a lot of people this wouldn't have mattered because no one would have noticed, but here, where there were so few of us, it stood out. The longer I remained quiet, the more and more conspicuous it became, the more impossible it was to say anything. I cursed myself, tied myself in knots inside, couldn't stop, listened to what was said, formulated something I could say, but didn't, held back, held everything back. An hour passed, two hours passed, three hours passed. We had been sitting there for three hours and I hadn't said a single word. The atmosphere was warming up, beer and wine and cognac were on the table. Four hours passed, five hours passed, I hadn't said a word. Then another problem presented itself. Soon I would have to go, but how could I do that, after five hours I couldn't just get up and say thank you for everything, it's been nice, I'm afraid I have to go, that would be impossible. Nor could I leave without saying anything. I was trapped, as I had been trapped all evening, naturally everyone had noticed and both Espen and Tore had watched me initially with curiosity, then with concern, but in that gathering, which consisted exclusively of writers and critics, I couldn't speak, I had nothing to offer, I was an idiot, a blushing tongue-tied little shit who came to Oslo from the provinces thinking that with his savage reviews in *Klassekampen* and his glowing grades he at least had *something* to offer, but I had nothing, I was a nobody, a zero, indeed, such a nonentity that I couldn't even get up from the table. I couldn't speak and couldn't leave. I was trapped.

Five and a half hours passed. Six hours passed.

Then I went to the toilet. Went into the corridor, put on my shoes and jacket, poked my head around the door, they were still sitting around the table, and I said:

"Got to be off. Thanks for everything. It was nice."

Everyone shouted good-bye and nice to meet you, I carefully closed the door behind me, went down the stairs, and when I emerged and the cold sharp autumn air hit my face I burst into a run. I sprinted as fast as I could across the road and down the block, the veins throbbing in my neck, my mouth gasping for air, and that was why I did it, I assume, that was why I ran, I needed to feel that I was actually alive.

I had read Rune Christiansen's work for years, his visual, almost filmic, poetry had a strong appeal for me, and the moods it evoked or that were aroused in me were a kind of constant in my life, which always informed the way I saw and felt, but on which I never reflected. If the theme of transience appeared in his poetry it wasn't brutal, as it was with Tor Ulven, this osteal hardness which could occasionally split open into a death's-head grin, this bone-rattling merry dance, laughter as life's sole bulwark against the void, no, with Rune Christiansen transience was gentler, bathed in a light of reconciliation, it was rust, autumn, decay, hedgehogs shuffling through a pile of leaves, planes crossing the sky, romance in a hotel room, in a subway entrance, in a train clattering through a forest somewhere.

I met him in a Sunday-empty café in Lommedalen. In the forest outside, the darkness fell as we talked with the Dictaphone on the table between us. Hardly any newspapers or journals wrote about poetry, and this was to be quite a big interview, so he had prepared well, keeping some densely written sheets of paper at his side, presumably containing everything he had considered bringing up. I was no poetry expert, but in some way or other the questions appeared to strike a chord with him or else he managed to twist everything toward the essence of what he was trying to say in his writing, because the interview was a success, we sat there for close to two hours and when I left to catch the bus to town it felt as if everything was within my reach, I was on to something important, all I had to do was stretch out for it. This was a vague feeling, nothing on which you could build, but all the same I knew I had something there. In the mist, in the darkness of the forest, in the dew drops on the spruce needles. In the whales that swam in the sea, in the heart beating in my breast. Mist, heart, blood, trees. Why were they so appealing? What was it that enticed me with such power? That filled me with such enormous desire? Mist, heart, blood, trees. Oh, if only I could write about *them*, no, not write about *them* but make my writing *be* them, then I would be happy. Then I would have peace of mind.

The following morning I had arranged to meet Geir Gulliksen. He worked for a publishing house called Tiden, they had an office in Operapassasjen, I stood outside the door and wiped my palms on my thighs, hardly able to believe this was happening, I had an appointment with an editor in Oslo. Tore had engineered it, this was true, I had nothing to show him, this was true too, but I *was* actually standing here, I *did* have an appointment, no one could take that from me.

I took the elevator up and went into reception.

"I have an appointment with Geir Gulliksen," I said.

At that moment he walked around the corner, thin, rangy, smiling, self-assured. I recognized him from the photos I had seen.

"Karl Ove?" he said.

"Yes."

"Hi!"

We shook hands.

"We can go into my office," he said.

Manuscripts lay there piled up, big envelopes that probably also contained manuscripts, and books stacked high.

We sat down.

"Well, you sent us a *damn* good short story," he said. "I'd just like to put that on record."

"Thank you very much," I said.

"Are you working on anything now? Or have you got anything else that's finished?"

I shook my head.

"No, but I've got a large-ish project in mind."

"I'd be happy to read it."

Then he started asking me all sorts of questions, what I had done, what I liked reading. I told him Stig Larsson.

"Hah, *all* the young writers say Stig Larsson now. Two years ago *no one* talked about him."

"That's good, isn't it?" I said.

"Of course it's good," he said. "Anyone else you read?"

"Tor Ulven."

"Alright," he said, and laughed. Aligned the edges of a manuscript. Did that mean my time was up?

I rose to my feet.

"I'll send you something as soon as I have it."

"Yes, please do. It might take a *while* before you get an answer."

"That's OK."

He stood up and accompanied me out, raised a hand to wave good-bye, turned, and went back in. He had lots of important manuscripts to read, I thought, lots of important writers to meet. I wasn't one of them, he had arranged the meeting because of Tore, but I had a foot in the door, now I wasn't just a name but also a face, and he had promised to read what I sent him.

We spent Christmas with Tonje's father in Molde. I liked being there, he had a big house with a view of the fjord and the mountains behind, there was a swimming pool on the ground floor, a wet room with a sauna and diving equipment in a corner, a large open sitting room on the first floor, above it a loft with a ping-pong table. It was always spotless there, everything worked, there was snow shoveling in the early morning, skiing late morning, they had good lunches, cozy evenings, and if there were any problems in the household, if there were any hidden secrets, I never came across them. We used to go down to the city center in the mornings, often bump into her friends, with whom I never managed to behave naturally, I was always quiet and tormented, apart from when we went out and I drank of course or on New Year's Eve when we ate at Tonje's father's place, with all her friends, and suddenly I could talk from the heart with them. Even the angst the following day was less there, in well-ordered surroundings, I felt less like a bad person than a young son-in-law letting his hair down on vacation.

At the beginning of January, Tonje went back to Volda while I took my computer and headed for Kristiansand, where I'd rented a room in an old manor house on the island of Andøya – provided by the local council's arts department. The poet, Terje Dragseth, had been behind this. After living in Copenhagen for many years he had returned to his hometown, where he worked as a literary liaison officer on the local council. He was published by Tiden and was held to be one of the best poets of his generation, his poems were often described as "hymnlike," I hadn't read any of them myself. He was energetic and outgoing, his personality razor sharp. He drove me to the manor house, which had once been situated a long way out of town, in the country, but now it found itself in the middle of a housing estate. He showed me around, said I only had to give him a call if there was anything, worked for a while in his office, at the other end of the building, which I could use any time I wanted, then he went back to town and I was alone. I took my computer from its cardboard box, connected everything, put the books I had brought with me in a pile next to it. Two volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, *Avløsning* by Tor Ulven, and Tore's debut novel, *Sleeping Tangle*.

The room was small, a bed, a desk, a kitchenette, but the building around it was enormous. From what I had gleaned, it had once belonged to the violinist and composer Ole Bull. In the evening I wandered around inside, the furniture and the wallpaper and everything was intact, like in a museum. I nosed around Dragseth's office, browsed through a few books, went back and sat down in front of my computer, but too much had happened that day for me to be able to work, so I rang Tonje and talked with her for an hour instead, then went to bed.

I woke up at eleven, had breakfast, switched on my computer, and sat down.

What was I going to write?

I didn't have the foggiest.

I opened some files to see if there was anything I could work farther on.

There is a time for everything. Now it is here, in this house, by this window with a precise segment of nature outside, resting in the dim May darkness; it cannot be other.

* * *

Footsteps across the soft grass, swish swish, in the rain. The rain falling on the field, the drops from the branches onto his neck as he stops to open the gate. It emits a gentle creak, thuds back against the post, is fastened with a wire loop. His hands *are freezing cold. He shoves them into his pockets and walks on down the narrow muddy path.*

* * *

The figure appears in the deep snow, running, head bowed into the wind. He notices the movement from the window, the figure becomes clearer, clearer against the heavy gray unchanging background; the eager flushed face of a boy with important news and a big responsibility. He knows what it is about, heard the shot himself some minutes ago. It filled him with such disquiet that to begin with he doubted what he had heard and speculated that it might have been thunder; instead of going out into the storm, up the hill, to investigate the matter, he tossed another log on the fire and sat down in the chair by the window, his head still muzzy with sleep. But now he had to go out, the boy was pounding on the door with his fists, shouting his name.

* * *

Every night the same. On scaffolding, high up, with an iron bar in my hand. The streets of the town so far below. A siren somewhere. The sudden clang of metal on brick. Someone shouting. I walk over to the railing. One of the cranes swings above the rooftop. The container hanging from the chains sways gently back and forth. Like prey, I think. I turn, smash the bar against the lock. What satisfaction. Grip the railing. Fingers in the glove, the coarse material against my skin. I know the metal is cold, I know I will feel it if I keep holding. But I duck underneath, walk along the planks on the scaffolding. Tip back my helmet, take off one glove, scratch my scalp. Feel the sudden cold on my sweaty forehead. Feels like the cold is coming from inside. One of the older workers is leaning against the railing staring out. I walk over to him. He says nothing. We gaze across the town. The sun is almost white against the hard blue sky. It gives everything we see great definition, I muse. The sun makes the scattered patches of ice glint. I feel like saying something to him. The shadow of the apartment building beneath us stretches across the sidewalk, making a sharp dividing line. The concrete bridge's gentle arch over the icebound lake. The smoke rising from the chim-

neys on the rooftops, almost invisible, just an undulating wave in the air, a darker hue. Heat. And the crane's leisurely hydraulic movements. I say nothing. I never say anything.

* * *

I could see no farther than the hills twenty meters from the house, with the cluster of rowan trees and the rickety fence at the top, which marked the boundary to the neighboring farm. The countryside beyond, the fjord, and the steep mountain on the far side of it, were hazy in a heavy gray mist. I opened the window a fraction. The rush of the ever-rising stream became louder. The deep ruts from the tractor wheels in the field were filled with turbid grayish-brown rainwater. I thought about the ferocious noise. With every turn of the wheels the tractor had sunk deeper, the sound had intensified in volume, in aggressiveness and power; a sign of impatience, of farther activity and the dogged belief that all problems can be solved. Then it was quiet. The neighbor jumped to the ground beside his vehicle in his thigh-length boots and yellow rain jacket, stood there studying it for a while, then returned in the ruts made by the tractor. He walked up the slope, across the field of red-currant bushes, over the fence, which the tractor had plowed through without ceremony, and for those of us standing at the window, watching, he disappeared from view. A little later we heard the sound of a second tractor, it swung up the gravel path and lumbered into the field; a neighbor was standing on the footplate holding on to the door frame, another neighbor was in the cab. Grandpa stood at the window while they attached the chain between the tractors and started them both up, he saw the thick black smoke pouring from the exhaust pipes as the engines were put under strain, the tractor rocked back and forth until in a matter of minutes it was pulled onto firm ground and the second neighbor could drive away. He watched with a blank expression on his face, I couldn't read any of his thoughts and I couldn't ask. Two days before, on the first evening here, he had discreetly referred to Kjartan's plans for what he still called the bog land, what he had intended to do with it this year. After seeing him stare at all this activity outside his own window, in which we weren't involved – Why didn't the neighbor come in and ask us for help? Why didn't he use our phone? It was right here, in the hallway.

He could have used it to call, couldn't he? – I didn't consider his remarks to Kjartan about the running of the farm to be a sign of calculated malice, as I first thought, nor incipient senility, as though he had forgotten what it was like here, no, it was a loss so great that he couldn't take it in, he had to act as if nothing had changed, re-create what went on outside here every day, find an explanation he could accept. Are you sure we can afford to hire all these people, he asked Kjartan later that day, when we were in the sitting room eating waffles. He drank the lukewarm mixture of half cream and half coffee, sucked a sugar cube, waited for an answer. I looked at Kjartan. He made no attempt to answer, carried on eating, but not in such a convincing way that I was unaware he was repressing enormous irritation. This had been going on for some time. But of course you've got another income on the side, Grandpa said, and with that he calmed down. I didn't know what to say, so we continued to eat in silence. There was nothing to ask, nothing to discuss.

I took the lid off the saucepan. Circles of grease had floated to the top, a couple of sausages had already split. I pulled it off the heat and took a pair of wooden tongs from the drawer. The clock on the wall above the window showed it was nearly twelve. Even if the land was leased out and everything that could be called farmwork had ceased many years ago, they still maintained the old mealtimes: breakfast at six, lunch at twelve, tea at five, and supper at nine. Habits that were tied to farmwork. This was how it had been around here for many centuries. And it had been like this for a reason. The fury I occasionally felt as they sat down to eat lunch at twelve sharp was completely unjustified, it was unreasonable to get worked up about this. Yet, somehow, yes, it was reasonable: what sort of life was it getting up at the crack of dawn to sit around all morning, as she did, in a chair, or as in his case, to lie on the sofa, with the radio on so loud that the voices were distorted, what sort of a life was it, living day after day, as though they were waiting for something and while they waited went into the kitchen to eat, then returned to wait and so on and so on? It was deeply entrenched inside them, almost an instinct, any tiny deviation could cause tremors that spread and became, or so it seemed, unbearable, perhaps even life-threatening.

I took the bread for the sausages out of the oven, turned off the stove, and put the sausages in a dish, then I went into the sitting room to get them. Grandpa was lying on the sofa, as was his wont, wearing a black suit, a tie, a somewhat stained, not-quite-

white shirt. I glanced at the television and the picture of drenched, bedraggled children walking in line down a road somewhere in Norway shouting sporadic and halfhearted hurrahs, switched it off with the remote control, and bent down by Grandma's chair. She was also in her finery, a blue dress with white embroidery, a brooch fastened to her chest. A strip of paper towel hung from the neck band.

This is what I had. Two years' work. I knew every sentence by heart. The slog it had been was unbelievable. And the happiness at finding a phrase: *head bowed into the wind, swish, swish in the rain*. But this wasn't something I could take any farther, everything in these sentences stopped there.

What should I write about?

I switched off the computer, got dressed, went out, to the bus stop by the main road, and caught the bus to town. It was smaller than I remembered and closer to the countryside, especially the sea beyond the streets, heavy, brooding. I walked up and down Markens a few times, there weren't many people out and about, but the atmosphere felt congenial, people greeted one another or stopped and chatted. The sky was gray, and what I saw, I thought, was everyday Kristiansand, one of an endless number of days that came and went. The people walking past were in the middle of their lives, in the middle of the depth of their existence. It was as though I was on the outside, I didn't belong here, for me this was just a place and my relationship to it a mystery. What was belonging really? It wasn't the place itself, for that was only houses and a few rocks by a sea, rather it was what they had made the place, the meaning they had infused into it.

Everything is woven into memories, everything colored by the mind. Then time flows through the cocoon that is our life. Once we were seventeen, once we were thirty-five, once we were fifty-four. Did we remember that day? The January ninth, 1997, when we went into REMA 1000 to do our shopping and came out again with a bag in each hand and walked down to the car, put the bags on the ground and unlocked the door, placed the bags on the backseat, and got in? Beneath the darkening sky, by the sea, the forest behind, black and bare?

I bought a few CDs and a whole stack of books, which were on sale and I thought I might need for my writing.

I should go and visit Grandma, I couldn't stay in the town without doing that, I might bump into Gunnar at any moment, for example, and he would think it was strange and perhaps also impolite to be here without telling them.

But it could wait a few days, I was here to work primarily, they would understand that. Instead, I went to the library café, bought myself a cup of coffee, and sat flipping through the books with an occasional glance through the window. I recognized the girl working behind the counter from *ungdomsskole*, but I didn't know her well enough to say hello and she evinced no signs of recognition. The town was full of such faces, which once had formed the context of my life, but no longer meant anything, except for precisely this.

A girl parked her bike outside, performed all the necessary movements with consummate ease, in with the wheel, out with the lock, click it into position, straighten up, look around, head for the door, and remove the hood of her rain jacket.

She greeted a girl at the table behind mine, ordered a cup of tea, sat down, and started chatting. She talked about Jesus Christ, she'd had a religious experience.

I wrote down exactly what she said.

This is where the novel should start. Right here, in this town by the sea, in this library café, with this conversation about Jesus Christ.

Excited, I made notes. A young man arrives in his hometown, Kristiansand, overhears a conversation in the library café, meets an old *gymnas* friend, Kent, and is transported back in time.

In my room, a few hours later, I began to write. At around ten in the evening I rang Tonje and read her what I had written. She said it was good. I continued through the night. Whenever I dried up or I thought it wasn't good enough I leafed through one of the books I had with me, particularly

Proust, and, invigorated by the atmospheres of that fantastic world and the clear language, I went on. There was no plot, I wanted to entwine the internal with the external, the neural pathways in the brain with the fishing smacks in the harbor, and so that the protagonist should not be me I made the language conservative, I no longer used the Norwegian "a" endings, I rewrote everything, it came to half a page, and I went to bed.

By the weekend I had eight pages.

I call Grandma. Is that you? she said. I told her I was in Kristiansand, would it be convenient if I dropped by? She replied that Dad was there and it would be nice if I did.

I hadn't seen Dad for almost two years. I had no wish to see him either, but now he knew I was here, so I couldn't not go.

I walked all the way from the bus station, over Lund Bridge and the final kilometer up to the house, nervous and tense the whole time, frightened for brief instants too, he was going to haul me over the coals, why hadn't I kept in touch?

I rang the bell, minutes passed, Grandma opened the door.

She'd changed. She was thin, her dress was stained and in a mess. But her eyes were the same. Radiant one moment, distant the next.

"He's upstairs," she said. "It's good you've come."

I followed her up the stairs.

He was in the sitting room watching TV. He turned his head when I entered the room. His face was damp with sweat.

"I'm going to die," he said. "I've got cancer."

I looked down. He lied about everything, even this, but I couldn't show I knew, I had to pretend I believed him.

"How awful," I said, glancing at him.

"I've just been to the hospital. They cut my back open. You can see the scars if you want."

I said nothing. He looked at me.

"Your father's going to die," he said.

"Right," I said. "But it could turn out OK, couldn't it?"

"No," he said. "That's out of the question."

He watched TV, I sat down on the footstool. Grandma came in and sat on the other chair, which faced the TV. We watched for a while.

"Everything going well here, Grandma?" I said.

"Yes, it certainly is," she said. A cloud of smoke hovered above her head. Dad struggled to his feet, lumbered across the floor to the kitchen, returned with a bottle of beer.

They were sitting in what had once been the parlor, used only on special occasions.

"I'm in Andøya Manor, writing," I said.

"That's good, Karl Ove," he said.

"Yes," I said.

All three of us watched the big TV. A girl was playing the flute.

"They say Erling's youngest girl is very musical," Grandma said.

Dad looked at her.

"Why are you always talking about her?" he said. "I'm also very musical."

I went cold inside. He had claimed that in all seriousness.

After half an hour in front of the television I got up and said I had to be off.

"Let's go to the restaurant one night while you're here," Dad said. "My treat."

"OK," I said. "I'll give a call. Take care."

No one went down with me. Distraught, I left, caught the bus to Andøya, where the mist lay thick and heavy between the houses on the estate, unlocked the door and went in, fried myself three eggs, put them on three pieces of bread, ate them standing by the window, sat down, and began to write again.

Back in Bergen, three months later, I had sixty pages, which I posted to Geir Gulliksen. In the two weeks that passed before he phoned me, I was beset by dreadful bouts of shame and terror. At first, I tried to repress what I had written, pretend it didn't exist, but to no avail, and so to gain control over these overwhelming feelings of humiliation I sat down one morning and tried to read my text through his eyes. I switched on the computer, opened the file, and the title page shone up at me.

A TIME FOR EVERYTHING
Novel, 1997
By Karl Ove Knausgaard

PART ONE
TIME'S PIONEER

The town is there, a place in the world, with its houses and shops, its streets, its harbor, its uplands. Geography, architecture, materiality. A place. Now and then I think about this town just before I fall asleep, follow one of the streets downward, pass house after house, block after block, I might stop in front of a facade and allow my eyes to wander over myriad details. The sun always shines on the dirty white wall, glints on a half-open veranda door, in front of it a terra-cotta flower box, two empty bottles, a plastic bag the wind has wrapped around the bars of the balcony balustrades. A hand grips the door, a face is glimpsed for a few seconds, the door slides shut. There is someone inside, I think, in this dark room, and that is how it is all over this town. An elderly woman draws the curtain to the side and stares out, her attention attracted by a sound. It is the neighbor opening his garage door; as so often before she watches him getting into the car, reversing down the drive, and she lets go of the curtain and lowers her head to concentrate on the crossword on the counter in front of her. Sometimes she lights one of the many half-smoked cigarettes in the ashtray, pencils in a word. A student sits gaping at the television, exhausted, with the sound off and the picture unclear in the glare from the morning sun. A woman bends her head and strokes her neck, a boy, ill in bed, watches the car he is operating race around the track again and again, another is in front of a computer shooting at anything that moves. There is no one to see them and they act without thinking; she crosses the kitchen floor to open a cupboard while the onions sizzle in the *pan on the stove and the radio blares. A cat wakes up and stretches before slinking over to see if there is any food in the dish, a baby screams. This is how it is around me, I think, and see the shadow of the squat row of houses casting a sharp dividing line, roughly where the patches of ice and remnants of snow lie between the pavement and the street. The traffic lights emit their shrill squeals to help blind pedestrians cross the road. Cars idle waiting, shiny, beautiful; it is cold and I inhale a mixture of chill air and mild car fumes as I walk across the road to go down Dronningens Gate, today with the sun shining on me, as I have done so often before, the streets of this town I sometimes traverse in my mind's eye. In the bedroom of my flat in Bergen, in the guest room of my grandparents' farm in Sogn, even in a hotel room one night at the southern end of Africa, in the Transvaal, I can visualize them, the streets, even as I walk along the stunning Cromer Beach it hits me: the light, the sea; I have it in me, I carry it inside me, in the darkness of my brain.*

The clear blue sky, the low sun on the tall hotel, the crowds. You go there to get the best possible view, squeeze between people behind the provisional barriers and the rope to keep them at a safe distance. Bodies push against you, all with heads back, tilted to one side, eyes trained on the top of the building. Bluish-black smoke seeps out and rises, follows the unpredictable currents of wind, disappears. More and more black smoke is belched out into the clear air. A fire engine ladder glides upward, you can hear the faint hum mixed with the crowd's murmured expressions of awe. One of the hotel occupants had jumped. The rime frost on the tarmac in front of you and the blue sky. It is clean, it is clinical, the world is precise. But the smoke continues to belch out, thick and black. You can't see any flames, only smoke. This disaster is soundless in the same way that pain is soundless. Behind you, people are shoving. Another ambulance weaves its way in, two men get out, lean against the side of the vehicle and stare upward as well. The hotel is empty now. Only firemen with breathing apparatuses and astronaut costumes move through the corridors and search the rooms in case there are any more guests who hadn't managed to get out before being suffocated, and lie in heaps where they fell, *their bodies unable to absorb any more smoke. It must be like drowning, you think, but much worse because there is plenty of air, nearby, they have a hope, they die in hope. This is your death day. You eat in the hotel restaurant, have an early night, flick through the TV channels, maybe find an old film, you fall asleep. A few hours later you wake up, snow on the screen, a blind channel, you switch off the television, get undressed, crawl under the duvet and go back to sleep. When you wake up now it is for the last time. To screams and slamming doors, to the roar of flames, this is how you will die, in the smoke seeping into and filling your room, visibility is zero, you are disorientated out of your wits, and so you die, sitting on the bathroom floor with a wet cloth over your face. And now it's over, you think, the dead are carried out, the survivors are evacuated. But the fire rages on. The flames switch directions blindly, frighteningly, spring up in more and more places, it is out of control.*

"Hi, Henrik."

You turn when you hear your name and see Kent waving, he comes toward you wearing his long gray coat and carrying a white helmet in one hand.

"You're ditching too, eh?"

"Heard the news early this morning. Seems to be over though."

"It's still burning," he says, looking up.

"But they got everyone out, they said."

"It's terrible," Kent says, smiling.

"The worst is all the people who come here to rubberneck. That's terrible," you say, and smile as well because you feel a sudden happiness standing here and talking to Kent, as only a seventeen-year-old can. The sudden happiness a seventeen-year-old can feel at even the most mundane, humdrum things, such as talking about everyday matters with someone his own age, a happiness that, if it continues, threatens to take control, his voice can fill with emotion, or laughter, he can laugh and laugh at trivia, he becomes intoxicated by it, it grows until he is so overcome that he has to start avoiding these situations. He has to look down instead of into people's eyes, withhold a comment instead of blurting it out to all-round hilarity and acknowledgment. You can't trust yourself anymore, you think, something is happening to you. There

> *is also the opposite, this sudden urge to cry that comes over you, in the strangest situations, your eyes go moist, you can't cope and have to look down, hold back. Like now, in front of the hotel, you can feel the happiness bubbling away, but you force yourself to focus on the smoke as if you are extremely interested in it and what it attests: a hotel fire. Later that evening footage of the conflagration is broadcast around the world, Germans sit in front of the screen and see pictures of the hotel, this is where it happened, Swedes, the British and the French, in this town, Danes and the Swiss, in this hotel."*
>
> *Fourteen people lost their lives.*

From there the text moved to Bergen, where the main protagonist lived, an incident describing him sleeping outdoors, and when he crosses Torgalmenningen on his way home, I had a ridiculous idea, he stops at a telephone booth, dials the number his family had during his childhood, and he himself is at the other end, ten years old, talking about how he is right now.

What would Geir Gulliksen think?

He had got himself involved with an immature person who not only unabashedly sent him the most hair-raisingly stupid stories, but also imagined, in all seriousness, they would be published and someone apart from himself would be interested in reading them.

How was that possible?

How could I be so crass?

So conceited?

The telephone call came.

"Hello, it's Geir Gulliksen."

"Hi."

"Hi! What a fantastic piece of writing!"

"Do you think so?"

"I certainly do. It's very, very good. Especially the moment where the protagonist calls himself, you know . . . He's crossing the square. Do you know which part I mean?"

"Yes."

"You've really got something there."

"Oh, good."

"You must continue. Write more. This is going to be good, you know. I mean *really* good. If you want me to read anything along the way, just send it. I can also read the whole book when you've finished if you'd prefer that."

"Oh yes," I said.

"There was one tiny thing I was wondering. At the end of the sequence, you write: in the world, out of the world, in the world, out of the world. Do you remember?"

"Yes."

"That's fantastic. I was thinking, is there a title in that? A potential title? Out of the World. Give it some thought anyway."

Tremendously encouraged, I wrote two hundred more pages, also a long passage about Dad, and I cried as I wrote it, I could hardly see the screen through my tears, and I knew it was good, it was quite different from anything I had done before.

That spring there was a family gathering in Kristiansand, one of Gunnar's sons was being confirmed. I traveled down again and arrived at Grandma's house in the early morning. Dad was sitting in the kitchen, thick and heavy, his hands trembling and his face shiny with sweat. He was wearing a suit, shirt, tie. In the living room behind us were his brother Erling and his family, with Grandma.

For the first time in my life I felt stronger than him, for the first time in my life I didn't feel a trace of fear in me when I was in the same room as him.

He was harmless.

I asked him whether he was still with the woman he had met, whose name I didn't even know.

"No, I'm not," he said. "She told me where to put my shoes. I didn't like it."

"No," I said.

"Can you decide where you put your shoes?"

"Yes, I think so."

"That's good. You can't lose your freedom. You must never do that, Karl Ove!"

"No," I said.

He looked down at the newspaper on the table in front of him. He was heavy and slow, but his manner wasn't, that was nervous and jumpy.

"You'll have to help me with my tie before we go," I said. "I still haven't learned how to do it."

"Who does it then?"

"Usually Yngve."

"Does he know how?"

"Yes."

He struggled to his feet.

"Let's do it right now. Where's your tie?"

"Here," I said, taking it from my jacket pocket.

He put it around my neck. His breathing was labored. He crossed the ends, folded over and through, watching carefully as he did so, then tightened.

"There you go," he said.

Our eyes met, mine were moist, he turned and sat down. Erling came through the door, holding a bunch of keys.

"Ready?" he said. "We don't want to be late for church."

"Doesn't Karl Ove look smart today?" Dad said.

He actually said that.

"Yes, he does," Erling said with a smile. "But let's go now."

The priest talked about prayer in his sermon. He said that God wasn't like a Coke machine; you put money in and out came a bottle. I couldn't believe my ears. He had six years of Theology courses behind him and close to thirty years of experience, judging by his appearance, and he spoke about divinity in that way.

When the service was over I met an old acquaintance outside. I hadn't seen her for many years. She gave me a hug, we chatted, she said she had wound up in Kristiansand again, somewhat apologetically, as though she had ceded to greater powers than her own. While we stood there I watched Dad make his way to the car. Perhaps it was because of all the people there, perhaps because of our surroundings, where I wasn't used to seeing him, but suddenly I could see him as he was now. All that usually drew my eyes in his direction, for our entire life together, everything he had done, been, and said, that which made up "Dad" and was immanent in him, or in my view of him, whatever his appearance, all that was suddenly gone. He looked like a drunk who had put on a suit. He looked like an alcoholic his family had picked up, cleaned up, and taken along.

In the car the conversation was about the best route to Gunnar's. Dad maintained we should turn right. No one listened to him, he got angry, talked nonstop about the road to the right, said he knew and they would see.

I watched him, chilled to the soul. His regression was massive. He was like a child. All the way to Gunnar's house he whined that we should have gone the way he said. When we arrived he stepped out carefully onto the gravel and shambled to the door. During lunch he was on his own, completely outside the conversation; now and then, however, he did make a comment, which was always out of place. He was sweating profusely and his hand shook when he put a glass of cider to his mouth. After the meal the children ran around and played, and soon they discovered a new game, yelling Dad's name, running over to him and touching him while shouting his name and laughing. He did nothing, reacted with surprise and stared at them. Erling had to tell them to stop. The rest of the time we were outside I had the children's jeers ringing in my ears.

This was a man who had once had the strength and magnetism of a king.

There was nothing left of him.

And now, now that everything was over, he turned to me. Only now could he say I looked smart. But I was twenty-eight, not eight, I no longer needed this, and I no longer needed him.

We went back in two smaller cars, Erling's family and Grandma in one, Dad and I in the backseat of the other. I was in a hurry, I had a plane to catch and the bag containing my everyday clothes was in the hallway. Dad stood on the steps fumbling with the keys. He eventually found the right one and opened the door. The burglar alarm went off quietly. Dad stared at it.

"Tap in the code," I said.

"Yes," he said. "But I don't know it."

"I need my bag now," I said. "It's just inside. Let me just run in and get it. Really quick?"

"Go ahead," he said.

I dashed in. The alarm immediately emitted a shrill penetrating howl. I grabbed my bag and ran back out. I was sure he would read me the riot act, but he just stood there eyeing the code panel and fiddling with the keys. Grandma came walking up the hill.

"Have you managed to set off the burglar alarm again!" she shouted. "How many times do I have to tell you? You have to tap in the code before you go indoors!"

She walked past him, tapped in a number.

"I couldn't remember the code," he said.

"But it's so simple!" Grandma said in a loud voice. "You're absolutely impossible! You can't do anything!"

She glared up at Dad with fury in her eyes. Dad stood with his arms down by his sides, looking down the hill.

In Bergen I continued to work on my novel. By the middle of May it had grown to roughly three hundred pages, which I sent to Geir Gulliksen. He asked me to drop by so that we could talk about it, I went to Oslo, stayed with Espen, when I went into his office, my manuscript lay on his desk.

He spoke about it for maybe ten minutes.

Then he said:

"Would you like to sign a contract now? We can do that, you know. Or would you rather wait until you have a final version? If we hurry we could publish it in late autumn."

"Publish it?" I said. I hadn't even considered the possibility.

"Yes," he said. "It's as good as finished. If you were run over by a tram on your way out we'd have enough to publish."

He laughed.

In the white spring light I threaded my way through the pedestrians on the sidewalk as if in a trance. What he had said reverberated in my brain; everything around me seemed to be so far away. A tram clattered past, a fat man got out of a taxi, two buses went up the hill, one after the other. I couldn't believe it was true, so I repeated it to myself again and again. I'm going to make my debut. My novel has been accepted. I am a writer. I seemed to be staggering under the weight of my elation. I was going to make my debut. The novel has been accepted. I am a writer.

Espen answered when I rang the doorbell, turned and went into the room at once, he was in the middle of something. I used his phone and called Tonje. Of course she wasn't home. Then I called Yngve at his office. I told him the novel had been accepted.

"Oh?" he said.

I couldn't understand the lack of interest in his intonation.

"Isn't it incredible?" I said.

"Yep," he said. "But you must have known it was going to happen, didn't you? I mean, you've had contact with a publishing house for a long time."

"I didn't know at all. In fact, I thought it was never going to happen."

"Yeah, yeah," he said. "Have you been out yet in Oslo?"

After we'd hung up I sat on the sofa waiting for Espen to finish, so that I could tell him. But he didn't show much enthusiasm either.

"I heard you say that on the phone," he said. "Congratulations."

For him this might have been a matter of course, I thought. Nearly everyone he knew was a writer.

"Did you believe I would make it?" I said. "That I would ever make my debut?"

"Yes, I did. But perhaps not in literature. I guess I thought it would be a collection of essays or something."

At the beginning of the summer we emptied our apartment and put everything in storage outside town, where it would stay until the end of August, when we would move up to Volda. Tonje had applied for a summer job in NRK Hordaland, which she didn't get, so to earn some money she was going to work in her father's medical office in Molde. We went up to Mom's place in Jølster, where the plan was that I would finish the novel. While we were there Tonje rang NRK Sogn og Fjordane and, miraculously, was offered a job, she canceled her secretarial work, and we stayed there all summer. She drove to NRK in the morning, I wrote, she buzzed around the county of Sogn og Fjordane in her white NRK car while I sweated in a room so full of light that I could barely see the letters on the screen in front of me, she came home in the afternoon, we went swimming or we had a barbecue in the garden or we watched TV. I wasn't making any headway with the novel, I was stuck and becoming more and more desperate, I started working every hour there was, also at night. It was all I thought about. To publish it as it was now would have been a terrible mistake, the storyline lacked a motivating force. A young man returns to his hometown, rents a room, meets some old friends, and his whole life takes a turn for the better, a series of protracted memories, in itself absolutely fine, but why tell them? There was no narrative engine. I had to make one. But how? Obviously he must have come from somewhere, and in that place something must have happened that was harrowing enough, severe enough, for him to flee and simultaneously cause him to relive his life, to search for a reason, to search for some coherence, to try to understand himself.

There was no space inside me for anything else. I kept everything else at arm's length. One night Tonje shouted at me in her frustration.

"I don't want this! I'm only twenty-six! I want to live, Karl Ove! Do you understand?"

I tried to calm her down, this had nothing to do with her, I had to write, and I didn't have any space for anything else, but it would soon be over and I loved her, I always would. It helped to talk, above all it helped her, she poured her heart out that night, we became closer to each other, it was as though we were starting anew.

Some days later I wrote a passage about Northern Norway, with Henrik Møller-Stray, the name of the main character, working there as a teacher. I had him sitting in the staff room, talking to the other teachers, then going into the classroom with the students, he was their homeroom teacher, and in that instant I knew I had the solution to all my problems.

He fell in love with one of the pupils, slept with her in the end, she was only thirteen, he had to flee and had nowhere else to go but Kristiansand.

It fit perfectly, but I couldn't do it, couldn't have him falling in love with a thirteen-year-old and definitely couldn't have him sleep with her. That was immoral, and it would be exploitative because the justification for using it was novelistic technique. I needed a plot with the most powerful fulcrum I could find. He could kill someone, but I wasn't interested in that kind of conflict. Steal something? No, no. It had to be a positive force that drove him, something fine and beautiful, falling in love, nothing else fit.

But I couldn't do that.

If I did, that is what would be discussed, the morality of the novel, and I wasn't in the slightest bit interested in that.

Another consideration was the unease I would feel if I wrote myself into the novel, for some of this was indeed true, which no one should ever find out, and if I wrote it, it would exist in the world, not only inside me, however much of it was fictional.

Tonje went to Molde, I stayed to meet Tore, we were going to one of the mountain cabins my family owned to finish writing a film script. It was about an apartment building, several stories were played out there, the most important of which concerned a woman who heard strange noises in the ventilation shaft, toward the end of the manuscript, after many misfortunes, it emerges that these noises come from an apartment belonging to two brothers, where they are holding their father prisoner and abusing him.

One night, after we had finished working, I explained my dilemma to him.

"Do it, for Christ's sake, don't even think about it. Go for it! It'll be a big hit!"

We were there for four days, several times I expressed my doubts and uncertainties, he remained rock-solid, go for it, do it. We strolled down the narrow gravel path through the forest to the lake, where we went into the little shop, I took him to see Borghild, who laughed at us and our shaven heads, you two look like convicts. She made us coffee and I asked her about her childhood, she told me she'd had TB and spent many months in a sanatorium, high above a fjord, the cure had been to get as much sun as possible, so the women had sat in chairs on the first floor veranda, and the men on the ground floor veranda, because we were topless, asthey say today, she said with a laugh, then she went on to tell us what it was like when she returned home, there was a stigma attached to the illness and to the tan you got at sanatoriums. Tore was fascinated by her and she liked Tore. Everyone liked Tore. We went back up and carried on with our work, a horse stuck its muzzle through the window while we were sitting there, we gave it some sugar cubes and an apple, in the evening we sat outside drinking beer and smoking, surrounded by the roar of the waterfall from the forest, with the snow on the mountaintops on the other side shining in the glow from the setting sun.

In the middle of August I traveled up to Volda. Tonje met me at the bus stop, we walked uphill to the house where we would rent the whole of the first floor, it was old and not in great shape, but there were three rooms and it was only us two living there. She had shared it with another student all last year, now it was ours. We were husband and wife, the thought of this still sent tingling sensations through me. We were going to share our lives together, and now we were here, in a little village full of students between the mountains.

From the room I used as a study there was a view of the fjord and the ferry that plied back and forth almost round the clock, glittering in the night darkness, and the instant I put my computer on the desk I knew I was going to be able to work here.

Tonje was enjoying her course, she made a lot of friends, sometimes they came back to see us, but usually she met them away from home. I joined her now and then, but not so often. I was there to write, this was my last chance, in only two years I would be thirty, I had to give it everything I had. Unlike all the other places I'd been, I had almost no relationship with Volda at all. I got up in the evening, wrote through the night, went to bed in the morning, longing for the evening when I could write again. Occasionally I would cycle down to the little town center to buy CDs or books, but even the short time that took felt like a huge sacrifice, something I really shouldn't allow myself. What I discovered during these months was the great power of routine and repetition. I did exactly the same every day so that I didn't have to waste any energy and could put it all into my writing. Which also derived energy from the same source, three pages in one day became three hundred pages in a hundred days, and in a year more than a thousand. From the cigarettes I rolled in the course of a night, twenty or so, I always spilt some of the tobacco, which after six months built up into quite a pile beside the chair leg. The letters on the keyboard became slowly worn according to a system that remained a secret to me, some shone bright and intact after six months, others were as good as erased. But the routine had a farther function: it protected me from seeing what I wrote from the outside. Routine had the effect of keeping me inside my writing day after day. If I upset the pattern, that is, visited someone or perhaps had a few beers out with Tonje, everything was dislocated, I lost my rhythm, saw the routines and what I wrote, which wasn't any good at all, what was I thinking, that anyone would have any interest in my childish immature thoughts? Then this idea found reinforcement and the stronger it became the more difficult it was get back into routine's exclusion and tranquillity. As soon I was back in the groove, I decided not to make the same mistake again, not to meet anyone, not to go out drinking with Tonje. Then the decision also vanished, because that was how it was inside writing, everything on the outside vanished. During working hours I often stood by the hot radiator on the bathroom wall staring out the window, not dissimilar to a cat, I would watch everything that moved outside, would stand there for half an hour, an hour, then went back in and carried on working. It was a way of having a break and resting without losing my rhythm.

It was a fantastic feeling. I had spent ten years writing without achieving anything, and then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, it was just flowing.

And what I wrote was of such quality, compared with what I had produced earlier, that I was surprised every evening when I read through what I had written the night before. It was like having a head rush, or walking in your sleep, a state in which you are out of yourself, and what was curious about this particular experience was that it continued unabated.

Tonje knew it was important for me, and she was independent, lived her own life, had her own ambitions, but sometimes I noticed she wanted more, of me, of us, that this wasn't enough for her, and then I tried to give it to her, not for my sake, I needed no more than I already had, but for hers.

Once she asked me if she could use my computer, only for half an hour, there was something she had to write and going all the way up to the school was a hassle. I was extremely annoyed, but I said nothing, of course she could use my computer for half an hour, and so that she would understand what a sacrifice it was for me I sat on a chair in the corridor, outside the door, waiting, seething with impatience.

She often referred to the opinion one of her friends had expressed about our life together, how strange it was that I worked all the time and never showed my face outside with her, of course she told me this because she thought the same, deep down, I was angry, what we did with our lives was none of his business.

One evening in spring she got terrible abdominal pains. She had to go to the urgent-care doctor, she said, I asked if I should go with her, no, she said, you write, it'll be fine, and then from the living room window I saw her walking up the hill stooped over and I thought it was generous of her to let me write instead of accompanying her to the doctor. Personally, I had no objection to doing this kind of thing on my own, I was unsentimental in this regard, and I was happy she felt the same.

Two or three hours later she phoned, they had admitted her to the hospital, they didn't know what was wrong and were going to perform a little procedure to find out.

"Shall I come?"

"Yes, could you?"

She was lying in bed when I arrived, her smile gentle and apologetic, the pain had gone, it was probably nothing.

The next day I went back up, they hadn't found anything, it was a mystery. I was going to Oslo for a final discussion of the manuscript, the plane tickets had been booked ages ago, so she would have to make her own way home, it wasn't a problem, and she had lots of friends who could go shopping for her, if need be.

In May I revised the manuscript for the last time, everything that had to be done had to be done now, so when the seventeenth of May came, Constitution Day, Tonje asked if I could be with her that day, have breakfast with some friends, then walk to town to watch the procession and afterward to have a few drinks in a pub, but I couldn't, work was at a crucial point, I couldn't lose a whole day, anyway you know lots of people there!

She went in her sailor's jacket, she looked a dream, I watched her from the window and that was what I thought, then I sat down in the sun on the veranda and began to plow through the manuscript with pen in hand. After a while I went in and had a bite to eat, continued to read, until the telephone rang. It was Tonje.

"I miss you so much," she said. "Can't you come on down? Just for a little walk? I'm having a great time, but it would be even better if you were here. And the others are asking me if there's something wrong. Because you're not here."

"Look," I said. "You know I have to work. I can't. You understand, don't you?"

Yes, she did, perfectly.

We hung up.

I stood scanning the fjord.

What on earth was I doing?

Was I a complete cretin?

Was she supposed to sit all on her own in her sailor's jacket on the seventeenth of May?

I threw on my jacket, jumped into my shoes, and hurried up the hill. As soon as I reached the top and started to walk I saw Tonje. She was ambling along with her head bowed.

Was she crying?

Yes, she was.

Oh, Tonje.

I ran over to her and held her in my arms.

"Don't take any notice of me," she said. "I don't know what's come over me."

As she said this, she smiled.

We walked back down to the center, into the bar where her friends were sitting and then to the pub, where we got drunk, the thing to do on a Constitution Day. While we were sitting there I said my novel would be on the front page of *Dagbladet* when it came out. Tonje eyed me. "Want to bet?" I said. Yes, she said. A trip to Paris. If you win you take me. If I win I take you.

We walked home that night with our arms intertwined. She told me how the way we lived had worn her down, I said it would soon be over, there was only one more month, then everything would be different.

"The worst is I believe you," she said.

The night England played Argentina in the World Cup a moving van took all our things away. We flew to Bergen and waited outside our new apartment the next day for the van. We had answered a want ad, Tonje had written a letter explaining who we were and we got the apartment, an old lady owned it and wanted very little for it, although it was big, at least by our standards.

My phone rang, it was the driver, he was at the bottom of the hill and couldn't get any farther. We ran down to meet him.

"Can't do it," he said, scratching his cheek. "I'll have to unload everything here."

"Here? In the street?" I said.

He nodded.

“But you can’t do that!” I shouted. “We’ve paid for the move. You’ll just have to carry the stuff to the apartment!”

“But I can’t get up the hill,” he said. “You can borrow a handcart if you promise to bring it back.”

I gave up and helped him to move all the furniture and boxes off the van. The pile was the height of a man. He drove off, I rang Eirik, who was the only person I knew was in town right now, but he was busy, so it was a case of rolling up my sleeves.

People walking past stared at the household goods. There was something completely wrong about it, I thought, putting three boxes onto the handcart and pushing it uphill. It looked obscene, naked, unprotected. A divan in the road. Our bed in the road. A sofa, a chair, a lamp. Pictures. A desk. All shining in the sunshine against the dry gray asphalt.

In the following days we painted the place and once we had finally decided how to arrange the furniture we were happy. It felt like our first decent apartment, we were no longer students, the future started here. Tonje had a job with NRK Hordaland, my novel was finished, all that was left was the proofreading. And the cover. I went down to see Yngve in Stavanger for some help with that. I had photos of zeppelins with me, I had thought from the beginning that a zeppelin would be right for the atmosphere I was seeking in the novel, the overwhelming feeling of everything that had been lost, all the time and all the eras, there was little that expressed this better than the German airship, this whale of the air, this Moby Dick of progress, so beautiful and alien it hurt. As an alternative I had a book that Dad had given me, it was about space, no photographs, just drawings. Early 1950s, space travel didn’t exist yet, but there was speculation, there were designs of space outfits, this is how the first space traveler would be dressed. There were designs of rockets, houses on deserted planets, moon vehicles. All in the style that was so typical of the 1950s, American advertising optimism. A father with his child pointing to the starry sky. The future, adventure, the entire universe at man's feet. The covers Yngve and Asbjørn designed, with zeppelins and fifties' drawings, were good, but not precise enough with regard to the novel. They tried more and more variations, and I was beginning to reconcile myself to this when Asbjørn came up with some photos by Jock Sturges, an American photographer, in a magazine. One of them showed a girl, perhaps twelve years old, perhaps thirteen, she was naked and stood with her back to the camera, and when we saw it the search was over. This was actually what the novel was about. Not time that was lost, but the main character's desire for a thirteen-year-old girl.

Back home again, I spent my days reading newspapers and watching TV, sitting in Verftet drinking coffee with a book in my hands, while Tonje worked, I was in limbo, a routine no longer did anything for me, it was just a routine, the days in it were empty. Yngve and Asbjørn lived in Stavanger, Espen and Tore lived in Oslo, Hans and nearly all of the others had also moved there. Only a handful of friends remained in Bergen. Ole was in town, I knew, he'd gotten divorced and moved back, I called him, we went out for a beer. Eirik, whom I had first got to know in Student Radio, was doing a doctoral thesis in Literature, I cycled up to his office and had a coffee with him in the canteen.

When I returned Mom called, Borghild was dead. She had passed away, she hadn't been ill, hadn't had any pain, she died in her sleep. It was a year since I had last seen her, I'd cycled up to her place from Mom's, sat on her veranda and asked her questions about farm life in the old days. I wrote down what she said in a notebook; what were memories for her was history for me. It was incomprehensible how different that world was from this. Borghild belonged in both, but now she was dead, and I could hear how upset Mom was. We arranged that I would go to the funeral. Tonje was working and couldn't make it, but I packed my suitcase the night before, had breakfast, and was about to go down to the bus station when the telephone rang. It was Yngve. He said Dad was dead.

* * *

Four days later I left the chapel in Kristiansand after seeing Dad, or what had once been him, and was now a corpse with his features, for the second time. The sky was bright but hazy. A stream of vehicles drove past on the road in front of me. Seeing him had been terrible, especially since in the days that had passed since I first saw him he had changed. His skin had gone yellower, it seemed more sunken. He was on his way to the earth, something was drawing him there, with great force. I went over the pedestrian bridge, beneath me cars swept past, the drone of engines seemed to resound inside me, I lit a cigarette and looked up at the tops of the houses in front of me. They said something, just by the way they stood there, what they said wasn't human, it wasn't living, but it was a statement. The house across the road, which might have been from the 1930s, said something else, and so it was with the houses all over town, in all towns. A blank expression beneath the sky, people entering and leaving.

Where the hell had all the blood come from?

When we went to see him for the first time the undertaker warned us, there had been a lot of blood, he had said, it might be a bit distressing. Naturally, they had washed him, but they hadn't managed to remove it, the blood seemed to have sunk in his pores. And his nose had been broken. In the living room, however, where he'd been found, there had been no blood. Had the pain been so great that he'd risen, slumped against the wall by the fire, maybe, broken his nose, dragged himself up into the chair, died, and been found there? Or had he broken his nose the day before, on a walk into town? Or had the fracture and the blood been what caused his heart to stop?

But where was the blood?

I would have to call the doctor tomorrow and ask him what had actually happened the day he was found.

Grandma was sitting at the kitchen table when I returned. She brightened up for an instant, she didn't want to be alone, not for one second: whenever Yngve and I left the house she followed us.

I put on a jug of coffee, went into the living room, and called Yngve, after closing the kitchen door first.

"Have you spoken to the doctor?" he asked.

"No, not yet. I was planning to do it tomorrow."

"Good," he said. "How's it going down there in Kristiansand?"

"I've cut almost all the grass in the garden today. Or hay or whatever you want to call it. I was thinking of cleaning tomorrow."

"The priest?"

"Oh, yes, that's right! I'll deal with that. I'll call him after this. But I think the undertakers have contacted him."

"They have. But you have to go through the ceremony with him. He'll probably say a few words about Dad, too, so you'll have to put him in the picture."

"What should I tell him?"

"Well, just give him an idea of his life. Teacher on Tromøya, active in local politics, stamp collecting. Two children from his first marriage, one from his second. Interested in . . . well, what was he actually interested in?"

I let out a soundless sob.

"Fishing," I said. "He liked that."

There was a pause.

"But . . . do you think I should say something about the end?" I said. "His last years?"

"Perhaps not in so many words."

"Say it had been difficult for him?"

"Yes, that'll do."

"I'd like it to be dignified."

"I know. Me too."

"When are you coming down?"

"The day of the funeral, I think. Or the night before."

"OK. I'll call you tomorrow whatever happens."

"OK."

"Bye."

"Bye."

In the evening the clouds opened and the low sun cast its orange light across the town as dusk slowly settled over the fields and soon it would begin to rise and fill the space all the way up to the sky, which was light's last bastion, it hung there, deep and blue, and then, almost imperceptibly, the light from a star came into view, as fragile as a newborn child, but it grew stronger, was surrounded by other stars, and soon the still-light summer sky was full of them.

While Grandma sat in the sitting room watching TV, I stood on the veranda alternately studying the sky and gazing across the town and the sea. I thought about that 1950s book Dad had given me. He had read it here. Dreamed about space the way children do, wondered what the future might bring in terms of rockets and robots, inventions and discoveries. What would that have been like for him?

How had he felt?

The summer he met Mom, when they had been seventeen years old, that is, in 1961, he'd told her he had testicular cancer and might not be able to have children.

It was a lie, of course, as it had been a lie when he told me he had cancer and was going to die.

But it wasn't a lie that he was going to die.

Perhaps it wasn't a lie that he couldn't have children either? In the sense that he didn't want them, he knew it wasn't a good idea.

My God, they had been twenty when they got married. If they had been as immature as I was when I was twenty, it was quite a feat they had pulled off.

I stubbed out my cigarette and went into the house.

The telephone rang.

"You answer it," Grandma said, without looking at me. Again it was as though she were talking to someone else, using a different tone, and this other person could only have been Dad.

I went into the dining room and lifted the receiver.

"Hi, Gunnar here. How are you two doing?"

"Not bad under the circumstances," I said.

"Yes, this is an awful business, Karl Ove," he said. "But we were thinking of taking you to the mountain cabin tomorrow. So you get a change of air. The forecast is good. What do you say?"

"Sounds great."

"So let's do it. We'll come by early tomorrow morning to pick you up. Make sure you're ready! It's best to leave early so we get something from the day, don't you agree?"

"Yes," I said. "That's best."

We went to bed at the same time, I followed her down the stairs, she turned in the hall and said goodnight and disappeared into her room, I opened the door to my room, sat down on the bed, put my face in my hands, and cried for a long time. Actually I had wanted to go to sleep fully clothed, but Gunnar was coming tomorrow and I didn't want to give him the impression that I was a mess, so I summoned the last strength I had, went into the bathroom and brushed my teeth, washed my face, folded my clothes and put them on a chair before going to bed. I had dreaded this, the worst moment was when I closed my eyes and lay there without being able to see anything in the house, it was as if all my terrible thoughts, finally liberated, launched themselves at me, tonight as well, as I sank slowly, sort of dangled into sleep, not unlike a hook on the end of a line, I caught myself thinking, which the weight drags down, then darkness fell and I disappeared from the world.

When I awoke at eight Grandma was already up. She was wearing the same filthy dress she'd had on every day so far, she smelled and was sunk deep inside herself.

She should have a bath, she should put on clean new clothes. Her mattress should be thrown away, she should get a nice new one, with nice fresh bed linen. She should have food, good hot food, and she should be allowed to rest.

I could give her none of this.

"They'll be here soon," I said.

"Who?" she said, looking up at me, a curl of cigarette smoke rising between her fingers.

"Gunnar and Tove," I said. "They're taking us to the cabin today, remember?"

"That's right," she said. "That'll be nice."

"Yes," I said.

At a little past nine their car drew up outside. Grandma peered out the window in exactly the same way she did when I was a child, turned to me and tossed her hand through the hair on her neck.

"It's Gunnar," she said.

"Shall we go down?" I said.

"You don't think they'll come up?" she said.

"They're taking us to the cabin," I said.

"That's true," she said.

I followed her down the stairs. Gunnar stood in the hallway waiting. Tanned, blond, tall, and slim. He regarded me with affection in his eyes.

"How are you managing?" he said.

"Fine," I said with moist eyes. "It'll be nice to get out for a bit."

Grandma put on a coat, grabbed a bag, which she carried on her forearm as we went down the steps to the car. Tove, squinting into the sun, welcomed us, took Grandma's arm and helped her into the car. I walked around to the other side and got in.

The cabin was about twenty miles east of Kristiansand, in the skerries. It was many years since I had been there. When I was growing up we used to go there perhaps once a year. There were various rituals connected with the journey there at that time and it was all an adventure. Even the parking lot, which was a little field in the forest with each place marked with a car registration number, painted on a rock or a piece of wood. Grandpa drove into their spot, by a stone wall, beneath the flickering shade from the branches of a large oak tree, I opened the door and got out, the air there, smelling of earth and grass and trees and flowers, was so hot it felt as if I was stepping into it. Apart from birdsong and perhaps some scattered voices or an outboard motor from the little harbor where we were going, all was quiet.

Parking the car on grass!

The big square cooler bag Grandma would lift out of the trunk. The dry moss in the cracks of the stone wall, all the smells there, some of them dark and moldy, if you lifted a stone, it could be damp underneath and tiny insects would dart in all directions. The same was true of the stiff grass, it smelled dry and hot, but beneath it, if you dug down a little, there were quite different smells with more presence and depth, akin to decay.

The bees buzzing around the rose hips on the other side of the stone wall. The air above the path, which in some places, where the sun had been all morning, was like bunkers of heat, spaces we entered and left. The salty tang of sea became stronger, and of rotten seaweed. The screams of gulls.

We were always taken over to the island by the same elderly boatman. Grandma and Grandpa stood on the quay and passed him whatever we were taking with us, he placed it at the bottom of the boat, then we climbed on board and sat down. Grandma, an elegant woman in her early sixties, who, when the wind ruffled her hair, always fought against it and kept patting it into position; Grandpa, an affluent man a few years younger with black combed-back hair and sensitive lips. The old boatman, wearing boots and a black peaked cap, one hand around the throttle of the outboard motor, the other resting in his lap. Slowly, we made our way out, crossed the sound, went ashore on the jetty at the other side, below the simple white cabin. Both Yngve and I used to long to come here. Where wild cherries and apples grew. You could swim by the smooth rocks beside the cabin. From the jetty we could fish for crabs. There was a little red Pioner dinghy we could row. But best of all we liked playing soccer on the little field behind the cabin, especially when the adults joined in: Grandpa, Gunnar, and sometimes Dad.

All this was in my gaze this morning. The parking lot was no longer grass but paved. The long walk through the forest was not long but covered in a matter of minutes. No boatman was waiting for us, he had probably died ages ago, and the atmosphere of industry in and around the harbor during those days had completely gone, now it was one of small boats and cabin life.

Nonetheless. The forest was the same, the sounds and smells were the same, and the sea with its islets and islands was the same.

Gunnar pulled the boat to the quay, Tove helped Grandma in, soon we were heading across the sound beneath the high blue sky. Grandma sat motionless, eyes cast down, as though the surroundings, the open space and the light that met us, hadn't reached her. Her pale, lean, birdlike face was even more painful to see here than at home. Because here there was bronzed skin after long days in the sun, salt in your hair after a refreshing swim, laughter and smiles, happy flirtatious eyes, evenings with shrimp and crabs and lobsters.

Tove laid her hand on my shoulder and sent me a consoling smile.

I started to cry.

Ooooh. Ooooh. Ooooh.

I turned away, stared at the sea. The sound was full of boats, this was a main thoroughfare for tourists in the summer. The small waves beat against the hull, showering us with saltwater spray.

While Tove was helping Grandma ashore and Gunnar was mooring the boat, he turned to me.

"Did Grandma have anything to drink yesterday?" he said.

My cheeks flushed, I looked down.

"I think she had a little," I said.

"Thought I could smell it," he said. "That's not good."

"No," I said.

"She can't look after herself anymore."

"No," I said. "That's obvious."

"We've helped them for so many years," he said. "Both your father and Erling moved away, so we had to step up."

"It's incredible you've had the energy," I said.

"It's got nothing to do with energy," he said. "It was something we had to do. She is my mother, you know."

"Yes," I said.

"Go and get yourself a cup of coffee!" he said.

I went up to the cabin, my eyes wet with tears. I was in a state. A little smile, a friendly hand, that was all it took, the dam would burst.

Grandma was his mother. Dad had been my father. I knew how he felt, I knew he wanted to die. I hadn't lifted a finger. I could have traveled down, talked to him, told him he had to go to a detox clinic. Yngve could have accompanied me, we could have stayed there, his two sons, and taken responsibility for him.

The thought was as alien as it was impossible. I was capable of doing many things, I was able to force myself to do almost anything if it was necessary, but I couldn't have done that. Never.

Should I have been able to say to him, come to Bergen, you can stay with Tonje and me for the time being, then we'll find a place for you nearby?

Ha ha.

Ha ha ha.

"Sit down, Karl Ove, and relax," Tove said. "You've been through a lot. You can enjoy some space out here. You'll both have to go back soon enough."

I sobbed and covered my eyes with one hand.

Grandma sat smoking and glanced down at the quay as Gunnar walked up.

An hour later he took me on a walk through the island. At first we said nothing, just walked side by side along the path, surrounded by trees, tall dry grass, scrub and bushes, bright flowers here and there, bare ridges, all gray with patches of multicolored lichen, the odd hollow with wispy stalks of grass swaying in the breeze, and then everything opened into a rectangular clearing, some houses shone white with orange roofs, and red pennants fluttered on the flagpoles.

"Do you recognize this?" Gunnar said.

"I do," I said.

"I can remember being here when I was little," he said. "Your father was a young man then. He was studying in Oslo. I looked up to him in the way that only a younger brother can."

"Mm," I said.

"There was something special about him. He wasn't like the rest of us. I remember he used to stay up late at night. No one else did that."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"He was so much older than me that we didn't grow up together," he said. "When I was ten he already had a son of his own. He already had his own life."

"Mm," I said.

"He didn't have it easy at the end. It was sad that things turned out as they did. But when it comes down to it, perhaps it was for the best. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I think so."

"There's a little restaurant here in the summer now," he said, motioning with his head to a house we passed.

"Looks nice," I said.

As we were walking I cried a soundless stream of tears. I no longer knew why I was crying, I no longer knew what I felt or where all this was coming from.

We stopped by the old skerry harbor, where all the sailors' houses had been renovated and everything sparkled with affluence and prosperity. The horizon in the distance was razor sharp. Blue sky, blue sea. White sails, laughter from somewhere, footsteps on a gravel path. A woman was watering a flower bed with a large green can. The spray from the sprinkler glinted in the sunlight.

When Gunnar parked his car outside the house in town it was five o'clock and all the trees were rustling in the breeze wafting in off the sea.

"We'll stop by tomorrow," Gunnar said. "Then we can give you a hand here. I suppose there might still be a little left to be done."

He smiled.

I nodded, we went inside. After all the light and air outside, the state of decline in the house, which in a way I had become used to, was evident again. As soon as we were upstairs I went back to cleaning. This time I turned my attentions to the two living rooms beyond the kitchen. The bench, the dining-room table, the chairs, all in 1930s' style with vaguely Viking carvings, the coffee table, the white wall paneling that had been installed in the eighties, the windowsill, the veranda door, the staircase. Both rooms had wall-to-wall carpets on the floors and I vacuumed them, but it didn't make much of a difference; tomorrow I would have to buy a detergent for them, I reflected, dumped out the dirty water, and called Tonje.

She'd bought a plane ticket so she could join me. I updated her on what was going on, I would be meeting the priest the next day, and there was so much left to do, but I would manage. I said I missed her and wished she were here. The former was true, the latter wasn't. I had to be alone here or with Yngve. The funeral was another matter entirely, she had to be there. She said she thought about me all the time and loved me.

After we got off the phone I called Yngve. He wasn't going to come to Kristiansand until the funeral, it was too complicated with his children, but he would do what he could from there. Phone relatives and let them know, keep in touch with the undertaker, all the things I found difficult.

Gunnar and Tove came over the next day. Tove helped Grandma take a bath, found her clean clothes and cooked while Gunnar and I washed and scrubbed and threw things out, me in as minor a role as I could manage, after all he had grown up in this house, it was his mother, I was the son of the man who had ruined everything. For Grandma the spruce-up had worked wonders, she seemed to come out of herself, suddenly I saw her going downstairs with a bowl of water in her hands and a cigarette in the corner of her mouth. Tove, who was cleaning the coatroom, laughed and winked at me. She looked like a brewery worker! she said.

At two I went to the church's office in Lund. Entered a long corridor, peeped through an open door, a woman was sitting behind a desk, she stood up and asked what I wanted, I told her, she showed me to the right door, I knocked and went in.

The priest, a middle-aged man with kind eyes, shook my hand and we sat down. I didn't have much confidence in Norwegian priests, I remembered the Coke-machine analogy from last spring, and the sole reason I wanted

Dad buried in a churchyard was tradition, the dignity of it. He was damn well going to have God's words read to him. It was therefore with some skepticism that I started speaking to this priest. I wanted a traditional ceremony with psalms, a sermon, earth thrown on the coffin, as few personal details as possible, as much distance as possible. I wanted Dad's life to be seen in that perspective, not the close-up, not the man children feared and who later drank himself to death but the broad view, a human who was born on earth, pure and innocent, as all are at birth, and who lived a life as all humans do and died his death.

But it didn't go like that. After we had discussed the practicalities, we started talking about what he should include in his eulogy.

"Who was your father?" he said.

I said he had studied in Oslo, worked for many years as a qualified teacher at an *ungdomsskole* in Arendal, married Sissel, had two children, Yngve and Karl Ove, divorced and remarried, lived and worked for some years in Northern Norway, had a daughter, moved back down south and died, fifty-five years old.

"Who was your father to you, Karl Ove?" he said.

I didn't like his attempt to gain intimacy with the use of my name, yet I longed to succumb. It was a terrible technique he had, I knew that of course, because he didn't know me from Adam, I met his gaze though, and in it I saw he was not an idiot, not a redeemed ignoramus, I saw warmth and understanding. He was no stranger to people drinking themselves to death, I recognized that, nor was he a stranger to people being bad, and he was no stranger to the notion that this was not the end of the world, actually it was the world.

"I was afraid of him," I said. "I was always so incredibly frightened of him. Well, in fact, I'm frightened of him now too. I've seen him twice this week and I'm still not convinced he's really dead, somehow. I'm frightened he's going to come and . . . lose his temper with me. It's as simple as that. He had a hold over me and he has never let go. I'm glad he's dead. Actually that is what I feel. It's a huge relief. And this weighs terribly on my conscience. He didn't *mean* to do this or be like this."

I looked at him.

"What was your brother's relationship with him like? Is it the same for him?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. I think Yngve hates him. I don't. But I don't know. He was always much worse to Yngve. He could reach out to me, try to make amends, but Yngve didn't want to know about that. He rejected him."

"You say he didn't mean to do this. Why do you think he did it then?"

"He was tormented. He was a tormented soul. I can see that now. He didn't want to live the life we lived. He forced himself. Then he got divorced and wanted to do what he really wanted, and it was even worse, he started drinking and at some point he lost his grip. He simply didn't give a damn then. At the end he was living with his mother. That was where he died. He drank. Actually it was suicide. He wanted to die, that I'm sure of."

I started to cry. I didn't care if it was in front of a stranger. I was beyond all such considerations. I cried and cried and I poured my heart out, and he listened. For an hour I sat there crying and talking about Dad. When I was about to leave, he shook my hand and thanked me, looked at me with his gentle eyes, and I cried again and said it was me who should thank him, and as I left the place, along the corridor and down the stairs, through the housing estate to the main road, it was as though something had let go, as though I was no longer carrying this, what I had been carrying, myself. We had only talked about Dad and me, but the fact that he had been there and listened, as he had to be there and listen to countless people who unburdened themselves to him, from the depths of their difficult lives, meant that it hadn't only been Dad and me we'd talked about but life: this was how this life had turned out. Dad's life, it had turned out like this.

Tonje arrived, I hugged her tight, we rocked back and forth, arms wrapped around each other.

"It's good you're here," I said.

"I've missed you so much," she said.

The house had been cleaned, it was still run-down, but as clean as it could be. I had washed all the plates, cutlery, and glass, I had set the table and there were flowers everywhere. Yngve, Kari Anne, Ylva, and little Torje had come. Dad's brother Erling and his wife and three kids were there. Grandma sat on a chair at the dining table, which we had moved into the other room. She was going to bury her eldest son today, I couldn't look at her, at those vacant staring eyes. But an hour earlier there had been a glint in them, when Yngve showed her Ylva, and she had tousled her hair.

I looked at Tonje.

"Could you do my tie?"

She nodded, we went into the kitchen, she put it around my neck and – ta-da – there it was, all done. It was the same tie I had worn at the wedding.

She took a step back and studied me.

"Does it look OK?"

"It looks very good," she said.

We rejoined the others, I made eye contact with Yngve.

"Shall we go then?"

He nodded, a few minutes later we were off. The sky was white, the air was warm, we closed the car doors and walked toward the chapel. One of the undertakers came over to us and gave us the program. Yngve glanced at it.

"The name's wrong," he said.

The undertaker stared at him.

"I'm very sorry," he said. "But, regrettably, there's no time to change it now."

"It doesn't matter," Yngve said, catching my eye. "What do you think?"

"I agree," I said. "These things can happen."

Nevertheless we both had our own opinions about the name we didn't bear ourselves. He had invented it, as his grandmother had invented ours.

Gunnar and his family arrived. Alf's daughter came with Alf, who hadn't changed and must have been eighty-something now. He was senile, she led him with a kind but determined hand toward the entrance.

I took Tonje's hand and we went in.

The first thing I saw was the white coffin.

Are you in there, Dad? I said under my breath. Is that where you are, Dad?

We sat down. Tears were streaming down my cheeks. Tonje squeezed my hand hard a couple of times. Apart from the family, which was tiny, there were three other people present.

I dreaded it, I knew what was awaiting us.

Behind me came a sound from Erling's son. A pure high note. The note continued and concluded with a sudden plummet, and I realized he was crying, because then it came again, he was sobbing, and it was heartrending, his little soul had seen the coffin, and it was enough, now he was crying for all he was worth.

The service commenced. The precentor we had hired was old, his voice was cracked and the cello sonata he played was not exactly a virtuoso performance, but it was apt, life was not perfect, only death is, and this was life watching death, the boy crying over the coffin.

The priest spoke. He talked about Dad's life and about those who were present today to take their leave of him. He said it was vital to have a focus. If you don't, you fall by the wayside. It was vital to focus on your children, on your nearest and dearest, on what is important in our lives. If you don't do that, you lose sight of everything and then you have nothing. No man is an island.

Yngve cried, and when I saw that, him sitting there and shaking, his face distorted into grimaces, him raising it to the ceiling and opening his mouth for air, I sobbed aloud with sorrow and joy, sorrow and joy, sorrow and joy.

We stood up and each laid our wreath on the coffin.

Stood in total silence before him with our heads bowed.

Farewell, Dad, I thought.

When we sat down and the cellist played Bach in his rusty cracked way I cried so much I thought I was going to split in half, my jaw hung open, wave upon wave of the very deepest emotions, those which only appear when all else has gone, washed through me.

After it was all finished Yngve hugged me, we stood crying on each other's shoulders and then, walking across the gravel, watching cars pass in the distance, an old couple walking through the cemetery, a gull sailing through the air above us, it was over. At long last it was over. I took several deep breaths and there were no more sobs.

The couple I didn't know came over to us. They introduced themselves as the parents of Rolf, Ann Kristin's husband. They said Dad had been such a fantastic teacher and Rolf had talked about him with such enthusiasm. We thanked them for coming and they walked over to their car.

"Who's that?" Yngve said, nodding discreetly in the direction of a woman. She wore a hat with a veil that concealed her face.

"No idea," I said. "But all self-respecting funerals have a woman no one recognizes."

We laughed.

"Well, the danger's over now," Yngve said, and we both laughed again.

Close family returned to Grandma's house, *smørbrød* were served, no speeches were given or commemorative words said, I wished it had been otherwise, sitting between Yngve and Tonje, but that would have meant doing it myself, and it would have gone badly, I couldn't have done it. Afterward we sat outside on the veranda, Alf said there was a man on the roof and I realized he was back in time, long, long ago, when he had been here and there *had* been a man on the roof. That was good. It was a day when both Dad and his father had been alive.

* *

The novel had been out for a few weeks, nothing had happened, when one morning the telephone rang. Tonje, who was having breakfast, picked it up, I was in bed, though not sleeping, and I heard her say she would see if I was awake.

I went into the living room, put the phone to my ear.

"Hello, Karl Ove here."

"This is Mads from Tiden. Have you read *Dagbladet* today?"

"No, I was asleep."

"Then I think you should go out and buy it right away."

"Is there a review?"

"Yes, you could say that. I won't say any more. Go out and we'll talk later!"

I put the phone down and turned to Tonje, who was standing beside the table finishing off her tea. She ran her hand over her beautiful lips and smiled.

"There's a review in *Dagbladet* today," I said. "I'll run out and get it."

"Did he say what was in it?"

"No. He was being secretive. But I would guess it's good."

She put on her jacket in the hall while I got dressed in the bedroom. When I came out she was hanging over the handlebars of her bike.

We kissed fleetingly and she cycled down the hill while I walked up, beneath the heavy trees, continued along the road and up the slope to the hospital. A sallow-looking man was checking the magazine shelf, a fat woman sat in a wheelchair by the cash register with a purse in her lap, she wanted *Hjemmet*.

I stopped by the *Verdens Gang* and *Dagbladet* stand.

At the top, to the right of the logo, there was a little picture of me. Sensational debut, it said.

Well, that was good. At least I had won the bet with Tonje.

I took a newspaper, paid and went toward the entrance, opened it at the culture section. The review was a two-page spread. Rottem had written it. He compared me with Hamsun, Mykle, and Nabokov.

Well, that was good. It could hardly have been better in fact.

I shoved the newspaper under my arm and walked back home, made myself a cup of tea, sat down at the table, and lit a cigarette. Then I called Tonje. She had just seen it and was deliriously happy for me. Personally, I wasn't especially happy. In some strange way I had expected it.

Later that morning a journalist from *Dagbladet* called, he wanted to interview me as a follow-up to the review. We agreed to meet at Hotel Terminus at two.

It was raining, I decided to catch the bus instead of cycling to town, and then walked up to my barber, whom I had originally chosen because the place couldn't have been less hip and because the guy who owned it, a young, energetic guy, was so nice.

"Hi," he said as I walked in.

"Any chance of an appointment? Like now?"

"In ten minutes," he said. "Take a seat in the meantime."

Was that all there was to it?

Outside the window, people passed by clutching at swaying umbrellas. The barber finished the customer, an elderly man, he seemed pleased, on the floor lay his dead white hair. When the door shut with a jangle I sat down in the chair, the cape was whirled around me, I said I wanted it short, as usual, and he began to cut.

"I've got an interview afterward," I said. "So I have to look as good as possible."

"What have you done now?" he said.

"I've had a novel published. It's received good reviews, so now they want to talk to me."

"Is there any money in it? How many copies have you sold?"

"I don't know. It's just come out."

"What's it about then?"

"All sorts of things."

"Any murders?"

"No."

"Love?"

"Yes, actually there is some."

"No good for me then. My wife just moved out."

"Has she?"

"Yes."

There was a silence. His scissors snipped away above my head.

"Over your ears? Shall I shave your neck?"

"Perfect."

It was only after I'd paid that I started feeling nervous about the interview. I had done one already, on the day of the press conference, *Dagsnytt 18* had called me and asked if I would go on the program. It had been live, sitting on the sofa outside the studio I was so nervous I could barely swallow the coffee I was passed. Tomm Kristiansen, who was the TV host, had come out and said that unfortunately he hadn't read my book.

"So I'm going to ask you questions about what it's like to make your debut, that sort of thing," he said. "On the cover it says the book's about male shame. Could you say a few words about that, do you think?"

"I didn't write the blurb," I said. "I didn't know it was about shame until I saw it."

"We'll find something else to talk about then," he said. "It'll be fine."

Right afterward I was shown in. Kristiansen sat with his headset on, scribbling on a piece of paper in front of him, I put on the headset in front of me, I could hear the segment before mine.

Then he introduced me.

"There's a big pedophilia case in Belgium at the moment," he said. "You've written a novel about a teacher who has a sexual relationship with a girl of thirteen. Would you say you've jumped on a bandwagon?"

I eyed him with horror. What was he actually saying?

"No," I said. "I wouldn't. This has nothing to do with Belgium."

I noticed that I could in fact speak and my nerves vanished.

"You're making your debut now. How has this process been? Do you feel your publishing house has failed to take you into account, by deciding on the blurbs and things like that?"

"No, I don't feel that. I chose the picture for the front cover, for example."

"Yes, it's a photo of a naked girl. Why did you choose that? Is it meant to be provocative?"

"No, no. It's relevant to what the book's about, actually."

I was bathed in sweat after the interview was over, and also a little indignant, all I had done was write a novel, you would have thought I had killed someone, judging by his questions.

The present interview, however, wasn't live, and it would probably be slanted toward the book's good review, so I had nothing to fear. Nevertheless I was nervous, and on my way there, through the rain-glistening streets, with all the car lights diffused in the gray daylight, I considered what I was going to say. Inside the café someone stood up, I guessed he had to be the journalist, his name was Stang, we talked for more than an hour and it went fantastically well, I talked and talked, about literature, Norwegian and international, about my own book, what my aim was, well, it was to escape from the minimalistic, into the maximalistic, something bold and striking, baroque, *Moby Dick*, but not in an epic way, what I had tried to do was take the little novel, about one person, where there is not much external action, it is all internal, and extend it into an epic format, do you understand what I mean?

He nodded and wrote, wrote and nodded.

I was excited when I bought *Dagbladet* the next day.

But the interview was short, it said I was proud of and pleased with the review, and that I had read *Dagbladet* ever since I was twelve years old.

I cycled up to the university and knocked on the door of Eirik's office.

"You've read *Dagbladet* ever since you were twelve, I see," he said, and laughed. "And that's something to *boast* about!"

I sat down on a chair and he could see I was actually pretty shattered by the interview, I came across as an idiot, a completely deranged fool, "proud and pleased," my God, I was so ashamed that I didn't know where to look.

"Probably doesn't make the slightest bit of difference," he said.

"No, maybe not," I said. "But everyone will read it. What a fool I am!"

"You aren't a fool, though, of course," Eirik said. "Take it easy now."

"I'm beginning to wonder," I said. "I did *say* what he's written in the review."

"A touch more subtlety is required for interviews, that's all," Eirik said. "Then it'll be fine."

Eirik was the type who had something to say about everything. Not in any vague or ungrounded way, he was well read about everything between heaven and earth, and for me he was a boon during these months, in the same way that Espen and Tore had been before, because he had read the novel and I used what he said about it shamelessly, such as it was an "autogeography," in all my interviews, of which there were now more and more. I sat down in Hotel Terminus and talked or I invited them home and sat at the living-room table and talked, and when Tonje came home I talked about everything I had talked about. Reading these same interviews, I burned with shame. I lay awake at night squirming at the thought of what an idiot I was. If nothing happened for a few weeks it felt like a complete void. I wanted more, and when more came it was always terrible. At the same time I was also being invited to a variety of events. I went to Kristiansand for a reading with someone called Bjarte Breiteig and someone called Pål Gitmark Eriksen, they had also made their debuts that autumn and held Tor Ulven in the very highest esteem, it turned out after a few minutes' conversation. They were so enthusiastic and in tune with each other that I saw them as literature's answer to Joe and Frank Hardy. As we were about to set foot on stage there were four people in the audience. I knew one, he was one of my old *gymnas* teachers, but when I went up to him afterward he said he was there because he was good friends with the family of one of the other writers. I did a reading at Hotel Terminus, everyone I knew in Bergen had come, the salon was packed, but I had to perform without a microphone or a stage, I stood in the middle of the floor, it was like reading to people in your sitting room at home, and when I did there was a passage in which the main protagonist, Henrik, sees someone mimicking him, I began to blush because I imagined everyone would be thinking I was Henrik and the description of the mimicry was a description of me while I was reading. I blushed, lost my rhythm, squirmed like a worm on a hook, and with friends present, they must have thought I was an even bigger loser than they had ever imagined because this was public, this was where I really had to sparkle, and all I could think of was that the mimicry was becoming a mimicry of me now and read faster and faster to finish.

After the reading someone in the audience put up his hand. This was a so-called "literary salon," this was normal practice.

"Now Knausgaard may not be the world's greatest reader," he said, "but I have to tell those of you who haven't read this novel yet: it is really good."

He had round glasses and big old-style radical hair and wanted to help me. But the reading comment smarted because I had been hoping all my thoughts had been confined to my own head.

Afterward he came up to me. He had an idea for a film and was wondering if I would write the manuscript for it. He explained what the idea was, producing lots of documents and pictures, I said it was extremely interesting and very topical, while inwardly I consigned him to hell, never to show his face again.

I also did a reading at a Sunday event in Bergen, the town's leading lights were gathered, the stage acts were a potpourri, among them was a revue artist who directed traffic off a ferry to music, people were screaming with laughter. There was one number with seminaked women dancing with top hats and sticks. Then there was me. I had bought myself a nice new Hugo Boss suit. Tonje had instructed me categorically to say a few words before I began reading. I stepped onto the stage.

"I'm going to read a piece about death," I said.

Some people in the audience started giggling. They didn't stop, not even when I was reading, and it spread. Death, ha ha ha. I could understand them, I was a self-important pretentious young writer who thought he knew something about the big issues in life.

I attended what was termed a "book-bath" in one of the Vestfold towns, with a crime writer who had also made his debut that year, I puffed myself up and spoke as if I were Dante to the twelve or thirteen people who had turned out. Afterward the crime writer refused to exchange books with me.

What was the point of all this? Flying all over Norway to read for ten minutes to four people? Talking smugly about literature to twelve people? Saying stupid things in the newspapers and burning with shame the day after?

Had I been able to write then this might not have mattered. But I couldn't, I wrote and deleted, wrote and deleted. On weekends we often used to visit Tonje's mother or brother, go to Café Opera, Garage, or Kvarteret, unless we went to the movies or rented videos. The social scene was different now from when we'd been students. A lot of them had moved away and those who remained worked or were not as flexible as they had been. People had started treating me differently, now that I "was" someone, and I hated this. The meaning of everything had disappeared, that was what had happened.

In March my novel won the Critics Prize. When they called and told me, I had just got myself entangled in a minor e-mail nightmare, at first I had written something stupid, then I had tried to repair the damage, and then it had become even more stupid and impossible to repair, a third e-mail was out of the question. This was all I could take in. Tonje told me to pull myself together, this was a big prize, imagine if I'd been told this two years ago, and I agreed, but it didn't help, what would he think when he received the second e-mail?

I invited Yngve and Tonje to the award ceremony, they were sitting at a table at the back when I stepped up to receive the prize. The little storm of camera clicks that met me was fantastic. Geir Gulliksen said a few words, I was touched and didn't know where to look. Afterward we went to Theatercafé with the publishing house people, initially I was ill at ease and said next to nothing, but luckily I warmed to the occasion. At the Savoy I met Kjartan Fløgstad, he had been nominated for the prize, my first inclination was to apologize to him for winning. Instead I asked him if he remembered me interviewing him. No, he didn't, he said with a smile, had I? He suggested we exchange books and then he rejoined his friends. By the time we got to Lorry I was well gone, and when I spotted Ole Robert Sunde at a table I immediately went over and sat down. He was with a woman. They were also good and drunk. Suddenly she leaned over to me, took my face between her hands and gave me a lingering kiss. Ole Robert Sunde said nothing, just averted his eyes. I stood up horrified and returned to our table.

In May, at the Literature Festival in Lillehammer, where I was attending a seminar with other debut authors, I met Ole Robert Sunde again. He was sitting at a table in the festival hall on the final evening. On seeing me, he shouted in a loud voice:

"There's our Knausgaard! He's good-looking, but he can't fucking write!"

My primary reaction was confusion. What was this? An insult, and not a petty one. The tone may have been jocular, but this was obviously something he had on his mind. At any rate, he shouted out the same thing on several occasions that evening. And, the second time, as I passed a few meters from his table on my way to the toilet, he shouted: "Knausgaard's writing is so ba-aad! But he is good-looking!" I didn't do anything then, either. Quite the contrary, when he beckoned to me on my return, I went over to his table. There were two women standing beside him. "Here's our Knausgaard," he said. Then, to the women: "Isn't he good-looking? Look." And he grabbed my hands. "Look at his hands! So big. And you know what that means, don't you?" The next moment he grabbed my crotch. I could feel his fingers on my dick and balls. "There's something else that's big!" he laughed. Even then I did nothing. Mumbled some comment or other, extricated myself, and left. The incident was unpleasant while it lasted, because he came so close to me, in purely a physical sense – actually he was the first and still the only man to grope me – but it didn't bother me, the only thing I felt was surprise. I knew some people considered me good-looking, so that wasn't a revelation, and as for my writing being poor . . . well, that was possible, but it can't have been *that* bad, after all the novel had been accepted by a publishing house and it had been published. The only new element, apart from the intimidation, was the underlying implication that there was an essential difference in the literature I produced and what Ole Robert Sunde wrote. At that time I no longer read his books, but that didn't mean I wasn't aware of his intellectual stature. My literary identity when *Out of the World* was published was high modernism, under the umbrella of which came such Norwegian writers as Ole Robert Sunde, Svein Jarvoll, Jon Fosse, Tor Ulven, and early Jan Kjærstad. But in Lillehammer six months had passed, my book was selling well, I had given one fatuous interview to newspapers after the other, said asinine things on the radio, been on TV, performed in libraries and bookshops, and slowly I was beginning to realize that the image I had of myself as a writer might not match the image others had. Stig Sæterbakken had, for example, called Tore Renberg and me Faldbakken & Faldbakken in a readers' column in *Dagbladet*, Liv Lundberg had hissed with contempt at us when we went to Tromsø for a reading and afterward we sat together at a party; everything we said during the night angered her and in the end she even went so far as to spit at us. And then there were Ole Robert Sunde's shouted insults in Lillehammer, which everyone heard, of course. That really took the wind out of my sails. I went to Kristiansand to write, it had worked once before, now I would try again. The same area, the same atmosphere, a continuation of the same novel. I managed one page, e-mailed it to Nora, who had read *Out of the World* before it was published and had been enthusiastic and who also had a collection of powerful poetry to her name, *Slaktarmøte*, she e-mailed me back and said that unfortunately she didn't think it was so good, especially the image I had worked on for so long, of a water sprinkler that waved like a hand, which she considered particularly weak.

I wondered if Hanne might still be living in Kristiansand and, if so, whether to call her. I decided not to. I gave Jan Vidar a call, it was a long time since I'd seen him, we went out, a stunningly beautiful girl, perhaps twenty-five, blond, came over to me and asked if I was Karl Ove Knausgaard. I said yes and I went home with her, she lived not very far from where I'd had a place as a sixteen-year-old, in a basement apartment under her parents' house. She was curvy and lovely, but as I stood there, in the middle of the night, very drunk, fortunately I realized what was about to happen and halted any advances, she made tea, I kept my distance and talked about Dad's death, of all things. As I left I felt like the idiot I was, but I was also happy, it had been a close call. I loved Tonje, I didn't want to ruin our relationship, it was the only blessing I had.

In the winter I went to the archipelago of Bulandet, I had rented a house on a little island where I would stay to write for three months. The island was so small that I could walk from end to end in ten minutes. The sea lay straight ahead, the winter storms were as wonderful as they were terrible. Five other people lived on the island, one died while I was there, I saw the ambulance take him one morning, it was snowing, four figures stood on the quay as the paramedics carried the stretcher on board.

I wrote nothing of any use. I went fishing every day, I read for a couple of hours, then I worked all evening and night. The results were worthless, but at some point surely it would have to flow, wouldn't it? Or was I a one-book writer? Had I shot my bolt?

Geir Gulliksen called me on my cell, he said my novel had been bought by an English publisher. I imagined English journalists coming out here to interview me, their photos of me standing with my fishing rod by the stormy sea in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Independent*, and *The Daily Telegraph*.

I went up to Northern Norway and rented a run-down shack in Lofoten so that I could write. Nothing.

Then something freed up. John Erik Riley called and asked if I had anything for *Vinduet*. I said I would see and get back to him. I probably had four or five hundred pages' worth of openings to novels, I read through them, found one that might be usable and worked on it, as a short text, not a novel.

It was published on their website a few days later.

FIRE

Fire belongs to the group of phenomena that has never undergone any evolution. Change is therefore alien to its form, it will not be moved in any direction by the many fluctuations of its settings, it rests in its own completeness. Fire is perfect. But fire's unique feature, that which sets it apart from many of the other unchanging phenomena that exist, is that it has managed to detach itself from the tyranny of time and place. While water is doomed to be situated in a particular place forever, in some form or other, as air and mountains also are, fire has this remarkable ability to cease existing, quite simply – not only to disappear from view, to go into hiding, but indeed to allow itself to be *extinguished – only to reappear exactly as before, in a new place, in a new time. For us, this makes fire difficult to understand, used as we are to regarding the world as a coherent system of continuous events, which at countless different speeds – from the tree's endlessly slow growth to the rapid fall of raindrops – progress temporally. Fire stands outside this system and that must have been why in the Old Testament the Divine revealed itself to man in the form of a flame: the form of revelation and fire are the same. The Divine has this ability to reveal itself suddenly, in its complete form, only then to disappear. The Divine also has this mysterious alien and merciless nature, which causes us to both fear and admire it. Anyone who has witnessed a house burning will know what I mean. Fire moves through the rooms and consumes everything in its path, the eerie roar of the flames, the blind will that only hours ago was nonexistent, but which has suddenly returned and wreaks havoc in front of our eyes with such abandon, you would have thought it was happening for the very first time.*

But now, in this, our world of fire alarms, sprinkler systems, fire engines with ladders, breathing equipment, hydrants, hoses, and powder extinguishers, no one fears fire anymore. It has been brought under control and takes its place in the world in much the same way that wild animals in zoos do, something we look at when we are relaxing, such as a fire in the hearth or a flame on a candle; states in which its former abandon is only seen as a residue: the crackle of wood, the swirl of flames in a draft, the shower of sparks against the wall as we push the logs closer together. And the Divine? Who talks about the Divine nowadays? You can't. It is impossible to talk about the Divine without feeling ridiculous. There is now a sense of shame attached to talking about the Divine. And as shame is based on a disparity between two entities – most often the person you are to yourself in relation to the person you are to others – it would not be unreasonable to assume that the Divine's somewhat comical status is due to the fact that it is out of sync with the era we live in and thus joins the succession of past customs and objects that time has left behind, such as airships, top hats, polite forms of address, the chamber pot, and the electric *typewriter. Things disappear, new things appear, the world slowly changes. Then we wake up one day, we rub the sleep from our eyes, draw the curtain aside and look out: clear air, bright sunshine, sparkling snow. We amble into the kitchen, switch on the radio, start the coffee machine, butter some bread, eat, drink, take a shower, dress, go to the hallway, put on a hat and coat, lock the door, and set off in this Østland dormitory town toward the station, which every morning is crowded with commuters. They stand on the platform with rolled-up newspapers under their arms and bags in their hands, strolling up and down in the cold, yawning, staring at the clock, peering down the railway line. Then, when the train thunders into the station, they form small queues in front of the doors, board the carriage, find a seat, fold up their coats, place them on the luggage rack, and sit down again. Oh, the tiny pleasures of commuting! Take out a ticket, place it on the armrest, unfold a newspaper, and start reading as the train slowly glides out of the station. Occasionally raise your eyes to look out: the blue sky, flashes of sun on the hoods of cars driving along the road across the river, the smoke from farmhouses in the valley, snowcapped mountains. The sudden noise as the door is opened, the bang as it is closed again, the conductor's voice approaching your seat. You give him your ticket, he scribbles his mark, you carry on reading. The next time you look out you have entered a forest. Dark green spruce trees huddle together on both sides of the track. Their branches exclude the light, but you think it is the opposite, they are preventing the darkness from rising, as if remnants of the night are still here, along the snow-covered ground beneath the trees in the forest you are speeding through. Sometimes the forest expands into copses, you see fences, glistening wires, small piles of timber. Then, as you turn your head back and look down at the newspaper on your knees, the train crashes. The carriage where you are sitting folds like paper, you find yourself pinned up against the seat in front and lose consciousness. When you come to a few minutes later you can't move. Diesel from the locomotive has sprayed into the carriage, you can hear the roar of the flames, passengers screaming, you try to free yourself, but to no avail. In the snow beneath the rails passengers from the rear carriages*

> *file past. You can hear the flames approaching your seat, you are trapped and can only wait until the fire reaches you. Outside, flakes of ash settle on the snow. Soon the first ambulances arrive. You can smell melting plastic, you can smell burning diesel. You sit there unable to move, in the escalating heat, until it becomes unbearable and in your helplessness you pray to your God, the Almighty, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, whom you have never been closer to than at this moment, for this is how He reveals himself to us now, in his purest and most beautiful form: a blazing train in the forest.*

So should I be writing short pieces?

For lack of anything better, I started there.

I wrote one about Dad. Yes, almost everything I did was about him, in one form or another, countless were the variants I had of two brothers, Klaus and Henrik, who traveled back to their hometown to bury him and went around cleaning the dreadful house where he had died. But this one came to nothing. I didn't believe in it.

Days passed, months passed, it was two years since I had made my debut, I had produced nothing, one night I was in the sitting room, drunk, and decided to fly to Kristiansand as soon as it was morning, I had received some e-mails from a girl who lived in the skerries off Kristiansand, in one she had written that she wasn't wearing anything, when I was drunk that was enough for me, and I *was* capable of this kind of stunt, even if I was broke, you just paid with a credit card. But the closer the morning came, the more sober I became, it was a crazy idea, typical of how I thought when I was drunk and I went to bed, where Tonje had been asleep all this time, while I had been going la-la in the sitting room.

Darkness descended.

I had everything I wanted. I was a writer and lived off writing, at least until my stipend ran out, I was married to a beautiful woman whom I loved and who let me do as I pleased. She didn't object when I said I was going to be away for two months, she said nothing when I went out at night and came home plastered at five in the morning, and she never threatened to leave me, even though I had been depressed for two years and obviously hated myself.

How could that be?

It wasn't the whole picture. I was good for her too, she needed me, and we had a good life together in Bergen, both when we were alone and when we were together with others, the circle of family and friends around us, so if I was filled with inner despair, it had nothing to do with life as it unfolded around me, with the trivial incidents that make up all lives and can suddenly shine bright in the dusk of meaninglessness: the door goes, she comes home, bends over and takes off her shoes, looks at me and smiles, her face is magical and childlike. She pours paint from a five-liter can into a small receptacle, climbs up on a chair and starts painting the molding over the window, wearing a workman's overalls stained with paint. She snuggles up to me on the sofa, we watch a film, tears run down her cheeks, I laugh at her and she laughs through her tears. There are thousands of such moments, lost the second they occur, yet still present because they are what form a relationship, the particular way *we* stayed together, which was the same as everyone's, though different, it was her and me, no one else, it was us, we dealt with everything that came at us as well as we could, but the darkness in me thickened, the joy in me evaporated, I no longer knew what I wanted or what to do, only that I was standing still, I was stuck, this was how it felt, as though I wasn't formed on the inside, it was only a mold shaped by everything on the outside. I walked around like a kind of imprint, a multitude of incidents and activities pressed tight against a mold, completely hollow on the inside. At night, when I was out, the longing for something else was all that existed, I could do anything and in the end I did. I was at Café Opera, there were lots of people I knew, there was a party afterward, I drank steadily and was completely out of it, but it helped to drink, I got into the mood, sat talking with Tomas, whom I had met a few years earlier and immediately liked, but didn't often speak with, we just exchanged a few words in passing every once in a while, in one of Bergen's bars. At five we decided to take a taxi to his place and continue drinking there, him, a friend, and me. While I was waiting for the taxi a woman from the party came down to the front door, she must have been in her midthirties, she had looked at me several times during the course of the evening, I had been evasive, I hadn't looked at her, hadn't spoken to her, but now this was different, I went over and asked if she would like to come too, she said yes, the taxi arrived, we got in, she sat close to me, I had my hand on her thigh, but sat still otherwise, the other two didn't notice what was going on, in the town center we tumbled out of the taxi and went up to Tomas's apartment, at the top of a large building, I had been there several times, always at night, always drunk. There was a balcony outside where once, with many others, we had watched two people fucking in the backyard, she had been lying over the hood of a car, he had stoked away from behind, I had gone in to chat with someone, had a bit more to drink, gone back, they were still at it. When at last they finished we applauded. He had bowed to us while she'd grabbed her clothes and sped off. Tomas was a writer, his face was handsome and sensitive and very distinctive, as soon as you saw him you realized he wasn't like anyone else, he was an exception, boundlessly generous and kind, deeply serious and passionate about what he was doing, independent in that rare way, you only find a handful of such people in every generation. He had done some boxing and fencing, he surrounded himself with women, in an enthusiastic boyish fashion, and he was the only person apart from Tore I knew who had read *À la recherche du temps perdu*. His style was elegant, he sought perfection and beauty, and in that, as in almost everything else, he was my antithesis. He led tonight, he opened the door and let us in, put on music, produced some whiskey, we were going to discuss Proust, and I did, but not for long, I was beyond everything, all I had in my head was her, who was also there, seated some distance away, I wanted her, so I went over to her, she sat on my lap, we kissed, my hands were all over her, I didn't care that all this was going on in front of Tomas and his friend, this was everything now, she was everything, I lifted her and stood up, took her hand and went into the bedroom, Tomas's bedroom, I closed the door and tore off her clothes, pulled the two sides of her jacket apart without bothering about the buttons, kissed her, undid her skirt and flung it off, pulled down her tights, she was nearly naked now, I unbuttoned my trousers and let them fall, threw myself on top of her, out of my mind with desire, without a thought for anything else, no, somewhere I was thinking I want this and I'm doing it, this is me who wants it, why shouldn't I do it? She groaned and I shouted, I came, I got up to go, she lay there watching me and told me not to go, she wanted more, I thought OK, lay down on her again, but it was no good and I got dressed, went into the living room without a second look, grabbed my jacket and went down into the street, flagged down a taxi, gave our address, paid him five minutes later, unlocked the door, let myself in, undressed, and got into bed beside Tonje.

When I awoke I was in hell. It was completely dark outside. Tonje was in the living room watching TV, I could hear it. My clothes, which lay in a pile beside the bed, smelled of perfume. I smelled of sex. The thought of what I had done, the guilt and the shame and the angst, were so great there was nothing else. It was bottomless. I was paralyzed, I couldn't move, I lay there in the darkness knowing the only way out of this was death. I hadn't moved since I woke up, it was as though the darkness was pressing down on me, it hurt so much I wanted to scream, but I lay there, motionless, perfectly still, from the living room came the sound of the TV, and then she walked through and stopped in the open doorway.

I lay with my eyes closed, breathing heavily.

"You still asleep?" she said. "It's almost six. Can't you get up so we can enjoy *some* of the day?"

"I'm really worried," I said. "I was so drunk."

"Poor you," she said. "But why don't we walk down and rent a film? I can make pizza."

"OK," I said.

"Good!" she said.

She left, I sat up in bed, still drunk. I took my clothes with me into the bathroom, put them in the washing machine with some other clothes and switched it on. Then I had a shower. I was in hell, this was hell. But I would manage. If I could get through today, and the next day and the one after, I would be fine.

I should go in and tell her, I thought. This was too much for me to bear. Her feelings were genuine and pure, she was honest in what she did, and then she was with me, who was so bad and did the worst things. If I told her what I had done she would leave me. I couldn't risk that. Better to lie for all eternity. Lying was something I was really bad at, but now I would have to. I would have to lie every single day for the rest of my life, but I would manage, I would.

It was good we were going out, the telephone was here, and it was conceivable that both Tomas and the woman might ring.

We set off downhill to Danmarksplass, where the big video shop was.

"Was it fun last night?" she said.

I shook my head.

"No, not really. Pretty run of the mill. But there were lots of people I knew there."

She asked who and I told her.

"You didn't get involved in anything, did you?" she said.

I flushed with shame and horror, my face was scarlet, but I forced myself to continue walking at my usual speed and held my head still, it was dark, she couldn't see.

"No, no," I said.

"But why did you come back so late? It was eight when you came in."

"I went back to Tomas's place after the party, me and a friend of his. We drank whiskey and discussed literature. That, in fact, was pretty good."

We rented two films and bought the ingredients for a pizza. When we returned the light on the answering machine was flashing. I hadn't considered that. It was worse because it would be played through the speakers, into the room, so if the message was about what happened she would hear.

She went into the kitchen, organized things, started frying the ground beef, and I pressed the button on the answering machine, hoping she would be too busy to notice.

It was Tomas. He didn't say anything specific, only that we could talk if I wanted.

"Who was it?" Tonje said, standing in the doorway with the spatula in her hand.

"Tomas," I said. "He just wanted to catch up."

I deleted the message and went in and sat down on the sofa.

The next day she went to work as usual. I called Ole, I had to talk to someone, I couldn't deal with this on my own. We arranged to go to the Film Club at Verftet, where they were showing a David Lean film.

Most of our friends in Bergen were shared, I couldn't tell any of them about this. But Ole, who had got divorced and moved back from Norwich, was outside the circle. Yes, he knew Tonje, they liked each other, but primarily his relationship was with me. He was still translating Samuel Johnson, mostly for himself out of interest, he had dropped out of university and was training as a nurse instead. Once, he had taken me down through all the subterranean corridors beneath the hospital, I was going to write about them, and I was far more fascinated by them than I anticipated. It was its own little world down there under the ground. Ole and I went to see the Lean film. It was about infidelity, I sat in my seat in agony, I was in hell. Afterward we went for a beer at Wesselstuen and I told him everything. What I wanted to know, what I needed his advice about, was whether I should confess and trust she would forgive me or keep my mouth shut, pretend everything was fine and let it pass of its own accord, I hoped it would.

"Don't even think about saying anything," Ole said. "What purpose would it serve? Then she would have the burden as well. You would be putting the responsibility on her. But it's yours. You did it. You can't undo anything, *you* did it. In this sense, it doesn't matter whether she knows or not."

"But then I would be deceiving her. I would be lying to her."

"You *have* deceived her. Words and actions are not the same thing."

"No, you're right," I said. "But this is just the worst experience of my life. I have never hurt so much. It's absolutely indescribable. It's so painful it feels as if it would be better to shoot myself."

"Well, do you have a gun?"

"Ha ha. It's all I can think about. It's always there, from the moment I wake up till the moment I go to sleep. There's nothing in my head except what I did. And then Tonje. . ."

"It'll pass. It sounds cynical, but it will pass."

"I hope so," I said.

But it didn't. Whenever the telephone rang, fear flared up in me. I took out the phone plug as often as I could without arousing suspicion, at least in that way I could have some kind of peace, knowing no one could call. When we chose films in the video shop I always read the blurb to see whether there was anything about infidelity, if there was, I made up some excuse for not wanting to see it. I carefully scrutinized the TV listings, so I knew what I could see and what I couldn't. If there was any infidelity I did something else. But despite this sometimes the topic cropped up, people were talking about it and then my head burned with shame and I tried to distract attention by changing the subject. I was stiff and unnatural, it was strange she didn't notice, but I presumed the idea that I might do something like this was so far from her perceptual world that it never occurred to her. My bad conscience was a constant, my sense of guilt toward her a constant, whatever we did, I was false and a liar, a cheat, a bad person, and the more affectionate she was with me, the closer she came, the worse I felt. I acted cool, but everything had been destroyed, everything had become a game.

We bought some property. Someone Tonje worked with wanted to sell, we got it cheap, it was in Minde, near NRK. It was a three-story detached house, built in the early 1900s, we bought the top two floors, one measuring a hundred and ten square meters, where we lived, and a smaller apartment in the loft, which we rented out. I polished the floors and oiled them; Tonje painted and wallpapered. We took the doors off their hinges and stripped them, we started to get quotes for the bathroom, which we wanted renovated. Afterward we would tackle the kitchen. We liked the place, it was a bargain. I had a spacious office, there were also two living rooms and a bedroom, a balcony, and a large garden. Life was normal, the future was ours, we began to talk about children. I couldn't write, three years had now gone by since my debut, I had nothing to show for it and probably never would have. But I kept trying, lowered my head and typed away. Every time the telephone rang a chill went through me. It would never disappear. Whenever I laid eyes on Tonje or she smiled at me I was overcome by pangs of conscience. But they passed, I managed, days passed, perhaps in the end they would go. Hans and Sigrid had come back to Bergen, we spent a lot of time with them, took a flight to London together, had meals at each other's places, and with their friends, this was a social circle, this was a life. Hans and Sigrid moved into a house high above Sandviken, I went there one day to give Hans a hand with painting, it was September, the sky was clear and blue, in the fjord a lifeboat was practicing a maneuver, an enormous shower of spray shot up skyward and it glistened in the sun. It was one of those days when everything was open and the town lies there, in the middle of the world, beneath a vast sky and you think life is worth living. Suddenly Tonje called, she said we had to turn on the radio, there had been an attack on the World Trade Center, a plane had flown into one tower. We did, we stood there painting in the sunshine as reporters tried to describe what was happening and what had happened. I couldn't visualize anything, it was all so unclear, Hans said it was probably Bin Laden, which was the first time I had heard his name. I went home, Tonje sat watching TV, they showed images of the plane flying into the tower again and again and then the building collapsed. We watched all evening. The next day we flew to Paros, where we would be for a week. We buzzed around on a moped, Tonje on the pillion with her arms around me, we swam and read, made love and ate out in the evenings, wandered around the wonderful streets, one day we went to Antiparos, where I had been thirteen years before and I remembered everything and laughed: On that island out there I had sat writing a novel in my notebook, I read Ulf

Lundell and had ambitions of being a writer. All on my own out there, and when I went for a swim I was overcome by a sudden fear of sharks. Here, in the Mediterranean!

Oh, it was great. But at home things continued as always, autumn passed, I couldn't write, Tonje worked, I gave a start whenever the telephone rang, expecting only nastiness. Several times someone had rung without speaking, that kind of thing goes on of course, but it was impossible for me not to connect it with what had happened almost a year before.

Then, in February, I had a dream. I dreamed that I was standing in front of a bull, it was buried in the sand and struggling to get out. I had a sword in my hand. I slashed at the bull's neck. Its head fell off, but the bull kept fighting, it tore its way out of the sand and I woke up.

Something terrible was going to happen. I knew it was. The dream had told me.

But what?

My first thought was the woman who lived above us, she was young and had a permanent job, so we didn't see much of her, but as she was in the house I thought the attack might come from her, she would report me for molestation or something, because she had become unstable and was fixated on me. I'd had this obsession for a while, it was totally without justification, rooted in my own bad conscience and mangled self-image, but with the dream as well I could imagine it happening.

The whole day passed. I worked in my study, Tonje came home, we ate, I went to my study to read, I had an armchair there, a little table with an ashtray and a cup of coffee, bookshelves circled the room, one of my greatest pleasures was to sit looking at all the books, taking them out, browsing. Now I was reading Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. It was just after eleven, the house was silent, the streets outside still. I put a CD on the ministereo I had bought, Tortoise, I lit a cigarette, poured some coffee.

From the sitting room came the sound of the phone ringing, I just heard it, as if from a distance.

I switched off the stereo.

If someone was calling so late, it meant something had happened.

Someone must have died. But who?

Tonje opened the door.

"It's for you," she said.

"Who is it?"

"He didn't say. Some friend or other I haven't met because he made a joke."

"A joke?"

"Yes."

I got up, went into the living room and picked up the phone. Tonje followed.

"Hello?" I said.

"Is that the rapist Karl Ove Knausgaard?"

"What are you talking about?" I said. "Who is it?"

Tonje had stopped, she was standing by the wall looking at me.

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. You raped my girlfriend a year ago."

"No, I did not."

"But you know what I'm referring to?"

"Yes, but it wasn't rape."

As I said that I glanced across at Tonje. Her face was white. She was staring at me with large eyes. She almost stumbled back against the wall.

"Yes, it fucking was. And unless you admit it we'll come over to your place right now. If you don't open the door, we'll smash it in. If you don't admit it then, we'll smash you in. We'll beat your face to pulp. Now, writer, do you admit it?"

"No. It wasn't rape. We went to bed together, I'll admit that. But it wasn't rape."

Tonje's eyes stared and stared at me.

"It damn well was. She woke up with her clothes torn. How do you explain that? She's right here."

"It wasn't rape. Whatever you say and whatever she's told you."

"Then we're on our way up there."

"Let me talk to her."

"If you admit you raped her."

"It wasn't rape."

"Well, then you can hear it from her own mouth."

Seconds passed. I looked up. Tonje had left the room.

"Hello," she said from the other end.

"Your boyfriend says it was rape," I said. "How can you say that? You were up for it as much as I was."

"I don't remember anything. I woke up with all my clothes torn. I don't know what happened. It might not have been rape. But this has been terrible. So I told him and he wanted to drive up and get you. I managed to stop that. But they're out of their minds."

"They?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

Apparently there were two of them, one was her ex-boyfriend, the other a writer I didn't know but I had met many times.

"He says you aren't as good as everyone makes out," she said.

"What's he got to do with this?"

"He's a friend."

"OK," I said. "I can't have it said about me that I've raped someone. It wasn't rape. Tell them it wasn't rape."

"It wasn't."

"Are they still coming up here?"

"I don't know what they think now."

"The best would be if we meet," I said. "You, your boyfriend, and me. So that we can talk about it."

"OK," she said.

"What about tomorrow? Two o'clock in the café by the decorative art museum?"

"Yes, that's fine. I want to talk too. I've called you a few times, but your wife has always picked up."

"See you," I said, and hung up.

At that moment Tonje came into the room, she must have been waiting. She glared at me.

"We need to talk," I said.

We sat in my office. It was as though I had stepped into a zone, the light was all white, nothing existed beyond it. We talked about what had happened. I told her about the night in detail. Why didn't you say anything? Tonje kept saying. Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you say anything? I apologized, I said I hadn't meant it, I asked for her forgiveness, but we were both in a completely different place, this wasn't about forgiveness, this was about what we had together, which had been so wonderful that it was ruined. The way all of this had come out, the brutal and uncontrolled manner of it, had given her a shock, she was in shock, her face was still ashen, and she wasn't crying, she was just attempting to grasp the significance of it. I was also in shock, the white light seared out everything else, all that was left was the terrible deed. I told her it wasn't rape, of course, she said, I know, that's not what this is about. For me though it was also what this was about, anything could happen, she could go to the police, they might come here and arrest me. No one in the world would believe me, I would be sentenced, as a rapist, the worst thing that could befall me, the greatest ignominy, for all the future, for the rest of my life. What was more, I was in the public eye, if the press got hold of it I would be hung out to dry on every single front page in the whole country. I didn't give that any thought then though, as we sat talking in my study, it was what I had done to Tonje that counted. She didn't cry, but she had withdrawn, she was deep inside herself, shaken to the very bottom of her soul.

The next day I walked into town, which had totally disappeared, it had been erased, the thought of what I had done was all that existed.

They weren't in the café. I waited for an hour, they didn't come.

I rang Tomas and brought him up-to-date. He was furious. He said he knew Arild, her ex, he was a criminal, a drug addict, he was nothing to be afraid of, but if you like, Karl Ove, I can go and pay him a visit and frighten him so much he'll never contact you again. I'll knock him senseless if necessary. Should I? Let's wait a bit, I said, and see what happens. If he contacts me again you could maybe have a word with him. I'll do that. You can count on me. That kind of person is just evil.

When I returned, the apartment wonderfully illuminated by the glow of the winter sun, I heard Tonje running water into the bath. I didn't want to disturb her, I went into the living room and looked up at the mountain opposite.

The sound of running water stopped.

A long drawn-out, heartrending sob came from her.

The despair in her sobs was so great I cried.

But I couldn't console her, couldn't help her. They never called again. I never heard any more from them. But the relationship was ruined anyway, and perhaps it had been from the night I did what I did, nevertheless we decided I should go away for some time. I called the people I rented the house from on Bulandet, the year before, it was empty, I could move in right away, and I did, caught the boat to Askvoll, then to Bulandet, the westernmost point in the country, far into the sea, that was where I was going to be.

I didn't write, I fished, slept, and read. I was distraught, not temporarily but deeply, that was how it felt, it didn't get better, it didn't change, every day I awoke to bottomless despair. It was purely a matter of endurance. That was all I focused on. I had to endure. I read Olav H. Hauge's diaries and that was an enormous solace, I had no idea why, but they were, for the few hours I read them I had peace. Every time the ferry docked I stood by the window and watched to see if anyone got off, perhaps Tonje will come, I thought. We hadn't arranged anything, all we agreed on was that we needed time to ourselves, each in our own place, and I came here. I didn't know if our relationship was over, if she wanted to separate or if she was yearning for me and wanted us to continue. I bore all the guilt, I didn't want to burden her, I kept away, she would have to work out what she wanted to do herself. I watched the ferry and hoped. But she didn't come. Once, I was convinced it was her getting off, I jumped into my boots and dashed over to meet her, but I immediately saw it wasn't and walked back.

Espen rang, he was going to Bergen, I longed for someone to talk to, caught the ferry, met him, we had a few beers, I slept in his hotel room. While we were out we met one of Tonje's friends. She looked as if she had seen a ghost when she spotted me. The following day I returned, and in a strange way it felt like home, this tiny little island far out in the sea, the yellow 1950s house on the promontory where I was staying. I loved the sky there, it was so vast and dramatic, and I loved the few days when there was sun and tranquillity. I loved standing on the quay and looking down into the compelling clear green fresh water where long strips of seaweed stood vertically and fish swam past and crabs moved sideways. Starfish, mussels, the whole rich subaquatic world. A plastic bag could drift out, deep in the water. I also loved to gaze at the quay, the small warehouses, all the equipment, all the yarn and all the buckets and boxes and cans. But most of all I loved the sky, the way the clouds slid through the darkness at night, like ships on their way to land or towered up before a storm, which always came from the west and made the entire house shake and quiver and gasp and throb.

On all my fishing trips I saw things, once an otter that was resident in the vicinity; it had made a little slide in the snow and kept diving down it every so often. Sometimes I saw it swimming toward me, a little black head just above the surface of the water. One night it ran at full speed across the veranda outside my house. I liked the otter, I was happy when I saw it, it was like a friend.

One morning the whole island was covered with birds. They made an unparalleled commotion. Then they took off, there were several hundred of them, a cloud rising into the air, they circled around the island a few times then slowly landed, like a carpet. At night they stood still in the darkness. I thought about them before I went to sleep, the silence of the living is quite different from the silence of the dead, and awoke to their din early the next morning.

Winter turned to spring. I didn't have a television, didn't have any newspapers, ate nothing but fish, crackers, and oranges, and all I thought about, when I wasn't thinking about Tonje, was that I had to be a good person. I had to be a good person. I had to do everything I could to be a good person. I had to stop being a coward, stop being evasive and vague, I had to be honest, upright, clear, sincere. I had to look people in the eye, I had to stand up for who I was, what I thought, and what I did. I had to treat Tonje better, if we were still together. I mustn't be grumpy, mustn't be ironic, mustn't be sarcastic but rise above it and always keep the bigger picture in mind. She was an exceptional person, absolutely unique, and I mustn't take her for granted.

Most of all I wanted action. To do something. But what?

I considered committing suicide, simply swimming off into the sea, it gave me a fine tingling feel, it had an appeal, but I would never do it, giving up wasn't in my nature. I was the kind to endure. No one had said you couldn't become a better person through endurance.

I wrote letters to Tonje, but didn't send them. I didn't receive any, didn't hear anything, and eventually I returned.

We hadn't seen each other for three months. I called her from the hill below the house.

"Karl Ove, have you come back?" she said in that voice of hers which was so intimate.

"Yes," I said. "I'm outside."

"Are you here?"

I unlocked the door, went up the stairs, she came into the hall, behind her was a colleague. Oh, fucking hell, I thought, has he moved in? Are they together?

They weren't. He had come by to fix the sliding door in the bathroom for her. She was thin and seemed sad. I was also thin, and there was no joy to be found in me.

We talked for days. She wanted to continue, I wanted to continue, and we continued. House, friends, family, Bergen. I wrote during the day, she worked for NRK. Everything was as before. The summer came and went, Christmas came and went, we talked about having children, but didn't take the final step. One evening I received a phone call from a stranger. He said he had been married to the woman I had been unfaithful with. They had children together. Now he wanted sole custody of the children. There was going to be a lawsuit. He wondered whether I would like to testify. He said that she and her boyfriend had done the same to a priest, she'd had sex with him, he had called the family and told them about it. The priest had been forced to resign, this man said, I didn't know what to believe, at first I thought it was some kind of trap, someone was recording the conversation, but he seemed genuine. In the end, I said I couldn't help him. When I told Tonje about this she said it would have come out immediately, all the media checked events in the courts, if I had said yes, as I had considered doing, the papers would have run the headline "Famous Norwegian Writer (33) Accused of Rape" with enough information for readers to know who was meant.

I clung to my writing, sat in my study from morning till night, nothing. Journalists had stopped calling ages ago, on the rare occasion one did, it was to ask whether I would be interested in contributing to an article about writers' block or one-book writers. But in February 2002 something happened. I had started another short text, located it in the nineteenth century but let everything that exists now, exist then, and the scene was Tromøya, yet it wasn't, a completely different story emerged, and in this parallel world, which resembled ours but wasn't, I had Yngve, Dad, and me taking a boat to Torungen one summer's night. I described the night as I remembered it with one exception: the seagull Dad shone his flashlight on had a pair of small, thin, armlike growths beneath its wings. They had once been angels, I had him say, and then I knew: this is a novel. Finally, a novel.

I was so excited. Suddenly I was full of energy, went shopping and made food and talked about everything under the sun, full of initiative with regard to Tonje, we could go there, do this, everything was possible again.

Tonje went to a seminar in Kristiansand, I had the whole day and night to write in, she came home three days later, wanted to go straight to a party, her band, made up of NRK staff, was going to play, she asked if I wanted to go with her, but I had to write, she went alone. After an hour I regretted my decision and went anyway, saw her playing the drums, I was moved for some reason, but when I went over to her afterward and she was packing up the drum set, she was evasive, wouldn't look me in the eye, and wouldn't talk. I knew that side of her, something was bothering her.

She carried the cymbal stands along the corridor, I had the snare drum in my hands, and I asked her to tell me what was up. I know there's something, so tell me what it is. I can see something's eating you.

"I wasn't going to tell you," she said. "But since you ask I will. I've been unfaithful."

"In Kristiansand? Just now?"

"Yes."

I looked at her. She looked at me.

I was angry. The thought that she had given herself to another man was terrible, but I was relieved, too, now it wasn't only me at fault.

When we got home we sat in my office as we had done a year earlier. I was no longer in a state of shock, since what had happened, what she had done, was no more than an extension of what I had done, but it was as terrible.

"Why did you do it?" I said. "I was so drunk I didn't know what I was doing. But you never do anything on impulse. You knew what you were doing."

"I don't know. I think it's because you were suddenly so happy. Suddenly you were walking around beaming with happiness. You've been depressed for four years, ever since the autumn your father died and your book came out, and it's been so hard. I've tried, I've tried everything. And then you start writing and you're happy again! That just told me so much. It feels as if I have nothing to do with your life. It feels as if I'm on the outside. That was the last straw, and I thought, well, what the hell. And then I did it."

I put my face in my hands.

I looked at her.

"What do we do now?" I said.

"I don't know."

We went to bed, early the next morning I packed a suitcase and traveled up to Yngve's, he had moved to Voss. I was there for two days, talked to him, he thought I should stay with her. We were even. Tonje was a fantastic person, I shouldn't leave her.

I caught the train back to Tonje, we talked all night, I had decided to leave. I wanted to get away from everything. We kept everything open, it wasn't finished, nothing was definitive, but we both knew it was over, at least I did.

She accompanied me to the train station.

She embraced me.

She cried.

I didn't cry, I put my arms around her and told her to take care of herself. We kissed, I got on board, and as the train eased out of the station I watched Tonje walking down the platform and into the town alone.

I was on the night train to Oslo, everything I did on the journey was meant to keep me from thinking. I read one newspaper after another, afterward I read a novel by Ian Rankin, the first crime novel I had read for twenty years, until I was so tired I would fall asleep the instant I closed my eyes. In Oslo I bought another Rankin novel, changed trains, destination Stockholm this time, boarded, and started to read.

That was how I left Bergen.

WITHDRAWN
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KARL OVE KNAUSGAARD was born in Norway in 1968. His debut novel *Out of the World* won the Norwegian Critics Prize and his *A Time for Everything* was a finalist for the Nordic Council Prize. *My Struggle: Book One* was a *New Yorker* Book of the Year and *Book Two* was listed among *The Wall Street Journal*'s 2013 Books of the Year. In 2014, *Book Three* was named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. *My Struggle* is a *New York Times* Best Seller and has been translated into more than fifteen languages. Knausgaard lives in Sweden with his wife and four children.

DON BARTLETT has translated novels by many Danish and Norwegian authors, among them Per Petterson, Roy Jacobsen, Lars Saabye Christensen, Ida Jessen, and Jo Nesbo. He lives with his family in Norfolk, England.

co [illegible] Megan Mangum

What's notable is Karl Ove's ability, rare [redacted] d mindful
of his own existence. Every detail is pu r decora-
tion, as if the writing and the living are ha ouldn't be
anything remarkable about any of it exc ou totally.
You live his life with him.

ZADIE SMITH, *The New York Review of Books*

Amusing episodes coexist alongside weighty, meditative, and essayistic passages on art and literature… Those who have come this far in the series will not be disappointed by *Book Five*; it is a pleasure to witness the gradual emergence of a dedicated artist over the course of a decade.

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JEFFREY EUGENIDES, *The New York Times Book Review*

In exposing himself as a bundle of contradictions, Knausgaard allows us to see ourselves.

BLAKE MORRISON, *The Guardian*

He does recapture the world, somehow; that's the thing, and it gives these strange, boring, hypnotic, luminous books almost a religious feeling, something like immanence. It's astonishing. If you haven't already, read them now.

CHARLES FINCH, *Chicago Tribune*

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ISBN 978-0-914671-39-8
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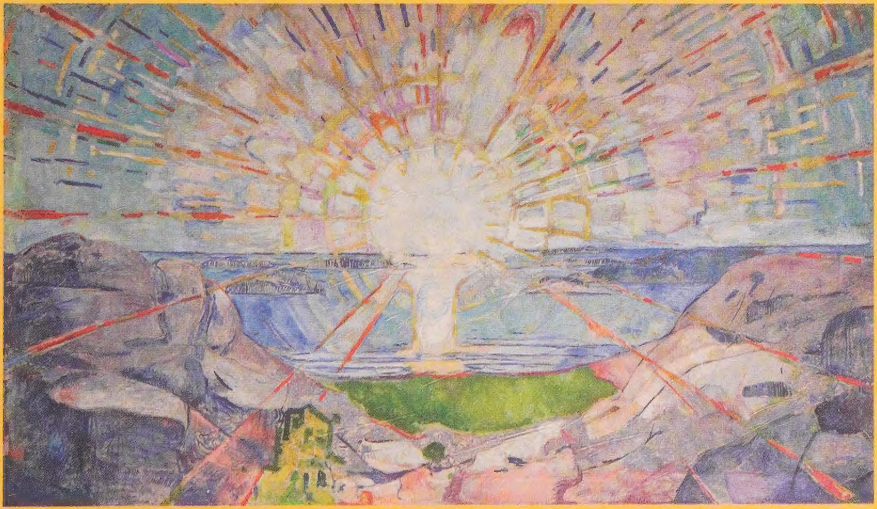
BOOK SIX



Translated from the Norwegian
by Don Bartlett and Martin Aitken

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The full breadth and achievement of Karl Ove Knausgaard's monumental work becomes evident in this final installment of *My Struggle*. In *Book Six*, Knausgaard grapples directly with the consequences of his transgressive blurring of public and private. His vulnerabilities and ambitions are exposed. *Book Six* depicts life in all its complexities, from the painful fallout surrounding the publication of the earlier volumes, to the emotional balm that his close friends provide, to the vivid texture of his days as he faces a marital crisis with his children around him. The book is an exploration of literature itself and of the profound – and at times startling – connection between writer and reader. Knausgaard also includes a lengthy contemplation of Hitler and his *Mein Kampf*, which not only directly confronts the implications of his own work's title but feels particularly relevant (if not prescient) amid rising public support for authoritarianism globally. *My Struggle: Book Six* offers a culminating dive into an atmosphere that has beguiled readers around the world and reveals Knausgaard to be one of the most groundbreaking artists of our time.

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11/2019

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Karl Ove Knausgaard

My Struggle

BOOK SIX

Translated from the Norwegian by
Don Bartlett and Martin Aitken

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First Archipelago Books Edition, 2018

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First published as *Min kamp Sjette bok* by Forlaget Oktober.

Archipelago Books
232 3rd Street #A111
Brooklyn, NY 11215
www.archipelagobooks.org

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Knausgaard, Karl Ove, 1968-, author.
Bartlett, Don, translator. | Aitken, Martin, translator.
Min kamp. Book six / by Karl Ove Knausgaard ;
translated from the Norwegian by Don Bartlett and Martin Aitken.
Other titles: Min kamp. 6. English
First Archipelago Books edition. | Brooklyn, NY : Archipelago Books, 2018.
First published as Min kamp Sjette bok by Forlaget Oktober.
LCCN 2018017041 | ISBN 9780914671992 (hardcover : alk. paper)
Subjects: | GSAFD: Autobiographical fiction.
Classification: LCC PT8951.21.N38 M5713 2018 | DDC 839.823/74--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018017041

Distributed by Penguin Random House
www.penguinrandomhouse.com

Cover art: Edvard Munch: *The Sun*, 1911, oil on canvas, 455 x 780 cm
University of Oslo, Ceremonial Hall

Archipelago Books gratefully acknowledges the generous support from
Lannan Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts,
the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs,
NORLA (Norwegian Literature Abroad), the Carl Lesnor Family Foundation,
the Nimick Forbesway Foundation, Adam and Diane Max,
the Munch Museum, and Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
This book was also made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts
with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo
and the New York State Legislature.

ART WORKS. National Endowment for the Arts NYCULTURE NORLA NEW YORK STATE OF OPPORTUNITY Council on the Arts

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

My Struggle

Part 1

In mid-September of 2009 I went up to Thomas and Marie's little retreat between Höganäs and Mölle, he was going to take some photos of me for the forthcoming books. I had rented a car, a black Audi, and headed north along the four-lane motorway in late morning with an intense feeling of happiness in my chest. The sky was clear blue, the sun shone like it was still summer. To my left the Öresund lay glittering, to my right yellow fields of stubble and meadows stretched inland, separated by stone walls, streams lined by leafy trees, sudden woodland. I was struck by a feeling that such a day wasn't supposed to happen, and yet there it was, an oasis of summer in the midst of autumn's paling landscape, and the fact that it wasn't meant to be like that, that the sun wasn't meant to shine so brightly, the sky wasn't supposed to be so saturated with light, tinged my joy with a sense of unease, so I tried not to think about it in the hope that it would pass of its own accord, sang along to the chorus of "Cat People" as it came through the speakers at the same moment, and took pleasure at the sight of the town appearing on my left, the harbor cranes, factory chimneys, warehouses. These were the outskirts of Landskrona, gliding by as Barsebäck had glided by only a few minutes earlier, the nuclear power station's characteristic and ever-ominous silhouette rising in the distance. Next up was Helsingborg, and from there it was another twenty kilometers or so to Thomas and Marie's place.

I was running late. First I had sat for a long time in the parking garage, in the roomy Audi's temperate interior, wondering how to start the ignition, unable to bring myself to go back to the rental office and ask in case they took the vehicle away from me once I had revealed such towering ignorance, and so I sat and pored through the handbook, flipping backward and forward through the pages, finding nothing at all about how to start the engine. I studied the dashboard, then the key, which wasn't a key at all but a card made of black plastic. I had unlocked the doors by pressing on it and wondered now if the ignition worked by some similar system. I searched the steering column in vain for a diagram. But there, wasn't that a slot of some sort? Maybe that was it?

I inserted the card and the engine purred. The next half hour I spent driving around the center of Malmö looking for the right road out of the city. By the time I eventually drove down the entrance ramp and onto the motorway I was nearly an hour behind schedule.

As Landskrona disappeared behind the low fold of the glacial ridge, I fumbled for my mobile on the seat next to me, found it, and pressed Geir's number. It was Geir who had originally introduced me to Thomas, they had met in a boxing club where Thomas had been working on a photo book about the sport, while Geir had been writing a dissertation on the same subject. They made an odd couple, to put it cautiously, but held each other in the highest regard.

"Hi there," said Geir.

"Hi," I said. "Can you do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"Could you give Thomas a call and tell him I'll be an hour late."

"Will do. Are you on the road?"

"Yes."

"Sounds good."

"It's fantastic, for a change. But listen, I've got to pass a truck now."

"And?"

"I can't talk on the phone at the same time."

"Someone ought to investigate your multitasking skills sometime. Catch you later, then."

I hung up, changed gears, and passed the long white semitrailer truck, which swayed gently in the turbulent air. Earlier in the summer I had driven the whole family up to Koster and nearly had two accidents on the way, one due to hydroplaning at high speed, which could have ended very badly indeed, the other not quite as drastic, but frightening nonetheless; I had changed lanes in a traffic jam outside Gothenburg without seeing a car coming from behind, and we only avoided a crash because the other guy was so quick on the brakes. The angry blast of his horn cut straight into my soul. After that I took a break from driving, and felt a little fear every time I thought about it, which was probably a good thing, but still, even passing a truck had become an ordeal, I had to force myself to do it, and any long drive filled me with anxiety for days afterwards, like a hangover. The fact that I had passed my test and was actually allowed to drive a car was something my soul cared little about, it lagged behind and was still living in the days when it had been a great recurring nightmare of mine that I got behind the wheel of a car and drove off without knowing how. Ridden with angst, negotiating the bends of Norway's roads with the overhanging threat of the police catching up with me any minute, I would be sound asleep in bed somewhere with the pillow and the upper half of the duvet soaked in sweat.

I left the motorway and joined the narrower main road to Höganäs. The warmth outside was visible in the air, something about the substance of light and sky, they seemed veiled in a way, and the glitter the sunshine sprinkled over everything. The world was wide open, that was the feeling of it, and everything shimmered.

Ten minutes later I swung into the parking lot outside a supermarket and got out. Oh, such a rush of well-being in the air, it seemed pervaded by the blue of the sea, though without being hot in the way the air is hot in summer, there was a hint of coolness and sedateness about it. As I crossed the asphalt toward the supermarket, whose flags hung flaccidly from their poles, the feeling the air gave me reminded me of smoothing one's hand over marble on a sweltering hot day in some Italian town, that coolness, as subtle as it was surprising.

I bought a box of raspberries to give them, and a packet of cigarettes and some chewing gum for myself, put the raspberries on the passenger seat, and started the ignition again. The narrow road, lined by the hedges of small whitewashed cottages, led down toward the sea only a few hundred meters from the supermarket. Thomas and Marie's place was right at the bottom, with the sea to the west and a vast green field to the east.

Thomas came across the lawn in shorts to greet me as I got out and shut the car door. He gave me a hug, one of the few people who could do so without it feeling too intimate. I wasn't sure why. Maybe it was down to the simple fact that he was fifteen years older and, although we didn't actually know each other that well, had always been sympathetic toward me.

"Hi, Karl Ove," he said.

"Long time, no see," I said. "What a gorgeous day!"

We crossed the lawn. The air was completely still, the trees stood completely still, the sun hung suspended above the sea, sending its scorching rays out over the landscape. And yet all the time the same coolness in the air. It had been ages since I had felt such calm.

"How about some coffee?" said Thomas as we paused at the rear of the house where the previous summer he had made a timber deck that stretched like the deck of a ship from its outer wall to the thick, impenetrable hedge that cast its motionless shadow a couple of meters back toward the house.

"Yes, please," I said.

"Great, have a seat and I'll get you some."

I sat down, put my sunglasses on again, and leaned my head back to soak up as much sun as possible while I lit a cigarette and Thomas filled a receptacle with water from the tap in the little kitchen.

Marie came out. Her sunglasses were pushed up onto her forehead, and she squinted at the sun. I told her I had read about her in *Dagens Nyheter* that morning, there was a piece about an art controversy she was involved in. I had forgotten what it was exactly they had written about her, despite racking my brains, but fortunately she didn't ask, saying only that she would check it out at the library, she was on her way there anyway.

"Has your book come out yet?" she asked.

"No, not yet. It'll be out on Saturday, though."

"How exciting!" she said.

"Yes," I replied.

"See you later, then," she said. "I take it you're staying for lunch?"

"Yes, that'd be nice!" I said back, and smiled. "By the way, I brought Linda's manuscript with me. I'll give it to you later."

Marie had been a supervisor at the writers' school in Biskops-Arnö and had agreed to read the manuscript of a novel Linda had just completed.

"Fine," she said, and went inside again. Shortly after, a car started at the front of the house. Thomas came out with two cups of coffee and a plate of muffins. He sat down and we chatted for a bit before he went and got his camera and took a few photos as we continued talking. The last time I had been to see him he had been reading Proust; he still was, he said, just before I came he had been sitting there reading the part about the grandmother's death. That's one of the finest passages, I said. Yes, he said, getting up to photograph me from a different angle. I thought about what little I remembered about the grandmother's death. The way it came out of nothing. One minute she had been getting into a carriage to take her through the Jardin du Luxembourg and the next she was struck by a brain hemorrhage from which she died only hours later. Or was it days? The house milling with physicians, the all-consuming anguish that bears down during the first phase of grief, apathy continually interrupted by the unrest that comes with hope. All out of the blue, the shock of that.

"Great," said Thomas. "How about if you move your chair over to the hedge there?"

I did as he suggested. When he was done he went inside to study the images away from the light. I went and got more coffee in the kitchen, glancing at the photos he was clicking through on the camera screen as I stepped past.

"These are quite good," he said. "As long as you don't mind having a long nose."

I smiled and went outside again. Thomas wasn't out to make me look good, nor to capture some particular expression, rather the opposite, so I understood, he wanted me the way I looked when I was relaxed, without posing.

He came back out with the camera and sat down in the sun.

"Are we done?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "They've come out nicely, I think. I might take a couple of full-lengths, though, a bit later on."

"Great," I said.

A low murmur of voices came from the other side of the hedge. I crossed my legs and looked up at the sky. There wasn't a cloud in sight.

"I was at the hospital visiting one of my best friends before we came down here," he said. "He's broken his neck."

"How terrible," I said.

"Yes. They found him in Gullmarsplan. No one knows what happened, he was just lying there on the square."

"Is he conscious?"

"Yes. He can talk and is quite lucid. But he can't remember a thing about what happened. He doesn't even know what he was doing in Gullmarsplan."

"Was there alcohol involved?"

"Not at all. No, it's an illness he has. Similar things have happened to him before, he can pass out in his apartment and wake up again without knowing where he is. But this time the consequences were more serious. I'm worried he might not pull through."

I didn't know what to say and nodded. We sat there in silence for a while. Thomas looked at me.

"Like to go for a walk?"

"Yeah, why not," I said.

A couple of minutes later he closed the gate behind us and we tramped off across the grazed pastures that sloped gently down toward the stony beach, where waves rolled lazily in from the sea. Some longhorn cattle stood and stared at us from the top of a small hill. We were only about fifty meters away from some houses and the busy road that ran behind them, but it felt as if we were walking on a deserted heath. Maybe it was the sea, and the way the pasture ran all the way down to the beach. Normally in these parts land like this was the most valuable of all and rarely given over to grazing.

"There are some old bunkers from the war up there," said Thomas, pointing toward some low concrete structures a bit farther ahead. "We're very close to Denmark here, of course."

"We had some where I grew up," I said. "But they were German."

"Really?" he said, lifting his camera to take a photo of me in profile against the sea.

"We used to play there when I was a boy," I said. "The bunkers in the woods were especially fascinating. Just the fact that they were there! This was the late seventies. The war had only been over for thirty years or so."

It was windier here in the open, but the waves that lapped the shore were low and lethargic. The cattle had begun to graze again. There were cowpats deposited everywhere they had been, some soft and mushy, others dry and shriveled.

"We've got something of a rarity over there," said Thomas. He gestured toward a small pond in a boggy area of reeds and moss, sheltered from the sea behind a rise in the landscape.

"And what's that?" I asked.

"You see the pond there?"

I nodded.

"There's a species of toad in it not found anywhere else in Sweden. It lives right here. In that little pond."

"Really?"

"Yes. They've got a few in Finland too, apparently. The European fire-bellied toad, it's called. If we're lucky we might be able to hear them. Their call sounds like little bells. I heard a program on the radio once where they recorded the ones here and compared them to the Finnish ones. Let's go see if we can hear them."

We trudged over to the edge of the pond. There wasn't a sound to be heard apart from the wind buffeting our ears and the gentle rush of the sea.

"No," he said. "Sometimes they're just quiet. They're in decline too. In the old days, not so long ago actually, this whole area was underwater. Then the houses got built, and the water has retreated since then."

"How come they only live here?"

"No idea. It seems they used to be found in a number of other spots as well, then they started to die out, apart from here. I suppose the conditions here must have suited them particularly well."

"How strange."

"Yes. A shame you didn't get to hear them! The sound they make really is rather special."

We walked on to what had once been a little fishing village, now a summer retreat. All the old cottages had been done up, the gardens meticulously kept, shiny new cars in the driveways. We followed the road that ran between them, and after a short while we were sitting once more in the little back garden we had left an hour before. Thomas got some more coffee going, Marie was preparing lunch.

Shortly after, as we enjoyed our omelettes with fried potatoes, bread, and beer, we talked about Jon Fosse. Marie translated his plays into Swedish and had just finished one that was to run at Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre that autumn. Fosse is a writer who has gone from describing the world the way it appears, the social-realist nightmares of small, unapproachable states-of-affairs in his early novels, brimming with neuroses and panic, to describing the world the way it is in essence, dark and open. From the world the way it can be inside the individual, to the world as it is between us, this is the line of development in Fosse's work. The turning toward God and the divine follows on from that. Anyone investigating the conditions of our existence must sooner or later investigate that too. The human domain has both outer and inner boundaries, in the space between them lies our culture, which is what makes us visible to ourselves. In Fosse's work it is subdued and almost indefinite, open to outside forces, the wind and darkness, which seem to rise and fall in the people he writes about. In that respect there is something premodern about them, in that all the things with which we fill our time, newspapers and TV programs, the vortex of politics, news, gossip, and celebrities that make up the world we live in, or mine at least, are something Fosse's characters stand outside. The simplicity of his later work prompts some to speak of minimalism, its darkness eliciting comparisons with Beckett, but there is nothing minimalistic about Fosse's work, rather it is essentialistic, and not in any way Beckett-like, Beckett being hard, ironic, without hope, his darkness is cold and filled out by laughter, whereas Fosse's darkness is warm, comforting, without laughter. Perhaps because he has come to that point from within, rather than going the other way like Beckett?

I could express nothing of this to Thomas and Marie because, as with most of the books I read and the art I look at, I relate to such things through something other than thoughts. Fosse is like this, Beckett like that, I know that, but then it stops there.

"How's it going with your uncle?" Thomas asked. "Is he still angry? Last time we talked you said he was taking you to court."

"Nothing's happened yet," I answered. "The book's at the printers, so if there's going to be a court case it'll be after it comes out. He's threatened to go to the papers as well. That's what I'm most afraid of, in a way. That they get hold of a story."

"But if he doesn't want anyone to read what you've written, then that wouldn't be the best way of going about it. It wouldn't be rational," said Marie, lifting her fork to her mouth.

"True, but rational doesn't come into it."

I pushed my plate away and leaned back.

"Thanks," I said. "That was delicious!"

I needed a cigarette but held off until they had finished eating.

Thomas looked up at me.

"Smoke, if you want," he said.

"Thanks," I said. I lit up and gazed out at the dark blue ribbon of sea above the green hedge, the way it glittered on the horizon, where the sunlight erased everything like a bomb, and the sky, lighter in color because of the haze, rose up.

It was such a fine day.

They started to clear the table, I left my cigarette in the ashtray and gave them a hand, putting the plates on the counter next to Marie, who began to rinse them in the sink. She was pushing sixty but came across a lot younger, the way so many writers do; only now and then, in the briefest of glimpses, did her true age become visible in her face. The impression of the face and the face itself are two different things, interwoven, a bit like those drawings that look like one thing if you look at the shading and another if you look at the other parts, perhaps, apart from the fact that a face is so much more complex. Not only does it change from hour to hour depending on the moods that ebb and flow behind and all around it, but also from year to year depending on the kind of relationship you have to it. My mother's face, for instance, appears mostly unchanged to me, what I see is "Mom," the way she has always been, but then she can turn her head slightly in a certain way and all of a sudden, like a shock, I see that she has become elderly now, a woman approaching seventy with perhaps no more than ten years left to live. Then she can turn again and say something, and once more all I see is "Mom."

I sat down again outside. The cigarette was still burning, I put it between my lips and sucked so hard it made the filter hot. I looked up at the sky, then at Thomas as he came out with the box of raspberries in his hand.

"We used to hear nightingales here," he said, sitting down at the other side of the table. "Not that many years ago either."

"What happened?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"They just vanished."

Driving home an hour later, the sun hanging low over Denmark on the other side of the strait, I thought about those vanished nightingales. It was the perfect beginning for the novel I was going to write when *My Struggle* was finished. An elderly man, full of years, potters about in his garden on the Swedish island of Gotland, reads in the shade, goes for long walks in the woods or along the endless beaches, retires early to bed in the evenings. It's summer, the sun beats down in the day, the vegetation is dry and scorched, and he'd is all alone with not a living soul for company. He thinks about a conversation he had more than thirty years before, sitting in the sun at a cottage on the Öresund coast, during which his friend Thomas, long since dead like so many of his friends are, told him the nightingales had vanished. It was the first he'd heard of it. Not long after, he saw a TV documentary about bees vanishing in the United States. From one day to the next they were gone, no one knew where, whether they had found some new place to go or simply died out. One Sunday, out with his family in the great beech woods outside the town where he lived at the time, they had seen hundreds of dead bats scattered everywhere on the ground. The newspapers carried reports of similar occurrences, flocks of birds falling from the skies, huge shoals of fish floating dead in the sea. Something was happening in the world and no one knew what. The fish, could it have been a volcanic eruption under the sea, gases rising and killing them off? Or was it caused by man? The birds, was some sickness running rampant among them? But then why would they fall down at the same time? Was it some kind of stress? The wild salmon disappeared, some suggested farmed salmon were to blame. Certain species of butterfly vanished – had there been a change in the environment so rapid that they had been unable to adapt? And then, in the space of a couple of summers, the great bird colonies stopped coming to their nesting grounds along the coast to the north. This time no one could even hazard a guess as to the reason why.

Every night before he goes to bed he writes a few pages in a notebook, mostly for his own sake, his days out there on the island being so alike that without his notes everything would merge seamlessly into one. He notes down the things he does, the way he feels, what he sees, and now and then events from his past life, which in that way emerges unsystematically.

That was the idea I had, and I elaborated on it in my mind as I headed south. In order to have the afternoon to myself I had taken the morning shift with the children, fed and dressed them and got them off to the nursery, and it was with that thought in mind that I had driven up to Thomas and Marie's when I did, it would give me some time left over to spend sitting at a café in Helsingborg. I took a left, passing at first through a semi-industrial area that gradually transformed into detached residences followed by long rows of linked houses on both sides of the road, eventually going down a steep hill, at the bottom of which was the town center, the harbor glittering in the light of the low-hanging sun.

I had been there once before with Linda and the children, it had been our first trip after I passed my driving test. Being a registered bad debtor, I was unable to borrow money or even rent a car in Sweden, so Linda had made the reservation in her name, it was a bulky, unmanageable vehicle which looked like a minibus. We came crawling into the town, my heart thumping in my chest, it was all I could do to steer properly, but at the same time I felt buoyant, driving gave me an immense feeling of freedom, as though being motorized solved all my many problems. Now I knew there were parking spaces at the far end of the expansive quayside area and I drove slowly in that direction.

An enormous cruise liner lay at anchor off the pier. It looked like it could carry several thousand passengers. I locked the car and ambled off. On the other side of the strait, surprisingly close, was what I realized must be the castle at Elsinore. The thought that I was looking at Hamlet's home made my spine tingle. I tried to eliminate everything that had since appeared in the world in the way of cars, boats, and buildings, to see only the castle in the landscape, to think of how enormous the distances were at that time, how little space people occupied within the world, how vast the gaps between them, and gazed across at the place where the young prince, broken with despair at the death of his father, seemingly at the hands of his uncle, had perhaps lain on his back in bed, staring up at the ceiling, tortured by the colossal meaninglessness that had come between himself and all things, his friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, seated on a bench in the courtyard, casting their long shadows across the cobbles, drunk on light and boredom.

I stood there staring toward the castle for a moment before turning and walking along the quayside toward the town. Here and there, tourists were leaning over the railing, peering down at the cool blue of the water. Maybe there were fish swimming around, or maybe it was the deep itself that fascinated them.

The town center was situated at the foot of a steep ridge; this was the only town in Skåne I had seen with hills and rises like this. It gave a completely different sense of space. I entered the pedestrian street, at the bottom of which was a park; there, beneath tall, shady deciduous trees, I spotted a pavilion, and a few minutes later I was able to sit down and order a coffee. The other people at the tables were speaking English with American accents, they must have come from the cruise liner.

I looked up at the treetops. The leaves were not yellow, but their green was not quite as fat and pastose as it had been in summer, it was drier now, and paler. All around me the sounds of the town swirled in the air. Tires rolling against asphalt, a rumble of car engines, footsteps, voices, laughter.

Hamlet was written at the close of the sixteenth century. The earliest edition still in existence is from 1603. A few years ago I would have thought of that as being a long time ago. I didn't any longer. The seventeenth century was only a few generations away. Goethe, for instance, must have run into people who had been born in the seventeenth century. To Hamsun, Goethe would have been someone who died a generation before he was born. And to me, Hamsun was someone who died a generation before I was born.

No, the seventeenth century wasn't long ago at all.

A waitress in a black apron crossed the road carrying a tray. The café itself was housed in a building on the other side. She skipped up the two steps to the pavilion, halted, and placed a cup of coffee, a small jug of milk, and a thin paper sachet of sugar on the table in front of me. I handed her thirty kronor and told her to keep the change, *det var greit*. She didn't understand and began to rummage in her apron for coins. I held up my hand and said it didn't matter. *Tack*, she said, and wheeled away.

The coffee tasted bitter, it must have been standing for ages. It wasn't what people were drinking in the hot weather.

I lit a smoke and looked out at the rooftops across the way, a zinc-clad chimney reflecting the glare of the sun, though without its movement, making the light seem like it was emitted by the zinc itself, an inexhaustible source. The gray-black slating that surrounded it, the fire escapes disappearing down into the backyards on the other side.

Everyone's life contained a horizon, the horizon of death, and it lay somewhere between the second and third generations before us, and the second and third generations after us. We, and those we lived with and loved, existed between those two lines. Outside were the others, the dead and the unborn. There, life was a chasm without us. That was why a figure like Hamlet could be so important. He was a work of fiction, someone had made him up, given him thoughts and actions and a space in which to act, but the point was that fiction was no longer a valid dividing line, a valid distinction, the moment one stepped beyond the horizon of death. Hamlet was neither more nor less living than the historical figures who had once occupied the earth; in a certain sense anyone from then was fictional. Or, since Hamlet was made of words and ideas, the others of flesh and bone, was it only he and his life form that could overcome time and mortality?

Does he rise now in his chilly chamber? Does he climb the narrow steps out onto the roof, to the parapets? What then does he see? The blue waters of the Öresund, the green land on the other side, the low-lying expanses stretching away and beyond. What thoughts does he have? Shakespeare told us. The earth appears to Hamlet as a sterile promontory. The air, this most excellent canopy, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, as he describes it to his two friends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, is to him but a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors, man but a quintessence of dust. This was what he saw over there at the castle. The English word *vapor* is the same one as was used of the darkened mind, and the space that opens out there, between the mind's and the world's darkening, appears like an abyss.

I took my mobile out of my jacket and pressed Linda's number. She answered right away.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

"Fine," she said. "We're in the park. The weather's gorgeous! Heidi refused to walk, but we worked it out. When will you be home?"

"Soon. I'm in Helsingborg. It'll take less than an hour from here, I suppose. There's the car to take back, though, and then I'll have to walk. Do you want me to get some things on the way?"

"No, I think we've got everything."

"OK," I said. "See you. Take care."

"Bye," she said, and we hung up.

I sat for a while with the phone in my hand and gazed up the road. Two women wearing skirts and sandals and carrying bags made of some lightweight material came walking along the sidewalk. Behind them a man on a bike, a child squeezed into the kid's seat against his back. Both had helmets on, the man wore glasses and a suit. I thought about Heidi and smiled. She invariably wanted to be carried. If it was up to her she would never walk a single step. She had always been like that, right from the start. I was so close to her then, after she was born. Vanja was jealous and claimed Linda's attention as much as she could, while I carried Heidi around until she was eighteen months and John came along. It stopped then, our closeness to each other. Every now and again I felt a twinge of sadness about it. But that was how kids were, everything came in phases, and phases came to an end. Before long they would be grown up, and the children they used to be, whom I had loved, would be gone. Even seeing photos of them from as recently as a year before could make me feel sadness at the fact that the children they were then no longer existed. But mostly they took up so much of our lives now and whirled up our days with such intensity there was no room left for such feelings. It was all here and now with them.

Not without relief, I dropped the car key through the mailbox of Europcar an hour later; that both I and the car were still in one piece after a long day on the roads was by no means to be taken for granted. The sun shone against the tall black spire of Saint Peter's church above me, while the street beneath my feet was shadowy and cold as I walked along. I went as fast as I could, feeling guilty as always about being away from the family, or rather about leaving

Linda to deal with the children on her own. I couldn't help it. I strode on, past the Hansa arcade, past Hi-Fi Klubben and Orvars Korvar, the hot-dog joint, before crossing over to the canal that ran through the little park, past Granit and Designtorget, across the bridge and onto the pedestrian street at the end of which towered the yellow-white Hilton hotel. The streets were busy, the tables outside both cafés were full, young girls chatting in pairs or small groups, some teenagers being boisterous, and a couple of men my own age, rather more subdued in body language and dress. All sat soaking up this unexpected summer's day. I felt calm and excitement at the same time; it felt good, but underneath was anxiety.

Our apartment was on the little square across the road from the Hilton. A steady flow of people from early morning to late evening passed our entrance door, which was tucked in between a Søstrene Grene store and a Chinese takeaway. On the square itself there was a fountain, the trickling sounds of which went on through the night, and a big octagonal fast-food stand that blared out soulful pop and eighties' hits to its customers, mostly people from outside town, who sat at the tables stuffing themselves with grilled sausages and hamburgers, with bulging carrier bags at their feet. The benches a bit farther away were occupied by homeless people. Ours was the top apartment, on the sixth floor, with a balcony running its whole width at the front. Once, Vanja threw a lighter over the railing, and it had hit the ground and exploded, just missing a couple of passersby who leaped into the air and glared up at us while I waved my hands in apology, trying to tell them it was an accident and hoping they weren't going to get angry.

I glanced up at the railing, so high above the sidewalk, and got my keys out of my pocket. This involved another memory, for tucked in behind the plastic window tag attached to the key ring was a photo of Vanja and me, the two of us together on a boat, we were on our way to look at dolphins on the Canary Islands, she no more than three years old, holding my hand and wearing a white hat and a look of anticipation. I tapped the orange key card against the panel next to the door, there was a click, I pushed the door open and went inside, pressed the button for the elevator, and checked my phone while I waited. No calls, but I knew that already. The only people who would call my cell were Yngve, Mom, Tore, Espen, and Geir Angell. Each followed their own pattern, and none of them was due to call just yet. I spoke to Yngve and Mom about once a week, Mom on a Sunday evening usually. Espen I spoke to about once every couple of weeks, Tore maybe once a month. With Geir it was about twice a day. That was pretty much my social life outside the family. But it was enough, and it was how I wanted it.

The elevator arrived, I stepped inside and pushed the top button, studying myself in the mirror as I slid slowly upward through the dark and narrow shaft that ran through the middle of the building. My hair had grown long over the summer and I now had a beard of sorts. My beard growth had never been impressive, the cheeks always seemed to remain bare, so every time I looked at myself in the mirror I kept wondering if it looked stupid or not. It was hard, if not impossible, to decide, there being no obvious criteria to apply. If I asked Linda she would just say it looked fine. Did she mean it? Impossible to tell. And obviously I couldn't ask anyone else about so intimate and vain a matter. So a couple of weeks earlier I'd shaved it off. When I showed up at the nursery the next day, Ola, the only other person there of my age, father of Benjamin, Vanja's current best friend, and a head of faculty at Malmö's university, had stared at me and asked if there was something different. Hadn't I had some facial hair or something? He was being funny, not referring to it as a beard, and it made me think shaving it off had been the right decision. But then, on the Friday, I picked up some of the photos we'd taken that summer. I sat with Vanja, Heidi, and John at the café at Triangeln where we went every Friday after nursery, they had ice cream while I sat with a coffee, and we looked through the photos together. One was of me standing on a beach over in Österlen with John on my arm. I looked unusually good, I thought to myself, there was something about the beard and the sunglasses that made me seem . . . well, so *masculine*. And with John on my arm to complete the picture, I looked like . . . well, dammit, yes, like a *dad*.

There and then I had decided to grow the beard back. Only now, on my way up between floors, I wasn't so sure. I was going to Oslo the next day to do interviews for the launch of the first book. This forced me into considerations about shirts, jackets, trousers, shoes, hair, and now beard. For the past few years I hadn't been bothered about that sort of thing, hardly giving a thought to the clothes I wore, simply grabbing something to put on if I happened to be going out, which was basically only when I was taking the children to nursery or picking them up again, or if we went out somewhere with them on the weekend. I was living in a city where I knew only a handful of people and didn't care much about what they might think. This gave me a sense of freedom and allowed me to run around in baggy old pants and big grubby coats, awful woolly hats, and sneakers, but now, from the end of summer on, with publication approaching and my first interviews in five years having all been arranged, it was a different situation altogether.

I turned automatically as the elevator approached the sixth floor, after three years I knew exactly how long it took to ascend, stepped out onto the landing with its clutter of kids' stuff – two strollers, toddler roller, Vanja's scooter, and Heidi's bike with training wheels – and opened the door of the apartment.

Coats and shoes dumped on the floor, toys strewn all over, TV sounds from the living room.

I took my jacket and shoes off and went inside. Heidi and Vanja were snuggled up close in one chair, staring at the TV. John, standing in the middle of the floor in his diaper with a toy car in his hands, looked up at me. Linda was sitting on the sofa reading the newspaper.

The rug was bunched up, cuddly toys lay thrown about the entire room, as well as a number of books and plastic toys, felt pens and sheets of paper they had been drawing on.

"How did it go, all right?" Linda asked.

"Yes, fine," I said. "Nearly bashed the car when I was getting gas. You know, that cramped underground place. Apart from that, fine. Thomas and Marie say hello."

"Did you give her my mansucript?"

I nodded.

"How are we doing, girls?" I asked.

No reaction. Their little blond heads were motionless as they stared at the TV. In the same chair: apparently they were getting along today.

I smiled, they were even holding hands.

"Daddy basement?" said John.

"No," I replied. "Daddy's been driving a car today."

"Daddy go to basement!" he said.

"Are you hungry?" Linda asked. "There's some leftovers out there."

"OK," I said, and went out into the kitchen. The dishes were still on the table, the girls' plates almost untouched, they hardly ever ate at dinner, never had. To begin with, Linda and I had argued about it, I wanted discipline when it came to meals and felt they should sit at the table until they had eaten up, whereas Linda held the opposite opinion, that when it came to food everything should be as free as possible, with no compulsion. What she said had seemed right to me, it sounded awful to talk about forcing them to eat, so ever since then we had let them do as they wanted. Whenever we came home from the nursery and they started going on about being hungry they had a slice of bread, an apple, some meatballs, or whatever was left over, and when dinner was ready and on the table they could sit there for as long as they felt like. Usually, that was no more than a few minutes during which they prodded a bit and took a few small mouthfuls before sliding off their chairs and toddling off into the living room or their own rooms, leaving Linda and me to eat at opposite sides of the table.

I piled up a plate with macaroni and meatballs, Sweden's national dish, cut a tomato into bite-sized wedges, squirted some ketchup over it all, and sat down. The first year we lived in Malmö I talked about it with one of the other dads from the nursery. How did they cope at mealtimes? They never had any trouble at all, he said. She always sat nicely at the table and cleaned her plate. How on earth did they manage that, I wanted to know, biking up alongside him on our way out to Limhamnsfältet to play football as we did every Sunday morning. She knows she has no choice, he said. How does she know that? I asked. We broke her will, he said. She sits there until she's finished, it doesn't matter how long it takes. One time she sat there until late. Sobbing, and shouting all sorts of things at us. Wouldn't touch a thing. But after a long while it sank in, she ate up and could leave the table. Three hours, I think it took! Since then there's hardly been an issue. He looked at me and beamed. Did he realize what he was telling me about himself, I wondered, but said nothing. It's the same whenever she throws a tantrum, he went on. I've noticed Vanja gives you a bit of trouble every now and again. Yes, she does, I said. How do you tackle that? I hold her still in a firm grip, he said. No drama, just hold her still until it passes. It doesn't matter how long it takes. You should try it, it works like a dream. Yes, I said, I certainly need to think of something.

The odd thing about that conversation, I thought to myself as I spooned the barely warm food into my mouth, was that I had gauged him – or rather both parents – to be alternative, meaning soft. He carried the youngest around in a sling, the way dads like him were supposed to, and on a trip we were on with the nursery I had overheard him talking about the advantages of it as opposed to a BabyBjörn baby carrier. They were more than ordinarily concerned that food should be healthy and additive-free, their kids' clothes were as far as possible made of natural fiber, and they were among the most active at parent meetings. So the fact that such uncompromisingly Victorian parenting methods should suddenly be revealed in their case came as a surprise to me. Or maybe it completed my understanding. I had always wondered how come their eldest daughter, who often played with Vanja, was always so reasonable and cooperative. She never spent a second in her stroller and walked everywhere they went, as opposed to Vanja, who could start pestering me to get in behind Heidi as soon as we were more than a few meters away from the nursery gate.

There had been occasions every now and then when I'd seen no alternative but to break her will, and of course eventually I had succeeded, but never without feeling awful afterward. It couldn't be right, surely. On the other hand it was *good* for her to sit and eat with us, *good* for her to walk, *good* for her to get dressed herself, *good* for her to brush her teeth and go to bed at a resonable hour.

Once, Vanja had been at their place, it was her first ever sleepover. I went to pick her up the next day, they said everything had gone fine, but I could tell from Vanja, who kept wanting to be as close to me as possible, that it hadn't been quite without problems. There had been a minor episode, he said, but we sorted it out no trouble, didn't we, Vanja? What happened, I asked. Well, she asked for more dinner, but then after we'd given her some she wouldn't eat it. So she had to sit there until she until she did.

I stared at him.

Was he mad?

No, he was already rummaging around to find her socks for me and I said nothing, even though I was furious. Who did he think he was, assuming he had the right to force *my* child to adhere to *his* ideas? I took the socks he handed me, helping Vanja put them on as she stretched out first one foot then the other, before giving her her coat, hoping and praying she was going to put it on herself so I wouldn't have to do it for her under his critical gaze.

Linda was enraged when I told her what had happened. By then I had changed my mind about it, it wasn't that bad, besides it was probably good for her to see that different people had different rules.

"That's not the point," Linda said. "They're criticizing us, aren't they? How dare they. Who do they think they are? You should hear how smug she is. You wouldn't believe it."

"They invited Vanja to do a fun run with them in the woods, I forgot to mention it," I said. "It's next weekend, in the Pildammsparken."

It was the sort of activity we never would have got involved in on our own. Vanja was excited at the prospect. She'd get to stand behind a starting line with a number pinned to her chest, and to run with a lot of other kids along a path through the woods, and when she crossed the finish line she would get a medal and an ice cream.

It fell to me to take her to the start, along with her friend from the nursery and her friend's mother, while Linda looked after Heidi around the finish line. Vanja was proud of her number, and as soon as the starter shouted *Go!* she took off as fast as her little legs could carry her. I trotted along beside her under the trees, with all the other moms and dads. But after a hundred meters or so she slowed down, then came to a complete standstill. I can't, she said. Her friend and her friend's mother were of course well ahead of us by then. They stopped, turned around, and waited. Come on, Vanja, I said. They're waiting for us! Let's run! And so we ran, Vanja in that wobbling way of hers, me loping along like an elk; we caught up with them and we all ran side by side, until her friend and her friend's mother once more began to edge ahead of us and we again fell behind. She ran like the wind, that girl. Vanja panted heavily at my side and came to a halt. Can't we walk a bit, Daddy, she asked. Yes, of course we can, I said. Just for a little bit though. They waited patiently for us until we caught up with them again, and we forged on together for another hundred meters perhaps, before the gap between us opened up again. Come on, Vanja, I said. Not far to go now. You can do it! And Vanja gritted her teeth and ran on, maybe it was the finish line that lay ahead and the ice cream she knew would be waiting for her that gave her renewed energy. Her friend was about twenty meters in front of us, she was a good runner with a light and effortless step, and if it hadn't been for us she would have been over the finish line well before. She turned and waved to Vanja, but then as she turned again she stumbled and fell headlong onto the path, where she sat clutching her knee and sobbing. Her mother stopped and bent over her. We were approaching now, and as we came up to them, Vanja was about to stop too. Come on, Vanja! I said. You're almost at the finish! Run as fast as you can! And Vanja heard me and ran as fast as she could, past her friend, whose knee was grazed and bleeding, with me alongside her, past child after child she ran, as fast as the wind and over the finish line!

Behind us her friend got to her feet and limped on. An official hung a medal around Vanja's neck, another handed her an ice cream. I won, Mommy! she shouted out to Linda, who came smiling toward us pushing the pram, with Heidi at her side. Only then did I realize what I had done, and blushed like I'd never blushed before. We ran past her! So we could be first! While she, the little girl who had stopped and waited for us along the way, sat bleeding on the ground!

Back at the finish, it was now her turn to receive her medal and ice cream. Fortunately, it seemed there were no hard feelings on her part. Her father came toward us.

"Looked like you really wanted the win there!" he said with a laugh.

I blushed again, understanding that he didn't realize it was true. That he would never in his wildest fantasy think that a full-grown adult could behave in such a way. He was making a joke out of it precisely because it was unthinkable that I should have urged my daughter on so she could win over his daughter, and to have done so in such an unsportsmanlike way. They weren't even four years old yet.

The girl's mother came over and said the same thing. Both of them took it for granted that it was Vanja who had pressed on and that I hadn't been able to stop her. They could understand a four-year-old not being able to show empathy with a friend her own age. But the idea of a nearly forty-year-old man being equally incapable was naturally beyond their imagination.

I burned with shame as I laughed politely.

On the way home I told Linda what had happened. She laughed like she hadn't laughed for months.

"We won, that's the main thing!" I said.

Two years had passed since then. John had been only a month old, Heidi nearly two, Vanja three and a half. I remembered it so well because we had taken so many photos that day. John with his big baby head and narrow, wrinkly baby eyes, kicking his slender bare legs, waving his slender bare arms in the stroller. Heidi with her wide eyes, short little body, and fair hair. Vanja with her delicate features and her character's singular blend of sensitivity and fervor. Then as now I was unable to fully grasp the connection between us, mostly I looked upon them as three little people with whom I shared my home and life.

What they had, and what I had lost, was a great and shiningly obvious place in their own lives. I often thought about it, the way they woke up every morning to themselves and their world, which they would inhabit all through the day, taking everything as it came with no questions asked. When we were expecting Vanja, I had been worried my gloominess might rub off on her, I had even mentioned it to Yngve once, who had said that children are basically happy, it was their point of departure, and so it had turned out, always they strove toward gladness, and as long as no complications arose, they were forever happy and buoyant. Even when that wasn't the case and for some reason they were feeling sad, despairing, or upset, they never removed themselves from who they were, but accepted everything completely. One day they would look back and ask the same questions as me, why had things been the way they were then, why are they like this now, what exactly is the meaning of my life?

Oh, my children, my beloved children, may you never think such thoughts! May you always understand that you are sufficient to yourselves!

But most likely that won't happen. All generations live their lives as if they were the first, gathering experiences, progressing onward through the years, and as insights accumulate, meaning diminishes, or if it doesn't diminish, it at least becomes less self-evident. That's the way it is. The question is whether it has always been that way. In the Old Testament, where everything is expressed through action and the narratives are closely bound up with physical reality, and in the ancient Greek epics, where lives unfold in similarly concrete fashion, doubt never comes from within, as a condition of the individual's existence, but always from without, by some external occurrence, for instance a sudden death, and is thus bound up with the conditions of external, earthly life. The New Testament, however, is different. How might we otherwise explain the darkness in Jesus's soul that eventually drove him to Jerusalem, there to close door upon door until only the last and simplest remained? His final days can be interpreted as a way of eliminating all choices, so that responsibility for what was to happen, his slow death on the cross, would not be his, since he would be directed there, so to speak, by the will of others. The same thing occurs in Hamlet, his soul too is darkened, he too approaches his demise with open eyes, in such a way that it appears governed by fate and thereby inevitable. In the case of King Oedipus it *is* fate, he is genuinely oblivious, but for both Hamlet and Jesus it is a choice they make and a direction in which they choose to go. Oedipus is blind, Hamlet and Jesus see with open eyes into the darkness.

I got up, rinsed the plate, and put it in the dishwasher. We had been given the plate by the same couple when they were moving house and didn't need it anymore. They had actually helped us a lot. What had we done for them in return?

Not much. I always listened patiently to whatever they talked about, asking questions and making an effort to seem interested. I had introduced him to our Sunday football. And I had given him a signed copy of my previous novel inscribed with a dedication. Two days later he told me he had given it to an uncle "who was interested in books." But it was for you personally, for goodness' sake! I thought to myself, though I said nothing; if he hadn't grasped the fact on his own I wouldn't be able to explain it to him.

This was how it was having children, you found yourself thrown together with complete strangers, people who were sometimes impossible to understand. Once he told me he and his wife liked to talk in the evenings in such a way that I understood that their talking to each other was something out of the ordinary, impressive even. After that I would often make a point of suggesting to Linda that we should talk. It became a joke of ours. Most likely they had similar ones about us. Nevertheless we kept on seeing each other right up to the time they moved, me especially in fact; I spent countless afternoons with him at different playgrounds, listening to all his ideas about how the world and everything in it hung together while our kids were playing.

On one such occasion he had a book with him by someone called Wolfram, which he would leaf through. It seemed to be about certain recurring patterns, in everything from leaves to river deltas, and contained a lot of line graphs. My first association was to Thomas Browne and his seventeenth-century treatise on the quincunx figure, the pattern on the five side of a die and its occurrence in nature, then to something I had only just read, in the book Geir Angell was writing, about how all complicated systems – society, share markets, weather phenomena, traffic – sooner or later break down because of instabilities brought about by the systems themselves. I found this idea striking, since the patterns these breakdowns form are the same in artificial systems as they are in nature. The sky was blue, and as wide as it is only at the sea, and although the sun hung low the air was still warm. The play area with its sand and its meticulously designed play structure, so typical of Sweden, was surrounded by an area of trampled-down gravel with a broad though shallow paddling pond in the middle that some of the children kept throwing armfuls of leaves into. Beyond the gravel there was a lawn, and beyond that an area of houses. The green grass took on a sheen in the sunlight. I said it looked interesting, that patterns occurring in different fields could be so fundamentally alike. He nodded and started talking about evolution. He said the complicated organisms and complex systems all around us are in actual fact quite simple, and that this had to be understood in the light of the huge period of time in which they have developed. A million years, he said, is so much time we're incapable of grasping it. So try thinking of twenty million years. Or sixty million. But time in itself is simple. The principle of evolution is simple too. It's all about optimization, the best way of going about a matter. In other words, the most efficient. Everything in nature strives for efficiency. When the ice opens up, the crack travels by following the points of weakness. When glass breaks it's the same thing. The cracks follow the weakest points.

"But there's no will in it," I said. "It's pure mechanics. A law of nature."

"Law?" he replied. "Forget laws for a minute, they'll only distract you. What's important is what happens. A glass breaks at the point where it breaks most easily. A branch snaps at the point where it snaps most easily. It's the optimization that's the thing. Leaves need sunlight, yes, so they seek the most efficient way of getting some. If the branches have to lift them higher, then the branches will lift them higher. If you place obstacles in the path of ants, what happens at first is confusion, but the confusion is only temporary, because if you go back after a while you'll see that the ants are now following a new path which is the shortest route around the obstacles. They optimize. The ants don't know it's the shortest route, in the same way as ice is oblivious to the fact that it cracks along the path of least resistance."

He leaned forward, placing his hands on his knees, shaking his head slightly until his hair was the way he wanted it. His daughter was sitting on her haunches in front of the twenty-centimeter-high wooden fence that penned in the play area, lining up little stones along the top of it. The sun shimmered against her waterproof yellow trousers. Vanja was climbing on the red play train. On her knees, she turned and looked at me. The wind blew her hair in front of her face, she pushed it back, the wind blew it forward again. I waved to her and glanced around to see what Heidi was up to. There she was, sitting on the little bench inside the train. Her posture was exactly the same as his, bent forward with a hand on each knee. *Little person*, I thought to myself, something Linda would say so often about her. Then she got up and stuck her head out the window, and watched the other children as they carried their bundles of leaves to the pond from under the tree on the lawn.

I leaned back on the bench. Under the trees that lined the park some fifty meters away, a chunky woman came along pushing a bike at her side. The trees above her head swayed gently in the wind, filling the street below with shifting nuances of light and shade. On a balcony no bigger than a box or a cage, a few meters up on the front of one of the apartment buildings behind the trees, a man and a woman stood looking out, each with a glass in their hand. From the gateway below, two men appeared lugging a table between them. A third man, who had been waiting on the sidewalk, flicked a cigarette onto the ground, climbed into the back of the van that was parked there, then emerged again with a gray blanket bundled in his arms. In the blue sky above them a plane angled steeply upward, impossible to separate from the white trail it left behind.

The world is old, yet simple, I thought to myself, and everything in it stands open.

It was as if my soul lifted as the thought occurred to me. But then a yell went up from Heidi and my eyes darted in the direction of the play train. She was lying on her stomach in front of it with her face in the sand. I dashed across and picked her up, scanning her face for blood, but she had been lucky, it didn't look like she had been hurt at all. Three times that month she had fallen badly, twice banging her mouth hard, once on the edge of the table and once on the tabletop, there had been blood everywhere and we had had to take her first to accident and emergency then the dentist. For some time following these accidents she would put her hand to her mouth whenever she fell, it didn't matter where the hurt was coming from. This time, though, nothing had happened. I hugged her tight, she put her face to my chest and sobbed, but soon she lifted her head and began to look around her and I was able to put her down again. When I returned to the bench and sat down next to him he was immersed in his book. A sudden movement in the upper corner of my eye caused me to look up. It was a leaf falling to the ground. Or rather, not falling at all. It was twirling, round and round, like the rotor blades of a helicopter, descending gently through the air.

Thinking about this made me remember something I had read some months before, it was a passage in a Swedish book called *Linjen* that brought together a dialogue between Heidegger and Jünger in which the latter had written something about patterns that had made a deep impression on me at the time and melded into some other thoughts I had with such intensity and fervor that I had jotted it all down on one of the blank pages under the heading "The Third Realm" with the idea of it forming the basis of a new novel.

I couldn't remember what exactly I had written and so I went into the living room to look for the book again. Linda put her newspaper down as I came in.

"What time are you leaving tomorrow?" she asked.

"The flight's at seven," I said. "So about five-ish."

"Are you nervous?"

"A bit. It'll be worse tomorrow, though."

My eyes passed over the spines of the books on the shelves. The ones on the bottom shelf had all been shoved in, some so far they had vanished into the depths. It was John's doing, and I had long since stopped bothering to pull them out again after his ravages, he was only going to shove them back again, probably within a matter of hours. Let's have a look . . . H, H, H . . . there! Jünger/Heidegger, *Linjen*.

"Bath!" said Vanja.

"Speak in full sentences when you speak," I told her.

"Bath!" she said again, and looked at Linda.

"*Can I*," I insisted.

"Can I have a bath?" she said.

"Are you up to it?" Linda asked me.

"Yes, of course," I said. "But then will you put them to bed?"

She nodded.

"Wait just five minutes," I told Vanja, beginning to leaf through the pages of the book that was now in my hand. The passage in question wasn't from Jünger's text as I had thought, but from an entry in his diary quoted by Anders Olsson in his afterword.

> *On our way back along the shore we discovered a bank of shells. None of the mussels and clams that had been washed up there was bigger than a bean, many were smaller than a pea – but what we saw was the universe itself, with its ovals, circles and spirals, in the space of perhaps a foot. Obelisks, Gothic and Roman arches, serrations, lances, tacks, crowns of thorns, olive trees, turkey wings, tooth marks, rakes, spiral staircases, kneecaps . . . And all shaped by waves.*

"Bath now!" said Vanja.

"Are you a little baby tonight, or what?" I said.

"Bath!" said Vanja.

"Bath!" said John.

"Let me just look at this book, then we'll go and have a bath," I said. "Five minutes."

I leafed forward to the final, blank pages and read what I had written.

Lucretius – On the Nature of Things
Nazism
Africa
The atom bomb
A man alone on Gotland
Eugenics
Atoms
natural science

biology
species
materialism

Title: The Third Realm
Aristocrat
Mass
Hölderlin
Heidegger
Jünger
Mishima
Patterns in the universe, the great and the small
Faust

The body, the blood
the biological
the clear, open
the sacred
the obscure

Animals that can be controlled
Albertus Seba
America, discovered, but left in peace

That was all.

The way I remembered this, it had been a detailed noting down of concrete ideas, a universe in which the novel would be set, but it was nothing other than the usual affinities I felt to certain words and the associations they awoke in me. "The body, the blood," "biology," "the atom bomb." And Lucretius's *On the Nature of Things* had been appearing in my notes ever since the midnineties.

But it *was* a novel. It *was*. A world described through the material and the mechanical, sand, stone, shells, atoms, planets. No psychology, no feelings.

A story that was different from ours, though similar. It was to be a dystopia, a novel about the final days, told by a man alone in a house, in the midst of a dry, warm landscape in late summer. And I had an ending ready, I had told it to Linda, who had lit up, it was sublime, amazing. It *was*!

"OK, do you want your baths now?" I said, returning the book to the shelf.

The girls slid down from their chairs and skipped off to the bathroom.

"Yes!" cried John, and toddled after them.

Even before I caught up with them, the girls had pulled off their clothes and were standing naked in front of the bath. I took the yellow Jif bottle from the shelf under the mirror, unscrewed the green top, and squirted the bottom of the bath with detergent.

"A shark!" said Heidi, peering over the edge. It was the shape made by the dribbles of detergent that fascinated her.

"Is that what you think it looks like?" I said.

She nodded.

"If a shark comes you have to hit it on the nose," said Vanja. "To scare it away."

She demonstrated what she meant, batting the air with her little fist. I wet a sponge under the tap in the sink and wiped the bath clean, then rinsed it with the showerhead, watching the water as it took with it the yellow detergent, which here and there dissolved in tiny clouds, pressed the rubber-edged metal plug into the drain, turned the mixer tap on, put my hand into the thick gush of water to gauge the temperature, and straightened up.

"OK," I said. "Everybody in!"

As Vanja and Heidi climbed into the bath I helped John off with his clothes. He stretched out an arm, his other hand was clutching a rubber duck. I took his arm out of the sleeve and he changed hands.

"That's right, John!" I said, and pulled the sweater over his head, tossing it in the direction of the laundry bin, from which our dirty clothes seemed to be advancing like a plant, unbuttoned his trousers, took them off, tore open the tape of his diaper and lifted him into the bath, where he immediately began splashing with both hands.

"I saw a witch today on the street, Daddy," said Heidi.

"It wasn't a witch," said Vanja. "It was an old lady."

"But what if she *was* a witch?" I said, crouching next to the tub.

"There's no such thing as witches," said Vanja.

"Are you sure about that?" I said.

She looked at me and smiled.

"Yes," she said. I could see part of her was going to say no.

"Imagine if I were a wizard," I said.

"You're just an ordinary daddy!" said Heidi.

I laughed and got to my feet. The water reached their tummies now. They loved bathtime, all three of them, and always had. I wondered why. Maybe it was the sudden switch from one element to another? Heidi gripped the side of the bath with both hands, then put her feet up on the other side to make a bridge. *Look, Daddy!* she cried, and let herself go with a splash, showering me with bathwater in the process.

"Stop that!" I said firmly. "You can hurt yourself! And look at me, I'm soaked!"

She laughed. John laughed too. Vanja made to repeat the stunt.

"No, you don't," I said.

"Just once!" she pleaded.

"OK, then," I said, and stepped back out of range. The splash was even bigger this time; the floor was awash.

They howled with laughter. When John decided to try I took his arm and held him back. No, no, I said. Yes, I want to, he said. No, I said. Yes, he said. Yes, I said. No, he said. And with that the danger was averted.

"C'mon, let's get your hair washed," I said.

"John first," said Vanja.

"OK," I said. "Did you hear that, John?"

"I won't," he said.

"Yes, you will," I replied, putting my hands on his shoulders and pressing him gently back into the water. At first he resisted, then when I kept pressing he wailed and started to squirm. I let go.

"All right," I said.

He shrieked. I took the shampoo bottle with the pictures from the Pixar film *Cars* on it that he had chosen himself in the supermarket and squirted the thick red liquid into my palm. When I'd finished washing their hair I ordered them to stand up, took three cloths off the pile on the shelf, put soap on them and washed all three of them between their legs. It felt like an assault, that was the thought that came to me every time. Imagine if someone came in and saw what I was doing, what would they think? A perverted father rubbing the crotches of his daughters? It was a thought only a man who had witnessed the incest hysteria of the eighties was capable of thinking, I knew that, but all the same it didn't help, the feeling was there and couldn't be ignored, and when they sat down again and I rinsed the cloths, wrung them and hung them over the radiator to dry, I was as relieved as ever that no one had come in and seen me.

"Pull the plug out, Vanja," I said.

"A bit longer, Daddy!" she pleaded.

I shook my head.

"It's way past bedtime already."

"*Snälla, pappa*," said Vanja. Please, Daddy.

"*Snälla, pappa*," said John.

"Not tonight," I told them. "Come on. If you won't, I'll do it myself."

Vanja sighed and pulled the plug out. The water began to subside around them. When she was younger, Vanja had been afraid of the little whirlpool at the drain, I understood she thought it was alive, and no sooner had I pulled the plug than she would clamber out of the tub as fast as she could, as if pursued by some terrible peril. Neither Heidi nor John had ever liked it much either.

I held my hand out to Vanja. She took it and climbed out. I dried her with a big bath towel, draping it over her shoulders before she ran off. I did the same with Heidi, relishing the feeling of drying them, the way they stood still and waited for me to finish, a bit like the way a horse will stand still to be groomed, I imagined. John sat down in the bath again, amusing himself with the plug, putting it back in the drain and pulling it out over and over again.

He protested as I lifted him up, kicking his legs like a reluctant cat, only then to stand still like his sisters when I put him down and toweled him dry.

I wiped the floor with his towel, hung it up on the rack above the bath and followed them into the living room, where Linda had got Heidi and Vanja into their pajamas. The big bath towels were two heaps on the floor.

"I'm just going to pop out to check my e-mail," I said. "OK?"

Earlier that summer our Internet had stopped working, maybe it was because we hadn't paid for it, or maybe there was some technical problem. Whatever the reason, I had solved the issue by conducting all my e-mail correspondence from an Internet café close to the square.

"Fine," she said. "I was thinking we might need something for breakfast in the morning. Maybe you could get something while you're out? Milk, perhaps. And some bread."

"I wasn't thinking of shopping," I said.

"OK. Don't, then," she said.

"No, it's all right," I said. "It's not a problem. Milk and bread."

The air outside on the square had a nip about it and I zipped up my jacket before going over toward the Internet café a bit farther up the street on the other side of the road. I went there at least twice a day, there was a lot going on at the moment, with manuscripts flying backwards and forwards between me and the publishers, and furthermore I had sent a copy to all the people I had written about, and responses were coming in all the time. The first book was all finished and would be back from the printers in two days. The second book was in its final stages, now it was to be edited, then proofed, and everyone I had written about would be given a chance to read it. The mere thought made me feel like I was burning up inside. Despair, guilt, and anxiety were the emotions that flared, and the only way I could keep them at bay was by the thought that as yet no one knew, nothing had happened, but it helped less and less, the day was approaching when I would have to give up the manuscript to Linda and she would begin to read what I had written about our life together. The only thing she knew was that I had written about us. She had no idea what or in what way. She had said that I had to include all the fluctuations and not keep anything back, that the worst thing that could happen was for me to portray her as dull, dreary, weak, what in Swedish she called a *mes*, and every time I said I was dreading her reading it she would reassure me and tell me everything was bound to be fine. There's nothing to be afraid of, she said. I can handle whatever, as long as it's true. But Linda was a romantic at heart, she accepted the despondencies and conflicts of day-to-day life as long as the idea prevailed of there always being something else to fall back on, our love for each other, our lives together. In the space of only a few minutes she could go from shouting her head off at me to declaring that she had never loved anyone the way she loved me, whereas I was completely the opposite, storing up and accumulating grievances and frustrations, which then lay like a sediment inside me, fossils of emotions, darkening my mind increasingly until eventually I became as hard as stone, unreceptive to reconciliation and tenderness. I had written about this and had no way of knowing if she could forgive me for it, since it was from that perspective she was being seen.

Why had I written such things?

I had been so despairing. It was as if I had been shut away inside myself, alone with my frustration, a dark and monstrous demon, which at some point had grown enormous, as if there was no way out. Ever-decreasing circles. Greater and greater darkness. Not the existential kind of darkness that was all about life and death, overarching happiness or overarching grief, but the smaller kind, the shadow on the soul, the ordinary man's private little hell, so inconsequential as to barely deserve mention, while at the same time engulfing everything.

If I was going to write about it I would have to tell the truth. Linda agreed with me on that. But she didn't know the nature of that truth. It was one thing having an idea what her husband was thinking in his darkest moods, but quite another to read about it in a novel. And our life together was what the novel was all about. Her life, Linda's, and mine, Karl Ove's. It was what we had – in fact, it was all we had.

Oh, I was so completely in the shit. To have to hand her the manuscript and say, here, read this, it's being published in a month.

I stopped at the crossing and waited for green. The big shopping mall next to the hotel had just closed; at this time of day there were fewer people about, apart from at McDonald's and Burger King, where groups of young people, mostly immigrants, hung around outside. Many of the city's immigrants hailed from Iran, thereby belonging to the people once known as Persian, an army of whom under Xerxes had invaded Greece almost exactly twenty-five hundred years before.

Only a few weeks previously I had read a novel by Eyvind Johnson, *Molnen över Metapontion – The Clouds over Metapontion* – published in 1957. It was one of the purest works of modernism I had read, certainly from that part of modernism that had been interested in the classical age, such as Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, Hermann Broch's *The Death of Virgil*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*, or, for that matter, Paal Brekke's *Roerne fra Itaka – The Oarsmen of Ithaca*. Like all these works, Johnson's opened up a space between the *then* of the ancient classics and the *now* of the moderns, though it was perhaps even more concerned than they were with the time that lay in between. The novel began in southern Italy just after the war, and what went on in it there at that time, which to a large extent revolved around a Swedish writer's journey in the footsteps of a French archaeologist he had encountered in a German concentration camp, alternated with events that had taken place in the same landscape four hundred years before Christ. A landed estate, an estate owner, his slaves, one of whom escapes and gets caught up in a military invasion cutting deep into Asia, all described in the minutest detail. Particularly lucid and exciting were the author's portrayals of the passage of such huge numbers of men through increasingly foreign land, from the coasts of the Mediterranean to as far as Babylon. But the most foreign thing about the book for me wasn't the history of the ancient military campaign or the slave quarters, which were so far away in time that the reader couldn't help but sense the author's efforts to make them come alive, but rather the Italian village of 1947. The landscape is barren and without event, such occurrences as take place being small and almost indiscernible, and while I knew that another kind of writer, a Latin, say, like García Márquez, Vargas Llosa, Cela or, why not, Cervantes, would have been able to bring forth the exact same landscape with a patent and natural intensity, the people who populated it quivering with love and longing in such a way that we would not have doubted that the place in which we found ourselves was the center of the world, Johnson's very distance to what he describes, his remoteness to his characters, their work and their emotional lives, is crucial in respect to what perhaps was the focus of his efforts, the chasm of time that separates us from ancient history and the sense of meaninglessness that arises on that account. Nothing happens here, people are mere guests in a landscape that is like the seabed in an ocean of time. Occasionally, a tension occurs, for instance the war two years previously, whose truth, however, is no different, a fact that becomes apparent in the passages depicting the ancient military campaign, devoid of any suggestion of greatness, heroism, or historical momentousness, continually deconstructed into its individual parts, a creaking wheel of oak, dust kicked up by horses' hooves, the individual's dreams of riches, the individual's denigration of defeat and flight. But this is a novel, a program. What isn't a program is the depiction of postwar Italy, since it is affected to such a great extent by a mood that is already alien to us but to which the novel is proximate and conversant with, unlike Antiquity. When I read the book, the Italy of 1947 in fact felt more foreign to me than the Italy of the centuries before Christ, presumably because the latter was based on literature I knew, whereas the former was based on nothing other than life as it occurred at that time and which is barely to be found anywhere else than here. We are so endlessly far away from it, and yet our parents and grandparents were alive then. No era can surely have undergone such radical transformation as our own, the second half of the twentieth century has so little in common with the first, it seems as if they occurred in different worlds entirely.

My eyes found the steps leading down to the Internet café. A new rush of anxiety surged inside me. For a month now I had been receiving the most abhorrent e-mails because of the novel I had written, and I knew there would be more, though not where they would be coming from. It was the same with the phone; every time it rang I froze. True, it had been that way ever since the night I had been called by a person demanding to speak to the rapist Karl Ove Knausgaard, but that was seven years ago and the alarm I had felt at the time had paled together with the recollection; with the book it all came back with renewed force, what I had written had to do with other people, their reactions were beyond my control, and what I had done to them, they could do to me, I knew that; everything I had ever done could be used against me. As long as it was private, as long as it stayed between them and me, I could handle it. But it was terrible, I was crippled with fear every time I checked my e-mail, every time the phone rang, so much so that I could hardly move, would sit paralyzed in a chair or lie paralyzed in bed for hours at a time, and yet I knew it would pass, sooner or later I would have battled my way through it and would be able to see things in their true proportions. But if it got out . . . If someone went to the papers . . . I knew I wouldn't be able to cope.

The light changed from red to green, I crossed over, and the wind blew my hair into my eyes; I swept it back, folding it behind my ear, a motion of the hand that I knew looked feminine but nevertheless had to be done, hurried over the road, descended the three steps that led down to the Internet café, pushed the door open, and went in. The place was almost completely dark inside apart from the glow of computer screens in a row along the walls, most of them taken up by youths absorbed in games. They shouted out to each other as they played, presumably it was the same game, nearly always soldiers on a mission into some hostile world, whether it was a city, a deserted factory area, a desert landscape, or a forest.

The guy at the first station turned his head.

"*Tjena!*" he said. "Where have you been all day, writer? We've been waiting for you!"

"Hello," I said. "Have you got a computer for me?"

"Nineteen's for you."

"Thanks," I said, then went and found number nineteen, pulled out the chair, and sat down.

I opened the browser and typed in my WebMail address. During the few seconds it took for the page to open, I held my breath. Then the column of names appeared before my eyes, the unopened messages in bolder script, and I took them in at a single glance.

Nothing bad.

An inquiry from a TV program, one from a bookshop in a shopping center in Sørland, one from a bookshop in Oslo, and one from a folk high school in mid-Norway. I wrote to Silje at the publishers, who had passed the messages on to me, asking her to decline the invitations politely. She had also sent me a change in my itinery for the following day, *Aftenposten* had pulled out, and *Bergens Tidende* was sending a different journalist than originally announced, so my schedule now looked like this:

9:00–9:45: NTB
Gitte Johannesen
At the publishing house

9:45–10:20: Bergens Tidende
Finn Bjørn Tønder, phone interview
At the publishing house

10:30–11:15: Fædrelandsvennen
Tone Sandberg
Etoile

11:15–12:15: Morgenbladet
Håkon Gundersen
Etoile

12:15–12:45: lunch

12:45–13:30: Dagsavisen
Gerd Elin Stava Sandve
Etoile

14:30–15:15: Sondagsavisen
Gry Veiby
Recording at NRK

15:15–15:45: NRK Radiofront
Siss Vik
Recording at NRK

The schedule was much the same as when my previous novel *A Time for Everything* had come out five years before. Lumping everything together meant I didn't have to spend more than a single day on the media. *Dagbladet* and *Dagens Næringsliv* had interviewed me in Malmö a few days previously, *Aftenposten* had pulled out, *VG* wasn't interested, so everything was covered.

Originally, *Bergens Tidende* had been sending Siri Økland, and it was a shame she wouldn't be coming, we had been literature students together in Bergen twenty years ago, and although we hadn't known each other then we always said hello, and that, together with the fact that we were of the same generation, made me feel secure. If I felt insecure in an interview situation I hardly ever said anything at all, they had to drag the words out of me, it was never any good. Prior to my previous book coming out, *Dagbladet* interviewed me in Stockholm. I hadn't talked to anyone about the book and felt uncertain as to what it was actually about and how good or bad it was, and added to that the photographer had been present during the entire interview, it had taken place at Saturnus, he said he knew Tore Renberg well and sat there staring at me with a half smile on his face that had me on edge the whole time, making me hear everything I said the way I thought it sounded to him, pure lunacy, Noah's Ark and Cain and Abel, angels and the divine, so after a few minutes I shut up, muttering a simple yes or no in reply to her questions, my cheeks blushing madly if I did make some attempt at a reasoned response. All I could think about was whether I could ask her to send the photographer away so I could talk more freely, but I didn't have the nerve, and there was not much else I could do.

Before the interview got under way I'd leafed through Gombrowicz's diaries; it was the fifth time I'd tried to get into them, the fifth time I'd read the first ten pages without getting any further, and that same afternoon I put the book away. But the woman interviewing me had noticed I had it with me and made a little aside of it. "Knausgaard reads Gombrowicz," a caption said. It haunted me for years after. I was contacted several times by newspapers and journals wanting me to write something about the Polish author for their pages. I, who had read only the first ten pages of his diary, and none of his novels or plays, was now thought to be a Gombrowicz expert. The horror of this was compounded whenever I happened to run into Dag Solstad, since Solstad held Gombrowicz very much in esteem, he was one of his favorite writers, and because I hadn't confessed to not having read him the first time he mentioned him to me I had to keep pretending to him that I was a Gombrowicz aficionado. Once, he came over and told me he had just attended a Gombrowicz seminar in Stockholm and had been expecting to see me there. Oh, but I'd had so much going on at the time, though obviously I would have loved to have gone. Had it been interesting? And so on.

I closed the browser, got to my feet, and left a ten-kronor coin on the counter as I passed, pulled open the door, and went up the steps, out into the swell of twilight, which was pierced only by the headlights of dark, sleek cars and the gentle hum of their engines.

The children were all still awake when I got back. *Pappa*, *Pappa*, they shouted out as soon as they heard the door open. I took off my shoes, hung up my jacket, went to their room, and stood in the doorway.

"Go to sleep," I said.

"But we can't," said Vanja, their spokesman in such cases.

"It's boring! Can't we stay up just a little bit longer? Just a teeny-weeny bit?"

"No," I said. "It's way past your bedtime."

Heidi, who had the top bunk, drew herself up onto her knees.

"*Kram*," she said. Cuddle.

I went up to her and she wrapped her arms around me and pressed her cheek as hard as she could against mine.

"*Också kram!*" said John. Me cuddle too.

He was lying on his back in his crib, clutching his pillow in his hands. He dragged it around with him wherever he went and it was the first thing he asked for when he came home from the nursery. Pillow, want pillow!

"You'll have to stand up if you want a cuddle," I said.

He did as he was told. I kissed him on the ear and he giggled. He was the only one of them who was ticklish.

"Vanja?" I said.

"Only if we can stay up!" she said.

"But it's not for my sake!" I said. "It's for yours!"

"OK then," she said, and leaned forward. I cuddled her, rubbing my hand up and down her delicate spine.

"Little treasure," I said. "Sleep time now, OK?"

"OK. But don't close the door!"

"I won't," I said.

She was slightly afraid of the dark, not much but enough for her to want some light when she went to sleep. Once, when we had been at Linda's mother's in the country, Vanja must have been about eighteen months old at the time, she had a nightmare. She cried, and when Linda asked what the matter was she said she had dreamed about the swimming pond. We were puzzled, but the explanation came a few months later. On a visit to a zoo we paused at a glass-fronted enclosure and looked in at a splendid monitor lizard. When Vanja laid eyes on it she recoiled and cried out in fright, *Swimming pond! Swimming pond!*

Now she lay in bed gazing up at me.

"Night night," I said.

"Night night," she replied. "Daddy?"

"What?"

"Who's tucking me in tomorrow?"

"Don't think about that now. Go to sleep."

Vanja preferred Linda to do everything, and for me to do as little as possible. For her, the height of joy was Linda tucking her in two nights in a row. That was just the way it was, I ranked second and always would, unless someone else came and took my place. But I didn't mind, Linda was closer to them and it was as simple as that.

I went into the living room where Linda, who was watching television, turned her head and looked up at me.

"I forgot to pick up milk and bread," I said.

"Doesn't matter," she said. "Aren't they asleep yet?"

"No."

"What are you going to do tonight?"

"Pack a few things. Decide what to wear tomorrow. How about you?"

"I don't know really. I'm a bit tired. I think I might have an early night. In fact, that might not be such a bad idea, with you not being here tomorrow."

"No," I said. "It's only two days though. And your mother's coming."

"I know, I didn't mean it like that. It's no bother."

I went into the bedroom and picked out two shirts, a couple of sweaters, some T-shirts, two pairs of pants and two suits, took the whole pile with me to the mirror in the hall and began trying things on. The children were giggling in their room, I started to get annoyed, went in, and turned the ceiling light on. They were all piled up together in Vanja's bed. I took hold of John by a foot and an arm, snatched him up, and lifted him back into his bed, turned around and repeated the procedure with Heidi, all without a word and so firmly it verged on the unreasonable.

"That's it," I said. "Now go to sleep. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Daddy," said Vanja. "But they all crept up to me. I couldn't stop them."

"All right," I said, and turned off the light.

"Mean Daddy!" said John.

I said nothing, closed the door, and went back to trying on clothes. A pair of black Lindeberg jeans, a blue Ted Baker shirt, and the gray Ted Baker jacket. Then there were the shoes, a pair of Fiorentini+Baker, bought in

Edinburgh a few weeks before like the rest of the gear. I'd been taking part in a literary festival there, Yngve and Asbjørn and a couple of their friends had traveled over to see me, but when it came down to it, just before I left the hotel to walk up to the venue, I asked if they'd mind not coming after all. They must have thought it a bit off, the festival was the whole excuse for their trip, but they didn't seem to mind that much and traipsed off to get something to eat instead. Most likely they were just as afraid as me that I was going to make a fool of myself. At least, I'm sure Yngve was, he identified with me. Onstage I was interviewed together with a Dutch author about fifty years old, who dressed eccentrically, spoke perfect-sounding English, and had written a novel based on Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. His name was Marcel Möring. He looked after me the whole time we were onstage, noticing how nervous and uneasy I was about the situation, and afterward as we sat down ready to sign books, each with a glass of wine in front of us, and he had a queue of people lined up at his table, all praising him for his perfect English and telling him how fascinating his book sounded, whereas my own table was completely ignored, he whispered politely that he had started out in exactly the same way and that as a rule nothing ever took off abroad, but it didn't matter, the important thing was this, the chance to gallivant around the world and meet new people. He gave me his card and vanished into the night with his young wife, while I sloped off to a pub to meet up with the other Norwegians. The next day Yngve did me the favor of going shopping with me, unlike me he always had a good eye when it came to clothes. If he gave the nod, I bought it; if he shook his head, I put it back.

I turned and twisted uncomfortably this way and that in front of the mirror, the trousers didn't quite go with the jacket, and wasn't it a God-awful cliché anyway, authors in suits? How boring was that?

I went back to the closet and stared at my other jackets.

There was an anorak-like thing, which I thought was nice, but it probably wasn't right for a book-launch interview.

Suddenly there was a commotion going on in the children's bedroom, one of them was crying, another screamed. I stormed in and turned the light on.

"That's enough! Back to bed, all of you!"

It was John doing the crying, Heidi the screaming. Vanja was in the middle with her hands covering her ears. I snatched John from the huddle, this time more firmly than before, and plonked him down in his crib, where he sat clutching the bars like a prisoner in jail, howling and sobbing. John hit me! Heidi yelled. I picked her up and put her back in her own bed.

"John's still little. Besides, I'm sure there was a reason. Now go to sleep. You too, John," I said, turning toward him.

"Mean!" he replied between sobs. I went up and crouched down at his crib.

"I'm not mean at all," I said. "But you're going to sleep. I won't have you wandering around anymore. You can see what it leads to, you end up hurting yourself. Now lie down."

Oddly enough he did as he was told. I turned off the light, closed the door again, and went back to trying on clothes, item by item, in every conceivable combination. Linda could get annoyed with me about it, I knew that, she disliked anything that resembled vanity. I could spend more time figuring out what to wear than what I was going to say to an audience. But once I knew I was going to be on view, I became obsessive about it. It didn't matter if the clothes were cheap or expensive, new or old, it was the ceremony of it, shirt on, shirt off, the stubborn self-appraisal, good, not good, awful, better, or maybe this one instead?

After half an hour, constantly aware of what Linda might be thinking, I went back into the living room.

"Can I wear this?" I asked.

"Absolutely," she answered. "*Du ser jättefin ut.*" You look good.

It was what she always said, but I needed to hear it nonetheless.

A hefty thud came from the children's room, a thump against the wall.

"What's the matter with them tonight?" said Linda.

This time it sufficed to open the door. John scuttled immediately back across the floor and Heidi scurried up the ladder to her bunk.

"I mean it this time," I said. "Once more and I'll be really angry with you."

They lay quite still and peered out with wide eyes. I went into the bathroom, found the scissors, and began to trim my beard.

There was a little patter of feet in the hall. It had to be either John or Heidi.

"Back to bed, this minute!" I shouted.

"I can't sleep!" said Heidi, appearing in the doorway.

"Come on," I said, lifting her up and carrying her back to bed. I stood for a minute behind the door, before opening it again to see Heidi on her way down the ladder.

"Back to bed!" I said firmly. "It's sleep time!"

"But I can't sleep," she said. "I'm awake!"

"I know what we can do," said Vanja. "We can hold hands and close our eyes and fly away to ketchup land!"

"OK," I said. "As long as you go to sleep, then."

And they did, they held hands, closed their eyes, and were quite still. Ketchup land was something they had heard about at the nursery, so I assumed, not really wanting to know since it filled me with such a sense of unpleasantness, ketchup being red, red being blood, blood being dead. And there they lay with eyes closed . . .

I went back to the bathroom and picked up where I'd left off with my beard. Again there was a patter of feet in the hall, whoever it was scurried past into our bedroom. I flung the door open to see Heidi climbing onto the bed. She turned toward me.

"Back to bed!" I shouted. "At once! I've just about had enough. Come on. Off to bed with you! You're NOT staying up. DO YOU HEAR ME?"

She took one look at me and burst into tears.

Oh, Heidi!

"I was only getting a book!" she sobbed. "Grown-ups can't get mad at children!"

I felt so sorry for her I almost started crying myself. Fortunately she didn't react with rage, as so often before – in such cases it was impossible to comfort her. No, she simply wept, and I lifted her up, held her little body close to mine and carried her back to her room, switched on the light and told them I would read them all another story. Heidi snuggled into my arms, Vanja sat up and buttoned up the coat of one of her many cuddly dogs, listening with one ear, while John messed around on the floor playing with whatever toys he happened to find. I read them a story about the Moomin who wakes up in winter while his parents are still hibernating, he can't wake them up and so he goes off on his own. Heidi twisted about, wanting to know this and that – Why are they laughing at him? It's not nice to laugh at other people. What's he saying there, Daddy? – while Vanja snorted at such childish questions and John immersed himself with his own projects on the floor, which now involved something he could press to make a loud noise like a siren.

By the time we reached the end of the story and I turned the light off again, they had finally settled down. I went in to Linda, who was watching the news, and said I wondered why they were so difficult tonight. She said Heidi had slept two hours after nursery school, and John had slept until late too. I sat down, put my feet up on the table, and stared at the television.

We went to bed an hour later. Kissed each other goodnight, turned off the light. I was nervous and realized right away it would be a while before I could fall asleep. I was nervous about the next day, the round of interviews that lay ahead, but not for the old reason, the way it normally was, the horror of having to talk and take up space, and be quoted on everything I said, the horror of making a fool of myself; this time I was scared about what I had written. The novel, which would be out in two days, and which had been given the title *My Struggle 1*, had been written in solitude. Apart from Geir Gulliksen and Geir Angell, no one had read any of it along the way. A select few had been aware of what I was writing about, among them Yngve, but they knew none of the detail. After a year like that, where the only perspective that existed was my own, the manuscript was ready to be published. Four hundred and fifty pages, a story about my life centered around two events, the first being my mother and father splitting up, the second being my father's death. The first three days after he was found. Names, places, events were all authentic. It wasn't until I was about to send the manuscript to the people mentioned in it that I began to understand the consequences of what I had done. I sent it out in late June. Yngve had to be first. There were things I had written about him that I had thought and felt but never articulated. As I sat down at the computer and attached the document to the e-mail I had written to him, I felt like dropping the whole thing, calling the publishers and telling them there would be no novel this year either.

I sat there for half an hour. Then eventually I clicked send and it was done.

The next day we went to the beach at Ribersborg, it was Sunday and there were lots of people there, we found ourselves a spot by the pier leading out to the open-air baths of the *Kallbadhus*. The structure dated back to the first decade of the twentieth century and was built on poles a hundred meters from the shore. John was asleep in his stroller. Vanja and Heidi paddled for a while at the water's edge and collected shells, Linda and I sat farther up the beach watching. After about half an hour John woke up and we took them to the bathhouse café, finding a table outside next to the railings at the end, the water glinting and glittering all around us as we sat with our ice cream. It was almost like being on a boat. We had the bridge to Denmark on one side of us, the Turning Torso skyscraper on the other, and the Barsebäck nuclear power plant visible in the haze to the northwest.

I saw all of this: people swarming on the long city beach and on the wide footpath behind it, cyclists and roller skaters whizzing by, the row of concrete blocks from the fifties or perhaps the sixties, the city's final bastion against the sea, that great light-catcher, calm and in no way dramatic here in the strait facing Denmark. The couples and the families sitting all around us, summer-clad and tanned, the big sky above us whose blue had no end until evening, when it would fade to gray and the first stars would seem to emerge from the space beyond, making visible its enormous distances. My own children sitting on their chairs with their short legs sticking out in front, absorbed in their own little worlds; ice-cream wrappers, dripping lollipops, and ice-cream cones. Linda, now and then wiping their mouths with tissues, her eyes almost hidden behind her sunglasses. I saw all of this, though as a film, something of which I myself was not a part, my thoughts and feelings being somewhere else. It was Yngve I was thinking about, though not actively, it was more like he just kept appearing in my mind. He was my brother, we had grown up together and I had leaned on him nearly all my life. We had been so close that instead of accepting his weaknesses or shortcomings the way I accepted my own, I identified myself with them and took on responsibility for them, however indirectly, in the feelings that ran through me whenever he did or said something I wouldn't have done or said myself. No one knew this, not even Yngve himself, because how could I ever express such a thing? Sometimes you're not good enough for me?

What was to be gained by telling things the way they were, representing my own feelings toward him? Compared to what I could lose? He could say fuck you, I want nothing more to do with you.

What would I do then? Remove it all? Or keep it and lose a brother?

I would keep it and lose a brother.

There was no doubt about it.

Why?

Was I mad?

Both Vanja and Heidi had bitten off the bottoms of their cones and were having a job licking up the ice cream that was now melting and dripping from two different places. John had chosen a popsicle, in principle it was easier, but he was so little he was having problems too. His fingers and chin were red and sticky from all the juice. But they were all immersed in what they were doing, which was good.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Linda.

"Yngve," I answered.

"It'll be all right, I'm sure it will," she said.

"That's easy for you to say," I said.

What I had written about Linda was much worse. But all I could do was take things one at a time.

A new wave of horror and shame washed over me.

Home again, I was checking my e-mail about twice every hour. It was Sunday, so my in-box stayed empty all day. Yngve was at Mom's in Jølster, which I was glad about, it would give him the chance to talk to her about it, which might soften his reactions, so I thought. We put the children to bed and sat for a bit on the balcony, and I checked my e-mail one last time before going to bed: nothing.

The next morning his reply was in my in-box.

Your fucking struggle, said the subject line.

I stood up without reading it and went out onto the balcony, sat there smoking and looking out over the city, cold and despairing.

But I had to read it.

His words were there, whether I read them or not.

I could put it off until evening, but that would only prolong my suffering, and the result would still be the same.

I stubbed my cigarette out and got to my feet, went inside into the living room, walked past the kitchen, where John was sitting in his chair with a spoon in his hand while Linda was reading the newspaper, into the bedroom, sat down on the chair, moved the cursor to the text line, two clicks and there it was.

> *Just wanted to scare the hell out of you, but the last few days have been rather intense, seeing my life pass backward and forward in front of my eyes on account of your book and me going through old papers and letters here, yours and mine.*
>
> *I don't quite know whether to go into the book or our lives and the relationship we have to each other, the latter definitely needs to be treated differently than it has been until now, or maybe not? As far as the book goes, there are passages that are extremely unpleasant for me to see down on paper, even if I can see why you've included them.*
>
> *The part with you, me, Ingar, and Hans really made everything go black for me. Obviously, I've seen you feel ashamed of me in certain situations, and still do see that. It's hard, because it touches on aspects of myself that I'm painfully aware of – the way I can sometimes not be there inside myself; the way I can criticize things that I haven't thought of myself; preferring the role of someone who reads Adorno rather than actually reading Adorno. Mediocrity combined with poor*

self-awareness and big ambitions doesn't come out very well. But reading it again it doesn't seem as bad . . . it's about you, not me. Which I suppose doesn't leave much room for the times I've been ashamed about you!

"We rarely looked each other in the eye." Is it as bad as it's made out to be here? Do we look at each other any less than other people?

And Yngve and Espen not getting along? That's simply not true from what I can see . . . I thought it was Tore and Espen who didn't like each other?

I'll read the rest over the next few days. Maybe you can give me a call?

Yngve

I went out into the hall and called him up. There was a slight feeling of uncertainty between us. He told me again about how he'd felt reading what I had written, but he wasn't angry, it was more like he was accepting some personal criticism, and that created a buildup of pressure in the situation that I found almost excruciating, because he had no reason to. Not looking each other in the eye, the fact that we never shook each other's hand, or physically touched at all, were things we were unable to talk about, it was out of the question, but when, a few weeks after this phone conversation, he came to see us in Malmö with his two kids, Ylva and Torje, he looked me straight in the eye and put out his hand as soon as I opened the door. No irony, no subtleties, he wanted to make amends. My eyes grew moist and I had to look down.

After Yngve had read it, I put off sending it to the others I had written about. I was dreading it all summer, until eventually at the beginning of August, only a month before publication, I mustered up the courage. I sent an e-mail to Jan Vidar asking how he was and received a reply within a few hours, he and his family were doing fine, he was going off on a fishing trip with some friends of his the next day, it was a thing they did together, Finnmarksvidda in the summer. I hadn't been in touch with him for years, the last time I saw him was when I had been in Kristiansand beginning a new novel after my debut, *Out of the World*. It was nearly ten years ago. In the book that was coming out now he was one of the most important characters. We had been best friends from when we were thirteen until we were seventeen, or thereabouts, after which we drifted apart. They had been significant years. We'd moved from Tveit, I was new at the school, he came up to me and we made friends, spent all our time together, not least with the band we went on to form. When I started writing about that time I found it all to be so much closer to me than I had imagined. The atmosphere of our house, the woods at the back, the river below, all the things we did together, which basically wasn't much at all, and yet it had been everything. The person Jan Vidar had essentially emerged for the first time when I sat writing about it all in Malmö more than twenty years later.

I had Googled him, and besides a number of hits to do with angling competitions where his name appeared, a band came up in which he clearly played. Several of their songs were online. I listened to them. They were a blues band. He was the guitarist, and his solos were really good. What had happened? We had been awful back when we played together. Since then my playing had not developed in the slightest, it was still exactly the same as when I was fifteen. But he had turned into a virtuoso. Because I hadn't seen him in all those years it seemed baffling to me. In my mind he was still seventeen.

I sent him the manuscript and hoped for the best.

I sent it to another old friend too, Bassen, he appeared only fleetingly but had been an important figure for me then and we had kept in touch for some time, I still had his number. He read through it right away and had no objections to the use of his character and name, and yet the conversation I had with him was unsettling, he said there would be trouble and that I shouldn't rule out the possibility of proceedings. That hadn't occurred to me, and we talked about it for quite a while. He was a criminologist with Statistics Norway and knew what he was talking about. My first thought was that he was exaggerating, but something about the gravity in his voice told me otherwise. Sued? Action for damages? For writing about my own life? If anyone reacted negatively I would alter their names, it wasn't that big a deal.

Another important character was Hanne, my first real love, once the light of my life, my everything. It had not worked out for us back then, and apart from a brief encounter in Bergen, we hadn't seen each other since. She too was viewed from my immature perspective, which moreover was suffused with infatuation and conceit.

I tried to get hold of her address, but couldn't find it on the Internet, and she wasn't in the phone book either. I called Bassen again, the three of us had been in the same class together, he dug out a number he thought might be hers, I called it, no one answered. I tried again, several times, but there was never anyone in.

Tonje, to whom I had been married, hardly appeared in the book, only fleetingly in the parts concerning my father's death, but I sent it to her too, explaining that there would be five more books coming out and that I anticipated her playing a more significant role in one of them than was the case here.

Finally, I sent the manuscript to my uncle Gunnar. He was ten years younger than my father, which meant he had been little more than a boy when his elder brother had married and his first child came along. From growing up I remember him as a young man in his twenties, very different from Dad. Gunnar had long hair, he could play the guitar, and he had a boat fitted with a twenty-horsepower Mercury motor. Once, he managed to get Yngve the autograph of IK Start footballer Svein Mathiesen, it was a big thing and it wouldn't surprise me if Yngve still has it. Gunnar was a person Yngve and I looked up to, someone we always hoped would be there whenever we went to visit Grandma and Grandad in Kristiansand, or be with them when they came to visit us. By the time I was in my teens, he was married and had his own family, lived in a neat row house, and spent his free time in summer out at the cabin Grandma and Grandad had bought in the fifties and which he gradually took on. He was a joker with a line in puns, in that way he was like Yngve, and he was responsible, the last ten years of our grandparents' lives it was he and his wife who were on hand to help them with whatever they needed. As Dad began to let go of me and everything else, Gunnar's role in my life changed. Presumably he remained the same, but my attitude toward him changed. In my mind he had sussed me out. At that point I'd started writing for local papers and had become visible in a way I sensed he disliked, and at the same time I'd become wayward, ditching school, drinking, occasionally smoking pot, an outrageous transgression I for some reason believed Gunnar to be aware of, unlike everyone else around me, and this rubbed off on the way I related to him. In the years after I left home, at the age of eighteen, I didn't have much contact with him, but the few times I visited him it was obvious to me that his children had complete trust in him, there was no sign of terror in their eyes when they looked at him, and I respected him for that. When I came into my twenties, with Dad becoming increasingly alcoholic, Gunnar became the representative of all that was orderly and proper, to which I, unlike my father, aspired, and as such I made Gunnar a kind of father figure, as well as a kind of superego. If the kitchen was littered with empties, I would think, What would Gunnar say if he came in now and saw this? If I had been absent from lectures for a few months, I would think, What would Gunnar have to say about this? Every time I did something excessive, Gunnar would appear in my thoughts. It had nothing to do with the person he was, it was something I had constructed, and yet it was by no means completely without foundation: during the summer when I was writing what would be my first novel I stayed for a while at Mom's in Jølster, I was twenty-eight years old, and one afternoon when I was visiting my maternal grandmother's sister Borghild and chatting with her about what life on the farm there had been like in the old days, since I was thinking of using it in my novel, Gunnar had been to see Mom and taken her to task for me being such a slacker and a layabout who was never going to make anything of himself. Because my father was no longer able to take responsibility for me, my mother needed to step up, he said, and at the very least stop encouraging me in my starry-eyed dream of becoming a writer. But there was a solicitude in that too, I thought, and my feelings were divided: on the one hand I wanted to write and was willing to make any sacrifice in order to do so, and moreover I was drawn toward the avant-garde, ever since my teenage years I had despised all that was conservative and staid; on the other hand, the avant-garde filled me with anxiety, and the pull toward the conservative, the staid, and the secure was at least as strong; it was a big part of why I got married and went to university at all. My father couldn't care less about me, so when Gunnar came and condemned the life I was leading, I felt there was something good in that too: at least he cared about what became of me.

Perhaps he felt divided too. When Dad died in Grandma's house and I went down to Kristiansand and cleaned up and took care of the funeral arrangements, he invited me out to the cabin one day for a break, and we went for a walk together across the meadows and among the trees, he told me what Dad had meant to him, and it felt like he wanted to get closer and share it with me. Later that summer he had gone to see Mom again, they spent a holiday every year at a place only a couple of hours from where she lived, and on that occasion he had been full of praise for Yngve and me, how well we had handled the situation when our father died. Only a few weeks later my first novel came out, and when it did everything went back to as it had been before. My father appeared in the book, and my father's brothers too, not ostensibly, but clearly enough for those close to the family to realize who the characters were modeled on. When I sent a copy to Gunnar I included a letter in which I put down a few words about my relationship to Dad and my respect for Gunnar as a father, sensing I suppose how he was going to take it and hoping it would soften his reaction. He was furious about the book, but instead of calling me on the phone or writing me a letter, he phoned my mother and let her have it. She refused to take responsibility for what I did or wrote, telling him I was a grown man and that she wasn't going to interfere. Six months later, however, he called me, the book had won the Critics Prize, I was staying at a hotel in Oslo and had just accepted the award when a man called, introducing himself by a name I didn't recognize. The voice, though, was familiar, and after a few seconds I realized it was Gunnar, he had introduced himself using the name I had given to one of the father's brothers in the novel. He wanted to congratulate me, and apart from him asking if we were having a drink to celebrate, it was a pleasant enough conversation. After that we met at Grandma's funeral and at the division of her estate, and then one summer when I was at Mom's together with Linda, Vanja, and Heidi he was suddenly standing there at the door, he just thought he would say hello, he said, would you like some coffee, I said, no, thanks all the same, he said, we're on our way south, just passing through, but come in at least, I said, but no, really, it was quite all right, so we stood there in the garden, exchanging pleasantries for perhaps three or four minutes before he got back in the car and drove off. Linda and the children were upstairs asleep, I said I could wake them so he at least could see my children, but he didn't want that either, it was too much trouble, then after they'd gone Linda and I laughed about the whole thing, since he had obviously only stopped by out of a sense of obligation and nothing else.

So that was the situation when I had to send him the new novel. I knew he wasn't going to like it, and the thought of him reading it scared me. But there was no way round it. So on the last day of July 2009, a month and a half before the novel was due to be published, I sat down in front of the computer and wrote him a note.

Dear Gunnar,

It's been a long time. Hope everything's good with you and the family. I was in Kristiansand this spring at a playwriting seminar and was intending to stop in and see you, only then there was a funeral in Ålesund I had to fly up to – Sissel's sister Ingunn had died – and my schedule was just too tight. Sissel's brother-in-law Magne, who was married to Kjellaug, died too in the spring, so it's been a rough year for Mom. Here in Malmö, though, things are well, all three children are in nursery school now, and Vanja will be starting school in the autumn, so the worst of our toddler years will soon be over.

The reason I'm writing to you now though is a different one. The fact is I've written six autobiographical novels – three coming out this autumn, three in the spring – all dealing with different parts of my life, and basically all names and events included in them are authentic, meaning they describe actual occurrences, though not in any great detail. The first of the books will be published at *the end of September – the first part takes place in Tveit in the winter and spring of 1985, which is to say the time Mom and Dad split up and Dad began his new life with Unni, and the second deals with the days in Kristiansand following his death. You appear briefly in the first part, giving me a lift down to a friend's house on New Year's Eve, and briefly in the second, when you and Tove come to the house and lend a hand cleaning the place up. As such, it's a positive portrayal, obviously, because that's the way I think of you, so that's not the difficult or painful part of it – this lies in the fact that I am laying bare the private life of our family, something neither you nor anyone else in the book has asked for. On the other hand, this is a book about me and my dad, that's what it deals with, my endeavor to understand him and what happened to him. To do that I have to go to the core, the inferno he made right at the end, in which he destroyed not only himself and the house but also Grandma's final years, besides harming everyone else close to him. Why did he do that? What made him do it? Was it something he had inside him all the time when we were growing up? I don't know if you realize this, but my father has had me gripped in a vise all my life, even after he died, and if I am to tell my story, that's where I have to delve. The fact that this story also involves other people, among them – and perhaps especially – you, torments me severely, but at the same time I've been unable to see any way around it. The rot and repugnance the book describes all comes down to Dad, no one else was to blame, but I can't describe any of it without reference to the context in which it took place. That's the way it is. Right now I'm sending the manuscript to everyone who plays a part in it. Yngve has read it, and Mom as well. Now I'm sending it to you, attached to this e-mail. If you would like your name to be changed, and your background made anonymous, I am of course willing to do that. It wouldn't be difficult, but the real problem lies elsewhere: that something you would prefer left alone, out of sight, is now going to be held up on display. Again, I'm sorry about that, but he was my father, the story I tell is my own, and unfortunately it looks like this.*

All the best,
Karl Ove

During the next couple of days I checked my e-mail several times an hour. Whenever the phone rang I felt stabs of anxiety. But nothing was forthcoming. I took this to be a good sign, he was reading the novel and thinking about what to say and how to react. Either that or he was away at the cabin.

It wasn't until the fifth day that I heard from him. As soon as I saw his name in my in-box I stood up and and went out onto the balcony, sat there for a while, smoking and gathering courage. The children were at the nursery, the sounds of the city rose toward me. The worst that could happen, I thought to myself, was that he would be angry with me for writing about the things I'd written about. But that would pass. All I had to do was take it, and it would pass.

I couldn't undo what I'd already done. Not only had I made the decision that it was what I wanted, but I'd also worked under the banner of that decision for more than a year. The will of one person couldn't change that.

That was what I thought. But it wasn't what I felt. I felt like I did when I was a little boy and had done something wrong. I was afraid Dad was going to come and be angry with me. There was nothing worse in all the world. After I left home and became an adult, the fear remained, it was with me all the time, and I did everything I could to keep it from breaking out. Dad was no longer around, and my fear of his rage had been transferred onto others: I was twenty years old and scared stiff of other people being angry with me. It never went away. When I left everything behind and moved to Stockholm at thirty-three, the fear was still inside me. Linda, whom I met soon after, was temperamental and often unreasonable in her outbursts, and yet I allowed myself to be intimidated completely, even the slightest raising of her voice was enough to fill me with anxiety, and the only thing I could think about would be to make it go away. Even as a forty-year-old, sitting on the balcony on a morning in August 2009, I was scared of someone being angry with me. Whenever I gave anyone reason to be, I became so terrified and despairing and so full of anguish, I never knew how I would ever get over it.

This fear of people being angry with me was the child's fear, it didn't belong in the adult world, where it was unprecedented, yet something inside me had never made that transition, never become adult and hardened in that way, so the child's emotions lived on in the adult. The adult, which is to say I, was completely at the mercy of the child's emotions, sometimes it hurt so much I could hardly bear it, knowing as I did that I was an adult and acutely aware that the feeling and everything to do with it was deeply shameful. Why was this? If my sense of self had been strong and whole, if I'd been more assured, I would have been able to say to myself that I did this and I'm accountable for it, and if anyone has another opinion that's their business, not mine. If they wanted argument, I'd give them an argument. But my sense of self wasn't at all strong or whole, I wasn't at all assured, and my self-confidence was completely built around what other people might think of me. My own thoughts and opinions didn't matter in that respect. I was still living in the world Dad had set up for me, where everything I did basically came down to not doing anything wrong. What was wrong was not defined by any set of rules, but was instead a matter of what he at any given time decided was wrong. These circumstances I transferred to my adult life, in which they no longer existed apart from inside me. But Dad was dead, he'd been dead for eleven years. I knew all this, but knowing didn't help, the feeling wormed its way through and did as it pleased. The only thing I could do was to meet it head-on and stick it out.

I stood up and went into the bedroom where the computer with the Internet connection was. I opened the e-mail. It was short, and nothing to be concerned about.

Hi Karl Ove.

Would you please send me an e-mail address for your contact(s) at your publishing house.

Gunnar

I read it through a few times, trying to make out what lay behind the words. He hadn't started with "Dear," as I had done, but if he was fuming about something then surely he wouldn't have written, "Hi Karl Ove." The fact there was a period after my name indicated a lack of enthusiasm, otherwise there would have been either an exclamation mark – which I didn't think was in his nature – or a comma, or else nothing. A comma or nothing would have been neutral and objective, a period was making a point, stern and unpermissive. His use of "please" pointed in the same direction. "Please" was formal, more formal than the uncle–nephew relationship warranted, so my understanding was that he didn't care for the manuscript. At the same time, it was a marker of politeness, which might indicate that he wasn't fuming at all, I thought, otherwise wouldn't he just have dispensed with courtesy altogether? The fact that he hadn't put anything before his name, either "Best regards" or "Yours" or something equally friendly, indicated the same thing as the opening, that this was a formal, matter-of-fact kind of inquiry on the computer screen in front of me. I knew he'd never cared for me, that he saw me as an attention-seeker, someone who wanted to be different for the sake of being different, who believed himself to be more than he was, and moreover without any sense of responsibility or order, and I took the content of his brief e-mail to be more indicative of that than of what he thought about the novel. Wanting the addresses of my contacts at the publisher was a good thing too, it seemed to say he would be putting any objections to them rather than to me personally. More than anything else, I was afraid of any direct contact with him. If he was going to be writing to the publisher, it would hardly be to rip into them.

I typed the e-mail addresses and phone numbers of the director of publishing Geir Berdahl and commissioning editor Geir Gulliksen, and sent them off to him. I went back into the study. The volume of work I had to get through was enormous and I had no idea how I was going to manage it all. In April I had sent twelve hundred pages off to the publisher, the idea all along having been for a single novel, to be published in the autumn, but then it had grown, it was too long, and the way I was thinking now was it was going to be another three hundred pages or longer still, which begged the question of how actually to publish the book. I'd discussed the matter with Geir Gulliksen over the phone. Was publishing a novel that ran to fifteen hundred pages at all feasible? Everything was feasible, he said. It could also be put out in two volumes, either at the same time or with a few months in between. Although this was more rational and would moreover have the advantage of giving me a double payout of two basic fees, a matter that was far from insignificant in view of our, to put it mildly, frail finances of the past few years, I nevertheless still preferred the book to come out as a single volume. It would be a statement, something there would be no getting away from, Norway's longest novel. Geir said he would run it past some other people at the publishing house and call me back. He did so a few hours later. He said that the proposal he wanted me to listen to, as suggested by Geir Berdahl, was probably unrealistic, and that I might not like it at all, but it was definitely worth considering.

"Let's hear it, then!" I said.

"We put it out as a series of twelve. A book a month for a year. We could set up some kind of deal so people can subscribe and get the whole lot. What do you reckon?"

"It's a fantastic idea!" I said. "Absolutely brilliant!"

"Yeah, I liked it too. It'd be a bit of a challenge, though. We'd need to find the funding somewhere. I'll go ahead and look into it, then we'll see."

"It'll be like Dickens or Dostoevsky," I said. "A serial novel! I really like the serial aspect of it. Like when The Wedding Present released a single once a month for a year, then put them all together to make an album when the year was up. It's a gimmick, but why not?"

"It's not an ordinary novel. It's fitting we do something special with it. Think of how it'll affect the way it's received. How would they review it? Each book as it comes out? Or the whole work as one at the end of the year?"

"It's fucking genius, Geir! Say hello to Berdahl and thank him for me."

"I think it's good too, and I'll do what I can to make it work. It'll take time. But let's say for now I go ahead and look into it, then I'll give you a call in a couple of weeks, OK?"

As soon as we hung up I went straight into the study and set about dividing the novel into twelve. If it was going to come to fifteen hundred pages in all, then each book would have to be roughly a hundred and twenty-five pages. I searched for places where one book could end and another begin. It was the first time during the year I'd been working on the novel that I'd felt anything remotely like joy and enthusiasm. I imagined the paperback with just the title printed on it, as they used to do in the nineteenth century. Subscription coupons in the newspapers and magazines that could be cut out and sent in to the publishers, the way people did in my childhood.

Nearly three weeks went by before Geir phoned back. When he did it was to tell me they couldn't make it work with twelve separate publications, there were too many practical problems and the figures wouldn't add up. He suggested six instead. Three in the autumn, three the following spring. I hesitated, not wanting to let go of the idea of twelve and once a month, almost pleading with him to think again, he could see what I was saying, he said, but it had turned out to be impractical, we ran the risk of ruining the publishing house, as far as I could understand him. Six had been difficult too, but eventually he had managed to get them all covered by the State Purchasing Program, thereby minimizing the financial risk.

"That's unbelievable," I said. "How did you manage that? Isn't there a strict rule they only purchase one work of fiction a year per author?"

"Yes. I had to present my case. It's a very unusual project. They listened and agreed."

That decided, I had to split the novel once more. In principle, I could just put two and two together of the twelve, making each book about two hundred and fifty pages. But that would be the same length as any average Norwegian novel, and with the subscription and serial idea abandoned it would be odd to simply break the narrative in one book to pick it up again in the next. Six books that weren't independent of each other, that didn't seem good to me. I needed to divide them differently so that each became a stand-alone book in its own right, which was to say I had to end up with six novels that could also be read as a single, continuous narrative. Doing it that way, the first book came to four hundred pages, the second to five hundred and fifty, and the third to three hundred. After that I ran out of material. If I was going to do it that way, I would have to write three new books in ten months. Which wasn't implausible, I'd been doing about ten pages a day for the past six months as it was, in the region of fifty pages a week given the fact that I wasn't allowed to work weekends. Subtracting ten pages for unforeseen difficulties, I could do around a hundred and sixty pages a month. If I rounded that down to a hundred and fifty, I could spend two or three months on each book and still easily do three, even having a month in hand.

I was almost burning with impatience and expectation as I sat down at the computer and scrolled through the manuscript. It was obvious I couldn't just divide it up into stand-alone books as it was, I would have to write beginnings and endings, bridges and transitions, move and delete sections, but that wouldn't be hard, the various parts differed from each other already because of how I'd tried to write my way into the period in which each narrative took place, not least by matching my reflections as closely as possible to the age of the first-person narrator in each book. The ten-year-old reflected on sweets, the twenty-nine-year-old on pop music, the thirty-five-year-old on parenting. Oh, it was going to be brilliant! Six books! Fuck, I was going to wipe the floor with them!

This afternoon in August, as I sat down to work after having read Gunnar's short e-mail, the first book was ready for typesetting; the last thing I'd done, after receiving two reader's reports, was to turn the mainly fragmentary and disconnected account of the year I'd spent living with Dad when I was sixteen into a cohesively told story, and the only thing left to do, as far as I could see, was to alter names if any of the people I had written about so wished. The second book was largely finished, all that remained was some minor work at the end, after which Geir Gulliksen was going to read it one last time, and once I'd gone through his suggestions and criticisms, that too would be ready for typesetting. The third book still needed a good deal of work. It wasn't where I wanted it to be, it was far too anecdotal, lacking in epic sweep, and had no clear thread besides the chronology.

This was perhaps the greatest difficulty in writing autobiographically, finding out how material was relevant. In real life, of course, everything was relevant and in principle equal, since it was all there in existence at the same time – the great oil tankers at anchor in the Galtesund in the seventies, the plum tree outside my window, Mom's job at Kokkeplassen, Dad's face when he drove by in the car and I was out somewhere and saw him, the pond where we skated in winter, the smells inside the neighbors' house, Dag Lothar's mom that time she made milkshakes for us, the strange car that was parked one night down at Ubekilen, all the fish we had for dinner, the way the pine trees in next door's garden swayed back and forth in the strong autumn winds, Dad's rage if I happened to dig my knee into the back of his seat in the car, the waffles we made every Tuesday, my great infatuation with Anne Lisbeth, the footballs Mom and Dad brought back for us from a trip to Germany, mine green with red hexagons, Yngve's yellow with red hexagons, the way we stood one day and kicked them as high into the air as we could to see if they could reach the military helicopter that happened to come sweeping low over the playground. The last of these recollections alone brought with it a host of other recollections, because while they were in Germany I had stayed with Grandma and Grandad on Dad's side, and Yngve with Grandma and Grandpa on Mom's side, a week I remembered so much from, and so very clearly, in particular the days we spent at the cabin. And that was what my entire childhood was like inside me – a thick garland of memories, one on top of another. To write was simultaneously to retrieve them from my mind and put them into words, and as long as this retrieval went from the inside to semioutside, by which I mean the words as they came to me in the process of writing, there was no problem, but what the novel as a form required was that my recollections be moved one place further still, to the unfamiliar reader. Relevance was a matter of communication, establishing community out of what was one's own, and the novel was one of the forms of relevance. The poem was another, less obvious, since it was shared by fewer people. Quality was bound together with exclusiveness, and everything to do with high and low literature, popular and elitist, was all about that. The wider the reach of the novel, the greater the community it strove toward, the easier it was to grasp, and the less challenging it became, in the sense that the reader's own efforts and participation diminished. In this there was a simplification, too. A novel that was meant to say something true about reality could not be made too simple, it had to contain an element of exclusiveness in its communication, something not common to or shared by all, in other words something of its own, and there, at some point between the madman's own particular and therefore uncommunicated ramblings, meaningless to everyone but the madman himself, who found them fascinatingly relevant, and the genre novel's fixed formulations and clichés, which had become clichés by being familiar to everyone, was the domain of literature. The highest ideal for any writer was to write a text that worked on all levels at the same time. The only writers I could think of who had done that were the authors of the first two Books of Moses – Genesis and Exodus – and Shakespeare. The *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* had achieved that once, but what at the time had been broad in reach, the epic poem, was now foreign in the sense that its relevance had radically declined. Not that I thought about any of this as I wrote, the problem there being real and tangible, how to turn all these recollections, which were almost inexhaustible, into a coherent narrative? And how to do so in such a way as to remain faithful to what was mine about them?

I went back and forth through the text without being able to collect my thoughts, or even to read what I'd written, my concentration was nonexistent, the only thing I could think about was Gunnar and his reaction. After a quarter of an hour like that, I got to my feet and went out of the study. As I went through the hall I heard the elevator on its way up. Most likely it was Linda; at this time of day there was hardly any activity in the building. I stood still and waited, heard the elevator doors open, and the next moment she stepped into the hall. She was wearing her blue and white sailor dress, she had eye shadow on, and her lips were painted red. In each hand was a carrier bag, and she had her little black backpack on her back. There was a busy air of eagerness about her; she'd hardly put her bags down on the floor before she came up to kiss me, then bent down and took off her red shoes while telling me about all the things she'd bought.

"They had these filing boxes or whatever down at Granit, the ones I was saying we could use for our mail, one for you and one for me. So now we don't need to leave all those letters and bills lying around all over the place. Do you want to see?"

I nodded and she produced the two boxes, which were like little sets of drawers.

"Nice, don't you think?"

"Yes," I said. "What's in the other bag?"

"A dress from Myrorna, a shawl, and a skirt. Dirt cheap, they hardly cost anything at all."

She took the three items out and held them up against herself one by one.

"Nice, don't you think?" she said again.

"Yes," I said.

"They hardly cost anything at all," she said.

"It would have been all right even if they had," I said. "It's not that."

"What, then?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does! Tell me. Have you had lunch, by the way?"

I shook my head.

"There's some bolognese left over from yesterday, is that OK?"

"Yes."

"Go on, tell me, then. What is it? Something wrong?"

"No, not at all."

She went over to the mirror and held the dress up against herself again.

"It is nice, isn't it?" she said. "We can heat it up in the microwave, no?"

"I'll do it."

I went into the kitchen, took the plastic container with the meat sauce out of the fridge, then the spaghetti, divided it between two plates, and started heating the first one in the microwave as I stared out the window, all the roofs in their various shades of red which seemed so close, the light blue sky above them. I've felt a twinge of guilty conscience from boyhood at being inside on such a fine day. It was one of the things Dad would never tolerate. If the weather was fine, you had to be outside, no excuses. Stupid as I was, I could wander around the neighborhood finding no one to hang out with and nothing to do, it was the holidays, people had gone away, either for the day in their boats or their cars, or else farther afield, enjoying bigger adventures. All I wanted was to be inside with my books, and as I walked aimlessly about I could make myself cry with self-pity.

"How's your day been?" asked Linda, sitting down at the table and opening the newspaper that was folded in front of her.

"I got an e-mail from Gunnar," I said.

"Oh? What did he say?"

"Nothing. He just wanted the address of the publisher. But it was enough to stop me working."

"You needn't be so worried," she said.

I took a deep breath. She looked up at me.

"What's wrong?"

"I thought you didn't like shopping," I said. "I thought you loathed it."

She stuck her tongue out at me.

"You're so stingy sometimes," she said.

"Stingy?"

"You're not begrudging me, are you? I'm feeling happy, that's all. I thought I'd get myself something for when I go away, and I've been thinking about what to do about our mail for months. Aren't you glad I've figured it out? So we can keep things neat?"

"Of course."

"Good."

She returned to the newspaper.

Then she looked up at me again.

"Anyway, you buy all your clothes from Spirit, fifteen hundred kronor for a pair of trousers. I've never said a thing about that."

"That's because it's my money."

"That we could have spent on something else. The clothes I buy cost a third of the ones you buy, if not a quarter."

"All right, yes, but that's not the point. Forget it. The last thing I want to do is argue."

"Who wants to argue? Not me."

The microwave pinged. I took the plate out and put it down in front of her. She got up and turned the radio on.

"We're friends, then," I said, and put the second plate in the microwave, set the timer to four minutes, shut the door, and pressed the start button.

"Karl Ove, I love you. Of course we're friends."

"OK," I said.

She carried on reading the paper. The news came on the radio. The microwave hummed, the green plate and its mound of spaghetti bolognese rotated sedately in its chamber. I got the knives and forks out, and two glasses, and filled a jug with water.

"Can you pick them up today?" she asked.

I didn't answer until she looked up at me.

"Yes," I said, charging the word with as much reluctance as I could. "If you can't, then I suppose I'll have to."

"Of course I can. But it was my turn this morning. So it's your turn this afternoon."

I looked down without saying anything. The microwave pinged again, I took the plate out, put it down on the table, and began to eat. Linda watched me for a moment, then put the newspaper aside before she too started eating. I was finished in a couple of minutes, the food was barely warm and offered nothing in the way of resistance, the only thing to do was shovel it in. Although Linda was still eating, I left the table and went out onto the balcony, where I sat down, put my feet up on the rail, poured myself a cup of coffee from the vacuum jug, and lit a cigarette. The basic rule of our relationship was that we shared everything. From that point of view it was only fair and reasonable that I picked the children up if she had dropped them off. But the thing was I worked in between, while she didn't. On this particular day I'd got up at four thirty to get some work done before the children woke up, after which I helped her get them dressed and ready to go, and then I'd gone back to work, during which time she had sat in a café, shopped for clothes, and bought a couple of filing boxes. If the kids took up 50 percent of the day, and work another 50 percent, then I was doing 75 percent of the total job and

Linda 25 percent. Whenever we argued, I would tell her. But I didn't want to argue now, so I left it at that.

I looked out over the city. I could see what looked like the small shadow of a Mercedes logo on a wall across the street below, perhaps cast by the sun shining on a parked car somewhere, I wasn't sure, but I'd seen it before and it seemed to indicate a habit, someone who always parked in the same place. Far, far away, a crane rose above the rooftops. Since all I could see basically were rooftops, any deviation would always stick out; if a person happened to be up there for whatever reason, I would see them, even if they were several kilometers away, the dark figure of the body against the brightness of the sky.

I stubbed my cigarette out in the upturned flowerpot I used for an ashtray, swallowed the last mouthful of coffee, and went inside. Passing the kitchen I saw Linda was on the phone. I paused to hear who she was talking to. Helena, I realized after only a few seconds. She looked up at me and lifted her hand as if in acknowledgment, I smiled and carried on into the bedroom to check my e-mails. It was already a quarter to two by the clock on the computer. Half an hour and I'd have to get going.

No e-mails.

Relieved, I lay down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. It was too late to start on anything now anyway. A faint, rather nauseating smell of food filled the air. When we first moved here I thought it came from our nearest neighbor, but after a while it struck me the smell might be coming through the ventilation system, in which case it was most likely from the Chinese takeaway down on the ground floor. I got up and opened the door onto the balcony, then stretched out on the bed again. The sounds of the city trickled into the room. I heard footsteps in the hallway. They stopped and the bathroom door was opened and then closed. The old saxophone player whose spot was by a pillar only a few meters from the entrance to our building, where the flow of people crossing the square was greatest, began to play. He always played the same thing, a minute-long fragment of some tune, presumably on the assumption that his audience was always new. That a man seven floors up had to listen to every note, not just day after day, but month after month, was something that almost certainly didn't occur to him.

Diii di daaa da dididi daaaa.

Diii di daaa da dididi daaaa.

Diii di daaa da dididi daaaa.

I closed my eyes. There was a rush of water from the toilet, the door was opened and the footsteps stopped in front of the mirror in the hall. Was she looking at herself or sifting through the letters that lay strewn over the little table against the wall?

Ba daaaa! The sound the telephone made when returned to the charger.

Had she taken the phone with her to the toilet? Or just put it down on the table as she went past, only now putting it back in its place?

She came toward me.

I opened my eyes and saw her pause in the doorway.

"I'll pick them up," she said. "After all, you're going to be on your own with them for a few days."

"No, I'll do it," I said. "I can't get any more work done today anyway. You can pack or something."

"You sure?"

"Do you want me to say it again?"

"OK, OK. You pick them up, I'll drop them off in the morning before I go."

"What time was your train again?"

"About half past eight," she said, and sat down at the computer. She was going off to visit Helena and Helena's new boyfriend Fredrik at an old farmhouse somwhere in mid-Sweden and would be gone until the weekend, when Geir and Christina were coming to stay with us. I hadn't met Fredrik, but from what I'd heard he was the complete opposite of Helena's previous partner, the charming and rather dodgy Anders. Fredrik was a fireman, an incident commander working in Stockholm, and had bought a house in the Dalarna region, taken it apart, transported it to Uppsala and rebuilt it plank by plank, and done it so well there had been articles about it in lifestyle magazines. That was all I knew. Apart from that, Heidi, who had met him once, was a little scared of him. He had let her comb his hair on that occasion, and Helena had said it meant she couldn't be that scared of him, but Heidi said she'd been scared of him the whole time, even when she was combing his hair. Helena laughed about that. Heidi loved her and would always sit as close to her as possible to be sure of her attention, and chatter on about all the things she'd been up to since the last time they saw each other. She talked to her on the phone too, and often made drawings of her. Heidi was attracted by all that glittered and shone, she loved dressing up more than anyone, five outfits a day was by no means unusual, and in Helena she had found her only truly glamorous role model.

"Are you looking forward to some time on your own?" I said.

Linda nodded without turning around.

"But I'm going to start missing you after a couple of hours on the train. Are you sure you don't want to come?"

"Positive. I've got to work. Besides, it'll do you good, not having the children around."

"I suppose so. And Helena does always look after me."

"Good, then," I said, getting to my feet. "I'd better get going."

"Are you bringing them straight home or going to the playground first?"

I gave a shrug.

"Can you give me a call if you're going somewhere? So I can come too?"

"Will do. See you later."

"See you."

We went to Magistratsparken, the place the children called the "normal park." Other parks we frequented were the "spider park" in the Pildammsparken, the "shark park" in the Möllevangen neighborhood, and Lugnet, a few streets behind where we lived. Besides these there was another playground we went to in the Pildammsparken, and one in the Slottsparken that we called the "troll's forest," as well as another one some distance away by the fire station, where we hardly ever went but which they liked because it had some very unusual apparatuses. Almost all their time outdoors was spent in these parks. The rest of the time they were inside, either at the nursery or at home. I didn't like it, it was so remote from the upbringing I wanted to give them. But there were no alternatives, we couldn't afford a house, and being registered bad debtors we couldn't get a mortgage. On the other hand, they didn't seem to be suffering in the slightest as their heads poked out from among the leaves of the tree they called the "climbing tree." I sat on one of the three benches at the other end and skimmed through a newspaper I'd bought to keep myself occupied, glancing up at regular intervals and scanning the various children at play until locating my own. Vanja could be trusted completely, and I didn't think Heidi would get it into her head to go off on her own anymore either, but John was still unpredictable, all of a sudden he'd be on his way across the grass toward the road that ran next to the park, and if I didn't keep a watchful eye out and immersed myself in my reading instead he could be gone when I looked up, and I might only discover him when I extended my field of vision and noticed his little figure in the distance toddling off toward the road.

Now, though, he was standing tugging on the swing, calling for me at the top of his voice. I got to my feet and went over to him, lifted him up and put him in the seat, drew it back, and looked him in the eye. Are you ready? I said. Yes, he said in a serious voice. I pulled him back into the air and let go, and he immediately started to laugh. Ten swings, I said, and began to count. After ten I stopped him, he protested, and once he realized I was going to lift him up he gripped the swing tight with a look of panic in his eyes. No, no, no! I put him down on the ground, where he lay on his belly, pressing his face into the sand, shouting and screaming. By the time I sat down on the bench again his tantrum had turned to tears. He cried and sobbed heartrendingly, as if he'd been orphaned and hadn't eaten for a week, and someone had smacked his bottom for good measure. I located Heidi and Vanja, lit a cigarette, and picked up the paper again. Subconsciously I must have registered the situation that would soon arise, and only a few seconds later I lowered the paper and the dad who'd been on his way toward the swing with his son held tightly to his chest now put him down in the seat. A big person launching a little person, the way a big boat launches a little boat, I thought to myself. But John was still lying underneath the swing, and he wasn't thinking of moving for a while yet. I got up and went over to him. Up you go, out of the way, I said. Other people want to use the swing. He didn't say anything, just kept on sobbing, his little shoulders shaking. I picked him up like a tortoise, lifted him a few meters to the side and put him down again. There we are, I said. You can go and play again now. I turned and went back to my bench. I felt guilty, I ought to have comforted him until he stopped crying, but for one thing the reason for his disappointment was completely disproportional to his reaction and I didn't want him to start thinking this was the right way to deal with adversity, and for another, my strategy was to intervene as little as possible when I was out with them, I wanted them to be able to look after themselves.

But it wasn't only children who had difficulty keeping things in proportion. When I thought about the way I'd dealt with Vanja and saw from the photos how little she'd been then, it was as if the bottom dropped out from under me. Had I stood yelling with rage at that little creature there? Had I snatched her up out of her stroller and put her down hard on the floor, dizzy with frustration and anger, she eighteen months old and utterly innocent of anything? It was the most painful thought I knew. How could I have done such things? What had I been thinking? How was it possible to so totally lose one's sense of reality? I didn't see how little she was, my objective view was completely absent, both she and Linda and everyone else around me were sucked inside that inner vortex where the most unreasonable things became reasonable and justified. And I didn't have anything else to compare with, that was all there was.

John had stopped crying but was still lying with his face in the sand. I reasoned I had to give him a way out. The big swing was free now, I noticed, so I put down the paper and went over to him.

"Do you want to try the big swing? Would you like that?"

"Ye-es," he said.

"Come on, then," I said. He got up and followed me, wiping his tears away with his hand and leaving dark streaks on his cheeks. The big swing was in the shape of a cradle, there was room enough for several children inside, and mine at least loved to lie there and look up at the sky as they swung back and forth at speed. As I lifted John inside, Heidi and Vanja came running across the playground toward us.

"Us too!" they cried.

"Yes, but John's with you now," I said. "So I can't swing very high, OK?"

"OK," said Vanja.

"OK," said Heidi.

I lifted them up and pulled the cradle as far back as I could.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Daddy. Swing us now!" said Vanja.

I did as she said.

John cried out in protest.

"I don't want to!"

I stopped the swing, lifted him out, and put him down. He stretched his arms toward me. I ignored him and pulled back the cradle, and he began to wail.

"OK, if you're going to be stubborn," I said, lifting him up then holding him with one arm while I swung the girls with the other. His little body against mine felt warm and good. He put his head on my shoulder. The cradle came toward me, I sent it back. The girls were lying on their stomachs with their heads poking over the edge, staring toward the road. Their dresses and their hair flapped in the wind. All around there were children, crawling, waddling, running, and climbing, the figures of their parents poking up, some with sunglasses on and cell phones in their hands, others absorbed in their children's activities. Beyond the playground there were lawns where tall trees stood, sedate and bathed in sun, offering circles of shade to all those who had come to the park that afternoon. Most were young, nearly all were white. Many lay on their own in the grass next to a bike; the way they had rolled their trousers up and removed their T-shirts suggested improvisation, a sudden impulse followed on the way home from work. Others sat around in groups, mostly students from the *gymnas* or university students. Here and there a couple lay tightly entwined, completely immersed in each other. The Pildammsparken on the other side of the old football stadium attracted mainly immigrants, whole families out picnicking into the evenings, occasionally the thud of drums could be heard rising up through the sunlight, as if from the depths of a dream. The way the shadows grew with evening, and the way the sun sank down, not into the sea or the forest, but into the city, had a dreamlike quality about it, I always found myself thinking when we were there. The world dissolved when filled with sunlight, that was the feeling I had, the relationships between all things vanished, everything seemed suddenly to exist on the same level. It was the job of culture to define those relationships, establish hierarchies of connections and draw together what lay dispersed into particular, meaningful patterns. That was why we had novels, films, TV series, poems, and plays, but also newspapers, television news, and gossip magazines. That a culture originating in a sun-scorched landscape, underneath a burning sky, along the fertile banks of a river, would draw the world together in a different way and create other meaningful patterns was obvious. I had no idea what the difference consisted of, for it was so big that their language to me sounded like so much coughing and spitting, and the letters of their alphabet looked more like bushes in the desert than writing, but I had an idea that everything surely had to be impenetrable to begin with, and while it might gradually open up as the language became understood, it could never be as self-explanatory as it was to us, and presumably never become possible, nor therefore desirable, to embrace. For culture's greatest role comprised the way it worked between people, its tissue of collocations, accentuations, and self-imposed constraints was so fine and complex that most within the culture were familiar only with the particular shadings that concerned his or her own layer of society, and possessed only superficial knowledge of the others. But everything had its own significance, that was what culture was. The fabric of a pair of trousers was significant, the width of a trouser leg was significant, the pattern in the curtain hung in front of a window was significant, the sudden lowering of a gaze was significant. The particular way a word was pronounced was significant. What a person knew about one thing or another was also significant. Culture charged the world with meaning by establishing differences within it, and those differences, in which everything of value existed, varied from culture to culture. That the units were becoming increasingly bigger, and cultures increasingly similar, was a discouraging thought, at least for someone like me who was fascinated by differences and attracted by impenetrability. The wonder of Japan, a country that had been isolated for so many hundreds of years and had developed what seemed to us in every way to be such a peculiar culture, almost completely closed to us, and yet existing before our eyes. The thought of that culture dissolving into that of the West and being lost forever, to exist as a mere variation of our own, was as great a loss as the extinction of any species of animal. But the Western world was so strong, and so expansive in its nature, that it would soon have the rest of the world subsumed within it, not by violence, as in the days of colonialism, but by promise. In this wide perspective, I was against immigration, against multiculturalism, against notions of sameness of nearly every kind. In the narrower perspective, that which related to the tangible, day-to-day reality of where I lived, in Malmö, it was hard not to look on immigration as an enormous resource all the while I could see how explosively vibrant and full of energy the city was compared to, say, Stockholm, where all the immigrants lived in the urban outskirts and the faces you saw in the city center were practically all white. Malmö, it's true, was run-down and poverty common to see, but at the same time the city vibrated in its contrasts, which all had to be brought together in synthesis and most surely were a gift to anyone who grew up there, with so many different experiences and backgrounds existing together side by side, and where a lot of what came about for that same reason came about as if for the first time, with all the freshness and vigor of the new.

"I envy them that," Linda had said one evening not so long ago after we'd picnicked in a corner of the big park and were heading home again with the kids in tow.

"Envy them what?" I said.

"The whole family out together. Parents, grandparents, children and grandchildren, uncles and cousins."

She nodded toward a congregation of people gathered around a barbecue, perhaps twenty in all, the elderly seated on chairs, the youngest running around playing. There were more like them, scattered across the lawns. The air all around smelled of smoke and grilled meat.

"It used to be like that here, too," I said. "Three generations ago, maybe. In rural areas at least. My maternal grandmother grew up with it. Well, not barbecuing in the parks, exactly. But they lived together in big families."

"It all looks so *himla mysigt*. They all seem to be having such a fine time," she said. "And here we come with our tiny little nuclear family. There's only us! Imagine if there'd been more of us, think of how different it would have been!"

"Yes, but our life's not that miserable, is it?"

"No, no, I don't mean that. It's just that – "

"You're a romantic. You see the aura of it, and you want it too."

She shook her head.

"It's not that I want it. It just seems so . . . well, as if there's so much more life around them."

"Your mother's stayed with us. And my mom's been here quite a lot. You're always glad to see the back of them."

"I know, but that's exactly it. It's all so centered around us, you, me, and the kids. Think what it'd be like if there were lots of others we could be with, we could forget all about ourselves!"

The sun behind us had been red and hung like a bauble above the rooftops, I remembered, and then I looked at John to see if he'd fallen asleep on my shoulder for once, but I found myself looking straight into his open eyes and stepped a few paces back.

"All right, that's your lot," I told the girls.

"But, Daddy!" Vanja said. "We've only just started!"

"Just a bit more?" said Heidi. "Please!"

"No," I said, putting John down so I could go back to my bench, and then I saw Linda crossing the circular gravel-covered area with the wall around it in the middle of the park.

"Look, Mommy's here," I said. The girls crawled from the cradle to meet her, John toddled off toward her, and her face broke into a wide and joyful smile as she crouched down to receive them. A stark contrast to the times I came home and she would be lying in bed oblivious to their expectant calls of *Hello?* and *Mamma?* as they came in.

I went over to the bench and folded the newspaper and was about to drop it into the basket under the stroller when a sudden unease came over me.

Where had it come from?

I looked over at Linda, she was on her way toward me with the children all around her. It wasn't that.

The book.

Of course. That was it.

"Hi," said Linda.

"Hi," I said. "You haven't got any cash on you, have you?"

"No, I don't think I have. What for?"

"So we could get some ice cream at the kiosk over there. I've only got twenty kronor and I don't think they take cards."

"Yes, they do now."

"Do you want ice cream?" I asked them, looking down at their little faces.

As we walked beneath the trees a few moments later on our way toward the pedestrian crossing, I argued against my unease, telling myself I hadn't written anything bad about the people now reading it, reminding myself that I'd been afraid of how Yngve would react and yet how well that had turned out.

"Were they all right at nursery today?" Linda asked.

"Yes, I think so," I said. "I didn't ask. They were happy enough when I picked them up."

We stopped at the crossing, and Linda and Heidi scrabbled to press the button first, but Vanja got in before them and pressed it triumphantly. Heidi started to cry.

"You can press it next time," I told her.

"Vanja pushed," she said.

"You shouldn't push, Vanja," said Linda. "But look, we can go over there now and then you can have your ice cream."

Heidi stayed put with her head lowered as we began to cross the road. I went back and lifted her up, and carried her the rest of the way to the kiosk.

"Why does Heidi get carried and not me?" said Vanja.

"Because she was crying," I said. "I can carry you a little on the way back."

I poked my head through the hatch and seeing no one there I rang the small shiny bell on the counter.

Jan Vidar was perhaps the person whose reaction I was most nervous about. He was and always would be fifteen to me, and I hadn't exactly depicted the world we had together back then as anything fantastic. Maybe it was fantastic to him? Maybe he gilded the past?

A woman, Romanian-looking, appeared from a small back-room and came up to the counter in front of me.

"OK," I said, looking down at the children. "Just point to the one you want, but don't be too long about it." I looked up at the woman. "Two coffees to start with. Milk in one."

"I want a . . . Calippo," said Vanja.

"Cola flavor, or the green one?" I asked her.

"The green one," she said.

"And a Calippo fruity," I said to the dark-haired woman.

"I want one, too," said Heidi.

"We'll make that two," I said. "What about you, John? Can you point?"

He pointed to an ice-cream sandwich. Whether he knew what he was doing or not was a different matter.

"And a sandwich."

She entered the amounts, I held out my card, she shoved a little card reader across the counter and pressed some keys. I inserted the card and she stepped over to the freezer. Behind the few chairs and tables, a fat young man came walking along the path with a little dog. I saw how Vanja followed it with her eyes. He was so fat I thought he must be on disability benefits. Cheap, khaki-colored shorts, air-force-gray baseball cap, black T-shirt. His entire body quivered as he went, he seemed almost to roll at the joints. I entered my PIN. The woman straightened up.

"What sort of dog was it, Vanja?" I said, pressing OK.

"A terrier, I think," she said.

Heidi sat on Linda's lap, in the shade of the parasol. John had climbed onto the chair and was trying to press a straw, now flattened at the end, into a crack in the table.

"Sorry, we're out of Calippo fruity," the woman said. "Will cola do instead?"

"Yes, that's fine."

The little card reader came abruptly to life and ejected a slow ribbon of paper from its innards. The woman handed me the two popsicles and the ice cream sandwich, then tore off the receipt, I took them over to the children, and when I came back she gave me the coffee in two paper cups with the receipt. I handed one of the cups to Linda, who was opening the wrappers, sat down at the table, and took a sip from the other.

Gunnar had been angry when *Out of the World* came out. But that was the first time I'd got anything published, it was completely new, and I guessed it must have been a shock for him to recognize himself in one of the characters, but more than ten years had passed since then, and the fact that my previous novel had been nominated for the Nordic Council Literature Prize must have altered things a lot; I wasn't just someone idling away his time with dreams of being a writer, I was an acclaimed author, not only nationally but internationally too, if only moderately so, but what little had been written about my books in the foreign newspapers had almost certainly been mentioned in *Fædrelandsvennen*: the review in *Frankfurter Allgemeine* that called the novel a masterpiece, and perhaps the one in *The Guardian* too, even if that had been more ambivalent. He almost certainly wouldn't be pleased about me writing about Dad and Grandma, but what I'd written about him could hardly give rise to displeasure, he came out well, was treated respectfully.

"I think I'm starting to get in a tizzy about going away," said Linda. "I feel a bit worked up."

An elderly man biked past with something flapping against the spokes and a pedal that scraped the chain guard.

"You mean about the train journey?" I said.

"Yes. I always get excited about traveling, I have done ever since I was little."

"What did you say, Mommy?" said Vanja.

"I said I'm feeling nervous about going away tomorrow."

"Why?" Vanja asked.

"Yes, why?" I said. "It's nice to have butterflies."

"Just think, I went on my own to Hydra when I was seven," she said. "It's not worth thinking about, is it?"

"No, it isn't."

"What isn't what?" said Vanja.

"I went all on my own to an island in Greece when I was only two years older than you are now. Well, not completely on my own, I went with a family, but my mommy and daddy weren't with me."

"That was in the seventies," I said. "They had different ideas about raising children then."

"It was extreme, even for the seventies," she said.

"Have I ever told you about the first time I traveled alone?" I said.

Linda shook her head.

"That was in the seventies too. Only I wasn't as tough as you. I was in the first grade and missed the bus home from school. I stood there crying and the caretaker came over. We had a fantastic caretaker, we used to go and see him sometimes in his workshop. Anyway, he said I could take the next bus that came along. It'd be going in the other direction, but we lived on an island, so it was bound to go past our house sooner or later. I got on and didn't recognize a soul. Then when we turned left instead of right I got scared and forgot all about what the caretaker had said, or maybe I just didn't believe him anymore. Eventually, I panicked and pulled the bell cord. The bus stopped, and there I was standing by the side of a road I'd never seen before, most likely miles from home.

"What did you do?" said Linda.

"There was another boy who got off at the same place. I told him I was lost, he said I could come home to his place, so I did. It was a dark house right next to the road. His dad called mine, and he came and picked me up."

I looked at Vanja.

"That was your grandfather," I said.

"And yours, and yours too," said Linda to Heidi and John.

"I know," said Vanja. "He's dead."

I nodded.

"He died before I was born," she said.

"Mommy's daddy died too," said Heidi.

"He died on New Year's Eve," said Vanja.

"Yes, he did," I said, and looked at Linda. She smiled.

"But you met him, Vanja," she said.

Vanja nodded gravely.

"Two times," she said. "In Stockholm."

"I was born in Stockholm," said Heidi.

"Yes, you were," said Linda, and held her tight.

The next morning I woke up at four thirty, switched off the beeping alarm, picked up my pile of clothes, and took them with me from the bedroom into the hall so I wouldn't wake Linda, picked up the two newspapers that had been dumped on the floor outside the door, put the coffeemaker on, scanned the arts and sports sections, and munched on an apple while waiting for the coffee to be ready. When it was, I drank a cup and smoked a cigarette on the balcony. The sky was a haze, the gray half-light of dawn still lingered between the buildings below, and there was something raw about it; it was mid-August and autumn would soon be here.

I lit another cigarette to put off starting work for as long as possible, but stubbed it out half-smoked and went inside to the study, switched on the computer, sat down, turned on the lamp attached to the bookshelf with a clamp, and flicked through the stack of CDs on the floor next to me, deciding on *Giant Steps* by the Boo Radleys, which instantly transported me back to the mood of Bergen in the early 90s. I'd barely played the album since, and for that same reason, not wanting to revive the feelings. I sat for a while debating with myself as to whether to put something else on instead, at the same time opening the manuscript of the second book and scrolling through the document. No, it wouldn't do. I picked out Josh Rouse's *1972* instead, it was soft and pleasant, verging on Muzak, and would be a good start to the day.

An hour later I heard a door open. I turned the music down and and listened. Feet padding through the hall. It had to be John or Heidi. Not that it mattered much; if one of them was up, the other would soon follow.

I opened the door and went out into the kitchen. John stood with his pillow in his hand and looked up at me. It was twenty to six.

"It's still night," I said. "Go back to bed."

"I'm not tired," he said with a twinge of resentment in his voice, as if I'd accused him of something.

"Do you want some breakfast then?" I said.

He nodded. I lifted him up into his chair, got the muesli out of the cupboard and blueberry yogurt from the fridge, poured some into his bowl, and put it on the table in front of him, then handed him a spoon, which fortunately he accepted.

More padding feet. I turned, and Heidi was standing in the doorway.

"Morning, Heidi," I said.

She didn't answer, just peered at me with narrow eyes and messed-up hair.

"I want some too," she said.

"Of course," I said.

"Hi, John," she said.

"Hi," said John.

I put a plate and spoon out for her.

"Are you all right here on your own for a few minutes?" I said.

Heidi nodded and started eating. I went into the study again, leaving the door ajar so I could hear them, and tried to get back into it again. It was harder without music, but only a few minutes later I was writing again, about a trip Geir Angell and I had made to Søgne just after his mother's funeral, when I'd been doing a reading at a rural high school. I had no idea exactly why I was writing about it, apart from the feeling the room had given me then, in the darkness under the glittering stars of winter.

"Daddy?" said Heidi all of a sudden behind me, and nearly gave me a heart attack.

"What's the matter?" I said, swiveling around.

"John wants out of his chair."

I got up and went back into the kitchen, lifted him into the air, and put him down again on the floor. His diaper was so heavy it hung between his legs. I tore open the tapes at the sides and dumped it in the bin under the sink, told him to stay put, which he did, went and got a clean one from the bathroom, then put it on him under Heidi's watchful eye.

"We want a bath," said Heidi.

"Well you can't have one," I said.

"What?" she said.

"You can't have one," I said.

"What?" she said again. It was a habit she'd got into, saying what to everything, sometimes it made her sound like she was slow-witted. I didn't care for it.

"No," I said. "You're not taking a bath."

She twisted her face angrily at me, then turned to her brother, who was down on all fours immersed in something over by the base of the wall.

"Come on, John," she said. "We'll go and play in the living room!"

It was five past six. The buses had started running outside. Their dull, heavy sounds were like groans. I went into the bedroom to wake Linda up. Vanja was asleep beside her. She usually came in from their room in the night, sometimes she was already asleep in our bed when we turned in for the night. We'd only just managed to get her to sleep in her own bed when Heidi was born, but Linda felt so sorry for her then that she let her sleep with us instead, and from then on she'd insisted we stay with her until she fell asleep. Only that wasn't enough, so if she woke up on her own she'd come into our room.

"It's ten past six," I said. "Heidi and John are already up. Can you get up now, do you think, so I can get a bit of work done?"

"Mm," she said.

I switched on the computer on the desk, logged on to my e-mail, and without expecting anything checked to see if any new messages had come in during the night. Fortunately, the only thing in the in-box was the *Agderposten's* daily news update which I'd been receiving every morning ever since the time I tried to access their archive to see if I could find anything in it about Dad. There'd been some technical glitch that meant I never got in, but they'd got my address and I'd never quite managed to remove my name from their mailing list. Still, it could be quite nice too, scanning its small-town news stories in the mornings. I deleted it and Googled myself, finding nothing new, surfed around a bit, and then, without Linda having stirred in the slightest, went back into the study again, closed the door behind me, put some music on, and tried to get back into it again. But the little break had been enough to put me off. When I got started in the mornings, my mind was as yet undisturbed by anything else, and the transition from sleep to text was smooth and fluid. As the day progressed I had to expend more energy to surmount an increasing resistance, and by the time the afternoon came around, the only thing I could do to eliminate it was sleep and start again.

It took nearly an hour to get into the swing of things again. Not long afterward, Linda knocked on the door wanting to know if there were any clean socks anywhere or if they could just have bare feet in their sandals. I swiveled around and gave her my coldest look. She closed the door hard again. I was seething. Their voices came from the hall, Vanja and Heidi shouting at each other. I sensed she was having problems getting them to cooperate and felt guilty enough to go out and see if I could help, though not guilty enough to look her in the eye. I stood behind Vanja, gripped her foot, and thrust it into her sandal.

"*Ai!*" she cried. Ow!

Always, always a Swedish *ai!*, never a Norwegian *au!*

I pushed the little straps through, bent them back and pressed them tight against the Velcro or whatever it was.

"Have they got sunscreen on?" I asked.

"I don't think they'll need any today," Linda replied.

"Are their teeth brushed?"

"John's are. Heidi's and Vanja's aren't. We haven't got that far yet."

I tore open the bathroom door, stuck the two toothbrushes under the running tap, squeezed the toothpaste on, and went out again, handed one to Linda and stood in front of Heidi with the other.

"Open your mouth," I said.

She pressed her lips together.

Sometimes it was for fun, but not this time; the look she gave me was narrow and rebellious.

"Is it because I've been in a bad mood?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Well, I'm not anymore," I said. "Do you think you could open your mouth now?"

She didn't.

"You don't want me to use force, do you?"

"What?"

"Use force. To make you brush your teeth, even though you don't want to."

"What?"

"I'm finished!" said Vanja, and flashed her sister a cheeky smile. John stood trying to open the front door, he was on tiptoes and had managed to get his fingers on the handle, but couldn't quite get the grip to pull it down.

"Mommy has to do it," said Heidi.

"OK," I said, handing the toothbrush to Linda, for whom Heidi immediately opened her mouth and bared her teeth.

"Have a nice time," I said.

No one answered.

"You could at least say goodbye," I said, looking at Linda.

"Bye then," she said. "But I'm coming back before I go."

"OK," I said, and returned to the study. I sat there motionless in the chair and waited until I heard them get into the elevator, then the elevator as it began its descent through the building, before clicking on the minimized document that within a second unfolded on the screen in front of me.

Linda came back half an hour later. I went out to to say hello, she wanted us to sit with a coffee on the balcony, and we sat there for ten minutes each smoking a cigarette and hardly exchanging a word.

"Have a nice time all of you while I'm gone," she said when eventually she stood with her suitcase in front of her in the hall.

"I'm sure we will," I said.

"I'll give you a call before their bedtime tonight, is that OK?"

"Of course. Take it easy up there. And say hello to Helena and . . ."

"Fredrik. I will."

We kissed each other, she closed the door behind her and I went and checked my e-mails, one from Play.com, otherwise nothing, before going back into the study, where I sat down and started writing again. I spent half an hour talking to Geir Angell on the phone, ate a packet of cold fish cakes for lunch, made a fresh pot of coffee, and then when I came back in from the balcony there was an e-mail from Gunnar.

The subject line said "Verbal rape."

Opening it was out of the question.

I stood up and went through the apartment, grabbing the phone on the way, sat down on the balcony, and called Geir Angell again.

"That wouldn't be you again, would it?" he said.

"I just got an e-mail," I said.

"From your uncle?"

"Yeah."

"And he doesn't like you?"

"Don't know, I haven't read it. I'm too scared."

"How bad can it be? Get in the game. Stop being an ostrich."

"The subject line says 'Verbal rape.'"

"Like I said."

"I'll have to read it," I said. "Might as well get it over with. Listen, I'll send it on to you, you can read it as well, and I'll call you back right after. OK?"

"Sure."

We hung up and I lit a cigarette and stared out across the rooftops. My heart was beating so fast it felt like it was trying to get out.

Verbal rape.

I swallowed a mouthful of coffee. I thought about going for a walk somewhere and leaving it for a bit, sitting in a park maybe, or looking in the shops. But I knew the thought of what the e-mail might contain wouldn't let go of me, that I wouldn't be able to relax whatever I did.

I got to my feet and went into the bedroom, clicked on his message even before sitting down, and read it through as fast as I could, as if the dread consisted in the encounter between my eyes and his words on the screen, rather than in what they said.

I'd imagined all kinds of things, but not this.

It was as if he were standing there screaming. It was my mother who was behind the novel, he wrote. She hated the Knausgaards, and always had. For all those years, she had indoctrinated me with her hatred, brainwashed me, until eventually I had lost contact with the real world completely and written this despicable, immoral, and self-centered shambles of a book so I could get back at the family and line my pockets. It was an act far worse than anything I believed my father had ever done to me when I was growing up. The source of all my books was my mother, all of them carried the mark of her hidden revenge motives. They were riddled with untruths, mean-spirited depictions, and an outlook on human nature he found completely alien to the family. I needed therapy.

He wrote that he was holding the publishing director personally responsible and would be taking action for damages if the manuscript came out. He left his e-mail unsigned.

Having read the e-mail, I barely managed to get to my feet again. I couldn't think straight. All I knew, as I typed Geir Angell's address and forwarded the e-mail to him, was that I had to talk to someone. I went through the apartment again. I stood in front of the window in the living room and glanced down at the square below, went into the kitchen and stared out at the rooftops, went into the children's room, glanced around, Heidi and Vanja's bunk beds, John's crib, turned and went out again, into the bathroom, turned on the tap and washed my hands, went into the living room, opened the door of the long balcony, the sun was shining and it was hot, I gripped the railing and leaned forward to look down on all the people below as they passed along the sidewalk, let go and went back inside, paced the floor, and then I made a decision, there was a document attached to the e-mail, I might as well read that too, it certainly couldn't get any worse.

It was a letter addressed to Sissel Norunn Hatløy, my mother. In it, he informed her that he had now read "the author's" latest manuscript. It was such that he had no words to describe what he thought of me. But he did so anyway. A concentration of the most negative characteristics imaginable. I glorified myself, I was a helpless wretch, a base individual. The strange thing, Gunnar wrote, was that the people I was attacking were the Knausgaards, whereas she, my mother, was completely untarnished. Not a single word against her had the author written. Why? His own picture of her was rather different, he wrote: she had neglected Yngve and me entirely when we were growing up, all she had been interested in was herself and what he called her quasi-philosophical ego, which I was now perpetuating. Not a thought for other people, only herself. No empathy, no feelings of solicitude, only self-infatuation. She ought to have been a pillar for my father when we needed her most, but she hadn't. He called it neglect. That was the essence, the important thing. I had never understood that because she had brainwashed me. I believed everything she said, and because she hated the Knausgaards I hated them too. Then he went on to describe the way he remembered her when she first came into their family.

He'd been only a young man at the time, and Mom's presence had clearly made an impression on him, because he used the strongest words to describe the way she came across, so cold and inhospitable anyone would think it was a glacier he was describing. There was no warmth in her, and no personality, she took no part in the family's life together, but would sit on her own in a corner, reading a magazine, occasionally scowling at them as she puffed on her cigarette. She communicated with no one and never had a kind word for any child in her vicinity, which I took to be referring to himself. It went on: she never once invited him to their home after he grew up, and never paid a visit to see his children, and in the company of his own sociable and loving mother she seemed positively miserable. In his words, he had felt sorry for his elder brother having to live with Mom and had always wondered why she turned out the way she had, what could have made her come across so unpleasantly, and he recalled a trip to Vestland to visit her and her family when he was twelve years old. He described her mother, my grandmother, as autistic, racked with all manner of neuroses and feelings of inferiority. He referred to the farm where they lived as wretched and called it a peasant smallholding. When he met my grandmother at the time, when he was twelve, he realized how such an abnormal desire to be someone could arise in her daughter, and how her son, my uncle Kjartan, could end up writing poetry about crows, something he apparently considered as ridiculous as it was inane and shameful. My mother lacked upbringing, had never developed any ability to show empathy or solicitude, to create a loving, caring environment, and this she had passed on to me, who suffered from exactly the same deficiencies.

He was writing to her to underline the fact that she remained responsible for me, who he referred to as "your friendless son," now that I was so completely far gone as was the case. He likened me to Dad, stating that I was just as unreliable as he had been and suffered from the same personality disorder. Then he compared me to Mom and declared that I was just as cynical and lacking in empathy as her. But was that anywhere in the book? No, that perspective, which apparently was the true perspective, was totally absent. Mom's culpability in Dad's demise was obvious to anyone who cared to see, he believed. Dad never got what he needed from her, which was to say love, intimacy, companionship, warmth. Gunnar had realized this even at the age of twelve, but to his brother, Dad, such an insight had come all too late.

By way of conclusion he asked her to get me to stop the project and to find me a place in a psychiatric ward somewhere instead. Otherwise, if we went ahead and the book got published, he would take action for damages. He was going to put a stop to this hateful attack on the Knausgaard family, which she was behind, by whatever means might be necessary.

The letter was signed not in his name, but as my father's brother.

I lay down on the bed and remained there motionless. Suddenly, this moment was all there was. I can't recall its exact nature or how it felt, eighteen months having passed since, and I am no longer in the grip of its explosive alarm. I can comprehend it, and even comprehend it well, but I can't resurrect it. Reading those messages again now, I am filled with the most unpleasant emotions, and they confirm to me something I've always known, always felt, but compared to the force by which it became apparent to me at the time, this is merely a shadow. During those days in August 2009 it paralyzed me totally. If I'd had even the slightest inkling that such anger lay in store for me I might have been able to prepare myself for it and thereby have softened the impact, or, and even more probable, simply not written the novel in the first place. But in all the time I'd been working on it I had never, not once, anticipated a reaction remotely like it.

The phone rang in the hall.

It had to be Gunnar.

There was no way I could speak to him. It would be the same as when I'd done something wrong as a boy and heard Dad's door open downstairs. He's coming. He's coming.

But it could have been Geir Gulliksen or Geir Berdahl too, seeing as how the e-mail had been sent to them as well.

I jumped to my feet and dashed into the hall. Just as I got there it stopped ringing. I lifted it from the charger and pressed to see incoming calls.

10, said the display.

It meant the call was from a hidden number. Geir Angell's was always a hidden number, so it was probably him. I usually joked about it being only the police and Geir whose numbers couldn't be seen. But it wasn't only a joke, because somewhere deep down I was still expecting a call from the police.

I took the phone with me out onto the balcony and called Geir.

"Hello, Gunnar speaking," he said. "Is that my despicable, friendless nephew? How dare you call this number?"

"Did you just call?" I said.

"Well, if you're going to be like that about it, yes," he said. "What's up, are you in a bad mood now?"

"Bad isn't the word. Have you read his e-mail?"

"Of course I have. He has a fine turn of phrase, your uncle, hasn't he?"

"He has, yes."

"I couldn't stop laughing."

"I bet you couldn't."

"Forget about him. He's angry with you. It's not hard to understand. But that's all it is. It's not like you've done anything wrong."

"Obviously I have. And he's going to take me to court. I don't doubt him for a second."

"But that'll be excellent! You should hope he does, it'd be the stupidest thing he could do. You'll be rolling in money! Everyone'll be wanting your books if it comes to a court case! This is literary history in the making. And you'll be a millionaire. There's no better scenario."

"I can think of a couple."

"Come on! What have you done exactly? You've written a book about your life, from where you stand. It's all about liberty. Liberty's something you take. If it's given, then you're a slave. You wanted to write about your life the way it is. There's a price for that. That price is what you're looking at now. You didn't think about your uncle, which means you've been thoughtless. That's what it costs. Yes, he's angry with you. Yes, I can understand that. He's entitled to be angry with you, from where he stands. But that's where it ends. Do you get what I'm saying? You haven't written anything bad about him. You've written about your own father. That's your prerogative, your fucking inheritance, that's what he left you. No one can deny you that. They can be angry with you, they can be seething mad, they can make life difficult for you and your family, but that's it. You didn't do anything wrong. You have my complete forgiveness. It's only a pity I wasn't a Catholic priest."

"Yeah."

"What do you mean *yeah*? Get a grip, man. You'll be rich. You should be laughing."

"It's no laughing matter."

"Of course it is! And reading that e-mail made me realize where all this is coming from. You're not the only lunatic in the family. You're all like that. Your dad, your uncle, you."

I said nothing. Predictably, his attempts at cheering me up weren't helping in the slightest, but I was glad he was trying nevertheless. We talked for an hour or so, about the same thing the whole time, the letters and the new situation they had presented us with. Geir thought I should just go with the flow. Moralizing had never created anything of its own, all it did was reject the created. And the created was the same as life itself. Why reject life?

Geir was a Nietzschean through and through. He could see things from the outside, that was his strength, but at the same time it meant that outside was where he was. I was in the middle of it all, and if there was anything in which I could find no comfort it was vitalism, because vitalism was the same as transgression, and if this was about anything, it was basically about fear of trangression.

As we talked, the phone beeped for an incoming call. I ignored it the first time, but when it came again I said to Geir I'd have to hang up and see who it was.

At first the display said simply there was an incoming call. I didn't take it, it could have been anybody. But then the number appeared. It was from Oslo. For all I knew, Gunnar could have been in Oslo, but the chances were slender, and besides I thought I recognized the first three digits, they belonged to the publisher Oktober.

I pressed the green key and put the receiver to my ear at the same time as I opened the door and went into the living room.

"Hello?" I said, going over to the window.

"Hi, it's Geir Berdahl."

"Hi."

"I got the e-mail from your uncle."

"Yes," I said.

He laughed uneasily. I stood at the window and put my forehead against the cool glass.

"Strong stuff."

"Yes."

"We need to tackle this properly."

"Yes."

I went over to the bookshelf and stared at the titles.

"We need to accommodate your uncle as far as possible. And we need to give ourselves some room to maneuver. We certainly can't allow him to make this a matter for the courts. I'm assuming it's not a problem for you to change the names of everyone on your father's side of the family?"

"No, not at all," I said, and went over to the opposite wall, turned and went back. "No, no problem. I offered to do that in the letter I sent him."

"Good. Then I can tell him we're changing the names. And anonymizing what needs to be anonymized, as far as we can."

"Yes."

"I'll get in touch with a law firm we use. Just so that you know. We need to be sure that whatever we do is current and above board, you realize that, of course."

"Yes."

"You've certainly got his back up, though, haven't you?"

"I'll say."

I went into the kitchen and stood there looking at the row of cupboard's above the sink. I went into the kitchen and stood there looking at the row of cupboards above the sink, one of them was open, one of the shelves, the one where we kept the glasses, was nearly empty. They must have been in the dishwasher.

"He might just want to put the wind up you a bit," he said.

"He has."

"All right, Karl Ove. Keep working at this as best you can. I'll call back once I've spoken to the lawyers."

"OK."

"Bye for now."

"Bye," I said, and hung up. I went back into the living room, then through the hall to the bathroom, where I turned on a tap and rinsed my hands in hot water. I went outside onto the balcony, but realized I couldn't sit there and smoke on my own, it would be too empty and still, so I went and got the phone I'd put down on the kitchen counter and called Linda.

"Hi!" she said.

"You sound happy," I said, going back into the living room and stepping up to the window. "Have you arrived?"

"No, I'm still on the train. I slept for a bit. Now I'm reading. What about you?"

"Not so good, I'm afraid. I got an e-mail from Gunnar. He's seething. Out of his mind with rage, pretty much."

"Oh no," she said. "What does he say?"

"You can read it when you get back. He wants to stop the book getting published, and if he can't he says he'll take us to court."

"You're joking?"

"I'm afraid not. It's about as bad as you can imagine."

"I can tell from your voice. Do you want me to come home again? I will if you want."

"No, no. No. Definitely not. Don't even think about it. You deserve this little break on your own. Everything's fine here. It's just the shock, that's all. It'll pass. I spoke to Geir Berdahl from

Oktober, they're getting the lawyers in and trying to patch things up as best they can. I'm in good hands. Everything's fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"OK."

"I just wanted you to know, that's all. Apart from that, everything's fine. I'll give you a call tonight, we can talk about it some more then if you want. Is that OK?"

It was OK. Linda had never met Gunnar, but she'd heard a lot about him. And it had left an impression on her that he'd stood there in the garden at Mom's without wanting to come in and meet the children or Linda herself. He was also the only one of those invited who hadn't come to Vanja's christening. Neither of these occurrences had seemed odd to me at the time; in the garden he was in a hurry, and as for the christening he simply hadn't been able to come. Now I saw things in a different light, the light of hatred in which he had written his letter. That hatred couldn't have arisen only now, suddenly, merely as a result of the book I had written, it must have been there long before, latent through all those years. I had felt it, had always felt it, and yet always thought it was my own paranoid unease. I didn't think anyone liked me, but that couldn't have been true, not really, he was my father's brother, why wouldn't he like me? If I did something he didn't approve of, wouldn't he give me the benefit of the doubt? That was how I looked at it, to combat what I told myself was all in my head, but now, in the tone of his letter, all semblance of such thinking vanished. That was how it was, and it had been like that for a long time, perhaps always. In his view, my writing the book confirmed to him what he had always thought about me. I had a small, though in my own view excessively large ego. I was unreliable and deceitful. I'd always felt it whenever I was with them, that I was deceitful. How did it come to that? If ever there was a thing I disliked and didn't want in my life it was deceit. Deceit could only make others, and thereby myself, look upon me as deceitful.

Why?

There was a simple answer. I had something to hide from them. A part of me I couldn't show or use in their company. And this fact, that there was something I had to avoid at all cost, made my behavior seem furtive in some way, thereby damaging my entire person and character. I tried to be like them when we were together, to talk like them, to be among them in their way, but in recognizing that I wasn't like that at all, like them, among them in their way, he saw through me. The betrayal started there.

I stood for a moment with the phone in my hand, staring through the living-room window at the buildings outside. I couldn't work, I couldn't read, I couldn't watch a film. I couldn't go out and meet someone either, not knowing anyone in Malmö well enough. All I could do was talk to someone on the phone. It wouldn't help, but it would make the moment tolerable, the mere fact of there being someone outside all this who would talk to me about it. So in the two hours that remained of the day, before I had to pick up the children from the nursery, I was on the phone. I talked to Geir Gulliksen about what to do, I talked to Espen, who told me I musn't change a word of the manuscript, not to give in to pressure, but to dig in and endure, I talked to Tore, who knew what it was like writing about things in a way that approached actual biography and how that could be taken by family, and

I talked to Yngve. He was distraught, he'd always got on well with Gunnar and there was no way he wanted to get caught in the crossfire. I told him it was my novel, I was the one who had written it, and that he had nothing at all to do with it, which Gunnar would surely understand. The way I saw it, Gunnar had always liked Yngve, always gone out of his way to keep in touch with him. Finally, I called Mom, she was on her way home from work and hadn't seen his e-mail, but would open it as soon as she got in. By then it was ten to three. I put my white sneakers on, got the keys from the cupboard, took the trash bag with me and went down into the basement, where I tossed it in one of the big garbage containers, went out through the back door, and followed one of the streets that ran behind the building in the direction of the nursery, the way I always did when I was feeling down and didn't want to be seen by anyone. I recognized the feeling I got when I emerged under the warm, deep-blue sky of August and walked along the exhaust-filled Föreningsgatan, past the cluster of figures who always stood smoking on the corner by the traffic lights, crossed over, went down the little stump of cobbled street up to the next junction with its row of young deciduous trees, dark green and shaded by the tall line of buildings, it was the same feeling I'd had the days after Dad had died, and the days after getting the phone call with its accusation of rape, the way the surroundings seemed almost to be erased, as if I'd wandered inside a zone so charged with force it extinguished everything else in its vicinity. I saw everything, I saw the cars, I saw the Lidl supermarket, I saw the pedestrians and the cyclists, registered what they were wearing, mostly shorts and T-shirts, skirts and dresses, but here and there a nice shirt and trousers, I saw the Montessori school on the other side of the crossing, the African hair salon, the Polish food store, and the row of little antique shops as I walked past, I saw the owner of one sitting on a chair on the sidewalk, as so often before, his old golden retriever dozing next to him, but none of it mattered, it was without substance and possessed no weight. And in this way I saw my own children too, as they came to greet me in the nursery's backyard. I bent down, I held them tight, because it was what I had to do, but not even that had substance enough for me to extract myself from my mood.

Two of the staff were sitting on a bench chatting while kids ran about playing all around them. The yard was asphalt with at one end a windowless wall maybe six stories high that looked mostly like the wall of a fortress and blocked out the sun for the better part of the day. Up against the wall was the sandpit and next to it a three-meter-tall playhouse. The storeroom on the other side was full of tricycles, bikes with training wheels, buckets and spades, balls and hockey sticks, as well as a miscellany of plastic toys that at the end of the day lay strewn across the entire area. The parents took turns putting in a week's work every six months, besides taking care of administrative duties and the day-to-day cleaning. I had done my best to avoid any position of responsibility, had never involved myself in the committee, for instance, never been in charge of human resources, recruitment or finance, always making sure to take on the most practical and least prestigious job of all, as part of the cleaning group. It was wholly manual work and it meant cleaning the entire nursery maybe five or six weekends spread over six months. Besides that, I cleaned on the days when the daily cleaning roster said it was my turn. Still, it suited me OK, requiring nothing more than the time it took, so when I was finished that was it. The only drawback was that every time I let myself in to clean on a Sunday evening I felt the strong urge to do a good job, which meant I always ended up spending a lot more time on it than was necessary. Most likely that was the reason I was asked to take charge of the cleaning group after my first six-month stint. I said yes, and from then on was charged with organizing the spring clean as well as drawing up rosters and keeping supplies of everything we needed, which didn't bother me that much, but when the year came to an end and jobs were to be redelegated at the annual meeting, I asked to go back to being an ordinary cleaner again. There was something about the prominence of being in charge that I didn't care for, as well as the fact that it also involved having to pass on any complaints about the cleaning from the staff to the parents who had been sloppy, which happened on occasion, and I could stand there wanting the floor to swallow me up, full of shame at having to inform them, because they were adults, and who was I to tell them they hadn't done their job properly and would have to do it again? I could do it once, twice in a pinch, but that was it.

I went up to the staff. Nadje, who grew up in Iraq and always kept the children under strict control, and Karin, one of the regular supply staff, formerly full-time, who had always felt very affectionate toward my children.

"How did it go today?" I asked.

"Fine," said Nadje. "No problems. John got his cheek scratched, not much, but he had a little cry about it and he's fine now."

"Who scratched him?"

"Heidi did. She said she was sorry," said Karin. "She was just as upset as John."

"OK," I said. "We'll be off, then."

I turned and called their names. John came right away, but Heidi, pedaling away at top speed over the asphalt with Malou in the trailer behind her, gave no indication of having heard me. Vanja was lying in the sandpit having her legs covered in sand, with Katinka doing the shoveling. I went over to them.

"Come on, it's time to go home," I said.

"*Lite till, pappa, var så snäll*," said Vanja with a grin. Please, Daddy, just a bit longer.

"Five minutes, that's all," I said, and sat down on the big stone opposite the bench. My body ached, and after having let go of Gunnar for a few seconds my thoughts seemed to return to him with renewed force. I'd been hoping that being with the kids would help and give me a new perspective, but it was just the opposite, I found myself feeling sorry for them having me for a father, for the person they saw and related to wasn't the same as who I was inside, and this would gradually dawn on them when they were old enough to be able to judge the people around them in terms of personal qualities and character traits, rather than just how they appeared to them in ordinary interaction. I wasn't good enough for them, but that wasn't the sad part of it, the sad part was that they didn't know.

"How's Linda?" Karin asked.

"She's fine," I said. "She's away at a friend's in the country at the moment, enjoying a break. Just for a few days."

"That's brave of you, having all the kids on your own."

"No, not at all," I said. "They're no bother."

That they never gave me any trouble was because I was strict with them, far stricter than when Linda was around. I wouldn't put up with things and gave them no leeway. They found this out soon enough and acted accordingly, but it wasn't good. The nursery staff didn't notice, seeing me only at drop-off and pickup times, and in those situations, with so many eyes upon me, my behavior was no different.

For crying out loud.

What a fucking mess.

How the hell could I ever have put myself in such a spot? What was I trying to do? Why couldn't I keep all the badness to myself like other people did? But no, I had to go and shove it in everyone's face, and drag others down with me in the fall.

Gunnar had done nothing apart from living his life as best he could, and now this.

I felt like shaking my fists at the sky and yelling at the top of my lungs. Instead I sat and stared at Heidi as she bombed around on her bike, John, who had climbed up next to Karin and now sat gazing up at the roof, Vanja, whose legs were now almost buried in sand, a stiff smile on my face to indicate how great I thought it was having children.

I stood up and went over to Vanja.

"Time to go home," I said. "No buts."

"But I've got no legs!" she said. "Look!"

"Is there a shark in this sand?" I said.

"No," she said. "I was born like this."

"All right, but it's still time to go."

"Why?"

"*Because*."

"OK," she said, getting to her feet again and brushing away the sand that didn't fall off on its own. I went over to John and lifted him into the air, he giggled until he realized he was going in the stroller, but after protesting a bit he gave in. Now only Heidi was left. I wasn't in the mood to look for her and shouted for her to come right away. When she didn't, I pressed the button for the gate, walked the stroller over toward it with Vanja holding tight and then opened it. We're going home, Heidi, I shouted, and with that she came running.

"*Vänta!*" she called out. "*Vänta!*"

"Yes, we're waiting," I said. "But you didn't come when you were called!"

In a sulk, she gripped the stroller without speaking. Sometimes all I had to do was look at her and wink, or make a face as if I was angry with her, for her sulk to dissolve into a smile, often a devilish one at that, and then came the annoyance at having been fooled, at which point she would hit me, but with a gleam in her eyes. Other times her resentment lay deeper. This was one of those times.

We walked along the sidewalk, the street was full of cyclists, people on their way home from work. Vanja couldn't stop talking. I listened with half an ear in case she looked up at me expecting a reaction of some sort, and noted that she was weighing up the pros and cons of the two breeds of dog she'd been interested in that week. Heidi walked along on the other side of the stroller, silent and in her mood, while John had descended into his usual stroller coma.

"Where's John? Did we leave him behind at the nursery?" I said, thinking he needed some attention too, in case he felt left out.

"Here! I'm here, Papa!" he cried, turning his face to look at me.

"There he is, our little John-boy!" I said, glancing ahead toward the pizza restaurant on the corner, where a few customers were sitting out eating under the green parasols. Some afternoons when I'd come past with the kids the place looked like there was a mafia convention going on inside. Elderly Italian guys in brown suits, short and stocky, with shifty eyes.

I looked back over my shoulder. Behind us, a woman in a black dress came hurrying along, almost dragging a boy by the arm, he was maybe nine years old, they overtook us and about ten meters farther on she shoved him up against the wall, where he pulled his pants down and started pissing while she glanced up and down the street. I couldn't believe my eyes. His piss flowed across the sidewalk.

"What's he doing?" said Vanja, looking from them to me.

"It looks like he's having a pee," I said.

The boy shook himself and zipped up his fly, and then they hurried over the road and continued on along the other sidewalk, whereas we turned left at the bike shop and made our way toward Södra Förstadsgatan. Just before the 7-Eleven we came to a halt. Heidi refused to go a step farther.

"I'm tired," she said.

"Oh, Heidi," I said. "Come on, it's not far, we'll be home in a minute."

She shook her head.

"I want in the stroller," she said.

"But it's not big enough for two, it'll break. Remember when the wheel came off?"

"I want some fruit," she said.

"You can have some fruit, but not here. You can have a banana when we get to the shop."

"I want it from that shop," she said, pointing back from where we came.

"You want to go back?" I said. "All that way?"

"Yes."

Vanja, who was still standing on the other side holding on to the stroller, laughed.

"Vanja," I said. "That's enough, don't interfere."

"She laughed at me," said Heidi. Heidi hated more than anything the feeling that people were laughing at her.

"No, she didn't," I said. "We'll walk on to the shop and you can get some fruit there."

Heidi looked at me. Then she turned and ran off as fast as she could along the sidewalk. She stopped halfway and glared at me in defiance.

"Stay right here, Vanja," I said. "Promise?"

Vanja nodded and I ran after Heidi. As soon as she saw me coming she set off again. As I caught up with her she stopped and wrapped her arms around a lamppost as tightly as she could.

"That's enough from you," I said, wrenching her away and carrying her back to the stroller. She screamed at the top of her lungs. People stopped and stared. It was what she wanted. But they couldn't see that. They thought I was hitting her or something. I thought the same thing myself whenever I saw mothers or fathers stooped over their children like that, their aggressive body language always made me think they had to be bad parents, people of the worst possible kind, even though I knew what it was like.

I put her down.

She yelled and said she wasn't going anywhere.

"Do you want me to carry you?"

She shook her head.

"What do you suggest then?"

"*Jag vill ha en frukt! Från* den *affären!*" she yelled. I want fruit! From that shop!

I lost control immediately. I grabbed her hard by the arm, pushed my face into hers, and hissed at her.

"That's enough from you! Do you understand? Come here!"

Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Do you hear me?"

"I won't!" she screamed. "*Du är dum! Du är en skitpappa!*" You're stupid! You're a horrible daddy!

"What did you say?" I spat, trying to keep my voice down so as to not give anyone watching ammunition.

"*Du är en skitpappa!*"she said.

Vanja grinned.

"It's nothing to smile about!" I said, and right away her face changed to serious. But then, for some incomprehensible reason, I smiled too, and Vanja started to laugh.

"You're all laughing at me!" Heidi yelled. And then she ran off again. This time she only made it a couple of meters before I caught her and hauled her back over my shoulder, then held her out in front of me.

"Are you going to walk with us?"

She shook her head.

"Put me down!" she shouted.

"Do you want me to ask John if he'll walk? So you can sit in the stroller?"

She nodded.

John, realizing what was happening, was already gripping the stroller tightly with both hands.

The thought occurred to me that Heidi might have a bruise on her arm in the morning. It made me think of a case I'd read about, in Norway, a registered nanny who had broken a child's leg forcing him into his stroller.

"Come on, John," I said. "I'll carry you, and Heidi can sit in the stroller."

"My stroller," said John.

"I'll carry him," said Vanja.

He went for it! I lifted him onto her back, he put his arms around her and held tight while Heidi got into the stroller, and our little circus procession finally set off again. Vanja could only manage as far as the 7-Eleven, but being out of the stroller already, John didn't mind at all being carried on my arm instead.

Heidi had fallen asleep even before we got to the supermarket. So that was why, she really had been tired. I bought some falukorv sausage, a recipe mix for beef stroganoff, a packet of rice, ingredients for a salad, milk and yogurt, a large Pepsi Max. I was angry with myself for taking my frustrations out on the children. And yet it didn't stop me being strict with Vanja as we passed through the supermarket. No, I said. No, you're not having one of those. Come here, now. Come here, I said! Oh no, you don't! It was like somehow existing on different levels, all of which had suddenly become active at the same time. One that was absorbed in the letter from Gunnar and an almost savage feeling of despair. One that was thinking about what to have for dinner, and that steered the shopping cart around the store accordingly. One that regretted having treated Heidi the way I had before. One that was annoyed by Vanja's behavior. One that was sad to see her obey, because maybe it meant I was strangling her spirit. One that was pleased she did as she was told.

The arm I was using to carry John was aching from his weight by the time it got to be our turn at the checkout. I put him down so I could place the groceries on the conveyor and he ambled off to the end and tried to climb up, it was one of those things he liked to do, to kneel on the shelf underneath and watch the groceries come gliding along. I lifted him up, then took the last items from the cart, inserted my card into the card reader, keyed in my PIN number, confirmed the amount when it appeared on the display, removed the card, and slid it back in my pocket.

I bagged the groceries, lifted John onto my arm, and then we set off home.

"Who did you play with at *dagis* today?" I said, and looked at Vanja, mostly to see if she was feeling affected by my harshness. "Benjamin or Katinka? Or Lovisa?"

"*Inte Lovisa*," she said. Not Lovisa. "*Og liiite Benjamin*." And Benjamin a teeny bit.

A beggar, one of the most active, had stationed himself outside the bank. He was on his knees with his hands folded in front of him, rocking backward and forward as he glared at the passersby. In front of him was a cap with some coins in it.

"Why's he sitting like that?" said Vanja.

"He's begging," I said. "He wants money."

"Why hasn't he got any money?"

"I don't know," I said. "He probably doesn't have a job. So he begs to get money for food."

"Why didn't you give him any?"

"Because he's not doing anything. If he'd been playing an instrument or something I'd have given him some. That's what I usually do, anyway. But sometimes I might give something to beggars anyway. If I feel sorry for them. Never much, though."

"Why didn't you give him any then?"

"What a lot of questions," I said, and smiled.

She smiled back.

"He's most probably from Eastern Europe. That's a group of countries a long way away. They come here to beg for money. They're a kind of gang."

"A gang of thieves? Are they thieves?"

"Not exactly. But they've basically made it their job. Which means there's no point begging anymore. Begging's not a job."

I laughed at my reasoning and Vanja smiled at me. I picked up speed so we could cross while the light was still green. On the other side of the road, the old saxophonist sat playing his amputated little tune. Now I'd have to give him something. I dipped into my pocket and fished out what was there, stared at the coins that lay in my palm, and handed Vanja five kronor.

"Do you want to give him this?" I asked.

She looked up at me with fright in her eyes. Then she nodded, a grave little nod, and stepped forward almost on tiptoe, slow, measured paces, and tossed the coin into his open instrument case. He winked at her, and she scurried back to my side.

We needed to get some fruit as well. The stall didn't take cards, so I put John down on the ground and waited my turn at the ATM, glancing at the faces of those standing around or passing the long curve of the building that occupied one corner of the square and on whose top floor we lived. I was keeping an eye out for Gunnar. I knew the chances of him turning up here were minimal, but there was little that was rational about this, it was basically all feelings, and the depths of those feelings were unfathomable.

The woman in front of me, with short sandy hair and glasses and an almost cone-shaped body, snatched her receipt from the machine and stuck her card back in her pocket, casting a quick wary glance at me. I inserted my card and tapped in my PIN, withdrew three hundred kronor, and checked to see what John was doing while I waited for the transaction to complete, he was already on his way over to the fruit stall, hugging the wall of the building, small as a tree stump.

"Do you want to hold the money, Vanja?" I said.

"Can I keep it?"

"No, but you can pay for the fruit."

"I don't want to."

"OK," I said. "Give it to me then, I'll do it. Look at John, have you seen him? Do you think he's forgotten all about us?"

She laughed when she realized he'd gone over to the shoe shop. I wheeled the stroller over to the stall, then trotted off to bring him back, picked out a bunch of bananas, put some apples and oranges in a couple of bags, filled another with green grapes, and handed the whole lot to the stallholder, who I supposed was from Turkey, or perhaps Macedonia or Albania. He weighed the fruit and put it all in a big white carrier bag, I handed him some money, and when he gave me the change I saw he'd knocked eight kronor off the price, I thanked him and crossed the square with Heidi still asleep in the stroller, handed the key card to Vanja, who held it up to the panel and pushed the door open. I wheeled the stroller inside and turned it around so I could drag it up the two steps. Heidi's head bumped this way and that, but without her waking up. John was already at the elevator, trying to reach up and press the button.

"You're too little," I said. "Try again next year."

"Lift me up!" he said.

I did, and held him up so he could see the elevator through the small rectangular window in the door when it came gliding down to find us.

When we got upstairs I pushed the stroller into the hall. If I woke Heidi up now she'd cry and whine for an hour at least, and I wasn't in the mood. The price for leaving her be was that she wouldn't be able to sleep when she went to bed tonight.

I put a film on for them so I could make the dinner in peace. Then I gave them each an apple, got the groceries out of the bags and sorted them, fruit in the fruit bowl in the cupboard, milk in the fridge, vegetables on the counter, falukorv on the chopping board. I'd thought about boiling some rice but changed my mind, there was still some macaroni left, we could have that instead. I went and got the phone in the hall, called Geir Angell, measured out some water and milk, put it in a saucepan, added the recipe mix, and started stirring all before he answered.

"What are you up to?" I asked. "You normally answer right away."

"I was in the bath, my book got wet and I had to dry it with the hair dryer."

"The hair dryer?"

"That's right, the hair dryer."

I made an incision in the tight dark red sheath of plastic around the sausage, tore it away, and began chopping the meat into little chunks.

"How's it going?" Geir asked. "Still as bad?"

"Still as bad."

I filled another saucepan with water and put it on the heat.

"He's got me in his power. Him turning against me is the worst that could happen. But being scared stiff of him is only part of it. There's the issue itself. I've offended him. He didn't do anything, he didn't ask for this. And once it gets published he won't be able to defend himself against it either. It's his mother, after all. They're real people."

"Have you ever been in doubt about it?" Geir asked.

"No, but you know what it's like when you're writing."

"I know what it's like to be written about."

"You didn't call for two days. You were pissed off with me."

"At first, yes. But then I thought about it. I think Ernst Billgren got it right when he was asked to comment on having appeared in *Den högsta kasten*. He said he was aware there was a character in the book with the same name as him. In my case, I can't see it that way, what you've written about is too close to home for that, but the point is that he indicates an escape route that's open to any person in a novel. There's a character in that book who's got the same name as me."

"But you're a literary person. I've never seen a book in Gunnar's house. I don't think he reads. That makes it a different thing altogether."

"You talk about him like he was defenseless! For God's sake, didn't you read what he wrote? He's making you out to be half-baked! And sending it off to your publisher! He's out to destroy you, Karl Ove. He's not defenseless. You can't just sit there and let him get on with it. I bet you've even thought about not publishing the book at all?"

"That goes without saying."

"In which case you'd be letting an accountant in Kristiansand decide the path of Norwegian literature. You can't do that, can you?"

"I will publish it."

I went to the cupboard and got the box of macaroni out, shook some into the boiling water, stirred a bit with a fork, and turned the heat down.

"The question is by what right. The right of literature? That means I'm saying literature is more important than the life of the individual. And not only that, I'm saying my literature is more important than his life."

"But it's not his life! It's your father's life. He's the brother, you're the son. The son's closer."

I angled the chopping board over the saucepan and scraped the chunks of sausage into the sauce, took four plates out of the cupboard and put them on the table, opened the drawer and got the knives and forks out.

"And then there's the law," I said.

"The law can't preside over literature."

"Of course it can."

"Of course it *does*, would be more accurate. Mykle was taken to court, but his book still gets read."

"There's a big difference between offending the sexual morals of the day and offending an individual. Besides, there was another aspect to the Mykle case. Maybe it was what broke him in the end. The people he wrote about recognized themselves. And not just in any old context. All the women he slept with recognized themselves in his descriptions. That was what the scandal was really all about. Tarjei Vesaas spoke about it, as far as I remember, once he realized. 'Rather unfortunate,' he said. Something like that, anyway."

"Ha ha ha!"

"You can laugh, but Vesaas was a decent man. Maybe the most decent Norwegian ever. If he says something isn't good, you can be damn sure of it."

"Didn't you say they found an envelope full of Marilyn Monroe cuttings among his things after he died?"

"I did, yes. Even in sin he was decent."

"Sounds like it."

I got four glasses out of the cupboard, turned off the two rings on the cooker. and filled a jug with water.

"Anyway, I've got to go," I said. "I've got the dinner ready."

"Are you going to be OK?" he said.

"Yes, yes. I just have to get through it, that's all."

"What exactly are you scared of anyway?"

"What, do you think the papers aren't going to write about it? That they're just going to let it pass without mention? It's going to be a storm. I'm going to be all over every newspaper in the land."

"Lie back and think about how rich you're going to be instead."

I didn't bother answering, and went into the hall.

"Cheer up. It'll be fun!"

"Speak to you later," I said.

"Hope so."

"All right."

I hung up and put the phone back in the charger.

"Dinner's ready," I called into the living room. Vanja said something I did't catch. I went in.

"John's asleep," she said.

He was lying there like a little cushion in a corner of the sofa.

"We're the only two awake, then," I said.

"Mm," she replied, immersed in a film, *Totoro*.

"Dinner's ready," I said.

"Can I have mine in front of the television? Please?"

"Seeing as it's only you," I said. "And if you promise not to make a mess."

She nodded. I went back into the kitchen and transferred the macaroni into a colander, then spooned some onto the plate, dished some of the sausage stroganoff onto it, cut a tomato into wedges that I placed next to the sauce for the sake of presentation, and took the whole thing into the living room and put it in front of her. I wasn't hungry in the slightest and made do with chomping a tomato on my way into the bedroom to check my e-mail. There was nothing more from Gunnar, and nothing from anyone else involved. Still, just seeing his name, and the subject he'd given his e-mail, "Verbal rape," was enough to petrify me. I stretched out on the bed and stared up at the ceiling. The fear and dread came back in full. I couldn't use the children to keep me going, that wasn't good, they were supposed to need me, not the other way around.

I got to my feet and went to the bathroom, found the blue IKEA bags and spent a couple of minutes sorting through the pile of dirty clothes, telling myself I'd have to go down in the morning after I'd dropped the children off and see if there was a slot so I could do the washing, then all of a sudden I couldn't be bothered and went back through the hall, stopping in the doorway to check on Vanja, she had a forkful of food paused in front of her mouth, completely spellbound by what she was watching.

Totoro roared. It was a terrifying roar, but he was good at heart, that much was obvious, and there was something reassuring about it.

The phone rang.

I looked at the display.

Linda.

I answered.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hi, it's me," she said. "How're things?"

"Good," I said.

"Did you get home all right?"

"Yes, everything went fine."

"Can I have a word with them?"

"Heidi and John are asleep. I'll see if Vanja wants to."

I held the receiver against my chest as I went into the living room.

"Do you want to say hello to Mommy?" I asked.

"Can you pause it?" she said.

I nodded and she reached her hand out for the phone.

"Hi," she said, and went out of the room. I looked around for the remote, fining it on the bookshelf, pressed pause, and went out after her. She'd gone into their room. When she saw me she closed the door.

She'd grown up so much she wanted to be left alone when she was on the phone!

I checked on Heidi, she was still asleep in the stroller. Then John, he was asleep too. I opened the door onto the balcony, lit a cigarette, took a few drags, stubbed it out, and went in again. I didn't know what to do with myself, too much on edge to sit down.

I went into the kitchen and filled a glass with water from the tap, downing it in one gulp. I got some coffee going, and the sound it made as it began to trickle through the machine was soothing, I'd been hearing it all my life and had always connected it with something good.

All I wanted was to lie down next to someone who could run their fingers through my hair and tell me everything was going to be all right.

I hadn't wanted that since I was a little boy.

No one had ever done that then. Now there was someone who could, if only I let her. I never had. There was something shameful about it, degrading almost.

Nevertheless, it was what I wanted.

I went into the hall and opened the door of the children's room. Vanja had climbed onto the desk and stood there chatting away.

"Can you give me the phone back when you've finished talking?" I said.

"I'm finished now," she said. "Bye."

She handed me the phone.

"It's me again," I said, and went down the hall. "What did she tell you?"

Linda laughed.

"All about what she did today."

"She didn't tell me anything," I said. "And as soon as I gave her the phone she went into her own room, as if she didn't want me to listen."

"It was so nice talking to her. She's such a big girl all of a sudden."

"She is, yes."

"How are you feeling?" Linda asked.

"Not so good. It'll get better, I suppose. I miss you."

"I miss you too. Do you think you could call back later?"

"Yes, of course," I said.

"I think we're having a barbecue. Maybe if you phone about ten-ish?"

"Fine. Speak to you then."

"Bye."

I hung up. Vanja had resumed the film herself. She'd barely touched her dinner.

"Can't you eat something?" I said. She sighed, took two mouthfuls, then pushed the plate away.

"Is that all?"

"I'm not hungry."

"But you'll be pestering me for a sandwich soon. It's better to eat your dinner."

"I'm not hungry, I said."

Now it was my turn to sigh. I picked up the plate and took it into the kitchen, leaving it on the table for her to eat later, went out onto the balcony, looked down at the square, went inside again, looked at the clock on the kitchen wall, half past five, then went into the bedroom and checked my e-mail. Nothing. I opened a couple of online newspapers, *Aftenposten* and *Dagbladet*, then *NRK*, and after that a couple of book blogs I half kept up with. One of them had come to my attention after I'd been invited to contribute an article. I declined, but would sometimes read what others were posting there, mostly one-book authors, occasionally someone better known. Those who commented all seemed to be people who were writing and wanted to get published, they were especially interested in the process and anything that had to do with the way publishers worked. The way they looked at literature and the things they wrote about authors were for the most part childish, they got steamed up about the slightest thing and seemed to view themselves as important people with important opinions.

It struck me that was exactly how Gunnar saw me.

It was almost word for word. I had a small though in my own view excessively large ego, he had written.

In other words I was a small person, yet blind to the fact, considering myself important, and what I did to be equally important.

It was a rather accurate description, I was indeed a small person. But the high thoughts I had were not about myself, but about what I did, or was capable of doing. In more positive frames of mind I believed I could achieve something big one day. But could a small person create something big? Didn't external greatness have to be founded on internal greatness?

How could I dismiss the people who posted comments on the blog as inconsequential? I was elevating myself above them, and so I was the same as them, important in my own eyes.

In my own eyes I was a better writer than most. Only seldom did I read the work of another novelist and think, I could never do this. But after my first novel came out that was how I looked at it, what I had written was so close to my own person I told myself anyone could do the same thing, all they had to do was write. Yet with the second book I had not only written in the third person, but also told a story as far removed from myself and my own reality as I could. That extended my radius. The unattainable for me was closely bound up with the person who had written it. Thomas Bernhard, for instance, what he wrote and achieved was completely out of my reach. Jon Fosse the same. But not a writer like Jonathan Franzen. Him I could match, and probably even surpass. The same was true of Coetzee, he also was a writer who lacked the distinctive aspect of personality that could take his writing that final stretch of the way; what he wrote didn't seem out of reach to me, and he'd been given the Nobel Prize. The issue was whether or not excellence was bound up with the personal. If that was what made the excellent excellent. And what point could there be in attaining the level below excellence, that which was good, perhaps even recognized internationally as high standard, if the excellent still remained? Clearly, it was because the value lay in the work, not in the appraisal of it. It didn't matter what kind of work you did, you were obliged to do your best. A joiner's work had to be as good and precise as possible. There was satisfaction in that. Should an ordinary joiner, whose work was run-of-the-mill, without panache, who went to work every morning and was there for his family in the afternoons and evenings, be troubled by the existence of a master joiner somewhere in Austria, a joiner who produced the most magnificent work, and ask himself what point there could possibly be in all his own solid yet unspectacular work? Should he lay down his hammer and nails because of that master joiner in Austria?

Of course not. He should carry on with his work, to the best of his abilities. Perhaps even be glad to at least be a better joiner than the one the newspaper had written about only recently, people knew about him, he wasn't as good a joiner as everyone said. His work might seem good, but on closer inspection it was shoddy. Thank goodness one's own work was solid!

The value lay in the work itself, not in the appraisal of it.

But to Gunnar I was nonetheless still a status seeker with ideas above his station, a bigheaded nephew willing to trample on the dead in order to make himself superior.

To him what I did was entirely without value.

And writing was such a fragile thing. It wasn't hard to write well, but it was hard to make writing that was alive, writing that could pry open the world and draw it together in one and the same movement. When it didn't work, which it never really did, not really, I would sit there like a conceited idiot and wonder who I thought I was, supposing I could write for others. Did I know any better than everyone else? Did I possess some secret no one else possessed? Were my experiences particularly valuable? My thoughts about the world especially valid?

Gunnar had pointed his finger at me. He had said, I know you. You think you're someone, but you're just a little shit. And you've meddled in something that's none of your business, something you don't even understand. If you go through with this, I'll take you to court. I'll make you bleed. I'll destroy you. You little shit of a nephew.

That was what he was saying.

He had warned me of it back when I was seventeen and had written disparagingly about Sissel Kyrkjebø in the local newspaper *Fædrelandsvennen*. Who do you think you are, he'd said, seventeen years old and writing so unfavorably about an artist who can sell two hundred thousand records? He was embarrassed by me, presumably also because we shared the same name and he would be associated with what I'd done. Kristiansand was a small town, and everyone read *Fædrelandsvennen*.

I was proud my name was in the paper. But when he said those words to me I squirmed on my chair and blushed, what he said hurt. I measured the world by my indie yardstick, it was how I judged the quality of everything in the field of culture. He knew nothing about that world at all, to him it was nonsense, and that was what I felt, that he was measuring me by the real world. The adult world, the world of responsible people. I opposed that world, but that was when I was on my own, because no sooner was I confronted by it than what did I do? I bowed my head in deep and heartfelt shame.

I shoved the chair back, my face burning, and went in to check on Vanja.

"Do you want to watch the film or *Bolibompa*?" I asked.

"*Bolibompa*," she said. "Is it on now?"

I nodded, turned the DVD off with the remote, and switched the kids' channel on. She'd been sitting on her own in front of the TV for a long time, it was a lousy last resort, and though I was distraught and restless I sat down on the sofa beside her. Because she seldom climbed onto my lap of her own accord but was often glad when I picked her up, I put my arms around her and lifted her onto my knee. She wrenched my arms away, but stayed put.

John lay motionless at the other end, his breathing a murmur, his hair damp with sweat. The sun was a barrage against the window, but the blinds kept most of its rays out and transformed those that came in into a white, hallucinatory shimmer, apart from the window of the balcony door, which was unprotected and allowed a cylinder of light into the room, full of floating specks of dust that whirled like electrons in the air.

"I'm hungry," said Vanja. "I want a sandwich."

I took a deep breath.

"Vanja," I said. "What did I tell you! I said you'd be wanting a sandwich soon. You haven't eaten your dinner yet. You can eat your dinner instead. You can see that, surely?"

She didn't answer.

"Do you want me to bring over your plate again?"

"No. Can I have an apple?"

"If you eat some more of your dinner."

"I don't want any."

"OK, then," I said. "You can have an apple, if that's what you want. But you can go and get it yourself."

She slid off my knee, scurried out into the kitchen, and when she came back, already munching on an apple, she climbed up next to me.

I got up and went to find some clean pajamas. The air in their room was warm and close, I opened the two small vents above the window and the sounds of the city seeped inside.

There were toys all over the floor. I made a mental note about having to clean up tomorrow, opened a drawer and found a nightgown. Heidi could sleep in the dress she had on, John in his shorts; if I was lucky they wouldn't wake up when I carried them to bed.

"Here, put this on," I said, tossing the nightgown into Vanja's face. She picked it up and gave me a fleeting smile, then started to get undressed with her eyes glued to the TV. I went and fetched her toothbrush and once she'd got changed I brushed her teeth.

"Do you want to read here or in bed?" I said.

"*Bolibompa*'s not finished yet!"

"It'll be finished in a minute," I said. "Bed or sofa?"

"Bed."

I went in and scanned their bookshelf, picking out three books so there was a choice. *Rapunzel* by the Brothers Grimm, *Gittan och fårskallarna*, and one of the Petra books, the one where she starts nursery school.

"What about John and Heidi?" she said after I turned the TV off. "Don't they have to go to bed?"

"I'll carry them in after I've read you a story."

"I want to be carried in too."

"All right," I said. "And are you going to pretend to be asleep?"

"No. Just carry me."

I lifted her up and carried her to the bed, sat down next to her, and said she could choose a book. She picked *Rapunzel*. A good choice, I liked it too. Earlier that summer I'd spent two days in Germany, I'd done a reading at a castle in the same area the Brothers Grimm had collected many of their folktales, so I was told.

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your golden hair!" I said to Vanja as she sat there beside me on the bottom bunk, looking at the pictures as I read out loud. I had no idea why she'd got attached to this particular tale when there were so many of the others she didn't care about. It started with a man and a woman having to give their child away to a witch, and to a child that surely had to be the most primeval of all fears, perhaps that was what appealed to her, or perhaps it was the strangeness of a woman letting her hair down from a tower and a man climbing up it to set her free. For me the fairy tale was a kind of literary archetype, or rather a primordial force of literature itself, since on the surface everything was about transformation, including the world's own transformation into fairy tale, and at the same time this transformation involved a kind of simplification, reality contracting into a small number of figures that were so precise and so perfectly honed after having been through so many differently shaped experiences that their truth surpassed any individual experience of the circumstances, this was the same for everyone, and when these different figures were set into motion, the depths in each and every listener opened, and those depths were bottomless. For many years I'd thought of having a novel take place in that domain, in the forests, where there were trolls and ghosts, workhouses and kings, talking bears and foxes, and in the nineteenth-century reality of the Norway through which Asbjørnsen and Moe had traveled when they collected their folktales. Kristiania, Telemark, the valleys of inner Østland. But it would take years of work, and time was something I didn't have at the moment. Nevertheless, whenever I read folktales to the children, the thought came back to me that the potential was there. One of the Grimms' tales was especially compelling, the woman who falls into the well and comes out into another world. Sadly, the version we had was a dreadful translation, which was a shame. Vanja didn't know that though, and it was for her sake we were reading.

"The end," I said when we finished the last page. "Sleep time now."

"Will you tickle me and sing a goodnight song?"

"Of course," I said. She lay down on her tummy, I drew up her nightgown and ran my nails lightly up and down her back. That was what she meant by "tickle," and we had to do it every night while we sang.

Vem kan segla förutan vind?
Vem kan ro utan åror?
Vem kan skiljas från vännen sin
utan att fälla tårar?

Jag kan segla förutan vind,
Jag kan ro utan åror.
Men ej skiljas från vännen min
utan att fälla tårar.

Who can sail without the wind?
Who can row without an oar?
Who can leave a friend so dear
without shedding tears?

I can sail without the wind.
I can sail without an oar.
Yet not leave a friend so dear
without shedding tears.

After I'd sung I tucked her in under the duvet, took off her glasses, and put them on top of the little set of drawers next to her bed.

"Daddy?" she said.

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yes, what is it?"

"Why can't he leave his friend without shedding tears?"

"Why do you think it's a he?"

"Because it's you singing."

"You're right, I hadn't thought of that. I suppose it's because he's very fond of his friend, don't you think?"

"Yes," she said, and put her head down on the pillow, apparently content with the answer. "Night night."

"I'll be back again in a minute," I said. "I've got to put John and Heidi to bed as well."

"Oh yes, I forgot."

I fetched John first and put him down carefully in his crib, then Heidi, which was more of a problem, I had to get her out of the stroller, and my efforts woke her up. No! she wailed, squirming as I clutched her tight to my chest and scuttled into the bedroom, depositing her inelegantly on her bunk above Vanja's, hoping that reality's intrusion into sleep would be so brief as not to get the better of it, and luckily, after drawing herself up onto her knees and staring at me for a few short seconds, she lay down on her side and closed her eyes, and before long her breathing grew heavy again.

"Night night, little one," I said to Vanja, and switched off the ceiling light.

"Can you leave the door open?" she said.

"Yes, of course," I said. "Sleep tight."

"Sleep tight."

I went in and checked my e-mail. There were no new messages. It was a relief in one way, but disturbing in another, since Tonje and Jan Vidar had both been sent copies of the manuscript some time ago, and that neither had got back to me about it could only mean one thing.

To allay their worries a bit, or assume some kind of control over them, I decided to send both a new e-mail. To Tonje I wrote:

Dear Tonje,

Not having heard back from you, I'm assuming maybe you're upset and shocked at having been dragged into a novel just like that without having asked for it. The way I see it, I'm not holding you up in any bad light, on the contrary, as Tore said when he read it, "Tonje's a princess, her entry makes you glad," but at the same time I understand that just being included in a novel is to be held up in *some way. If you want, and I'm sure you do, I'm quite willing to change your name and those of everyone in your circle so that you can't be associated with the novel (in any other way than having been married to its author, but of course that's unavoidable).*

All the best,
Karl Ove

To Jan Vidar I wrote pretty much the same. Once I'd done that I looked in on the children, they were all asleep now, picked up the phone, went out onto the balcony, sat down, poured myself a coffee, lit a cigarette, and called Mom.

She answered right away.

"Hello? Sissel speaking," she said.

"Hi, it's Karl Ove," I said. "Have you read the e-mail now?"

"Yes, I have."

"What do you think?"

"I'm incensed, I must say," she said. "And upset. I've been sitting here trying to work out what to say to him. But I suppose it's best to wait a while."

"You shouldn't reply to him," I said. "If you do, you'll be meeting him on his own terms, you'll be descending to his level."

"That's true," she said. "Your grandfather once said folly isn't worth an answer. It's a good piece of advice. But I'm so angry I'd like to give him a piece of my mind. He signs himself your father's brother. Well, your father would never have done anything like this, I want you to know that."

"I don't know what to believe," I said, and laughed uneasily. "You're my only source as far as all this is concerned."

"What do you mean?"

"That's what he says, isn't it? That I got it all from you."

"Oh, that. It's sort of an odd opinion, that I should be responsible for you when you're forty years old. How long can a person be held responsible for what their children do?"

"He watched me grow up. I think to him I'm still a teenager."

"You might be right there. But the idea of me hating the Knausgaards like that is just ludicrous. I've no doubt I was shy and reserved when I came into the family as a twenty-year-old, he's right about that, and your grandmother on your father's side was certainly a very warm and sociable person, especially to you children. So there is a grain of truth to what he says. In a way he's describing a caricature of me. I can see I could be perceived like that."

"A cold wind from Vestland?"

"Yes. Visiting us that time obviously left an impression on him. A peasant smallholding, he calls it. Funny to see that word again, but compared to what he was used to, we were poor. It was a totally different culture. Maybe it frightened him. Grandmother was quiet, she never said much, that must have been different for him too."

There was a brief silence. I lit another cigarette and put my feet up on the railing as I stared at the gray-blue summer sky with all its planes on their way in and out of the two airports, Kastrup and Sturup.

"There was something he wrote that touched me in a way," I said after a moment. "That bit about him having known us when we were little. You know, where he talks about "the boys"? He says you neglected us by not putting Dad right and intervening when we most needed it. I had no idea anyone else could see that Dad maybe wasn't good for us. But he saw that. He must have, for him to put it like that. His conclusion is different from mine, because I was there and I know you were the one who rescued me, but just the fact someone else could see what was happening, or there was some knowledge of it, touches me, strangely enough."

"Everything's about being seen. I understand if you feel that way. Especially if you put him in your father's place, as you say."

"Yes, there is something there. I feel that. Some deeper structures."

"But your father saw you, I want you to know that. He knew you for who you were."

"I'm not sure about that, to be honest."

"Well, it's true. He did."

I cried when she said those words, though quietly and without it affecting my voice, so she wasn't aware of it. We talked for another half hour or so about Gunnar and what he had written, not so much about the book that had provoked him as about the family, both Dad's and hers. She told me more about what it had been like for her coming into his family back at the beginning of the sixties, and some more about the person he'd been then. She had done the same when Dad died, I'd called her several times a day, and what she did was to raise him up for me, reminding me over and over that while he may have been tormented he had also been a person who made an impression on people: intelligent, insightful, knowledgeable, inquisitive, farsighted. She knew I needed another image of my father and gave me the man she had known, showing me the way he had appeared in the eyes of an adult when I had still been a child.

She was doing the same thing now.

I was being drawn further and further into something whose deeper nature was as yet unknown to me. Gunnar's letter gave a picture of the family I'd grown up a part of that was completely different from my own, and the picture Mom gave of Dad was different too, impossible to reconcile with my own experience of him. It was as if everything was suddenly turning in on me.

The first thing I did once I'd finished talking to Mom was call Linda.

"Hi," she said.

"Are you on your own?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm sitting in my room here. It's such a lovely place they've got. And Helena's taking such good care of me."

"Did you barbecue?"

"Yes, it was really nice," she said. *Jättemysigt*, in her Swedish. "But how are you doing? And how are the kids?"

I told her about our day. We discussed Gunnar's e-mail and the letter he'd sent to Mom, but it wasn't the right time for it. She told me a bit more about what she'd been up to, what they'd been doing, what the place was like. While she was talking I remembered another conversation we'd had once, early in the summer the year we first got together as a couple. She had gone to her mother's place outside Gnesta, it was the first time we'd been away from each other. I missed her so much my whole body hurt. That time too I had tried to imagine what the place where she was staying looked like, picturing a house, a garden, forest. Later, in the first weeks of autumn, I saw it with my own eyes, and of course it was quite different, much more forceful in its impression, and the first, almost dreamlike images that had come to me vanished without a trace, displaced by reality's chunky solidity. She told me she'd been at the beach that day, that she'd been lying on the jetty with her mother, reading out loud three texts that I'd written that had just been published in a book I'd given her. Her mother thought they were fantastic, she said, and laughed with joy. Later in the evening she had told them all about me, and she said they liked me already. I sat in my apartment, her dark voice in my ear, and imagined the room in which she sat, the person I loved and wanted more than anything else.

In the photos we took at the time we looked almost frighteningly young. Linda was twenty-nine, I was thirty-three. Linda still looked young, whereas I looked like I'd spent the intervening years living on the street, there was something ravaged about my face now, the deep, almost parodic furrows in my brow, my nose longer and more pointed, and my eyes made me look like I was glaring even when I felt most at ease.

How I'd loved her then. She was the only thing I cared for. I didn't give a damn about anything else. It couldn't have gone on like that, of course not, I would have burned out, but was this really where we were meant to go? Was this what we were together for?

But it wasn't too late. Nothing had been lost. Everything was still within reach.

"I wish you were here now," I said.

"I'm so glad to hear it, Karl Ove," she said.

"I'm not just saying that."

"I know. I miss you too."

"That's what I mean. Being away from each other's a good thing."

"Ha ha."

We said goodnight, I hung up and went in to check my e-mail again. Not a word from anyone. I surfed the Web for half an hour before getting undressed and going to bed. It was only ten to nine, but if I was going to get through the next morning without irritation I had to wake up rested. And

Heidi had fallen asleep so early she'd probably be up and about at five, if not before.

I woke briefly at about half past ten when Vanja came in dragging her duvet behind her, but fell asleep again right away. The next time I woke, John was standing at the bed staring at me holding his pillow.

"Is it morning yet?" he said.

I glanced at the time. Five fifteen.

"Nearly. Do you want some breakfast?"

He nodded.

"Go into the kitchen then, I'll come in a minute."

He did as I said.

I got up, and Gunnar's e-mail came back to me. I went through the hallway and picked the papers up off the mat before going into the kitchen. It faced directly east, where the sun already reddened the horizon. I lifted John up into his chair, put a plate of muesli and yogurt in front of him, filled the coffeemaker with water, put a filter in the filter holder, spooned in the coffee, and switched it on. As it ticked and gurgled, I skimmed the culture and sports sections in the two newspapers.

"Hi, Daddy!" said Heidi, appearing wide awake in the doorway.

"Heidi-Hi," I said. "Muesli or cornflakes?"

"Cornflakes. But I want to pour the milk."

"OK," I said.

She went off and I heard her come dragging her little chair from the bedroom through the hall, she used it to stand on when she was rummaging for clothes among the big piles in the IKEA cabinet on wheels that we'd put by the cupboards. A few minutes later she came in dressed in a rose-colored top with strawberries on it and a blue Hello Kitty denim skirt. The top was her absolute favorite; if it was up to her, she'd be wearing it round the clock.

"You look nice," I said.

She smiled, but said nothing.

"I look nice too," said John.

"But you're not even changed yet," I said. "Heidi is. That's why I said she looked nice. You've still got your clothes from yesterday on!"

I filled a bowl with cornflakes and put it in front of Heidi along with a carton of milk, went out onto the balcony to get the vacuum jug, filled it with coffee, took a cup from the cupboard, poured myself the few mouthfuls that wouldn't fit in the jug, and went out onto the balcony again. The only handle the door had was on the inside, it was a nuisance, all of a sudden the kids could push the door shut, and if they did I'd be locked out. They were too small to open it themselves. Vanja could, but she was asleep. So I turned the handle into the locked position and left the door ajar before sitting down and lighting a cigarette.

There was a chill in the air, but the sky was clear and the red sun was on its way up over the horizon. My stomach muscles ached, it felt like I'd been working out the day before. Most probably it was from all the tension.

A movement at the window caught my eye and instinctively I jumped for the door to make sure it didn't get locked, then realized there was no danger and sat down again.

Heidi pushed the door open.

"I spilled, Daddy," she said.

"It doesn't matter," I said.

"Can you come?"

"Let me drink my coffee first, then I'll come. Go back in."

Instead of doing as she was told, she opened the door wider and stepped out onto the balcony.

"Heidi," I said. "Go inside! You're not supposed to be out here."

"I only wanted to see," she said with a sulk.

"Go inside, I'll be there in a minute. OK?"

"OK."

Why couldn't she have waited, so I could have this little moment to myself with my coffee and my first cigarette of the day? Five minutes in peace, that was all I asked for.

I took a last drag and drew the smoke down into my lungs, swallowed what was left of my coffee, and went inside. It wasn't just a little she'd spilled, it had run over the edge of the table and onto the floor. I tore off some paper towels and began to wipe it up.

"Was it on purpose?" I said as I cleaned up the mess, looking up at her as she sat on her chair watching what I was doing.

She shook her head.

"All right," I said. "But eat what you've got in your bowl, at least!"

"But it's too full," she said.

I said nothing, but took it over to the sink, poured off some of the milk and the cornflakes, wiped the bottom and the edge of the bowl, and set it down in front of her again.

"There you go," I said. "Now you can have your breakfast."

"You're angry," she said. Coming from her, it was an accusation.

"I'm not angry, Heidi, not at all. I just don't want to spend the morning cleaning up after you, that's all. But it wasn't your fault. It's all right."

"Is it morning?" said John.

"It is now," I said. "When the sun comes up, it's morning. When it goes down, it's evening."

"Not in the winter," said Heidi.

"No, that's right. But in the summer it's true. And whose birthday is it in the summer?"

"Me!" said John.

"Next week, already!" I said.

"What am I getting?" said Heidi.

"You? It's not your birthday, is it?"

"But Daddy," she said.

"I don't know what you're getting," I said. "How about a bag of *gulrøtter*?"

"What?"

"*Morötter* in Swedish. A bag of carrots, how does that sound?" I said.

"What?"

"Just pulling your leg, Heidi."

"What?"

"*Jag skojade*," I said.

"*Du får inte skoja*," she said. Don't make fun.

"Not even a little bit?"

She shook her head.

"So I'm not allowed to be angry, or make fun?"

"No."

She bent forward and started slurping her cornflakes and milk. John had finished, there was yogurt all around his mouth and the table in front of him was spattered with soggy muesli.

"Do you want some more, John?" I said.

He shook his head. I went around the table and lifted him up, snatched off a sheet of paper towel and wiped his mouth, took off his diaper and dropped it in the bin underneath the sink along with the used paper towel.

"John's a bare-bottomed boy," said Heidi.

"I am NOT!" said John, immediately incensed, and stomped off.

Heidi laughed, a bubbly little giggle. I gave her a smile, grabbed a clean diaper from the bathroom, and went after him. He ran as soon as he saw me.

"Stop!" I said, and ran after him. I lifted him up, he kicked his legs, but not in any protest, and lay still when I put him down on the sofa and put the diaper on him.

"There you go," I said, and went into the bedroom to switch the computer on and check my e-mails. Vanja had pulled the duvet up over her head, a wisp of hair on the pillow was all there was to indicate someone was underneath. I left her alone and logged on to my e-mail, nothing, apart from the news update from the *Agderposten* and a message from Amazon. I skimmed the headlines of the online newspapers, first *Klassekampen*, then *Aftenposten*, *Dagbladet*, *Dagsavisen*, *VG*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Expressen*, and finally *Aftonbladet*.

With Vanja on the left side of the stroller, John inside and Heidi on the right, I stepped outside some half an hour later, walked to the crossing, went over and carried on up Södra Förstadsgatan all the way to the 7-Eleven, where we first made a left, then a right, and ten minutes later we were outside the nursery entrance, where Vanja keyed in the code and Heidi swung open the gate. The others who had arrived were all out in the yard, so I just lifted John out of the stroller and parked it by the wall, made eye contact with Nadje so she knew the children were there, and headed home again. On the way, I stopped off at the 7-Eleven to buy cigarettes and a box of matches. I stood outside and lit up with a big green garbage truck making a racket in the street behind me. The noise echoed off all the walls, its own little cacophony.

They probably weren't called garbage trucks anymore. I wondered what they might be called instead. Environmental service vehicles, perhaps?

I walked along the street smoking my cigarette. There was a steady stream of buses now that the morning was underway, they made the ground shake as they rumbled past. The air was crisp and cool in the shade, warm and gentle in the sun; it looked like it was going to be a fine day. Not that it mattered. I was going back to bed, and hopefully I'd get some work done later.

The building we lived in came into view. I flicked my cigarette into the road as I walked the last stretch, past the huddle of pale, empty faces at the bus stop as a bus pulled up with that sound they made of something being ripped apart, a sound it had taken me more than a year to realize came from the contact between the iron grids of the gutter and the big wheels of the buses, crossed the road and walked up to the entrance door, where I tapped the panel with my key card. I took the stairs, put the cigarettes down on the hat rack, unplugged the phone, pulled the blinds in the bedroom and lay down to sleep.

I woke up an hour and a half later having dreamed. My T-shirt was damp and the pillow I'd been lying on soaking wet. A craving for sugar drove me into the kitchen, where I pulled some grapes from the bunch and crammed them into my mouth to restore my blood sugar. After that I went back into the bedroom and checked my e-mails.

There was a new message from Gunnar in the in-box.

I got to my feet again and opened the door of the balcony, walked along the dark planks of the decking to where the sun was, and looked across at the Hilton, the three elevators that slid up and down in their glass tubes.

I had to stand up and take it.

I had to meet it head-on, I couldn't hide.

So he was angry with me. So I'd done something terrible. I would have to answer for it. Take everything as it came. It was as straightforward as that.

But first I needed a cigarette.

I went in and took the packet from the hat rack, then went out onto the balcony on the other side, which was already boiling hot in the sun. I didn't feel like sitting down, just lit up and gripped the metal railing, staring six floors down at the felted roof below, then sat down anyway, took three drags of the cigarette, stubbed it out, went back into the bedroom, opened the e-mail, and read it as quickly as I could.

He began with a couple of formal comments about having made his objections to the book clear to the publisher over the phone, but given the importance of attaching a date to his objections in the event of any proceedings, he felt obliged to write to me again by e-mail. He made the following absolute demands. He and his wife were to be removed completely from the book. The description of his mother and her life before and after Dad's death was to be removed from the book. The description of the final phase of his brother's life, which was painful to his next of kin, was to be completely removed from the book. The description of his father's brothers, and the fictitious and untruthful stories about their relationships to each other, were to be completely removed from the book. There had never been the slightest conflict between them, they'd been the best of friends all their lives. All mention of the Knausgaard name was to be removed from the book. All remaining names were to be made anonymous. All mention or description of identifiable residences having belonged to his family were to be removed from the book. All errors of documentary fact had to go. He had noted more than fifty of them, he wrote, which were either downright lies or the result of ignorance. Nothing pertaining to these lies would he require to be rectified now, this would follow in the event of proceedings being taken. He found it telling that the dominant role played by the author's mother regarding his brother's tragedy received no mention in the book, though he would not insist on it being included. There was much more still to be said on the matter, the issues mentioned simply being a few of many, and he sincerely hoped he would not be compelled to make them public at some later date. That such a respectable publishing house as Oktober would even consider publishing a novel of this nature without contacting those involved was something he found scandalous. That he had indeed been contacted, and that his letter was in reply to that contact, didn't seem to have occurred to him. He was too angry. He characterized my manuscript as a documentary portrait, which presumably was why he thought the family ought to have been contacted by the publisher, so that they could have been alerted to all the lies, all the distortions, all the glaring omissions. How could such a respectable publishing house fail to check the sources and their credibility? This was all the more serious in view of the manuscript having been written with one thing only in mind, which was to make money. That was the only reason I was exposing members of my family to the public eye, so I could get rich. Publishing such a book was utterly unacceptable, for not only was it untruthful, it was also an invasion of privacy. In the event of his failing to receive an immediate reply to his letter, the book, together with the e-mails in his possession, would be passed on to a lawyer, as well as to the newspapers, at the earliest opportunity. He named *VG* and *Dagbladet*. If this book, which distorted the truth and lied about the facts, was to be published, then the rest of the story, mark his words, would have to be told too, and in the language of the tabloid press. All the money I, the author, together with the publisher envisaged earning would be lost in damages.

So he was going to take it to the papers. And the courts.

I lay down on the bed and curled up in a ball, clutching a pillow. A moment later I got up again and went into the hall, picked up the phone, and dialed Geir Angell's number.

"Another e-mail," I said as soon as he answered.

"What's he saying, anything new?"

"He's going to the papers with it if I don't do as he says. And he's going to claim for damages as well."

"Relax. Can you send me a copy?"

"Yeah. I'll do it right away."

"I'll call you back once I've read it. OK?"

"OK."

I hung up, went back into the bedroom and forwarded the e-mail on to Geir, then went into the bathroom with the phone still in my hand. I stared at the three blue IKEA bags, went into the kitchen, filled a glass with water from the tap and drank it. I put the glass down on the counter, went into the living room and opened the door of the balcony, only to close it again the same instant, went into the bedroom, lay down on the bed, sat up and stared at the display on the phone. I called Geir Angell again.

"Are you that fazed?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"Let me finish reading it through. Hang on a minute."

I got to my feet and went over to the balcony door, pulled on the cord that lifted the blinds, fastened it tight and went out into the hall.

"He's not saying anything new here, Karl Ove. He's making threats. He's saying he'll sue for damages if the novel comes out in its present form and that he'll go to the tabloids and give them his side of the story. But the book hasn't been published yet. The only story at the moment is there's an uncle who wants to stop a novel about his family. No one can pass judgment before it's out. And if he goes ahead like he says, it'll be fantastic publicity. Everyone wants to read that kind of thing. Relax. He's angry, that's all. He can't do anything."

"He can go to the papers, and he can go to the courts. It's no wonder I'm scared, is it?"

"No, I understand that. But there's no need to be. He's huffing and puffing now because he wants the book stopped. He's trying to frighten you into doing what he wants."

"He's doing a good job."

"But you've no idea if he's actually willing to do what he says."

"Oh, what a mess!"

"Relax. Everything's going to be fine!"

"This is hell. It's just hell."

"What, someone being angry with you?"

"It's not some trivial little thing, like you're making it out to be."

"I'm not saying it's trivial. I'm saying it's not as bad as you think."

I said nothing, just stared out the window in the living room, the sunlight glittering in the windows of the Hilton.

"How about I come down?" said Geir. "We're coming on Friday anyway, and I'm on my own here with Njaal, so it makes no difference whether I'm here or there. What do you say?"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. I'm not getting any work done anyway, with Njaal under my feet."

"Isn't he in day care?"

"Do you want me to come or not?"

"I'd never have asked under normal circumstances. You know that. Besides, it was your idea."

"Is that a yes?"

"Sounds like it."

"Great! We'll leave first thing in the morning, so we should be there about . . . well, twenty-four hours from now, or thereabouts."

We chatted for another half hour or so. When we were finished, I called Geir Gulliksen. He answered right away.

"Did you get the e-mail?" I asked.

"I did, yes," he said. "He's hopping mad, this uncle of yours, isn't he?"

"What I'm scared of is him going to the newspapers. They'd jump at the chance of making a story out of this."

"You don't think he's just trying to put pressure on?"

"I think he's angry enough to do anything at all."

"He says he'd give them the manuscript. That'd be against the law. The novel hasn't been published yet, and the rights to the manuscript are yours. But I'll ask Geir Berdahl to get in touch with him. The important thing is to make sure we handle things properly."

"What about his list of demands?"

"No more than expected. What he's after really is for the book not to come out at all."

"Changing the names of everyone in the family, anonymizing people and places, that's all fine by me. But removing my father and my grandmother is out of the question. There'd be no novel left if we did. And I can't take Dad's name out either. He's what the novel's about. He was my father. I *can't*."

"We'll deal with all that as we go along. But the novel doesn't stand or fall with the names."

"Not those on the periphery, no. But I draw the line at my dad's name. I won't give that up."

"The important thing now is to make sure he doesn't go public. We need to accommodate him as far as we can."

As soon as we hung up I called Espen. After I'd talked to him, I called Tore. Then Linda. Then Geir Angell again. I was on the phone all day, and when I wasn't pacing about with the phone to my ear, I was lying stretched out on the bed with the blinds down, wishing it would all go away. As I lay there the phone was in my hand the whole time. I was aware of the risk of trying people's patience; if I called Espen or Tore again, for instance, I'd be approaching the limits of what I could reasonably expect from them. I was sure they didn't see it that way themselves, but I did, they had work to do, families to attend to, lives to live. Linda was different, but she was on holiday, I couldn't heap all this on her now. I had no such qualms with Mom, she would always put herself aside when it came to Yngve's and my problems, but she was at work in the daytime, and I couldn't just barge in there with my troubles. I could do that with Yngve, but with him it was more complicated, he was involved, not on the outside like everyone else, but caught between a rock and a hard place. That left Geir Angell, I wasn't worried about pestering him, I could quite easily ask him to put everything else aside and listen to me going on about the mess I was in, but even with Geir there had to be a limit somewhere, I'd spoken to him three times already today, so a fourth would surely be pushing it.

As I lay there quite motionless, staring at the desk under the window, only half an hour from having to pick up the kids, the phone lit up. I looked at the display. It was a 0047 number. A mobile. But Gunnar couldn't get to me unless I answered, I told myself, then felt an immediate wave of relief as the number was superseded by Yngve's name and it began to ring.

"Hello?" I said.

"What a terrible drama this is with Gunnar," he said.

"I know," I said. "I'm really sorry. But at least he's not dragging you into it."

"She's my mother too, you know."

"Of course."

"Did you know he thought about her like that?"

"No. I had no idea."

"Me neither. We'll just have to hope he doesn't go to the papers. What is the publisher saying about it?"

"They want to accommodate him as far as possible. They've got some lawyers looking into it."

"What are they saying?"

"I don't know. They're still looking at it."

I could hear he was upset. Why couldn't I just have left well enought alone, why did I have to go and poke around in such a sewer of old resentment?

I dropped the phone into the charger and went into the kitchen, ate two slices of bread with liver paste and pickled beetroot while standing by the counter, well aware that on an empty stomach it would be virtually impossible to get the kids home without taking my annoyance out on them at some point. I washed the bread down with a glass of water, wondered if I had time for a cigarette on the balcony before I went, then decided to have one on the way instead, lifted the trash bag out of the bin under the sink, tied a knot in the top, and sat down on the mat in front of the door while I put my shoes on. After that I took the keys from the cupboard, picked up the trash bag, and took the elevator down into the basement. The door that led to the storage rooms belonging to each apartment was open, a man came toward me, it was our neighbor on the other side of the landing, a huge brick house of a man, he was in his sixties and naturally I ran into him now and again on my way up or down, he always filled in the uncomfortable little pauses with some comment about the weather, often padded out with a supplementary inquiry about the climate in Norway. I said hello, he said there'd been a break-in during the night and that I should check our storage. I told him we had nothing valuable in it, and they'd be doing us a favor if they'd made off with what there was. He didn't appreciate the comment, burglary was a serious matter, or maybe he just didn't understand what I said. Probably that, I thought to myself, and went out through the other door and down the passage to the refuse room.

I slung the bag into the big garbage container, which was completely empty, and went back out of the dingy, grubby space and along the passage again, where I noted that the pane in the outer door at the top of the stairs had been smashed. It often happened. The first bike I owned in Malmö disappeared after three days, I'd been stupid enough to leave it outside after locking it. The next one I made sure to always leave locked in the basement, only one time I forgot to lock it, and surprise, surprise, the next day it was gone. They'd had so much time they'd unscrewed the child seat and left it neatly on the floor before making off. Another neighbor, an elderly woman who got stuck between floors in the elevator one morning, thumping her fists against the door, her shaky voice calling for help, had said when we moved in that the place was like Chicago. I loved that expression for the fact that while Chicago had been the very epitome of crime and violence in the fifties, the image had lived on, into the new millenium, in the minds of the old. It was like Chicago here, they stole bikes from the basement and broke into the storage rooms, where would it all end?

The light outside was bright and I put my sunglasses on. The air was warm, though not still in any way, a breeze came from across the street and the leaves of the tree in front of me rustled. The cars were tailing back at the traffic lights. Pedestrians were crossing, their hair blowing about in the gusts. People on the sidewalk passed me like shadows, I saw nothing, registering only their movements, regulating my own automatically according to theirs. Past Åhléns, Hemköp, Maria Marushka or whatever the hell it was called, the shop Mom always went into whenever she came to stay, Myrorna, 7-Eleven, and then, on the corner of Norra Skolgatan, the Hojen bike shop. The street lay sheltered from the wind, and heat rose from the asphalt. Cars rolled gently, almost unnoticeable in the swarms of bicycles on their way from Möllevangen to the city center. The owner of the little immigrant store stood on the step and looked around. I stopped at the nursery entrance and tapped in the entry code. They were out playing in the yard. There was a water sprinkler in the middle, surrounded by children, some of them naked. They shrieked and giggled. A bike with a trailer attached stood parked a bit farther away. It belonged to one of the parent couples who'd been there when we started coming. Many others had come along since then, we were already veterans. The problem was I'd written about this particular couple in the second book.

But for the time being I felt safe. None of the people I could see in front of me here in the yard knew anything of what I'd done. Book 2 wasn't out for another two months yet, and the way things were going it was more than doubtful it would ever get to be published in Swedish.

"Daddy!" shouted John, and came running across the asphalt.

I lifted him up and tossed him in the air.

Vanja was sitting on a swing together with Katinka, they'd seen me and were yelling as loud as they could. Heidi was standing, her face visible in the open window of the little playhouse next to the sandpit. She noticed me and came running out. I lifted her up too. Then I went over to the staff to hear if everything had been all right. All fine, they said, the children had been cheerful and full of beans.

Half an hour later, I finally managed to get them together and accept the fact that it was time to go home. John was in the stroller, Vanja and Heidi walked along on either side, holding the handle tight. Vanja chattered all the way. Heidi said something now and then, completely unrelated to what her sister was talking about, while John sat quietly, staring out at whatever appeared in front of him. When we got to roughly the same place as the day before, Heidi again refused to continue, and it took ten minutes before we got going again. Outside Hemköp it was Vanja's turn, no way was she going to let me do the shopping before we got home. Couldn't I take them home first and then do the shopping? I tried to explain to her that we couldn't do that while Mommy wasn't at home, but she was having none of it. Five minutes later, after I said they could each have a bun, we walked through the automatic doors into the chill of the busy supermarket. John wanted out of his stroller, he said, I tried for as long as I could to hold him off, he wasn't nearly as disciplined as his sisters, to put it mildly; he could stop in front of something he decided he wanted and not budge before I put it in the basket, or he could suddenly take off on his own, but eventually I gave in and lifted him out of the stroller. Over by the milk I realized he'd disappeared. I told Vanja and Heidi to stay put and went down the aisles looking to both sides. I found him by the dog food, lying on his back looking up at the ceiling. He chuckled when he saw me. I grabbed the collar of his T-shirt and lifted him up, carrying him like a sack over my shoulder back to the stroller, and he screeched and giggled all the way until he realized he was going back in the stroller and went sulky. I bought a pack of yogurts, which settled him a bit, and then we walked back down the aisle to the checkout, where I paid, bagged what we'd bought, and went out into the sunshine again. Vanja and Heidi munched on their buns. We crossed over and went into the shopping precinct, not to buy anything, but because it was a shortcut. It wasn't far from the back entrance to the playground. I carried Heidi for a bit so as to get on, she sat on my arm, and with the other I carried the bags and pushed the stroller. After a while I put her down and picked Vanja up instead, anything else was out of the question, everything had to be in equal shares. When we got to the playground, which was teeming with children, I sat down on a bench and smoked a cigarette while they darted around from one piece of equipment to the next. After only a few minutes John came toddling up to me, he flopped forward onto the bench and said he wanted to go home. I tousled his hair and said we'd be going soon. No, now, he said. No, soon, I said. And then my phone rang. I was quite unfazed, the only people who knew my mobile number were people I trusted. Private number, said the display.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hello," said Geir. "Are you out and about?"

"Yeah, I'm at the playground."

"How are you feeling?"

"I haven't jumped off the balcony yet. I take it all out on the kids instead."

"You're not the type to commit suicide," he said. "Your method's to stick your head in the sand."

"True," I said. "But the most fascinating thing about the ostrich isn't that at all. I saw this documentary about them once. They're huge and really strong, and with the claws they have they can be lethal, so do you know what the farmers do to get close to them?"

"Put a sack over the ostrich's head?"

"Well, once they get that far, yeah, they go completely still. But before that. Before they go up to them and put the sack on."

"No, what?"

"They hold a stick up above their own heads. A broom handle, whatever. As soon as the ostrich sees something taller than itself it won't attack. Its brain is that tiny. Ha ha ha!"

"Ha ha ha!"

"It's got three rules it lives by. If a broom handle comes along that's taller than me, I stand still. If I'm threatened, I stick my head in the sand. If someone puts a sack over my head, the world disappears and I no longer exist."

"Those are your rules you're talking about."

"Why do you think I mention it? Still fascinating, though, don't you think? The ostrich is such an ancient creature. It doesn't need a bigger brain, it's looked after itself perfectly well all this time."

"You can keep your fascinations to yourself."

"It's the same with crocodiles and sharks. They're so ancient. They behave quite mechanically, there's no improvisation, no element of choice for them, they're not able to assess anything. If something falls in the water where they happen to be, they open their mouths and try to swallow it. Whether it's a plastic container, a mine, or whatever, it all goes in, down the hatch. I love it, the thought of everything once having been so primitive and simple, a kind of biological-mechanical world, and the fact that a few creatures descend from that and are with us here now."

"I hear primitive, simple, biological-mechanical, and guess what, crocodiles and ostriches aren't the first things that occur to me."

"You're the last Freudian."

"Everyone is. They just don't know. I'm telling you, Eros and Thanatos, that's all you need. But in your case, the ostrich maneuver isn't going to do you much good now. You're going to be visible everywhere when your book comes out. You're going to be an ostrich without sand."

"Hang on a minute. I feel an inspiration. There's a poem coming on . . . I am John Lackland, ostrich without sand, dim and witless, you understand."

"That's the spirit! Well done, Karl Ove! There comes a point where you've got to laugh. It's the only thing you can do. Life's a comedy. Everything's stupid when you come to think about it."

"That wasn't me talking. It was someone else, talking through me. I'm just an instrument. The truth is I'm at my wits' end."

"That's why I prefer Cervantes to Shakespeare. Comedy is truer than tragedy. You've got to laugh at it all."

"That's because you're from Hisøya. You people never take life seriously. You're all nihilists and cynics. But I'm from Tromøya. The very focus of gravity and tragedy."

"I thought that was Athens?"

"Well, you thought wrong. People often get Arendal and Athens mixed up. Aristotle was from Froland, and Plato came from Evje, they say. The Cynics originated on Hisøya. Aristophanes lived in Kolbjørnsvik. And Sophocles hung out in Kongshavn."

"Yeah, if you say so. Anyway, I was only calling to ask if we needed to bring some bedding with us, duvets and whatever else."

"Don't bother. We've got everything here."

"OK, good."

"Speak to you later then."

"Not much choice, I'm afraid."

As soon as we got home, Vanja, Heidi, and John disappeared off into various corners of the apartment while I dumped the shopping bags on the table and put the things away in the cupboards and the fridge, slashed open two packets of fish cakes, and fried them while I got the potatoes and some cabbage on the boil and grated some carrot. I'd only cleaned the kitchen the day before, now it was a mess again, and I decided to try to tidy up a bit while the dinner was getting ready, but managed only to empty the dishwasher before having to change John, he'd dirtied his diaper, and what usually took just a few minutes now turned into a performance, we'd run out of wet wipes again and I had to wash him down with the hand shower in the bath. He cried at the top of his voice as soon as I put him in the tub and kept trying to climb out again, I gripped his arm with one hand and showered him with the other while he howled.

"All finished," I said once he was clean, and turned the water off. "It wasn't really that bad, was it?"

He carried on howling. I lifted him onto the floor and rubbed him dry with a big bath towel. I realized I could forget all about getting him into a clean diaper and a clean pair of shorts, he'd just have to go around with no clothes on until dinner. Then Vanja yelled, and Heidi began to cry. I left John and went to their room to see what was going on. Heidi cried even more.

"What's happened?" I said.

"Heidi hit me!" said Vanja.

"Vanja hit me!" said Heidi.

Vanja had been teasing, as she did from time to time, and Heidi, who wasn't as verbal or as quick yet as her eighteen-months-older sister, had hit out at her in desperation.

"You're not to tease, Vanja," I said.

"I wasn't teasing," said Vanja. "And she hit me!"

"I know, that wasn't nice of her. You shouldn't hit, Heidi."

I looked at them in turn.

"There, are you friends now?"

They both shook their heads.

"In that case, I can't leave you on your own together. Heidi, you can come with me into the kitchen."

"No," she said.

John padded into the hall, barefoot and naked.

"Vanja, then?"

"I want to stay here," she said.

"Can I leave you here together, then?" I said. "With no fighting?"

Vanja nodded. Heidi shook her head.

"OK," I said. "I'll leave you here. But any fighting or crying and you'll have to work it out yourselves, do you hear? I have dinner to make."

I went back into the kitchen, where John was trying to climb into his chair. The children eating undressed was one of the things I wouldn't allow. I went to the bathroom and got a clean diaper, then dug out a pair of faded gray shorts both Vanja and Heidi had worn when they were little, and a green T-shirt with a blue dolphin print on it, which I got him into before lifting him up into the battered old high chair. The fish cakes were almost black on one side, I flipped them over, turned the heat down, poked a testing skewer or whatever it was into the biggest of the potatoes, which was still hard in the middle, put the plates out on the table, filled the jug with water, got some drinking glasses and put them out, and the knives and forks, took a serving dish from the cupboard on the opposite side, and handed John one of Vanja's little plastic dogs, only for him to throw it disdainfully on the floor, announcing that he was hungry and didn't want fishcakes.

I took the last of the clean items out of the dishwasher, and put them away in the cupboard and the drawers. Heidi started wailing again. A moment later she came into the kitchen and clutched me tight, then stepped back and told me between sobs what Vanja had done. I didn't quite understand what she was saying, and told her dinner was ready and that she could sit down at the table. The potatoes weren't done yet, but the smallest of them were probably OK, and I needed to get some food into them now.

I strained the water from the potatoes, put them one by one into the dish with a spoon, slid the fish cakes from the pan onto the same dish, cut the cabbage up and arranged it around the edge, and put the grated carrot in a little glass bowl on its own.

"Vanja!" I called. "Dinner's ready!"

I put two fish cakes on each of their plates, along with a potato I skinned for them, got up again and went to get Vanja, she was sulking on the floor with her back against the wall and wouldn't look at me when I crouched down in front of her.

"Food's on the table, Supergirl," I said. "Come on, come and get your dinner."

"You only listen to Heidi," she said.

"That's not true. I didn't even hear what she said, if you really want to know. Come on. You need some dinner in your tummy. That's why you're fighting."

"Why?"

"Because you haven't eaten."

"I'm not hungry."

"OK, just come when you're ready."

I sat down at the kitchen table again, cut their fish cakes up for them, placed a small portion of cabbage and a bit of carrot on their plates, even if I knew they wouldn't touch it. I spooned a pile of vegetables onto my own plate, followed by five fishcakes, and had devoured the lot in minutes. It was ten to six. I got up and started loading the dishwasher. Heidi slipped down from her chair.

"*Bolibompa*'s on in a minute," I said. "Do you want me to switch it on for you?"

She nodded. Behind me, John shouted that he wanted to watch it too. I lifted him down, switched the TV on with the remote, went in to tell Vanja that *Bolibompa* was starting, then went back to loading the dishwasher; Vanja came in and picked up a fish cake with her fingers, she knew I didn't like them doing that, but I didn't say anything, put some detergent in the little compartment, slammed the door shut, and pressed on. I washed the frying pan and the pots quickly in the sink, dried them and put them away. I left the food on the table, hoping they might be hungry later on and eat what was left, then went to the bedroom to check my e-mail. Making sure to avoid seeing the two e-mails from Gunnar, I went through my new messages, none of which was particularly important. Once I'd done that I phoned Linda and asked if she wanted to speak to the children, not so much for her sake or theirs, more for something to happen. John said hi and sat nodding to what she said at the other end, then handed the phone back to me. Heidi talked about what was on the TV without saying it was something she was watching, so it sounded like she was in Flowerland herself, whereas Vanja did the same as the day before, went off on her own with the phone in her hand.

"Me again now," I said when Vanja came back five minutes later and handed it back to me. "Are you having a nice time up there?"

"Yes. It just feels a bit funny being here without all of you, that's all."

"I'm sure it does," I said. "But that was partly the idea, wasn't it?"

"We've been at the beach today. All we've done is lie about all day. We're having a barbecue again tonight."

"It must be reassuring having a fireman around the place, then," I said, opening the door onto the balcony and stepping out. The wooden decking was warm, and the metal railing I leaned my arms against was positively hot.

"He's an incident commander," she said.

"Even better."

"You'll have to meet him. He's from way up north, from Norrland. Completely down to earth and unflappable, it doesn't matter what happens. Just like my family up there, you know. Like all Norrlanders."

"What are you doing now?"

"Lying down, reading. All that sun's made me tired, I think."

"I've hardly been out of the apartment," I said.

"What have you been doing? Working?"

"No, nothing like that. Just been on the phone."

Behind me, John squirmed around the door. He looked up at me, his eyes asking if it was all right, and when I didn't say anything he set off toward the far end, twenty meters from where I was sitting.

"About those e-mails?" she asked.

"About those e-mails, yes."

"I feel sorry for you having to spend so much energy on all that."

"I don't have much choice really."

"I know. But I still feel sorry for you."

"It can't be helped. Listen, do you think we could talk later instead? I'll have to be getting them off to bed soon. The place could use a bit of cleaning up as well."

"Yes, all right. Will you call me?"

"I will. Speak to you later."

"*Hej då*."

At the other end of the balcony John was climbing onto a chair. I hurried over. Standing on the chair, he'd be high enough to fall over the railing. It had been our worst fear ever since moving in.

I put my arm around his midriff and lifted him down just as he was leaning forward to get a look at all the people down below.

"You can run back instead," I said. "I'll chase you."

"OK," he said, and pattered off. I lumbered along after him, he turned and shrieked when he saw how close behind I was, I let him run on a bit, then snatched him up into the air.

"Again!" he said.

"No, we're going in now. It's bedtime soon."

"No!" he said.

"Yes!" I said, leading him into a trap, our old yes-no routine, where I suddenly said the opposite, confusing him into doing the same, before he realized and switched back, and by then he'd forgotten all about wanting to be out on the balcony.

I went and got their pajamas from their room, and they got changed in front of the TV, complaining when I switched it off, they wanted to see what was on next, and then, when they couldn't get their way, they were hungry all of a sudden. The fish cakes wouldn't do.

"No," I said, sensing my patience about to run out. If I gave them a slice of bread each, they would sit still and eat it while I read them a story. If I didn't, they would twist and moan, and most likely steer the situation off into a dead end where the only way out would be to impose my will on them, meaning there'd be tears and sulks all evening, or else give in, which was the same as losing face.

Knowing what was most advantageous didn't mean I was going to end up doing it. With my patience ebbing, the urge to put my foot down became all the stronger.

"Fish cakes or nothing," I said.

"But we're hungry," said Vanja.

"Eat your fish cakes, then," I said.

"We don't want fish cakes."

I gave a shrug.

"You'll have to go to bed hungry, then, won't you?"

"But, Daddy," said Vanja.

"End of discussion," I said. "Off to bed with you and I'll read you a story."

I found *Out for a Walk* for John, and *The Three Little Pigs* for Vanja and Heidi.

Vanja sat up against the wall under the window with her arms folded in front of her chest.

"I'm not listening," she said.

"Me neither," said Heidi.

"Then I'll read for John," I said, and lifted him onto my lap. I'd been reading *Out for a Walk* ever since Vanja was ten months old, both she and I knew it by heart. Now I raced through it as fast as I could without any thought for John wanting to show me he knew what all the things were called. When I'd finished, I carried him over to his crib and pulled the blind down.

"Night night," I said, and left the room, went into the living room, and out onto the balcony, where I sat down and lit a cigarette. A few seconds passed before Vanja appeared in the door.

"I'm hungry," she said. "And you haven't read to us."

"Go to bed," I said, and stared out at the rooftops and walls, which were blushed by the sun.

"Waaaaarh!" she wailed.

"What's the matter with you tonight? It's late, time for bed."

"You're stupid!" she yelled.

"That may be so," I said. "But I'm still your daddy. And if your daddy's stupid, then it's a shame for you."

She turned and went back in, her shoulders shaking a bit too exaggeratedly, I thought. I poured myself half a cup of coffee, it was tepid now and I gulped it down in a couple of mouthfuls. I went inside again, the place sounded like a zoo. Both Vanja and Heidi were yelling and carrying on.

"What's the problem here?" I said firmly, standing in the doorway of their room.

"You're stupid!" Vanja shouted.

"I'm hungry," Heidi wailed.

The tears were streaming down their cheeks.

"I want Mommy," said John in his crib.

"Mommy's not here," I said. "And if you're hungry you can eat the fishcakes from dinner. If you don't want them you can lie down and go to sleep."

I closed the door and stood there quietly in the hall. A moment went by before it opened again. It was Vanja.

"Back to bed, do you hear me?" I said. "I've just about had enough of this."

I took her by the arms and pressed her back into her bed. Then I gripped Heidi by the waist and lifted her up onto her bunk, closed the door again, went into the living room and turned the TV on, it was the news, images of vast fires in what I took to be Greece. There was a banging on the wall, I went and opened the door of their room. Vanja was lying kicking her feet against the wall. Heidi lay crying in the bunk above.

"Listen," I said. "I don't want any more nonsense. You can have an apple each. Will that do?"

"Yes," said Vanja, and stopped kicking.

I went out to the kitchen and got three apples, filled two drinking bottles and a sippy cup with water, and took it all with me into their room.

"Do you want me to read?" I asked.

They nodded. I lifted John up, Heidi climbed down by herself, and soon all three were gathered around me, each wanting to be one of the pigs in the story, as if nothing had happened. I sang the same song for each of them while stroking their backs, and they were quiet and agreeable and ready for sleep after all their crying.

"Will you leave the door open?" said Vanja.

"Of course," I said, and went to the kitchen to get some more coffee going. When it was ready I poured a cup, went out onto the balcony and phoned Mom.

"Hello? Sissel speaking."

She sounded tired.

"Hi, it's Karl Ove," I said. "You weren't asleep, were you? You sound a bit tired."

"Do I? No, I wasn't asleep. I lay awake last night, though, so perhaps I am a bit, now that you mention it."

"Was it Gunnar's letter keeping you awake?"

"Yes. And thinking about what to say in reply."

"I thought you weren't going to?"

"I'm not. I was just thinking about it, that's all. I was livid, you understand."

"Did you read the one I sent you today?"

"Yes."

"What do you think?"

"I think the consequences for you are going to be quite far-reaching. If he goes to the papers or takes you to court. It'll be a huge strain. You're going to get a lot of negative publicity. The pressure will be enormous. People can crack in that situation."

"Are you worried about me?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, you shouldn't be. I've always taken care of myself."

"But you've got a family to think about as well."

"Are you saying I shouldn't publish the novel?"

"That's for you to decide. All I'm saying is you should think very hard about it. Whether it's worth it."

"That's just what Gunnar wants."

She sighed.

"Yes," she said. "It is. I mentioned it to some people at work today. Some of them thought it was your book that was outrageous, not your uncle's reaction. That's what the public is going to think. Gunnar's going to come across as the ordinary man in the street, decent and law-abiding, whereas you risk being made out to be some kind of criminal. That's one thing. The other is they can easily set you up as representing some kind of elite, with Gunnar as the everyman. You can imagine the field day VG will have."

"So what? I can't let what people might think, determine my every move, surely."

"I'm just thinking about the consequences, that's all. You mustn't let this destroy you, Karl Ove."

"I'm not going to have a breakdown just because someone writes something negative about me in the papers, Mom."

"No, that's not what I meant. You're strong, I know that. But think of Mykle, how it broke him. The comparison's a relevant one in my opinion. The pressure it put him under. It destroyed him."

"You're not really asking me to backpedal on this, are you?"

"No, I'm not saying that at all. I'm asking you to think very carefully about it, that's all."

"I'm already thinking about it. In fact, I'm doing nothing else. But withdrawing the novel isn't an option. I'm not going to do it, not in any circumstances. I can't just give up at the first little sign of resistance."

"It's hardly a little sign, is it? You mustn't underestimate it."

"No, of course not. I appreciate what you're thinking, and I'm glad you're telling me."

I went inside, dropped the phone in the charger, then put my head around the door of the children's room. They were all well away, their breathing heavy with sleep. I went into the living room, the floor was littered with clothes, towels, and toys dumped all over; the mat was bunched up, the armchairs shoved up close to the TV, the white woolen throws we used to hide the stains on them tossed on the floor, as was the one from the sofa, whose cushions were even grubbier, if that was possible. I left it all as it was, went to the bathroom and filled the IKEA bags with dirty clothes; I'd have to remember to do the laundry tomorrow or else they'd soon have no clean clothes to put on. I left the bags up against the laundry baskets and went to the bedroom to check my e-mails. Neither Tonje nor Jan Vidar had answered. I logged off and went through the hall, picking the phone up as I went, then, with the phone in one hand, I switched off the dishwasher and opened it, and a cloud of steam tumbled out into the air. I went into the study, there was a note on the desk with what I thought might be Hanne's phone number on it, I picked it up and took it with me onto the balcony. The number belonged to a person named Hanne, but the surname was a common one, so I was by no means sure the number was actually hers.

I put the phone on the table, sat down, poured myself some coffee, lit a cigarette and looked out over the rooftops with a feeling of unease.

All day the light and warmth had been infused with a kind of density, something listless that had latched unnoticeably on to the ethereal quality of June and July, for summer was now drawing to its close, the world receding into the shadows, darkness encroaching. I longed for it. I wanted the darkness. I wanted to disappear, to be visible no more, neither to myself nor anyone else. I wanted my feelings to sink down inside me, like the sap sinks through the tree in autumn, and for my thoughts to flutter to the ground, like leaves from the multitude of branches on which they had unfolded in spring.

I hadn't spoken to Hanne in almost twenty years. I'd often thought about her, though more and more infrequently, until I'd started work on the novel and found her occupying my mind increasingly as I sat in the study and wrote. If I opened my door and went into one of the other rooms, where Linda was perhaps, those thoughts would disappear again, bound up as they were with a time in my life that had been lost, whereas the time that surrounded me was alive and existed in all things, and by virtue of its being concrete and nearmade the past into what it was, spectral and vague. Nevertheless, I felt guilty. To ease my conscience, I occasionally told Linda what I was writing about, trying to make light of it, and she seemed to approve, until one morning she told me what one of her girlfriends had said when she'd mentioned what I was writing about. "You mean he's writing about his old flames?" her friend had said. "And you're putting up with it?"

Now there was another step I had to take. I couldn't possibly publish the novel without Hanne reading it first and approving.

I called the number.

No answer.

Like the other times I'd tried, and I was just about to hang up when a voice came on the other end.

"Hanne speaking."

"Hello, Karl Ove here," I said. "Is this the Hanne I used to go to school with?"

There was a silence.

And then that wonderful, effervescent laughter I hadn't heard for twenty years.

"Karl Ove!" she exclaimed. "Is this the Karl Ove who used to send me notes during class?"

"It is," I said. "How are you?"

She laughed again, that same laugh. She'd always been the cheerful kind, never far from gladness, and it was something she clearly hadn't lost.

"I've always imagined you were going to phone someday," she said. "Or else we'd bump into each other in an airport or somewhere. Isn't it strange? I felt sure we'd meet again. How are you? I see you live in Malmö now? I've read about you in the papers, of course. A good thing you didn't follow my advice and become a teacher!"

"I suppose so," I said. "I have a wife and three children here. How about you? I'm assuming you've got kids?"

We exchanged information about our lives for a while. She lived in the Mandal area, with the same man as before, had been in charge of a nursery, and was now working at a school.

"Anyway, it's not just for old times' sake I'm calling," I said after a bit. "It's more specific than that."

"I thought it might be," she said.

"The thing is, I'm writing a novel about my life," I said. "Parts of it are about when I was sixteen. And seeing as how you were so important to me then, I've written about you too. All names and places are authentic. I realize that might cause some difficulties. So I'd like you to read it before it comes out."

She was completely silent.

"If it's not OK with you, which I would totally understand, because it's a lot to ask, then of course I'll change your name and make you less recognizable."

"You mean you've really written about me?"

"Yes."

"I don't know what to say."

She fell silent again.

"But it's not so much about you as about me," I said. "I was in love with you, to put it bluntly. I've written about that. If you don't want to be in the novel in that way, with your name, I mean, I'll just change it. It's not a problem. Are you surprised?"

"Yes."

She laughed.

"Do you remember much about that time?" she asked.

"Sort of," I said. "Not so much exact details, but moods, that kind of thing. The feeling of it all is still very much there for me."

"I remember a lot. I think about it sometimes. I've always thought we'd meet up again and talk about it. About back then."

"We still can," I said. "As long as I haven't ruined it all by writing about it."

"I doubt that," she said, and laughed.

"Can I send you the manuscript today, then, and let you get back to me once you've read it, so I know if it's OK or not?"

"Yes, of course. I can't wait. I'm a bit nervous now, though!"

A silence ensued.

"It was so nice hearing your voice again," she said.

"Same here," I said. "Your laugh's exactly the same, do you realize that?"

"No," she said, and laughed again.

"I'll send you the manuscript, then maybe we can talk again?"

"Fine."

"Speak to you soon, then."

"Yes. Take care."

"You too."

I hung up and lit a cigarette. The conversation had gone much better than I had feared. And yet I was thrown off balance. I had gone into something I couldn't control. She had said she remembered that time very well. I didn't. Or rather, I remembered a few episodes very well. Others I recalled only faintly, shaping them in my writing, inventing dialogues, for example, which, no matter how likely they might have been, certainly weren't accurate. How was she going to feel when she read them? After all, she had been there herself.

I stubbed the cigarette out and went inside, into the children's room, and paused for a moment. John lay curled up on his belly, and had kicked off his duvet as usual. Vanja was lying on her back, spread-eagled, her arms above her head in a *V*, like a snow angel. Heidi was on her side, her head resting on her upper arm. There was something dark on her cheek and under her nose. I put the light on.

Her face was covered in blood, smeared across her lower cheeks and chin, the pillow was dark red. My heart began to pound, as if suddenly I had found myself on the edge of a precipice. I went to the bathroom and quickly wet a facecloth with hot water, then went back and began to wipe her face. She opened her eyes and looked at me.

"You've had a nosebleed," I said softly. "It's all right. Just lie still and let me wash it clean."

When I had finished, I took the soiled pillow and gave her one from our room instead. She laid her head on it and closed her eyes, and I smoothed my hand up and down her back a couple of times before turning the light off and leaving the room, first to rinse the facecloth in the bathroom, wringing it out and draping it over the radiator, then going back out onto the balcony, where I pressed Linda's number on my phone. It rang for a while at the other end, and when eventually she answered, she sounded like she had been asleep.

"Hi, it's Karl Ove," I said. "Did I wake you up?"

"Yes, I must have dropped off."

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to."

"That's all right. How are things at home?"

"Fine. They're all fast asleep. Nothing much happening here otherwise. We were at the park after nursery, then they watched the children's programs before bedtime. The place is a mess, that's the only thing. I can deal with that tomorrow, though."

"You're so good."

"I don't think good is the word," I said. "Anyway, how are things at your end?"

"Fine," she said, and yawned.

"Have you been at the beach?"

"Yes, it was gorgeous."

"Geir's coming tomorrow," I said.

"Already? I thought that wasn't until Friday?"

"He's on his own with Njaal. I suppose he thought he might as well come here."

"You and Geir on your own with four kids. Who'd have thought?"

"I know. It must be a sign. The end is nigh."

"It'll be good for you, though."

"Yes, I'm sure it will. I was thinking we could get some prawns in when Christina comes on Friday. What do you think?"

"Sounds good," she said, and yawned again.

"I'll let you get back to sleep, then," I said. "I think I'll be off myself. I better, if John's going to wake up at half past four again."

"Kiss them from me. I miss you all."

"I miss you. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

I went back in, dropped the phone into the charger, looked in on Heidi to make sure her nose wasn't bleeding again, checked my e-mails, no new messages, surfed the Net for a bit, then sent a copy of the manuscript off to Hanne, made myself a glass of squash in the kitchen and took it with me out onto the balcony, smoked one last cigarette, brushed my teeth, and went to bed.

It was just after five when I woke up and saw John standing beside my bed with his pillow in his hand. I sat up. His nose had bled too. What was going on? A dribble of coagulated blood streaked his lip under each nostril, and there was some on his cheek as well. Worried, I went to the bathroom and wet another facecloth. Nosebleeds weren't dangerous, they happened all the time, but two kids during the same night, could that be a coincidence?

Wouldn't it have to be the same cause? It was scary enough as it was, them bleeding, but to think it might be a symptom of something else was worse. A dryness in the air, perhaps, I thought to myself, giving his face a couple of wipes with the cloth while he tried to squirm free.

"There we are," I said. "Should we have some breakfast?"

"Yes," he said, and went off toward the kitchen in that totally placid way of his. His diaper drooped between his legs, I took it off, got a clean one, and put it on him while he stood waiting, like a racing car during a pit stop, it occurred to me. Then I lifted him into his chair, got the muesli out of the cupboard, and went to the fridge to get the blueberry yogurt, only to realize we'd run out.

"There's no more yogurt," I said. "Do you want milk instead?"

"No."

"What, then?"

"I don't know."

A door opened in the hall, it was Heidi. She came in and sat down on her chair.

"Hi, Heidi," I said.

She didn't answer, but from the little smile she tried to conceal by lowering her chin I could tell she was in a good mood just the same. We had breakfast, the sun streamed in, I woke Vanja up, brushed their hair and teeth, got them dressed, grabbed the trash bag from the kitchen, and then we all got in the elevator and went down together.

When I came home again I threw a load of laundry into one of the machines in the basement, then phoned Geir Angell to see if they were on their way. They were, he reckoned they would be arriving around one or so.

I checked my e-mails again. There was a new message from Gunnar. It was addressed to the publisher, with me copied in. The heading was "Libelous author and publisher." He began by stating that he had already established that the events and descriptions he wanted removed from the book consisted of lies and half-truths, gross distortions and outrageous assertions, and were moreover of such nature as to unquestionably be in breach of Chapter 23 of the criminal code, concerning defamation. He had witnesses, he wrote.

His wife had kept a diary that could be presented as evidence in court. Their children could take the stand. Furthermore, there were any number of people who, in a professional capacity, had been in regular contact with his mother during the time laid out in the novel. There were health visitors, there were home helpers, and neighbors and friends as well. All would be able to testify that what I had written in my book was false. He gave an example. The novel said that Dad had moved back home to Grandma's two years before he died, and I had described in detail the wretched conditions in which they had lived. None of what I had written was true. It was pure fabrication. Dad had not been living in Kristiansand. He had been living in Moss at the time. According to Gunnar's version, his life there had been nothing but normal. He had an apartment, he had a car, he had his job teaching at the *gymnas*, he had even been in a relationship. He had only stayed with his mother in Kristiansand the last three months, that spring and summer. And there he had died of a heart attack, Gunnar wrote, making it sound like it had happened under quite ordinary, unexceptional circumstances. My account was therefore incorrect, and twisted to meet my own ends. I was making myself out to be a hero who came and cleared up the miserable mess my father had made. Only there was no mess, Gunnar claimed. He had gone to the house shortly after the ambulance had been there and his brother's body had been removed from the chair in which he had died. All that day, and the one after that, he had stayed there in order to help and be with his mother. During that time he had quite naturally cleaned the place up where it was most urgent. What I had written, that the house had been littered with bottles from the front door all the way up the staircase, was utter nonsense. It simply was not true. By the time Yngve and I turned up a couple of days later, he had already taken care of most of what needed doing, all that remained for us to do was to help with a few items that were too heavy for him to lift on his own. The only room he hadn't touched was our father's bedroom, where his clothes and personal items were, having naturally considered it right not to interfere with them, since he was our father.

After that Yngve and I had been over to their house for dinner with Grandma, he wrote, and it was strange because I couldn't remember that at all. The work I had put in at Grandma's he reduced to nothing. It was his wife who had done the bulk of the cleaning up, changed the curtains, helped Grandma in the bath. I, the writer with his head in the clouds, had merely swanned about, bucket in hand, incapable of making a difference, such were the abilities I lacked, something that was attributed to my mother, who had never had a clue about even the basics of keeping a house clean. Yngve had hardly been there at all, having made himself scarce after a single day. And then I had the audacity not only to present things as if I had straightened the place up on my own, but also to portray his and my own father's mother as a geriatric alcoholic. But Gunnar knew why: once, when I was still at the *gymnas* in Kristiansand, she had caught me stealing red-handed. I had stolen money from her, he wrote, had been caught, and had resented her ever since for that reason. Grandma had also expressed concern to my mother over my wayward behavior, I spent too much money, and took drugs, so her worries were hardly without foundation, but how had my mother reacted? Rightly, she had been angry. But with whom? My father, for having left us.

Then he turned to other faults in the manuscript. I had never had a great-grandmother on my father's side who lived to be over a hundred and died falling down a staircase, it was pure invention. My father had never had a cousin who won a beauty competition. I wrote that we used to hire a certain function hall for family occasions, the Elevine Rooms, but that was nonsense, and had never been the case. As for my grandfather and his brothers, they had been the best of friends all their lives, and had never, as I had written, fallen out and stopped speaking to each other. Grandma had never stolen money from her employer, the true story was different altogether, and in fact rather funny. Gunnar himself was another victim of my mendacity; he had never said we could take the money in the envelope under the bed and not declare it to the tax authorities, as I was claiming.

At the end of his lengthy exposition he turned to the love and care he and his wife had given his parents in the autumn of their years, making it possible for them to stay on in their own home and enjoy a relatively large degree of comfort. This was a fact completely subverted in my novel, inasmuch as anyone reading my account on its own would think he had not been fond of his mother at all and had neglected her entirely. Nothing could be further from the truth. To anyone who knew how much they had put into that home, how cozy and pleasant their times together there had been, my description of the situation was immediately fallacious. But then that was me through and through, so I understood, because in the next sentence he was warning the publisher against me and my deceitful nature, manifested in the way I sat, hunched forward, and the way I held my head, always with my face turned away from whomever I was talking to, with a cheerless, scowling expression, eyes full of guilt and brooding speculation. They should not allow themselves to be fooled. What I stood for was not goodness and truth, despite the impression I tried to give, what I stood for was in fact the opposite. I was a notorious liar, I was a quisling, I was selling my grandparents and my father for blood money in a quest for fame, to which end I would shun no means, however shabby. If the publisher did not halt this project he would take legal action. In order to avoid such a step, he wished to put forward a proposal. I had written so lavishly about angels in my previous novel, as my uncle Kjartan had about crows. The publisher ought therefore to suggest to me that I write a book about devils. They were on a level with which I was familiar. And in that I could make use of the literary talent I had inherited from my father.

In Gunnar's eyes everything was different. Together with his wife and children he had infused the final years of my grandparents' lives with meaning. They had helped them out in practical matters, but also been on hand socially, visiting them one or more times a week, taking them out to the cabin, taking them to visit Grandad's brother, spending Christmas with them, Gunnar and Grandma laughing and joking as always. A totally normal, well-functioning family, no big secrets, no skeletons in the closet, no dark clouds on the horizon. Apart from one, the fact that his brother was an alcoholic. Yet it didn't affect his life too adversely, he still taught at the *gymnas*, had his girlfriend in Moss, and was an altogether excellent and well-liked teacher. He'd had his problems in life, notably with his first marriage, which had been cold and without love, as Gunnar saw it, and that coldness had left its mark on his children, who, once they grew up, gradually distanced themselves from their father, but also from their father's family. The youngest, Karl Ove, was the worst, though Yngve too had drifted away. They lived in Bergen, in Vestland, where their mother's family were from and still lived. But in Kristiansand things had been fine until Gunnar's brother moved in with their mother. However, that was only for a very short time, eight weeks, and then he died in the living room, of a heart attack. Grandma had her home help and her nurse, Gunnar and his wife had been there for her too, always on hand, and although Dad drank a bit, it hadn't stopped him being able to drive Grandma over to his other brother at Hvaler the summer before he died, and at the same time he had even been busy selling his place in Moss. He was fine, and she was fine too, they both were, but of course it had been a shock to her when her son had died. The place had been a bit untidy, there were a few bottles lying around, but that was only to be expected when a person had a drinking problem, it was nothing alarming, not in the slightest, nothing that couldn't be cleared away in a morning or two.

Gunnar was the only son who had stayed behind in Kristiansand, he was the one who had looked after the family, made sure Grandma got her home help, and her nurse, no one else had been around. Gunnar had never hurt anyone, there wasn't a blot on him or his behavior; on the contrary, he was cheerful, helpful, stable, a pillar of the community as well as his own family. A good son, a good brother, a good father, a good citizen.

His brother's sons come down for the funeral. He leaves things to them. They clean up a bit, take care of the service, then clear off again. Ten years pass. Then he gets sent a novel the youngest has written. He can't believe his eyes. Everything that was so fine and decent has been turned into an inferno. He writes that the father had been living there for two years, that he sent the home help and the caregiver away and turned the respectable home into something more like a squat, making his mother out to be a drunken, senile old woman. Nothing of what Gunnar has spent so much of his adult life upholding is represented, everything is made out to be misery and squalor. How will it look to his friends and neighbors? How could Gunnar allow all this to happen to his mother and brother? The truth is it never happened. But how can he get that across? It says so in the novel. Is the author a liar?

Apparently, yes. So then he's faced with two issues: why is the author lying, and how can Gunnar stop his lies from getting out? The author is lying because his mother, that ice-cold, egotistical woman, has brainwashed him, made him look negatively on everything to do with his father's family, and because when he was young and took drugs his grandmother had rejected him, something he had never forgotten. When his father and grandmother died he decided to seek revenge, with all the means at his disposal. He hated his grandmother, he hated his father, and at the same time he was intelligent enough to express his hatred in the form of a book and make money from it. Moreover, he had the audacity to play the hero, making out that he had cleaned up after his father, whereas the true story was that there had been hardly any cleaning up to do, and what little there was had been taken care of by Gunnar himself. He had then tricked the publisher into taking on this series of lies, this hateful project, which they had done only because they had no way of knowing the truth. They had trusted the author and bought his story without reservation. In order to stop the book, the publisher therefore had to be made aware of the truth. So he wrote to them, and to the author's mother and brother, but not to the author himself, his deceit being of such proportions he no longer wished to have anything to do with him, he never wanted to see him again for having deliberately twisted the truth in order to destroy his family. But there was another reason too: along with the manuscript the author had sent a letter explaining why he had written what he had written, and from that letter it was obvious he had no idea what he was doing. And since this was the case, Gunnar was compelled to target the person who knew better, the person who throughout all those years had distorted the author's outlook on reality to such an extent that he no longer knew what was real and what was a figment of his imagination. He was a Judas, a quisling, but he was steered by his own mother. Gunnar had seen the origins of her coldness himself, her mother, the author's maternal grandmother, had appeared almost autistic that summer he had visited them when he was twelve years old, she had clearly been ridden with inferiority complexes there in that peasant plot beneath the fells. The woman's son, the brother of the author's mother, had lost his senses and been committed to the madhouse on more than one occasion. He wrote poetry, his last collection had been about crows. This environment, of raving lunacy and insensitivity, with all its failing mental health, autism, crows, and emotional dispassion, was what the author had inherited and made his own, it was from this premise that he had written about his father, a good man at heart who perhaps in frustration at the life into which he had been tricked, with the cold woman from Vestland, had not always treated his sons the way a father ought, as Gunnar had treated his own sons, but never improperly and certainly not in any way that could warrant the picture the author had drawn of his father. He saw things through his mother's eyes, but didn't realize it.

So it wasn't my writing the truth about my father and what had happened to him in the later years of his life that was Gunnar's main issue with the novel, it was my lying about him and that period, and the fact that it made Gunnar seem guilty in the eyes of others, which was grossly inaccurate and, not least, unwarranted.

There was no doubt he meant what he was saying, that his perception of the events in question was quite different. That made me scared. If there was one thing I feared in myself, it was not being reliable. I had written that Dad had lived with Grandma during the last two years of his life, spiraling them both into decline. I had written that he had sent the nurse and the home help away. Gunnar denied both these things, and said he had witnesses to the contrary.

Where did my version come from?

How did I know it had been two years?

I had no idea. It was something I had written, and it had to have come from somewhere, but where?

I had been in Kristiansand at the time I started writing *Out of the World*, in January 1996, when Dad's drinking had been severe and he was living with Grandma. True, he still had his apartment in Moss, but as I understood it he spent most of his time at her house, and for some reason my perception was that he had moved in with her for good that summer, two years before he died. But how I had arrived at that understanding, I didn't know.

Could I simply have assumed as much, and then allowed that unconfirmed assumption to morph into certainty, subsequently elevating it to absolute truth when I started writing about it ten years later? It was not only possible, it was likely. If Gunnar said he'd only been living with Grandma for three months, and he had witnesses to confirm it, then surely it was true. I had also written that he had sent the home help and the health visitor away. Where did that come from? I didn't know that either. Somewhere in my mind I had a very vague idea it had come from Gunnar himself, perhaps he had told Yngve over the phone that Dad had sent the home help away and was out of reach, wasn't that what that phone call had been about? That Dad had barricaded himself in at Grandma's and that Gunnar felt there was nothing left he could do, having already tried to step in and appeal to Dad's reason, but to no avail? It was from that phone call too that I knew Dad had broken his leg and had been lying there helpless on the floor for some considerable time at Grandma's before Gunnar found him and got him to the hospital. That event had etched itself into my mind, since it told me things must have been bad, but the exact circumstances of what had happened were unclear, I couldn't put a date on either the event itself or my being told about it. But it was also possible the information about the home help being sent away had come when we were there, after Dad had died, when Gunnar was describing to us what had happened. I didn't know. He might have been exaggerating, it might have been his way of saying Dad had made it impossible for him to intervene, or maybe the home help didn't come that often. Maybe it was only the home help, the person who came to do the cleaning up, he'd been talking about, and not the nurse? But as far as I remembered I hadn't written anything about the nurse. A third possibility was that no one had said anything of the kind and it was just something I'd assumed on the basis of the dreadful state of the house; it was hard to imagine anyone had done any cleaning for a very long time, therefore the home help must have been sent away, and the person who had sent them away must have been Dad. Maybe that was what I'd got into my head in 1998, and what to begin with had been little more than a vague theory had now become a solid truth ten years later.

I didn't know.

But I felt certain Gunnar knew, and if he was so absolutely positive that was what had happened, then surely it had to be right.

In which case I was unreliable. In itself this was a crushing admission. But had I been unreliable in everything I had written? Did it in any way alter the fundamental truth of the novel if Dad hadn't lived with Grandma for two years but for three months, and the home help hadn't been sent away but had kept up the normal routine?

Yes, it did. It would mean I'd be talking about a few days of misfortune and consternation in a world of peace and tranquillity, not about a catastrophe that had been going on for a couple of years. The only thing I knew was that the sight that met Yngve and me when we entered the house back then had been dreadful. Gunnar was saying it was untrue that the place had been littered with bottles from the front door and all the way up the staircase, that in the two days before we arrived he'd cleaned and neatened the place up, and that only Dad's room and some of the heavier items had been left.

Hadn't there been bottles? The way I remembered it, there had been empties all the way up the staircase from the living room to the top floor, there were shopping bags of them dumped underneath and on top of the piano, and the kitchen had been crammed too. But what about the staircase leading up to the living room? I had no recollection at all. I must have exaggerated. Unreliable, again. The way Gunnar was looking at it, this was about maintaining that it was he who had cleaned up the mess, not us. I vividly remembered Yngve and I spending that day and the next clearing up and scrubbing the place down, whereas what he described was a distracted author swanning about with a bucket without even the most elementary idea about what to do. I had no recollection either of our having had dinner at their place, in fact I felt sure it had never happened. But still I couldn't rule it out entirely, there were a lot of things in my life I couldn't remember. What he wrote about our going out to the cabin with Grandma, and me diving off the jetty, was true, but that had taken place outside the novel's time frame, after its conclusion. Giving Grandma a bath, washing the curtains, Gunnar and Tove's efforts when it came to cleaning the place, all that had happened after the two and a half days I'd described. The way I saw the business of cleaning the house up was the exact opposite of Gunnar's: the way I recalled it, I had found it decent of him to step back for a couple of days as he did and let Yngve and me assume responsibility, it was a way of saying to us that Dad had been our father, a way of returning him to us. Gunnar had been back and forth, helping us out with good advice, taking the furniture we lugged out of the house together away to the dump on a trailer he hired. He had not neglected anything, in fact he had behaved impeccably, but hadn't I written about all of that?

If he was right about what he was implying, that the sight that confronted us in the house had been quite normal, and that my depiction was grotesquely exaggerated, then everything fell apart. It bore down on something fundamental, first and foremost of course the very premise of the novel, that it was describing reality, but also its motive, the reason I had written about my father's death and the dreadful days that followed. When Yngve, in a car full of empty bottles, had turned to look at me and said that if I ever wrote about this no one would believe me, it was for that very reason, that everything we had seen had been like something out of a novel or a film, and not reality.

In the years that followed, I willingly told anyone who cared to listen about Dad and his demise, it made me special and perhaps interesting too, it made me into someone who had seen a few things, gave me a certain air of casual disregard and depth, something I'm sure I was trying to attain, I'd always carried that inside me, the desire to be someone, and that notion of elevation had always been a part of my motivation for writing. Holding forth in that way about my father and what became of him always left me with a bad taste in my mouth, because I was exploiting him and the tragedy of his life for my own ends. But that was small scale. The novel blew it all up and made a big thing out of it. I was exploiting him, yes, I was climbing on his corpse. And I was doing that simply by writing about it. At the same time it was the most important story in my life. If it wasn't true, it meant I'd exaggerated things in order for Dad's fate to make the greatest possible impact, thereby lending me some of the recklessness and destructive force I thought I needed for me to become a real writer instead of someone pretending. In that case I wouldn't just be letting him down, but myself as well. It was this that Gunnar's letter addressed, as forcefully as if he'd punched me: I had lied. There had been no bottles on the staircase up to the living room. Dad had not been living there for two years. The home help had not been sent away.

If I accepted that perspective, on the other hand, I would be obliterating myself. Not once had I considered myself to be exaggerating when writing about what had gone on in the house, not once had I considered myself to be exploiting Dad and Grandma, the events I was describing were too overwhelming for that, and what I was delving into was too important.

I'd written about Dad. I'd written about my fear of him, my dependence on him, and the enormous grief his death had filled me with. It was a novel about him and me. It was a novel about a father and a son. It didn't matter that the very sight of the words "legal action" terrified me, and that my insides turned cold when he wrote that he had witnesses to the effect that I was lying, I couldn't give up the story of my father.

Not even if it was a lie?

Without realizing, I had touched on something dangerous, more dangerous than almost anything else.

But why was it dangerous?

He had to attack Mom because he felt that was what I'd done in writing the novel, attacked Grandma and Dad. It was retaliation. An eye for en eye. He was only doing what I myself had done, the difference being his retaliation lacked symmetry: my novel would be published for anyone to read, it would be available in all bookshops and all libraries. His e-mails would be read only by those he sent them to, which was to say the publisher, Mom, Yngve, and me. Because our strengths were so unevenly distributed, he was rectifying matters by hitting us even harder.

I sat down and switched the computer on, opened the document containing the novel, and started to read. In the light of what had happened in the past few days, nearly every page had me feeling uncomfortable, all the old friends and classmates I'd written about could react in exactly the same way as Gunnar.

I called Geir Gulliksen so we could discuss the purely practical implications of Gunnar's e-mail, the fact that I was going to have to alter some specifics as to time, the two years Dad had lived with Grandma in the novel, maybe by just not being specific at all, as well as correcting the errors that had occurred. I asked him what we should do about all the other names. Geir considered that anyone from my childhood or youth who was described in a relatively neutral way could stay as they were without any problem, this was quite without risk, whereas I would have to anonymize the ones I'd written about in a way that could be perceived as compromising, for instance if I'd gone into their family relations, a father who drank or was violent or who in any other way had done something that might be considered questionable. Geir's views calmed me down, he was talking of the basis of the novel, it was the novel we had to focus on, the editing of the manuscript.

After I'd spoken to Geir I called Yngve. We talked back and forth about what we remembered from the days surrounding Dad's death, he couldn't recall that many details, but hadn't balked at anything he'd read in my description. In the event of our being taken to court, he would be my only witness, though I didn't mention this at all. A court case was the worst thing that could happen, and the publishers were doing everything in their power to prevent it, I knew that. The second-worst thing that could happen was something leaking to the papers.

All of this was about Gunnar and the way he saw the novel. What we were talking about was basic human consideration. But there was another, more literary, critical issue about the novel that I'd been thinking a lot about in the interim between completing the manuscript and being made aware of Gunnar's objections. It too concerned truth, though more from a formal perspective, and what set me off was that I'd read a short novel by Peter Handke called *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, it was about his mother's suicide and thereby autobiographical. In contrast to my own prose, which constantly leaned toward the emotional and evocative, Handke's prose was dry and unsentimental. When I started writing I'd been trying to achieve a similar style, if not dry, then raw, in the sense of unrefined, direct, without metaphors or other linguistic decoration. The latter would give beauty to the language, and in a description of reality, especially the reality I was trying to describe, that would be deceitful. Beauty is a problem in that it imparts a kind of hope. As a stylistic device in literature, a particular filter through which the world is viewed, beauty lends hope to the hopeless, worth to the worthless, meaning to the meaningless. This is inevitably so. Loneliness beautifully described raises the soul to great heights. But then the writing is no longer true because there is no beauty in loneliness, not even in yearning is there beauty. But while it may not be true, it is good. It is a comfort, a solace, and perhaps that is where some of literature's justification lies? But if that's the case, then we are talking about literature as something else, something unto itself and autonomous, valuable in its own right rather than as a depiction of reality. Peter Handke tried to get away from this in his novel. It was written a few weeks after the funeral, and in it he endeavored to approach his mother and her life in as truthful a way as possible. Not truthful in the sense of things actually having occurred, her having been a real person in the real world, but truthful in its insight and the way that insight is conveyed. He refrained from representing his mother in the text, to have done so, I felt in reading the book, would have been a violation of her as a human being. She was her own person, living her own life, and instead of representing that life, Handke referred to it as something existing outside the text, never inside the text. This meant that he wrote in very general terms about the connections of which she was a part, about the roles she assumed or did not assume, but this general aspect could also potentially be a problem, he stated at one point, in that there was a risk of it becoming independent of her and taking on its own life in the text by virtue of the author's poetic formulations – a betrayal of her, this too. As he wrote, "Consequently, I first took the facts as my starting point and looked for ways of formulating them. But I soon noticed that in looking for formulations I was moving away from the facts. I then adopted a new approach – starting not with the facts but with the already available formulations, the linguistic deposit of man's social experience." In these formulations he searched, as it were, for his mother's life. And he did so, as far as I could understand, in order to protect her dignity and integrity, but something else was going on in the text too; when a person is portrayed from a social viewpoint, through the contemporary eyes of society's culture and self-understanding, with all its various roles and limits, that person's inner being, her singular, individual existence, what used to be called the soul, vanishes, and, I considered, Handke's book was perhaps a story about just that, the suppression of the individual by the social world, the strangulation of the soul. After all, in the end she took her life. Handke steered away from all affect, all feelings, anything anecdotal, anything that might inject life into the text, always insisting that he was writing a text, that the life he was describing exists, or existed, elsewhere, and when, after some seventy pages or so, he arrives at the moment of death and the funeral, which takes place on the fringe of a forest, he writes, "The people left the grave quickly. Standing beside it, I looked up at the motionless trees: for the first time it seemed to me that nature really was merciless. So these were the facts! The forest spoke for itself. Apart from these countless treetops, nothing counted; in the foreground an episodic jumble of shapes, which gradually receded from the picture. I felt mocked and helpless. All at once, in my impotent rage, I felt the need to write something about my mother." This sudden insight into the nature of death is the novel's true starting point. I recognized that insight, it was mine too. However, the book I had written was the direct antithesis of Handke's, its antipode.

I wrote that I had the same insight as Handke when he stood there at the graveside and looked toward the trees and realized that nature was merciless and that the forest spoke for itself. But was that true? How could it be true when that insight had prompted Handke to write a book about his mother and his mother's death in which she was not represented but merely referred to? Given shape only by way of the time in which she lived and the formulations and insights of that time, viewed as an individual who had a certain number of types to choose between, socially and historically determined, albeit of course not without her own personality, though this was not given shape, because then it would have become "typical" of her, and paradoxically a deceit, for the reason that she was always, and invariably, something else. Death in Handke's universe was merciless, and the life he described was merciless too, and given that this is true, his book could not be about mercy. From a literary perspective, mercy lay in beauty, which is to say in the beautiful sentence, and in the creative manifestation, the fictionalization, the secret alliance of events that crisscrossed any novel, because this crisscrossing in itself was an affirmation of meaning and cohesion. So how could Handke's insight be the same as mine when I had written a book about my father's death in which I allowed the text to represent him as if it were in the text that he existed, which is to say making him an object of the reader's own feelings, in prose that sought to form and shape, to creatively make manifest throughout, since it, or its author, was aware that shaping a character into life, making him manifest in that way, rouses or manipulates feelings in a world that was not merciless, because meanings and cohesion would continually be established by their different routes, regardless of what the text otherwise had to say about the matter?

Handke wrote, "The people left the grave quickly. Standing beside it, I looked up at the motionless trees: for the first time it seemed to me that nature really was merciless. So these were the facts! The forest spoke for itself." I wrote, "And death, which I have always regarded as the greatest dimension of life, dark, compelling, was no more than a pipe that springs a leak, a branch that cracks in the wind, a jacket that slips off a clothes hanger and falls to the floor." That was beautiful, it was something, whereas what it described was nothing, empty, neutral, as hopeless as it was merciless. Handke did not lie, or at least he made the greatest efforts not to. I was lying. Why?

When I looked at a tree, I saw that it was blind and arbitrary, an entity that had come into being and would die, and which in the meantime was growing. When I looked at a net full of flapping, silvery fish, I saw the same thing, something blind and arbitrary that came into being, flourished, and would die. When I looked at photos from the Nazi extermination camps, I saw people in the same way. Limbs, heads, bellies, hair, genitals. It had nothing to do with the way I considered them, what I saw was the way these people were viewed at that time, which made it possible for so many to have known about those atrocities and even to have taken part in them without raising a finger. That it was possible to see things in that way was frightening but did not make what was seen any less true. It could be taken as nothing, and all thoughts that sought meaning in the world would have to relate to that zero point. I looked at a tree and I saw meaninglessness. But I saw life too, in its pure, blind form, something that simply existed and was growing. The energy and the beauty of that. Death was indeed nothing, a mere absence. But just as blind life on the one hand could be viewed as a force, something sacred and – well, why not – divine, and on the other hand as something meaningless and empty, death too could be seen in that same way, its song too could be sung, it too could be infused with meaning and beauty. This was what made German National Socialism so infinitely significant to us, a mere two generations having passed since the Nazis were in power, and under their reign of terror, modern in every respect, all three of these perspectives prevailed at once: life as a divine force, death as beautiful and meaningful, human beings as blind, arbitrary, worthless. This aspect, which prior to Nazism belonged to art and to the sublime, became a part of the social order. Handke's mother was a young woman when all that took place, and after describing her childhood years, in Austria between the wars in relative poverty and ignorance, when her wish to learn something, anything, was considered utterly unrealistic and undesirable, Handke sketches out the new mood arising in and around National Socialism, with demonstrations, torchlight parades, buildings festooned with new emblems of nationhood, and writes, "The historic events were represented to the rural population as a drama of nature." Of his mother he states that she continued to have no interest in politics, since "what was happening before her eyes was something entirely different from politics. 'Politics' was something colorless and abstract, not a carnival, not a dance, not a band in local costume, in short, nothing *visible*."

Nazism was the last major utopian political movement, and it showed itself in nearly every way to be destructive, it has made all subsequent utopian thinking problematic if not impossible, not only in politics but also in art, and since art by its very nature is utopian, it has languished ever since, self-examining and suspicious, something of which Handke's novel and nearly all novels by authors of his generation are an expression. How can reality be represented without adding something it doesn't have? What does it "have" and what does it not "have"? What is authentic and what not authentic?

Where is the line between what is put on and what is not put on? Does a line even exist? Is the world anything more than our conceptions about it? Language has no life of its own, is not itself alive, but invokes life, and the primal mise-en-scène of this, the very source of creative literature, is found in the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus and his crew moor on the Oceanus River after visiting Circe, and Odysseus offers a sacrifice to the dead on the shore. The dark blood drains darkly away into the pit, and the dead souls flock around it. He sees young girls in bridal dress, young warriors in bloodstained armor, and old men, their screams are terrifying, and the fear runs through him. The first person he recognizes is Elpenor, who died during their stay with Circe and was left unburied. He speaks to Tiresias the soothsayer, who tells of the future, and then Odysseus's own mother drinks of the blood, she recognizes him and tells him how she died. Odysseus wishes to embrace her and approaches three times, yet three times she escapes him, like a dream or a shadow. She tells him her sinews no longer keep flesh and bone together, the funeral pyre having turned her body into ash, and all that is left is her soul, which wanders about. Literature invokes the world as Odysseus invokes the dead, and regardless of whatever way it does this, the distance is always unbridgeable, the stories always the same. A son loses his mother three thousand years ago, a son loses his mother forty years ago. That one of these stories is fiction, the other fact, does nothing to alter their fundamental likeness, both are made manifest in language, and in that perspective all of Handke's efforts to avoid the literary become futile, there is nothing in his depiction of reality that is more real than Homer's. Nor is that what he seeks to do.

Handke endeavors to write about a human being, his mother, without invoking her, without giving her blood in such a way as to make her manifest as something reminiscent of her previous, living form, in other words denying her the fictional life that might connect up what is dead, her existence in the past, with what is living, the mind of the reader. What the language invokes instead is what surrounded her, the shapes in her life, and although her identity, that which was particular to her, becomes visible in this way, it does not speak to us. Moreover, what is invoked by the language is not something found on the other side of some unbridgeable abyss, for these shapes are in themselves of the language in a certain respect, though not in a wholly literal sense. In this way Handke manages to achieve what he presumably set out to, which was to represent reality in a truthful manner. Another way of doing the same thing might be to remove the narrator entirely and simply present the reader with the documents in which the mother was mentioned or which concerned circumstances of which she was a part; in that case the relationship between reality and its representation would be as good as congruent. The "as if" of art, the abyss that separates it from reality, would then be removed completely. Or, more correctly, would merely be sensed as the will that tracked down the documents, gathered them together, and arranged them in a certain order. Of course, the reader might regard that order as manipulative, since in reality the documents were arranged horizontally, in various archives, in different locations, and even a chronological principle would represent an intrusion and create effect: the last entry in the medical journal is followed by the postmortem report, and the reader wipes away a tear.

The important thing for Handke was to describe his mother without traducing her, which is to say without intervening in what was singular to her, out of respect for her integrity. To me this was not a good thought at all, since I had written about a similar set of events in my own life and had done so in a way that was almost diametrically opposed to Handke's, reaching continually toward affect, feeling, the sentimental in contrast to the rational, and dramatizing my father, allowing him to be a character in a story, representing him in the same way as fictional characters are represented, by concealing the "as if" on which all literature depends, and thereby traducing him and his integrity in the most basic of ways, by saying that this was him. I had said the same thing about all the novel's characters, but only in the case of my father had I done so in a way that failed to show consideration to him and the person he was. He had been dead for more than ten years, but that only made it possible, it didn't justify it.

I had thought about none of this while I had been writing, neither the manufacture of reality, representation, nor my father's integrity, everything took place intuitively, I began with a blank page and a will to write, and ended up with the novel as it was. In that there lies a belief in the intuitive that is as good as blind, and from that basis a poetics might be derived, and an ontology too, I suppose, since for me the novel provides a means of thinking radically different from that of the essay, the article, or the thesis, because reflection in the novel is not hierarchically superior as a pathway to understanding, but coordinate with all the other elements in it. The room in which it is conceived is as important as the thought itself. The snow falling through the darkness outside, the headlights of the cars gliding past on the other side of the river. This was perhaps the most important thing I learned at university, that practically anything at all can be said about a novel or a poem, and what is said may be as likely as it is plausible, but never exhaustive, perhaps not even important, since the novel and the poem are always entities in their own right, singular and existing as they are, and the fact that what the novel or the poem says cannot be said in any other way makes them essentially mysterious. The world is mysterious in exactly the same way, and yet we tend to forget this all the time, always giving precedence to reflection whenever we look at it. What does it mean to "walk"? Is it putting one foot in front of the other? Yes, it is. But describing the motor function, the putting of one foot in front of the other, says nothing about what it feels like to walk, of the difference between walking uphill and down, walking along a stone jetty or up a flight of stairs, across a lawn or on the mossy earth of the forest, barefoot or in boots, and even less about the feeling of watching others walk – the pedestrians bustling across the square on a Saturday morning, the lone man striding through snow-covered fields or a person you've known for a very long time, the way their entire character seems to be contained in the way they walk when they come toward you. You see it at once, here "he" or "she" comes. In that unique pattern of movements is all that you know and have experienced about that person, though not as separate, clearly divided parts, what you see is in a way the sum of that person, what they "are" to you. They come walking, you see them, and that's it. One could delve deeper into this, for example scientifically, in which case it's all about muscles and sinews being deployed in a particular way so as to make it possible to put one foot in front of the other, the way the blood runs through the arteries and veins, the gases it transports, the cells and cell walls, the mitochondria and the strings of DNA, not to mention the impulses that race through the nervous system, sent on their way by a will or a wish for movement in the form of chemistry and electrical discharges in the brain, which then begs a whole series of questions. What is will? What is a wish? What is a motor impulse? What form does it have? If it is chemistry, then what is the connection between the various chemical reactions and what we know as will, or the urge to do something? These impulses do not belong to the conscious mind, but to deeper-lying and considerably older parts of the brain, unchanged through millions of years right back to the time our first and most distant ancestors emerged into the world, like the apes in almost every respect apart from their hip sockets and the length of their arms, as well as a few more physiological peculiarities that made it possible for them to do what no other animal until then had been able to do, and which none other is able to do to this day, which was to walk upright on two legs. Walking upright on two legs is what above all distinguishes us as a species. This property characterizes not only our physical but also our mental reality, since we orient ourselves in the world of thought as if it were topographical, a landscape through which we walk, from the depths of the subconscious to the sky of the superego, one political utopia farthest to our left, the other farthest to our right; some thoughts are nearby, either easy to grasp or hard to see because we are right up close, some thoughts we need to reach for, others are higher up and can only be made our own by the greatest, most alpine of efforts, while others are low and grubby, close to the ground and to the earthly.

As a writer you can go that step further or, as Lawrence Durrell describes the process of writing novels, set oneself a goal and walk there in your sleep. The act of "walking" is inexhaustible; however, literature's job is not to be exhaustive but to construct the inexhaustible, at least it is for the kind of literature that aims to represent reality and our ever-changing, fluctuating reactions to it. The trees that are, to put it in the manner of Rilke, and we who pass by it all, like changing breaths of wind. The forest speaks for itself, Handke writes, there is an abyss between us and it, but if nature's mercilessness appears threatening, it is not because it is turned away from us, as it can appear when we look at it, in its almost dreamlike remoteness, but because its muteness and blindness exists in us all. Merciless is the beating heart. Odysseus tried to build a bridge across the abyss, between what was culture and what was nature in his being when he spoke to his heart and beseeched it not to beat so hard. The abyss is inside us. I saw it the first time I stood in front of a dead body. I didn't understand it, but I saw it and knew. Death is not the abyss, but exists in the living, in the space between our thoughts and the flesh through which they pass. In the flesh, thoughts are a kind of intruder, conquerers of a foreign land, who leave it just as quickly again the moment it becomes inhospitable, which is to say when all movements cease and all warmth seeps away, as it does in death.

But it wasn't simply a dead body I saw back then. The dead body was my father. My vague notion of what death was constituted only an infinitely small element in the barrage of thoughts and feelings that consumed me. In front of me lay the person who had created me, his body had made mine, and I had grown up under his supervision, he was the single most important and influential person in my life. The fact that he was dead did nothing to alter that. Nothing was concluded that afternoon in the chapel in Kristiansand.

After speaking to Yngve I took the elevator down to the basement and walked through the damp bunker-like passages in which the ceiling lights futuristically came on by themselves one by one as I proceeded, and reached the laundry room at the exact moment the display on the last of the machines changed from one minute left to zero. I transferred the wet clothes into the tumble dryers, and stuffed the last of the dirty ones into the washing machines, sprinkled washing powder into the little trays, and switched them on, and a second later the machines rumbled and spluttered into life. I stood for a moment, watching their drums revolve, the way the clothes inside became more and more saturated and were slung against the glass, wrenched from sight, slung against the glass, my thoughts wandering to the worst possible scenario, a court case. I saw myself in my mind's eye arriving in a taxi, the blitz of photographers as I left the building, the headlines in the newspapers, KNAUSGAARD THE LIAR, SHAMBLES, SHOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED, ADMITS LYING, KNAUSGAARD RAPED ME, because I understood all too well that proceedings of that kind would kick up all sorts of other accusations, and that an autobiographical project in which I also wrote about others opened the floodgates for just about anything to be said about me by anyone at all. On its own terms, I wasn't anticipating the novel making any major impact, and neither were the publishers, ten thousand copies were being printed to start with, that was a lot, though no more than my previous novel, but if there was going to be a court case, sales no doubt would rocket. It would be a scandal then, dirty and sensational, and all kinds of shit would be dug up about me. In my thoughts, I sat in the witness box, which for some reason I imagined to be a kind of desk not unlike the ones we'd had at school, on a low platform in the middle of a packed room, answering the most provocative and insinuating questions imaginable. The first was why had I written the novel in the first place. Why had I used people's real names instead of concealing their identities, as was the practice in novels running close to real events, and had been for as long as the genre had existed. Why real life? What was the point? At first I found myself unable to answer and shifted uneasily in the chair, stuttering and stammering much as I sometimes had onstage, most recently in Munich, where many of the small audience that had found its way there had got up and left, something that consumed me with shame whenever I thought about it. But what was the point of wallowing in thoughts of weakness and wretchedness, I thought to myself, and looked up at the ground-level window just below the ceiling, through the cracked pane of which I glimpsed the asphalt outside.

Why not fight back? I straightened my shoulders, and there, in the midst of all the journalists and inquisitive onlookers, perhaps a hundred in total, I began to speak, vividly and full of insight, about the relationship between truth and the subjective, literature's relationship to reality, delving into the nature of social structures, the way a novel of this kind exposed the boundaries to which society adhered but which remained unwritten and were thus invisible insofar as they were melded into us and our self-understanding, and how they for this reason had to be breached before they could be seen. But why did they have to be seen, my defense lawyer asked. There is something all of us experience, which is the same for all human beings, I replied, but which nonetheless is seldom conveyed apart from in the private sphere. All of us encounter difficulties at some point in our lives, all of us know someone with a drinking problem, mental issues, or some other kind of life-threatening affliction, at least this is the case in my experience; every time I meet a new person and get to know them, some narrative like this will eventually come to the surface, a tale of sickness, decline, or sudden death. These things are not represented and thereby seem not to exist, or else to exist only as a burden each of us must bear on our own. But what about the newspapers and the media, the defense lawyer then asked. Surely there's enough death and sickness there? Of course, I said, but there it is presented as facts, described from a distance as a kind of objective phenomenon. The ripple effect of such cases, the impact on the individual and the next of kin, is ignored or briefly referred to as something external. Moreover, it has to be something spectacular to be written about. What I'm talking about is day-to-day life. The metaphor for that is death. Death is present in all our lives, firstly in the shape of something that happens to someone we know, then, eventually, to ourselves. People die in droves every single day. It's something we don't see, it's kept from us. We don't like to talk about it either. Why not? It touches the very depths of everyone's existence. Why do we suppress that? It's the same with aging and human deterioration. If you get too old to look after yourself you're put in an institution, hidden away from everyone. What kind of a society are we living in, where everything that is sick, deviant, or dead is kept from sight? Two generations ago, sickness and death were both very much closer to us, if not a natural part of life then at least unavoidable. I could have written an article about all this, but it wouldn't have said much because arguments have got to be rational, and this is about the opposite, the irrational, all the feelings we have about what it means to confront what has withered away into death, and what that actually is. I remember the first time I saw real sickness, my maternal grandmother was in the final throes of Parkinson's disease, and the sheer physical frailty and human suffering was an enormous shock to me because I had no idea it existed in that way. I knew there was sickness, but I didn't know it was like that. I had a similar experience the first time I worked in an institution for the mentally deficient, I was stunned by what I saw, all those deformed bodies and crippled minds, why had I not known that this too was part of the human experience? It had been kept out of the way, but why? It made me think about what physicality actually is, what it means, the animal or biological, material nature of the human body and its absolute closeness to the world, in contrast to the world picture and self-understanding that comes out of our reflections as to who we are and what kind of terms we exist under, not just in the limitless amounts of scientific research we produce, but also in the limitless amounts of news stories and programs we read and watch, in which this perspective is absent. What I was trying to do was to reintroduce a closeness, trying to get the text to penetrate that whole series of conceptions and ideas and images that hang like a sky above reality, or cling to it like a membrane enclosing the eye, to reach into the reality of the human body and the frailty of the flesh, but not in any general way because generality is a relative of the ideal, it doesn't exist, only the particular exists, and since the particular in this case happens to be me, that was what I wrote about. That's how it is. It was the only goal I had, and that's the reality of the matter. Some people are of the opinion I had no right to do what I was doing because in doing so I was involving other people besides myself. And this is true. My question is why we conceal the things we do. Where is the shame in human decline? The complete human catastrophe? To live the complete human catastrophe is terrible indeed, but to write about it? Why shame and concealment when what we are dealing with here is basically the most human thing of all? What's so dangerous about it that we cannot speak of it out loud?

Gunnar's lawyer, who had stood pensively listening to all this, looked at me in a way I took to indicate sarcasm.

"All well and good, Knausgaard," he said. "But the truth is that your father's demise did not occur in the manner in which you have described. We have witnesses. He drank and had his problems, certainly, but his demise was quiet and uneventful. Moreover, the fact of the matter is that your grandmother did not drink at all. The two years you, in your colorful depiction, would have them living and drinking together exist only in your imagination.

He lived with her for three months. The house was not littered with empty bottles. Nor did you wash the house down, as you have written, because your uncle did that. And therefore my question to you is this: Why are you lying about these matters? You, who wish to write about the world the way it is, why should you, of all people, depict a world that never existed? That is the issue facing us today. You can try to hide behind as much existential intellectualism as you like, to my mind it's pretentious gibberish, so pompous it makes me feel sick just standing here listening to it. However, that is not the matter at hand, at least not today, but from what I can deduce from your self-exalting and conceited claptrap, you consider what you have written to be the truth, this to your mind being the whole point of your despicable and duplicitous novel. Only then it turns out not to be the truth at all. Can you explain that to me?"

I stared at him stiffly, unable to move.

"It's how I remember it," I said after a while.

"Not good enough!" the lawyer barked. "You have offended these people, desecrated the memories of two deceased members of your own family. You sold your father and grandmother for blood money. And all you can say is it's how you remember it? Violating the privacy of your family is a serious enough matter on its own, a criminal offense, but to have lied about your uncle's mother and his brother exacerbates that offense tenfold. We're talking about defamation of character, carrying a sentence of up to three years' imprisonment."

He wiped the perspiration from his brow and swept his blond hair from his face in one and the same movement, then looked at me, waiting.

"But I did wash the house down," I said. "It's not true that I can't manage things like that. I may have exaggerated the chaos inside the house, but it was dreadful. And as for what I've written about my father, it's my own story I'm telling. That can't be against the law, surely? Can it?"

I consciously avoided glancing at Gunnar, who sat proudly in the first row, having refused to acknowledge my gesture of reconciliation in the minutes prior to proceedings commencing, when, heroically and forgivingly, I had extended my hand toward him, and crossed the floor back to my seat to await the testimony of the first witness, the Swedish essayist, professor, and member of the Swedish Academy Horace Engdahl, the man who for many years had announced the winner of the Nobel Prize, known for his literary elegance and incomparable style, classmate of suspected Palme assassin Christer Pettersson, and friend of the wild and fearlessly gifted writer Stig Larsson. I had seen Engdahl at a seminar in Bergen many years before; he had veered off the theme and talked about Carina Rydberg and her novel *Den högsta kasten*, *The Highest Caste*, it was at the time when the controversy surrounding that book had been at its peak in Sweden – she had written about actual people, using their full names – and Engdahl had said that, quite apart from the bickering to which it had given rise, the book was first and foremost a brilliant work of literature. I suppose I was hoping he would say the same about my own book. On the other hand, I found myself thinking as I stood there, staring emptily at the washing machine and the soapy water that sloshed against the glass, there was something essentially elitist and superior about the man, he was a literary aristocrat, and how was that going to look in court, with Gunnar coming across as the man in the street, the everyman who quite unwittingly found his life destroyed by his writer nephew? People would think it could happen to them too, and shudder at the thought. I would be made out to be the basest of human beings, a kind of literary vampire, brutal and without consideration, self-seeking and egoistic. Perhaps an aristocrat wouldn't be the right person to argue in favor of such a practice?

A door opened in the passage, perhaps it was someone who had booked the washing machines I was now using, and I turned my head to look, but the faint footsteps came to a halt at another door, which whoever it was then opened. I waited a few seconds for them to go inside, then went out. The sounds of the laundry room were cut off abruptly by the heavy slam of the steel door closing behind me. It felt like I was in the depths of some great factory, I thought to myself. I went up the stairs, through the door, and out onto the square, I needed to get some cigarettes. The fruit merchant waved at me, I was probably his best customer. I smiled and waved back, twirling my key strap around my index finger and crossing to the other side of the square, glancing as always at the shoes in the window of the Nilson store as I went by.

Lars Norén had written about a Nilson shop in his expansive diaries, which I'd read halfway through the previous summer, he'd expressed astonishment at the fact that a woman – I couldn't quite remember if it was his daughter or his new girlfriend – could buy her shoes there, apparently Nilson wasn't good enough for him, he bought his own shoes in a different class of shop altogether, so I understood, though until then I'd always thought of the place as having a certain status. Now it was impossible for me to go past the store without thinking about it, Norén's cosmopolitan consternation at the provincial footwear habits of others. I glanced at another shop on the other side of the street, as was my habit, since it sold underwear and often displayed posters of scantily clad women in its windows, before pushing open the door of Thomas Tobak and stepping inside, where Thomas himself looked up amiably, before looking down again at a receipt he seemed to be checking.

"Hello there," he said.

"Hello," I said. "Three packs of Lucky, please."

He picked them off the shelf behind him.

"No papers today?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"A hundred and forty-seven, then," he said.

I took my card out of my back pocket.

"You can use this one," he said, nodding at a new card reader he'd got, one that read the chip rather than the magnetic stripe, which was good for both of us, since the stripe on my card was rather the worse for wear and he'd had to key in the number manually on more than one occasion. Not that he minded, he always had plenty of time for his customers, no matter how busy he was.

"Well, that's something," I said. "Thanks a lot!"

"No problem," he said.

With the three packs in my hand I went out again, into the pedestrian street that ran down to the first of the canals, then on to Gustav Adolfs torg, teeming with people on Saturday mornings but now almost deserted.

The children.

Where were they?

I stopped.

They were at the nursery. I'd dropped them off there.

Or had I?

What had I done that morning?

Flustered, I tried to recall some definite occurrence that would confirm to me that I had taken them to the nursery and delivered them there, and then, in the same instant, I remembered we'd gone back for Vanja's glasses, and everything was all right.

I started walking again and went around the corner, past the flower stall first, then the fruit stall, still with a vague sense of unease; I hadn't given the children a thought all morning, and if they'd been anywhere else but at the nursery I would have been grossly neglecting them. The previous summer I'd read about a Danish father who forgot to stop off at the nursery one morning, his child had been asleep in the back when he parked the car, he explained, and he had gone into work oblivious. The child had died in the heat. Something similar could easily happen to me, I'd often thought, and if I happened to be out with only two of them, I could find myself suddenly stricken with terror. Where's John? Have I forgotten him somewhere? Where is he? Where the hell is he? And then I would realize he was at home with Linda and everything was all right. But even though I'd been through it before, the fear could come back at any time, where is he, with Linda, how can you be sure that wasn't yesterday, think back!

I passed the key card over the panel and pushed the door open. A postman was delivering the mail, putting it in the various mailboxes. I nodded and stopped. He dropped a small pile into ours, I waited until he stepped out of the way, then retrieved it, opened the elevator door and flicked through the bundle on my way up. There was a letter from Svea Inkasso, the debt collection company, three bills, a *Bamse* magazine, and an advertising brochure from Spirit. I opened the door and went inside, dumping it all on top of the pile on the table under the mirror before taking my shoes off and putting them away in the cupboard. I put two of the cigarette packs in the drawer of my desk, took the third out with me onto the balcony and sat down, poured myself a cup of coffee from the vacuum jug, opened the packet, took out a cigarette, and lit up.

Above me a pigeon cooed, the sound came suddenly and was very close. I looked up, it sounded like it came from inside the roof.

Uuhh-huu-huuu, it said.

Uuhh-huu-huuu.

The bird scratched about up there, presumably it was the sound of its claws against the zinc I could hear, it had tried to change position and now couldn't get purchase. Oh, its claws, they were so prehistoric, what were they doing on modern metal?

I poured myself some more coffee.

The pigeon sailed into the air above me, gliding toward the rooftop on the other side, perhaps two floors down, where it settled on a TV aerial.

Faintly, as if from the depths of the apartment below, came the sound of a door buzzer. A few seconds passed before I connected it to Geir being due. I got to my feet and went back inside, down the hall, as it buzzed again.

I picked up the entry phone.

"Yes?" I said.

"It's Gunnar. Is that you, you bastard? I'm here to get you!"

"Come in," I said, and pressed the button until I heard the door open downstairs, then hung up, opened the door, and stood waiting at the elevator.

Geir emerged shoving a big black suitcase in front of him. Njaal came out behind him, hugging his leg; the look he gave me was partly suspicious, partly curious. Geir put his hand out without smiling, then looked up at me.

"Hi," he said hurriedly, as if he'd lost his breath, already leaving the greeting behind.

"So you found it all right?" I said.

"I have been here before, in case you'd forgotten," he said, bundling past me into the hall, where he put the suitcase down and bent down to help Njaal off with his shoes.

"How could I forget?" I said.

He looked up and smiled.

"Relax, it's going to be all right."

"What is?"

"Whatever's worrying you."

He bent down again and took his sandals off.

"Where are Heidi and Vanja?" said Njaal.

"At the *dagis*," I said. "They'll be home again soon. You can play with their toys while you're waiting."

He stepped cautiously toward their room.

"Good to see you," I said as Geir straightened up.

"I'm sure," he said. "You'll be saving a fortune on your phone bill now."

"You think I call too often, is that it?"

"Often?" he said. "It's all I do! Get up, brush my teeth, talk to you, have some lunch, talk to you, have some dinner, talk to you, brush my teeth, go to bed. I wonder what's going to happen tomorrow, I think to myself. Who knows, maybe Karl Ove might call?"

"Do you want some coffee or something?" I said.

"You bet I do."

He followed me into the kitchen, angling his head slightly upward, the way he often did when we hadn't seen each other for a long time, a wide, sardonic smile on his face, as if to say, I know you.

And in a way, he did.

When we moved to Malmö I had been afraid Geir and I would lose touch. That's what distance does; when the time between conversations gets longer, intimacy diminishes, the little things connected to one's daily life lose their place, it seems odd to talk about a shirt you just bought or to mention you're thinking of leaving the dishes until morning when you haven't spoken to a person for two weeks or a month, that absence would seem instead to call for more important topics, and once they begin to determine the conversation there's no turning back, because then it's two diplomats exchanging information about their respective realms in a conversation that needs to be started up from scratch, in a sense, every time, which gradually becomes tedious, and eventually it's easier not to bother phoning at all, in which case it's even harder the next time, and then suddenly it's been half a year of silence. But that didn't happen. Far from it, we were in touch even more after I moved away, we talked more often on the phone, and for a lot longer, to the extent that sometimes I found myself wondering if it was normal, which filled me with a vague sense of unease because I didn't want not to be normal. A typical day would be me phoning him first at nine in the morning, when we would talk for anything from twenty minutes to an hour and a half, then I'd call him again in the afternoon, when I'd read him what I'd written during the day, and he would comment on it. He never criticized but would discuss what I'd written in such a way as to open it up, presenting other perspectives and possibilities, which I would often make use of in what I wrote the day after. Occasionally, we spoke in the evenings too, though I tried to keep it to a minimum, sensing that Linda perhaps found all this talking to Geir rather excessive. But I had no friends in Malmö, no other writers I saw, and the only space I had in which to talk about the things that interested and occupied me was this, and since it had been going on for several years I saw no need to be any different to what I was, no need to pretend I was any smarter than I was or say anything else other than what I actually thought. Many of the ideas and conceptions I discussed either directly or indirectly in the book had come from Geir, just as we also talked about the directions in which they took me. He was an influence, my thoughts were increasingly similar to his, and the only redeeming aspect of this, because that was the way I looked at it, was that I allowed the thoughts I so shamelessly appropriated from him to find resonance in what belonged to me, my own story and biography, as well as the fact that I likewise played a part in his work and development, though not as significantly and in a quite different way that was less threatening to his own integrity. Six years previously he had traveled to Baghdad and stayed there before, during, and after the American invasion of Iraq. His intention was to write a book about war, and he had entered the country as a human shield, a cover that gave him enormous freedom and allowed him to interview all kinds of people who in one way or another were affected by the war. He had spent the six years since his return writing that book, a process that slowly but surely was approaching its conclusion.

His working title was *Against Better Judgment*. It could have been his motto.

I poured the coffee into the mugs and handed him his. Outside the window the rooftops and their ridges, red against the sky's blue, seemed to slant inward, it was something to do with perspective, I was looking at them diagonally from above, and it created an illusion. It had struck me the very first time I had stood here looking out. We were being shown the apartment, and that faint feeling of dizziness it had given me made me certain I wanted to live here. Now I was used to it, but Geir being here made me notice again.

"Anything more from him?" he said.

"From Gunnar?" I said.

He nodded, and flashed me a grin I might have taken to be malicious if I hadn't known him better.

"No. Enough's enough, don't you think?"

"Absolutely," he said, still grinning.

"You can wipe that smile off your face, then," I said.

"I'm in a good mood, that's all. Oh, but you wouldn't have noticed, would you? Ha ha."

"My problem's a bit bigger than that."

"I know. Your problem is that you're a bad person."

"Exactly."

"And, I should add, one of the few true narcissists."

"If you say so."

"There's no doubt about it. The only reason I point it out is because I'm one too."

"I'm not sure I follow. You put up with me and all my morbid self-absorption, because you're just the same, morbidly self-absorbed? Wouldn't it be more logical for you to hate me for taking up time better spent on yourself?"

"My ego's big enough for it not to bother me."

He looked up at me and grinned again as he lifted the mug to his lips.

There was a crash from the living room.

"Njaal, what are you up to in there?" he called.

Njaal's little voice said something back.

"Do you want to come outside while I have a smoke?" I said. He nodded and we went out onto the balcony. On our way we saw Njaal sitting on the floor surrounded by toys he'd taken out of the round ottoman, it was the lid that had dropped on the floor. We sat down on either side of the little camping table. I lit a cigarette and put my feet up on the railing.

"Do you want something else to think about?" he said.

"That wouldn't be bad," I replied.

"I was in town the other day and bought a pair of clogs."

"I don't think this is going to be enough to lift me up into the light," I said.

"The reason I bought them was to annoy my neighbor," he said. "If it doesn't work, I'm going to buy some for Christina and Njaal as well."

"You mean you're wearing clogs indoors now?" I asked, and looked at him inquiringly.

He nodded.

"It's a war. As soon as I get home I put them on and jump up and down on the floor for an hour or so."

"Like Donald Duck, you mean?"

"No, Donald Duck gets mad, that's all. He's totally irrational. This is rational. I'm exploiting the advantages of the terrain. I'm higher up than him. My floor is his ceiling."

"Haven't you thought about beating him up? Dragging him out into the woods and giving him a good hiding?"

"That would be too brutal, even if it is touch and go. And we could lose the tenancy. I don't want to risk that. There's no rule against clogs, though. No one can deny me clogs. If he laid a finger on Christina or Njaal, that'd be different. You've got to measure your violence. It's all about violence against over-violence. I could have shot him, but that would have been excessive. The same goes for beating him up. You've got to wait and see how the conflict develops and tailor your violence according to how much is reasonable. That's Clausewitz. Violence is a means of removing a problem. A practical measure."

"So you've thought about beating him up, then?"

"Of course I have. But this is the best solution. I'm going to be wearing clogs until he gives in. If it takes a year, I'll wear clogs for a year. If it takes ten, I'll wear them for ten."

"You're out of your mind."

"Not in the slightest! I'm involved in a conflict with my downstairs neighbor. He attacked me. I tried to be reasonable, but it didn't work. So I'm retaliating. I'm not doing anything against the rules, and he'll discover that soon enough. And then the only way he'll be able to stop it will be to give in. He knows that. There are three ways he can get out of this. One, he moves out. Two, his wife apologizes to Christina. Three, he never speaks to us again and never so much as looks at us when we meet, i.e., stays well and truly away. If you ask me, my guess is he'll go with the latter. But we'll see. For the moment, he's sticking it out."

"You make it sound like a normal way of dealing with things," I said. "But it's not, is it? No one resolves a conflict by buying themselves a pair of clogs and tramping around in them indoors. And the way you talk about it as well. Exploiting the advantages of the terrain. Anyone would think you were an army unit taking a hill in Vietnam or something. But it's an apartment in Stockholm we're talking about."

"A conflict is a conflict," he said. "I know this is going to end it. There's no way he can win. No one can withstand the sound of clogs on a floor. He'll last a month, maybe two. Then he'll come creeping and ask what he can do to make me stop. You'll see. It'll be problem solved."

"Not his."

"No, but his is unsolvable. Mine, on the other hand, isn't."

A few months earlier Geir and Christina had moved out of their two-room apartment in Västertorp to a four-room in the same neighborhood. Even as they were moving in, their downstairs neighbor had complained about the disturbance as they lugged their furniture and boxes up the stairs. He complained about their hammering when they were hanging their pictures on the wall. They told him they would try to move in as quietly as they could, but that it was impossible for them not to make some noise. A few weeks after, he complained about doors being slammed and Njaal running across the floor. Geir fitted rubber strips around the doors and cupboard doors, and put more mats down on the floors. The neighbor wrote a formal complaint to the landlord. Besides the noise from the apartment, there was the noise in the stairwell whenever they went in and out, and the stroller inside the street door. Geir responded in a letter to the effect that they were as considerate as they could be. They never played music, never held parties, and went to bed every night at ten. The noise their neighbor was complaining about was the same as that made by any normal family with children, and there was nothing to be done about it. His letter, as I understood it, only made the neighbor even more furious, he had even confronted Geir one time in the basement. The situation reminded me of when Linda and I lived in Stockholm and had a neighbor who likewise complained about everything we did and behaved threateningly toward us. We too had tried to accommodate her demands, but they had been too unreasonable for it to work. We solved the issue by moving out. I still felt the panic grab hold of me if one of the children was noisy, if they happened to kick a radiator, for instance, or thump around on the floor. A chill of anxiety would run through me, and I'd be there like a shot to make them stop. Our neighbors here had never complained, it was the fear of our Stockholm neighbor that still lived inside me, three years after we moved away. I'd spoken to Christina about it, and her reaction was the same as mine, to try to eliminate the cause and tiptoe around. Geir was made of sterner stuff. He didn't internalize, he retaliated. He had resorted to buying the clogs now, he told me, because of something that had only just happened. Christina had been out on the balcony with Njaal and had gone in again for a moment when she heard shouting from the balcony below. What's going on up there? It turned out Njaal had opened the lid of the parasol stand, which had been full of water, and some of the water had dripped down onto the neighbors below. Christina had no idea what had happened, and said they hadn't been doing anything. Whereupon the wife had shouted to her husband that the bitch was being cheeky. As soon as Geir heard about this he got in the car, drove into town, and bought the clogs he'd been tramping about in ever since, from when he got up in the morning until he went to bed at night.

"It sounds like you're enjoying yourself while you're at it," I said.

"Not the actual going around in clogs. They're a bit clunky for my liking. But the thought of it driving him mad down there without him being able to do a thing about it, that's different. That gives me pleasure, yes."

"I'd prefer if it didn't," I said.

He laughed.

"A few weeks and I can take them off again."

"You're not solving anything. He's just going to find something else to rile you with."

"If he does, I'll step things up. It's a war. The point being that the enemy has to be made to understand you're always going to be ready to go a step further than him. And when he does, that's when you've won."

"But there's a difference between major and minor conflicts, isn't there?"

"That's where you're wrong. The principle's exactly the same. As soon as he realizes he's not going to get anywhere with me, and that I'm willing to take it further than he is, no matter what he decides to do, then he'll surrender. Wait and see."

"I will," I said.

"Your strategy, putting up with everything and hoping it'll all go away, doesn't work with that kind of person."

"That's what you say," I said. "But I'm still not sure you know what you're doing."

Njaal opened the door and stepped outside.

"It's high," he said.

"Yes, very high up," said Geir.

Njaal got down on his knees and peered through the gap between the concrete floor and the railing.

"There's something there!" he exclaimed.

"Is it that paintbrush?" I said. "Vanja dropped that. There are some lighters down there too, I think. Ones I've dropped."

"Can I throw something down?" he asked, and looked up at his father.

"I don't think that's such a good idea, Njaal," Geir said.

"How about we go out to the garden?" I said. "Let him run around a bit? I don't need to pick the kids up for another couple of hours yet. We could go in your car."

An hour and a half later we sat chatting on a couple of chairs by the hedge, in a hum of wasps and bumblebees as we watched Njaal run around on the grass. We had a paddling pool, but he didn't want to go in. Now and again he came up to guzzle some fruit juice, in that unrestrained, greedy way in which children drink, and then he'd be gone again, on his way across the grass in the direction of something else that had caught his attention. When we bought the place it had been one of the neatest of all the cabins. Two years on, and everything about it had fallen into decline. But in the frenzied flourish of summer it wasn't hard to call the garden lush instead of neglected. And anyway, this wasn't a day to worry about it.

There was a sound of lawn mowers, and two gardens from ours two families stood nattering away in their Skåne dialects, but apart from that the place was quiet. I tried to explain to Geir how I felt, to define the emotion so he could understand, and ended up calling it terror. I could easily see how superficial it all seemed to anyone on the outside. It wasn't in the least bit likely that Gunnar was going to call or turn up; he had severed all contact with me, any correspondence went between him and the publisher, with me copied in. Maybe he was afraid of me and hadn't the guts for a direct confrontation? Judging from what he'd said about me, this was wholly unlikely. In his eyes I was a sixteen-year-old layabout with no self-knowledge, a money-grubber inflamed with hatred. It was far more likely he was avoiding me because I was a disgrace. A third and final possibility was because he didn't think I was responsible for my own actions, I was a Knausgaard, after all, and this was his way of going easy on me. At one point this had been what I'd thought, and it still made me feel strangely warm, but I had long since realized it was a kind of wishful thinking.

We talked about it. Which is to say, Geir talked and I listened. I'd heard everything before and was convinced I'd thought every thought that could possibly be conceived on the matter, when all of a sudden Geir asked:

"How old is he, anyway?"

"About fifty-five, I think."

"And here you are. Gray hair. Gray beard. Forty years old. You're about the same age. You shouldn't put up with someone your own age treating you like that."

"That never occurred to me."

"What?"

"That we're the same age."

How odd that this should be such a liberating thought. Most of what Geir had said had already occurred to me and I'd thought about it myself, but not that. Gunnar and I were the same age. He wasn't above me. One thing was recognizing this, another was understanding it.

"He saw you when you were in diapers, that's the problem here. You're always going to be a kid to him. But it doesn't mean you have to be a kid in your own eyes when you're dealing with him."

"He's my dad, isn't he?"

"I know that. But you're more than just feelings and irrationality. You're thoughts as well, and rationality. Let them take over. It'll all sort itself out then."

"You make it sound like I've got a choice."

"And?"

I raised my hand in the air.

"Enough for now. How are things, anyway?"

He laughed. "Oh no, you don't."

"All right, so it was an abrupt change of subject. But only so you'd take the hint. Isn't that how it's supposed to work?"

"What?"

"Social interaction. The conversation has to move on at some point. It's the normal procedure, so I'm told."

"I think we've gone beyond polite convention, don't you?"

"Certainly not. How are things, anyway?"

"Let me see," he said. "I sit in my room and write . . ."

He looked up at me.

"Same as usual in other words. There you go. Should we talk about Gunnar again?"

An hour later, as I carried the two chairs into the open shed at the side of the little cabin, I felt a sense of relief. Maybe things weren't that bad after all. Maybe it wasn't the end of the world. I put the glasses and cups on the counter in the kitchen, heard Njaal running on the gravel outside the gate, locked the door and went out through the garden, breaking into a trot so as to catch up with them. We'd left the car in the parking area a hundred meters away. Every garden I passed was immaculate, with little ponds and sculptures, hedges straight and trimmed to perfection, lawns like billiard tables. The people who owned them moved out here in May and stayed until September, most were retired, and to them gardening was a lifestyle. I found it all so ghastly. I hated the place, really hated it. Being here was like being on display, viewed not as the person you were, whoever that was, but as the person you looked like you were. The fact that I knew the rules of such places from my own childhood did nothing to improve matters, for how on earth had I got myself into buying a property, however small, in the midst of this inferno? How could I have been so oblivious to myself?

I caught up with Geir and Njaal just before the barrier where the parking area began.

"The next novel I write starts here," I said. "Have I told you that? The last world war never happened and Nazism spread peacefully through Europe. The main character grows up here. All through his childhood and youth he's been thinking about Africa. That's the first sentence: 'In all the time I was growing up I read about Africa. It filled me with a yearning so great it was almost unbearable.' Something like that. I read this article once in *Dagens Nyheter* about the Nazis' plans for the world. They mapped out this gigantic port on the coast of North Africa. The rest of the continent was just darkness, nothing there. That would be a good framework for a novel. A world planned and ordered down to the minutest detail, everything in it utterly controlled in all its aesthetics, and then this other world in which everything is unknown, unpredictable and improvised, where things happen and are then just gone again. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

He nodded.

"I see you needing a hideaway from what you've got going. It's an escape attempt, pure and simple."

"You're probably right. But I mean it, seriously. Africa is something else entirely. I saw that when I went there, and I've seen it in lots of documentaries, too. What we haven't understood yet is that Africa is our utopia, not this."

Geir opened the car door, and Njaal climbed onto the backseat. I waited until Geir got him strapped in, then got in the passenger side. A couple of other car doors were opened and closed a bit farther away, it reminded me of a parking lot next to a marina or a landing stage, people lugging cooler bags back and forth, and camping chairs, people in shorts and skirts, their tanned skins, their lazy movements, the extravagance of the great blue sky and the serene surroundings, broken by such trivial occurrences, objects lifted and carried, doors slamming shut, the mutter of voices.

"We should stop all development aid to Africa. Stop all trade and pull out completely, let them get on with it. The way it is now all we're doing is carrying on the colonial relationship, which says we're better than them, look at the way they do things, they can't govern themselves, can't keep anything in order, they can't even manage to organize schools. It's a mess. They've got wars, child soldiers. All that shit. No, cut them off, leave them all to it. Close the continent. I hate that underlying thought that runs through everything we do in the world, the idea that everyone's got to be like us. That's the real hell. The bigger the differences, the better, as far as I'm concerned. African cultures are so glaringly different from our own. They're the utopia, not us."

"You like that wording, don't you?" said Geir. He put on his awkward-looking aviator sunglasses and pulled slowly away across the dusty parking area toward the shady asphalt of the road at the top end.

"What, the utopia part, you mean?"

"That part, yes."

"But it's what I think."

"I know you do. It's that yearning of yours for the seventeenth century, only in another bottle."

"Maybe. But anyway, a dystopian novel with a main character who grew up here and who longs for Africa, and probably goes there at some point. When the narrative takes place he's an old man living on an island in the Baltic."

"Let me guess. You went there on holiday? Slite, on Gotland, was that it?"

"Thereabouts. It's not much of a plot, but it's a start."

"What are you going to call it?"

"*The Third Realm*."

"Another Nazi title."

"I suppose, but it's a good title."

"I'm sure it is. Didn't I think of it?"

"I don't know. Did you?"

"I'm pretty sure. But you can't remember, can you?"

We left the cabins, Geir halted at the roundabout until there was a gap, then drew slowly away, accelerating out of the curve. There was a bus pulled in at the bus stop, apart from that the road ahead was empty. It was half past three, still a while before the rush hour got going.

"You've got a funny kind of memory. Someone will say something to you, or else you'll read something, then you forget all about it until all of a sudden it pops up again while you're writing, completely removed from its orginal context, as if you'd thought of it yourself."

"Isn't that what they call plagiarism?" I said, feeling a warmth rise to my cheeks.

He looked at me for a second.

"No, it's what's called freedom. It's because you're made in such a way that you're writing a novel, whereas I'm writing nonfiction. I've been destroyed by academia. It makes me check and double-check everything I do. I can't write a sentence without adding a footnote with a reference. I'm tied down. You're without bonds entirely."

"You're reliable, I'm not."

"All right, no need to be harsh on yourself. What you're doing works!"

"I suppose you're going to tell me it was you who came up with the *My Struggle* title as well?"

"Well, now that you mention it."

"Seriously?"

"It was in a sentence you said, my struggle, and I said there you go, there's your title. That's how it was."

"Shit."

"It's how you work. Your head's this simmering pot, everything goes into the soup."

We drove along Bellevuevägen, lined with low detached homes in light-colored brick. It looked like Denmark, the way a lot of things did in Malmö and Skåne. Geir stopped at a light by the Statoil station, Njaal kept shuffling back and forth in his seat like he was trying to take in as much as possible of what was going on outside. The light changed and Geir accelerated quickly, soon we were stuck behind a bus. There was a big advertising banner running under the rear window. It was for a local firm of real estate agents and showed four smiling women in dark suits that made them look a bit like airline hostesses. I'd seen the image lots of times before, it was all over the buses in the city, and the bus shelters too, so I'd already had time to consider it before it turned up again in front of us now.

"See that photo there?" I said.

"Yes, what about it?" said Geir.

"I bet I know which one of those women you'd fancy," I said. "And don't deny it just to spite me if I'm right, OK?"

"OK," he said.

"You'd go for the one on the right."

He laughed.

"Correct," he said. "But the only reason you got it right is because you like her too."

"No, mine's second from the left. I've stared at that picture so many times."

"Straight up?"

He laughed again.

"It's not often you surprise me. How did you know which one was mine?"

"I know you. It was a no-brainer."

"Can't say the same for you. I'd never have thought you'd pick her. For me there's only one in it, the one on the right. It's inconceivable anyone could think differently!"

"Make a right here," I said. Geir indicated and changed lanes, the bus heading straight on.

"It's like with those clogs," he said. "Before you told me I was mad, the thought never even occurred to me it was anything but normal. To me it's a completely logical, reasonable thing to do."

"You mean jumping up and down on the floor wearing clogs to get back at a downstairs neighbor?"

"Not to get back at him. To resolve the conflict. To break his will. But apart from that, yes, to me that's perfectly natural. I had no idea anyone could think otherwise."

"I thought you were a sociologist."

"I am. But I'm a human being too."

We passed the Kronprinsen, a high-rise housing project built in the sixties, which until the Hilton went up had been Malmö's tallest building. The road was edged by the trees of the Slottsparken on our right, and we followed the increasing flow of cars, which glittered in the sunlight.

Geir laughed.

"You got me there. You mean you actually *knew*?"

"Nothing odd about that, surely?"

"Yes, there is. I didn't know myself."

After we'd parked the car, I rode up in the elevator with them and let them in, then went out again to get the children. John got off his trike as soon as he saw me and came running. The girls were in the sandpit next to the little playhouse, they had seen me but weren't letting on. With John on my arm I went over to Karin and asked her how things had gone. Fine, she said, the older ones had been in the park before lunch, John had stayed behind. They were all in good cheer and it had been a lovely day.

"John still hasn't got any diapers, Karl Ove," said Nadje, who was sitting on the bench just behind us.

Oh fuck, I knew there was something I'd forgotten!

"Sorry," I said. "It slipped my mind completely. I can run over and get some now, if you want."

"No need. As long as he's got some tomorrow, that'll be fine."

"I'll make sure of it. Sorry. Were you able to work around it?"

"We borrowed a couple."

"OK, thanks, much appreciated. I completely forgot."

She smiled wearily, I smiled back and carried John over to the stroller so Vanja and Heidi could see it was time to go instead of just hearing me say so.

"Time to go, girls!" I called out.

There weren't that many children there, a lot of them were still on holiday. Of all the parents, we used the nursery the most, at least so it seemed to me, but perhaps it was just because I felt so guilty about all the times ours were on their own here while I was writing. I pulled the stroller over to a chair in the sun and sat down.

"Five minutes!" I called. "That's all, OK?"

Vanja looked across at me and nodded. I leaned back and gazed up at the sky, it was bright blue, the wispy elongated clouds that were so typical of summer floating like vaporous sheets in the distance. I felt the air on my face, a cool breeze sweeping over the rooftops, whirling through the yard, brushing all things, my body too, my sticky skin which shivered with pleasure at the unexpected, delicate chill. I felt the urge for a cigarette, sat up straight in the chair, and looked at John in his blue sun hat, the grime around his mouth, his unworried radiance as he sat there staring at two children who came biking past. Either he wanted something and would be tormented if he couldn't get it, or else he wanted nothing and was simply himself, at ease with the world as it was.

"Vanja and Heidi!" I called out. "Come on, time to go!"

"A bit longer!" Vanja shouted back.

"We have visitors," I said. "Njaal and Geir have come. We can't keep them waiting much longer. Njaal's looking forward to seeing you."

"Are they here now?" she asked, and looked at me inquisitively.

I nodded.

"They came a bit early. Come on, let's go. You can get a banana on the way, if you want."

"An ice cream," she said.

"You and your ice cream," I said, and gave her a stern look.

"Can we?" she asked again with a cheeky smile.

"Well, OK," I said.

"Heidi, we can have an ice cream!" she shouted out.

I looked down at the ground, embarrassed that the other children should hear that mine were having ice cream. Or rather, embarrassed that the staff should hear me say so out loud for anyone to hear.

"We're getting an ice cream, Karin!" said Heidi, her hand already gripping the stroller.

"How nice," said Karin with a smile.

"While the summer's still here," I said.

"Enjoy it!" she replied.

"Will do," I said, pressing the door opener. "Vanja, do you want to run on and open the gate?"

Like a wind she swept past me, pulled the handle down and heaved open the gate, three big steps back, her little body bent almost double as she pulled.

"Well done!" I said. "Say goodbye to all your friends."

Vanja and Heidi ignored me completely, while John, who no one could see in his stroller, waved and shouted, "*Hej då!*"

"We have visitors at home, Heidi and John," I said as we strolled along the shady sidewalk. A gust of wind pressed Heidi's skirt against her legs and held it there for a moment.

"Do we?" she said. "Who?"

"Njaal and Geir. Can you remember Njaal?"

"A little."

"He's one day younger than you."

"What?"

"His birthday's the day after yours."

We stopped at the crossing, then went over. John protested, he wanted to go on the other side. He twisted around in the stroller and glared at me full of rage and despair.

"Do you want an ice cream too, John?"

"Yes," he said, and turned round again.

When we got to the two yellow mailboxes outside Hemköp, I said:

"Right, I want you to listen now. You can have your ice creams when we've paid for the shopping and not before. OK?"

All three nodded and we went inside into the supermarket's icy environment. Vanja and Heidi ran off, presumably to the ice creams, while John wriggled to get out of his stroller as fast as he could. I stopped and lifted him out, his feet hardly touched the ground before he was off after the girls. I snatched two packets of red sausages, the ones with the highest meat content, something I had suddenly and rather neurotically become obsessed with after someone at the nursery made me realize there were big differences from brand to brand, then dropped a bag of hot-dog buns into the basket along with a regular loaf, a bag of coffee, the dark-roast French blend I'd settled for after six months of experimentation and had since stuck to, a liter of milk, a liter of yogurt, a six-pack of beer, toilet paper, and a packet of four bars of soap, seeing as how we had visitors and they probably washed their hands more than we did, and finally three ice creams.

John wanted to walk the rest of the way home, which meant I could put the shopping in the stroller.

Had it got colder now?

Yes, the temperature had dropped in the short time since I left the apartment.

"I can see Malmö!" John shouted. Somehow he'd got it into his head it was our apartment that was called Malmö.

Vanja looked at me and giggled.

I smiled back at her.

"Is there anyone on the balcony, John?" I asked him.

"No-o-o," he said.

"There's a young *gutt* waiting for us at home, did you know?"

He looked up at me, perplexed.

"Daddy means a *pojke*!" said Heidi. A boy!

"*Just det*," I said. "*Jag måste tala svenska nu*." That's right. I'll have to speak Swedish now.

"*Pappa, inte*," said Vanja. Don't, Daddy!

"Are you ashamed of me?"

"No, you're just stupid."

"That's true."

The light changed from red to green just as we got to the crossing. I reached my hand out, John took it, while the girls held on to either side of the stroller. On the opposite sidewalk I gave the keys to Vanja, who ran ahead and opened the door, holding it open for us so I could maneuver the stroller inside and pull it up the three steps after me, while Heidi and John stood heaving at the elevator door without it budging in the slightest.

The laundry. I'd forgotten the laundry.

I opened the elevator and pushed the stroller inside, tipping it onto two wheels to make room for us all. Vanja pressed the button for the sixth floor. Heidi, who had also wanted to press the button, started crying. Vanja mimicked her, Heidi lashed out. Vanja hit her back, so by the time I opened the door of the apartment I had two screaming kids on my hands, both howling for their mother. But as soon as Geir and Njaal came out of the living room they fell silent. The children stood and took stock of each other for a few seconds, the same way dogs do – what kind of children are you, they seemed to be thinking – before accepting the new situation and sliding off into their room, apart from John, who had plonked himself down on the floor in his blue hat and was trying to take his shoes off.

"Sausages for dinner," I said.

"Great!" said Geir.

I went past him into the kitchen, where I put the shopping down on the table and started putting it away.

"I forgot the laundry downstairs," I said. "Can you get the sausages going while I go down and get it?"

"I'm good at sausages," he said. "We ran a sausage business once in Uppsala, did I ever tell you? The Svea Sausage Company. Two bikes with a frying pan and a grill mounted on the front. We went all over town. They were painted the colors of ketchup and mustard, red and yellow. And there was a big metal sausage on the back. It's the only decent job I've ever had, now that I think about it."

"Here are the sausages, then," I said. "There's a pan in the cupboard over there."

"Ossie-Pete," did I ever mention him? He gave free sausages to any girl who showed him her tits. Lots did."

He laughed.

"I think that was probably the first thing you told me when I arrived in Stockholm," I said.

"Good times. We used to sit there drinking until the bars closed and all the students came out, about one in the morning, then we'd light the paraffin lamp and start selling. Huge lines there'd be. It was all about grabbing the best spots before anyone else got there on Saturday nights. Like the square outside the Celsius House, you know, the guy with all the degrees. It's at an angle to the street, because Uppsala burned down and nearly the whole town had to be rebuilt, but Celsius's house wasn't touched. I studied aesthetics there. It's where I met Christina. She was taking photos of our sausage bikes. I'll have to show you some time. Delicious sausages, they were."

"You never told me how much money you made out of that," I said on my way into the hall.

"Oh, you know, up and down, it depended," he said from behind. "I can't remember exactly. No, hang on a minute, there was a first of May when we made twenty thousand kronor. We're talking back in the early nineties here. Twenty-four hours nonstop grilling sausages. We were so exhausted we couldn't be bothered dividing all the takings up properly, it was like here's a pile for you and here's a pile for me."

"That's a lot of money," I said, stopping in front of John, who was still in a struggle with his shoes on the floor.

"The most I earned at one go was at a Danish longball tournament for political economists. They wanted a sausage stand. None of them actually bought any sausages, but they'd guaranteed me a minimum, two thousand an hour. And, of course, I still had all the sausages left to sell afterward. I tell you, though, we were the bottom of the barrel. I mean, this was Uppsala, with all its academic traditions, all the stiff-necked snobbery. A sausage vendor wasn't exactly well respected."

"Do you want to come down into the basement with me, John?"

He nodded.

I put the shoe back on him that he'd managed to take off, then stepped into my own, while Geir stood leaning against the wall reminiscing about his sausage days.

"We put the boiled sausages in the freezer, then heated them up again. Sometimes we could only sell them after it got dark, they were almost green. The students never knew whether they were puking from the alcohol or the sausages. Do you remember Cuba Cola?"

"I do, yes," I said, my hand on the door handle.

"We used to have that. Everyone used to comment on it, I haven't seen it since the seventies, but we hardly sold a bottle. Then we tried Pommac for a while. But who drinks Pommac with hot dogs? It was a disaster, of course. French mustard, we had that. No one wanted it. Too sophisticated, I suppose. Do you know the Swedish slang for a hot dog?"

"No, tell me," I said, pressing down on the handle and opening the door.

"*Raggarballe med svängdörr*. Dick in a swingdoor. Ha ha ha. You wouldn't believe it, would you? Arf, arf."

"If we're not back in half an hour it'll mean someone's done us in for breaking the laundry-room rules," I said.

"We had our own little sausage logo on the front of the bikes as well," he said. "Made of metal too."

"Anyone would think you hadn't seen another human being in years, the way you're going on," I said.

"Someone has to say something," he said. "Seeing as you're not, I mean. Can't you take your phone with you?"

I closed the door behind me, lifted John up, and rode the elevator down with him sitting on my arm. As soon as we reached the basement he bombed off along the passage on his little legs. In the laundry room itself he immediately started playing with the sweeping brushes. Someone had put our clean clothes nicely in the bags for us. Although this was a kind gesture, with no hint of annoyance in the form of a note about sticking to our times or reporting the matter to the caretaker, I still hurried back out again in case I ran into whoever was responsible, John in one hand, the two IKEA bags in the other. There had been feces on the sofa, I remembered all of a sudden, perhaps prompted by the two beer crates and the carrier bag that someone had left up against the wall, which we passed again on our way back through the basement. And there had been empties all the way up the staircase to the upper floor. The place had been littered with them. Plastic bags full of empty bottles under the piano. But maybe not on the staircase from the ground floor to the first floor? I couldn't remember. Yet Gunnar seemed certain. He said he had proof, if it came to a court case.

What was I going to do if it went to court?

Oh, hell! Hell, hell, hell.

I lifted John up so he could press the button for the elevator, then put him down, only for him to reach out for me again, his arms in the air, perhaps because he wanted to see the elevator arrive, the light of its interior appearing in the rectangular window of the door. I lifted him up again. My body was weak with dread. He was so angry with me. He was so terribly angry with me.

"There!" said John.

And, sure enough, a light descended!

I opened the door, holding John up so he could press the top button, then putting him down again and studying my reflection in the mirror.

There wasn't a trace of my inner turmoil to be seen. Just a serious-looking face with sad eyes, that was all.

John crouched and examined a little strip of red plastic on the floor that had caught his attention. It looked like one of those plastic binder things.

After some trouble he managed to pick it up between his little fingers.

"Look, Daddy!" he said, holding it up.

"Oh yes, that's good," I said.

Inside I was trembling, and nothing outside could help, it was as if everything was trembling there too.

The elevator stopped, I opened the door, John toddled out with his head down, absorbed in his bit of plastic. I cast one last glance at the mirror, stepped the few paces across the landing to the door of the apartment, which John was already trying to open, though without succes, and with ill-concealed annoyance prized his hands from the handle and opened the door.

Inside, the children were watching TV while Geir stood at the stove stirring the contents of the big saucepan he'd found, from which a thin, almost invisible veil of steam rose.

"How's it going?" I asked.

"Fine," he said. "I put the TV on. Is that all right with you?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm not a fan though."

"You might not be, but the kids love it."

I was sticky with sweat, not because I'd exerted myself in any way, but because the air was so humid. Through the window I noticed the sky to the east had gone cloudy and was now gray-white rather than the clear blue of only an hour before.

"If it were up to them, they'd watch TV from the minute they got up till they went to bed," I said. "That's why we've got rules."

"Are we going to debate morals now? I'm not sure sausage is all that good for them either, but it tastes great and they like it."

"There's more than 70 percent meat in those sausages," I said with a smile. "Morally, they're beyond reproach. And now I'm going to have a smoke. Do you want to come with me?"

He nodded and followed.

"Actually, I have one principle when it comes to what Njaal watches," he said from behind. "I try to slip something useful in every now and then, something educational. It's not easy, though. All he wants is entertainment. It's like pornography."

I sat down, held up the thermos, and caught his eye, raising my eyebrows in inquiry. He shook his head, then leaned back against the railing. I poured myself a cup and lit a cigarette.

Here and there the gray-white cover of cloud slashed open, and gashes of dark drifted across the sky.

"Looks like there's a storm on its way," I said with a nod in its general direction.

"Is there?" he said, turning to see, then looking back at me. "But you play with your kids, don't you? You might not like it all the time, but you do play with them. I do nothing. I rely more on warmth and humor."

"So I'm cold and humorless when I play with them, is that it?"

He laughed.

"I don't play with them much at all, to be honest," I said. "I spend a lot of time with them, but I never exactly get down on the floor with the Lego or the farm animals."

"Don't give me that. You take them to the swimming pools on weekends. You take them to the park. You play football with them."

"Sometimes, yes. But that's not playing, is it?"

"True, if you want to be nitpicky, that's up to you. But what I mean is you spend a lot more time and energy on your kids than I do on mine. That's not to say Njaal doesn't give me any joy. I believe the Chinese. They say a man doesn't realize he's a dad until his child's five years old. There's a lot of truth in that, if you ask me."

"You won't be a dad before next autumn, then."

"Exactly."

"You've only got one child, though. That makes it different. Once you've got three, you no longer have any choice in the matter."

"I do tell Njaal I love him. In those words."

"I can't say the same. I don't think I've ever said that. There's a limit."

"Draw not nigh hither. Ha ha ha!"

"Tread not upon the grass, my boy. Skjæraasen, wasn't it?"

"Leave tender shoots to sprout! No, I can't remember. But I think it has to do with the way we are, not just the roles we choose. Some people love to play. My dad's got a way with children, they love him. The neighbor's little boy still invites him to his birthday every year. He's knocking on eighty now. The same outlook on life as Goethe. 'For nothing brings us closer to madness than distinguishing ourselves from others, and nothing maintains common sense more than living in a normal way with many people.' *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*."

"Only someone on the outside, who doesn't live in a normal way, could say something like that."

"That's the big difference between you and me, I think. Nearly everyone I know has a father who failed them in some way. And everyone tries to compensate for that failure in the way they relate to their own children."

"It keeps the world going round, doesn't it?"

"Even if you succeed, like my dad did – and I'd say he was an ideal father – the ideal doesn't necessarily get passed down. What happens then is that the sons haven't got anything to make up for. So you're a better dad than your own father, while I'll be a worse one than mine, and when it gets to Njaal's turn he'll be compensating for that in the way he relates to his own kids, who for their part are going to be just as hopeless as me, their granddad. The ideal doesn't get inherited, that's the point."

"A kind of dialectics of hopelessness, is that it?"

"Exactly. Having a decent dad doesn't help in the slightest."

"Of course it does. It's a good thing in itself. Having a stable and harmonious life, I mean."

"But what do we get out of a harmonious childhood? I know loads of people whose childhood was fantastic, but where did it get them? What have they done?"

"But that's like an industrial viewpoint on life. As if it's got to have a product. If that's the idea, then you're right. Nothing comes of a harmonious childhood. But what if it's the harmony itself that's the point? What if the meaning of everything is just a well-balanced life?"

"Oh, come on, you don't really mean that! I'm much more in line with Ayn

Rand, who writes that only a few individuals, a very small number of us, keep the world going. They're the ones who make something of life, who achieve something in the world rather than just using or enjoying it."

"But even in those people there's a sense of restlessness. That's why they create or act the way they do, because there's a restlessness inside them, something incomplete. But what they're aiming for, all the time, is harmony. All through their twenties and thirties and forties. The aim is to be able to sit in a garden and watch the sprinkler watering the lawn, with their children all around them, and to be able to think, right, that's it, I'm happy now. All human urges are about the urge for harmony."

"Listen, Aristotle, didn't you just write that you weren't interested in happiness?"

"Yes, but not that I'm not interested in harmony."

"Same difference. But you're right in what you say about restlessness and feeling incomplete, that it's the strongest force of all. What's happened in our time is that restlessness is no longer translated into action. Restlessness doesn't produce anymore. We live in the age of therapy. Restlessness isn't wanted, we try to remove it by talking about it. We've got one Vision Zero after another, trying to live immaculate lives in immaculately happy families, and our explicit aim in life is to eliminate road traffic deaths. But it's a chimera, a great big lie. It's ridiculous that we even believe it. But we do. Harmony, happiness, and no more deaths in traffic. Give me a useless dad who doesn't give a shit! Give me a godforsaken awful childhood! Because something comes of that. Something gets created there. In the disharmony and the dissonance."

"I can agree to that in theory, but not in practice. I look at my kids and the only thing I want is for them to be happy. To have as good a life as possible."

"Well, all I can say is I hope you fail!"

"Actually, it's something I think about a lot. What kind of impressions they'll be left with from their childhoods when they get older. What all this is to them. I've no idea myself. And what they'll have from me. No idea."

They're very different as well, in character, I mean. What you give to Vanja and Heidi might be exactly the same, but you can bet your life their experiences of it are going to be different, and they'll understand it all differently too, in later life."

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"The truth is we don't know what we're doing. We don't know where it's going to lead. It's a known fact that children of divorce are overrepresented in the crime figures, and the younger they were when the parents divorced, the greater the risk of them getting into trouble. But we won't give up the right to divorce, so instead we say it's best for the kids. In any system it's impossible to foresee all the effects. To get back to the automobile: if anyone had said the invention of the automobile was going to kill thousands of people every year, would we have put it into production and centered our lives around it the way we have? No. So we don't talk about that, we say the automobile brings us freedom and opportunity instead. And when capitalism increased its hold and we needed more labor, did anyone say women have got to leave the home now and start producing goods, so we can double the labor force? Not to mention double the number of consumers? No, they didn't. That was women wanting the same rights as men. The right to work, what kind of a right is that? How's that supposed to be liberating? It's just the opposite, a prison. The consequence of that is that our kids are farmed out to an institution from the age of two, and what happens then? Mom and Dad are almost driven insane, aren't they? They're riddled with guilt, so they spend all the time they can on their kids when they're not at work, trying to be as close to them as possible. Compensation, compensation, compensation."

"The road from sociology to paranoia is shorter than one might think," I said.

"What, don't you agree?"

"Actually, yes. Especially the part about the chimera, as you called it. If you read Marx, *Das Kapital*, much of it's about exploitation of the workers. They slogged away for sixteen hours a day under the most degrading conditions. So one of the most important goals of the workers' movement was to limit the amount of work. Work was seen as something the employers – the capitalists, if you like – forced on the workers. It was slavelike. Nowadays, though, people work themselves into the ground of their own accord. Why?

Because the idea has arisen that they realize themselves through their jobs. So work has become the opposite of alienating. Now it's self-realization. Everyone works like mad now, because it's good for them. The same with consumption. We find our identities in the purchase of goods that are mass-produced. You'd think it was a joke. But the worst thing is you're not allowed to say that, it means you're paranoid. And what's more, that criticism has turned into a cliché, it's become invalid by virtue of being repeated too many times. I remember when I was a student and read all that criticism and was totally in agreement with it at the same time as I was living my life in exactly the same way as what I was criticizing. It didn't even occur to me then. And even if it had, I wouldn't have done anything about it. The two spheres are separate. What you know, and what you do. They never join up. They're like east and west. Or, at best, like the tie and the vest."

"You couldn't stop yourself there, could you?"

"No, but the point is it's no longer possible to live in any other way. There are no alternatives. It's seeped into everything."

"Do you remember what you said once about Nazism being like amateur night? Well, it's true. We, on the other hand, lead professional lives. And how can we not? I can't ignore thinking about safety when it comes to Njaal, for instance. I can't let him ride his bike without wearing a helmet, or run around at will in the neighborhood, even though it's what I did when I was a kid."

"Why, because you'd feel guilty if he fell and hit his head?"

"No, it's not as simple as that. Once the thought's there, that they have to wear a helmet and you've got to go with them everywhere they go, it's no use trying to escape it anymore. It becomes my thought too. We can't do anything other than wish the best for our children. Now, this is what happens to be best. But what governs that is the thought of what's best. Because whether it really is best is something we've no way of knowing. When Njaal started nursery school, I wanted him to go to the nearest one, because that was the most practical, but Christina went all over, checking out all these different nurseries, because she wanted the best. But how could she know what was best for Njaal? Who knows what's going to happen in a place, who he's going to meet and what it's going to mean to him? We can't control life, only our thoughts about life. So everything that has to do with our kids is actually all about us. It's the tyranny of good intent. All we can do is try for the best, it's impossible to imagine any other way, but the consequences are beyond our control."

"We're starting to get old, that's what it is," I said.

"We are. How old was Voltaire when he wrote that all you need in life is a garden and a library? Certainly not twenty, that's for sure."

"Wasn't it Cicero who said that?"

"Was it?"

I shrugged.

"Anyway," I said. "I got a letter about six months ago with that quote in it. Only I read it wrong. I saw *hagle* instead of *hage*: 'He who has a shotgun and a library wants for nothing,' I thought it said."

"Ha ha ha! A lot more credible too, if you ask me."

"Completely in your spirit."

"Yeah, but why do you think men went to war? Why do you think men would put everything, even their own children, aside in order to fight and kill? The answer, of course, is love. The love they felt was no less than the love women felt, just different. Now we connect intimacy and closeness with the truest of feelings. I've lost count of how many times I've read people ridiculing men's ways of dealing with emotions. Slapping each other on the back, that sort of thing. But a woman doesn't know what it means to get a slap on the back when you're down in the dumps. Men's emotions are worth no less, if anyone believes that, just because they're not expressed the way women's are. What I'm saying is there are many different kinds of solicitude, and intimacy isn't necessarily going to be right in itself. There's no monopoly on feelings or caring. What happens if you're all over your kids all the time, what does that get you? Nothing."

"Harmony."

"Nowhere near. I've yet to meet anyone less harmonious than you when you weren't writing and all you had was your family. And when all these men start making amends for their own childhoods, they overcompensate, and in overcompensating they create the opposite problem. We go to the opposite extreme, wrapping them up in cotton wool and giving them whatever they want, in that way making sure they're not going to feel any sense of gratitude or meaning, all they get out of it is an extreme childhood, only in a different way. So compensation doesn't get you harmony or equilibrium. That said, however, I do know I'm a shitty dad. I had to face that when Njaal came along. It wasn't nice. All the bad sides of me suddenly became significant. I try to be good for him, but most likely that's not good enough. When he grows up he'll be able to judge me for it. That's his prerogative. But I can never judge him. Never. That's a right I don't have. And that's where your uncle is wrong. He can't take your father's side and judge you. He hasn't the right. No human being has. The children can judge the parents, but never the other way round."

"Did you have to bring that up?"

"What?"

"Gunnar. I'd just managed not to think about it for five minutes."

"It's not worth worrying about."

"Of course it is," I said.

Next to us the door opened and Heidi put her head out.

"When's Mommy coming home?" she wanted to know.

"Tomorrow," I said.

"I want Mommy," she said.

"I know," I said. "Do you want to speak to her on the phone?"

She nodded. I stubbed out my cigarette and got up, went inside with Heidi following on my heels, picked up the phone, and pressed Linda's number.

"Hi, it's Karl Ove," I said when she answered. "The children are missing you. Want to say hello?"

"Yes, of course," she said.

"Here's Heidi, then," I said, and handed her the phone.

"When are you coming home, Mommy?" she said.

I went into the living room.

"Do you want to speak to Mommy on the phone, Vanja?" I said.

She nodded and got to her feet.

"Me too," said John.

"Not just yet," I said. "Heidi's talking to her now, it's your turn when she's finished."

Vanja sat down again and stared at the television. I recognized aloofness in her body language and could tell she was holding back her feelings, it always happened sooner or later whenever I was on my own with them, but meant nothing other than that she was missing Linda. If Linda had walked in through the door now she would have run toward her and hugged her and told her about all the things she'd done while she'd been away, and not moved an inch from her side the rest of the evening. She accepted the distance I kept as a necessity, not consciously of course, but still for her there was always an element of enduring when we were on our own together, of holding out, the opposite of letting go and living.

I went back out to Heidi again, she was looking at herself in the mirror while listening to what Linda was saying at the other end.

"Can you say *hej då* to Mommy now," I said, "so Vanja and John can talk to her too?"

"*Hej då!*" she said, and handed me the phone.

"Are you ready for the other two?" I said.

"Yes, put them on."

I stood in the doorway.

"Vanja?" I said. "Do you want to speak to Mommy now?"

Vanja shook her head.

"She doesn't want to," I said. "But here's John for you."

John took the phone and pressed it to his ear. His entire little self lit up in a smile as soon as he heard her voice.

"Yes," he said with a nod. "Yes."

"Bit of a disaster with the sausages, I'm afraid," Geir called out from the kitchen.

I went to see what was the matter.

"They've split. There are two things that matter when it comes to heating up sausages. One is to to put a laurel leaf in with them. The other is they're not supposed to boil."

"You're trying to teach your grandmother to suck eggs," I said, and peered into the pan. The pink meat peeped out from the red skins of all the sausages.

"I'd never be so presumptuous."

"It doesn't matter," I said. "They still taste the same."

I took five hot-dog buns from the packet, put a sausage in each, placed them all on a dish, squirted ketchup on, and took it all into the living room.

The phone was dumped on the sofa. I picked it up.

"Hello?" I said, but it was dead and I dropped it back in the charger under the mirror in the hall. When I came back into the living room they'd each taken a hot dog.

"There's more if you want," I said. "Just say the word. We'll be in the kitchen."

I went in and got the mustard out, a coarse local variety from Skåne I'd been putting on everything for a while, fished out a red sausage with its split skin, put it in the bun, and sat down at the table, where Geir was already demolishing a hot dog.

"They're good, the Danish ones," he said.

"Mm," I said. "You should taste the mustard, it's good too."

"I'll have some on the next one. It reminds me, do you remember that advertising campaign a while back for Gilde sausages?"

"No."

"You must. Gilde sausages have a slight curve to them. They made this slogan about them putting a smile on your face. Some feminists reacted, claimed it was sexist. They even confronted Gilde's managing director about it. But he had no idea what they were talking about. They're sausages! he said. Ha ha ha!"

The sky was completely dark in the east now, and where it was lighter, above the outskirts of the city, it was streaked by what had to be rain. I felt a headache coming on.

"It was good, what you said about Marx," Geir said after a while. "The way we work just as much, only now it's because we're realizing ourselves. The fact is, people made fortunes from other people's work then, and people make fortunes from other people's work now. There's no difference, it's all the same, apart from the way we look at it."

"Mm," I said. "I think it has to do with having to learn to live with something. It's an adequate response to a real issue. As long as we can't stop working, we have to change our reasons for doing it. The motivation, I mean."

"It's funny," said Geir, and got to his feet. "A job was a job to my dad, something that had value on its own. The job in itself was what it was all about. He went to work because he had to. Did his best and kept his head down at the same time. The idea of him realizing himself would have been completely alien, I'm sure."

He lifted a sausage out of the saucepan, placed it in a hot-dog bun, and sat down again. I shoved the jar of mustard across the table toward him.

"But your argument about us doing everything in order to compensate isn't right," I said. "Normally, we've always reproduced the pattern, repeated what we ourselves experienced as children. My dad's dad used to hit him, so Dad hit us. Not often, only occasionally, but the fact that it existed as a possibility meant it was something he could resort to every now and then. He never made any effort to compensate for anything at all. It wasn't a part of the role. You were brought up in a certain way, and that's what you did with your own children. We're the ones trying to compensate all of a sudden. Do you remember what I said about Rudbeck that time? From his biography? His father hit him and humiliated him, but he didn't internalize that, never saw it as part of his psychological makeup, but as something objective, an action belonging entirely to the external world. That was in the seventeenth century."

"I remember. It was my university lecturer who wrote that book."

"So the question is, on the one hand why we give such weight to the traumatic, or construe things as traumatic at all, and on the other, why we bring up our own children differently, in a new way."

"You think that's something we choose, then?"

"No, just the opposite. Things have changed, beyond doubt. And all of us are a part of that change. I think it's a response to something. I think the very fact our kids are in nurseries from the age of one, and that we surround ourselves with all sorts of crap that just alienates us, TV, computer games, all that kind of stuff, on its own means we just have to get close to our children. Kids used to be at home all day, a place they felt was theirs, and there were grown-ups around, maybe not close in that sense, but they were there. When that place no longer exists there has to be some compensation. That has to be compensated for. No one planned it that way or probably even thought about it. It just gets like that, and becomes an imperative. That's what I think, anyway."

John came into the kitchen and stared at Geir.

"Do you want another sausage?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"*Korv*," he said.

"Ah, a *korv*," I said, and smiled. "Yes, you can have a hot dog, of course you can."

I made him another, taking the mild mustard from the fridge and squirting a long ochre-colored dribble along the length of the sausage before handing it to him. He started munching at the same time as he turned and went back in.

"There's no alternative either," I said. "The only alternative to capitalism in our time has been Nazism. The Nazis attempted to change society from the bottom up and start something radically different. And we know how that turned out."

"It's a shame the Germans lost the war, but a good thing the Nazis didn't win it, as I usually say," Geir said. He had a red streak of ketchup across his cheek.

"Daddy?" Heidi called out from the living room.

"Yes?" I called back.

"I want another hot dog!"

"Come and get one then!"

"No, you have to come!"

"No!"

"What?"

"No!"

Silence.

"And what does all this thinking about safety actually do?" said Geir. "What happens when we're in this state of high alert as to what can go wrong and what we can do about it? All it does is increase anxiety and heighten our fears. We used to walk to school. None of us got killed. Now they're all taken in cars. None of them gets killed either."

"Daddy!" Heidi called out.

"Yes?" I called back.

"Come here!"

"No, you come here!"

"OK," I heard her say, and I got up to fix another hot dog. It was ready for her when she came in.

"Do you want a glass of water too?"

She nodded.

"Does Njaal want another hot dog, do you think?"

She gave a shrug and went off again. I filled four glasses with water from the tap and took them in, handing one to each.

"Do you want another hot dog, Njaal?" I said.

He nodded without taking his eyes off the TV.

"How about you, Vanja?"

She shook her head.

"When's Mommy coming home?" Heidi asked.

"Tomorrow," I said. "Do you miss her?"

Heidi nodded. Vanja stared. John looked up at me and smiled.

"*Mamma!*" he said.

How I ever could have produced such a happy little boy was a mystery.

"Want a beer?" Geir said when I returned to the kitchen.

"Yeah, why not?"

"So we structure the social space," he said, opening the fridge. I sat down, and he handed me a beer. "We redesign the physical environment. We're on high alert as to everything. We know who designed the fork we use to eat with. We eliminate every peril and take precautions against everything. Spontaneity goes out the door. Why do we want to get rid of our spontaneity? Where does that get us? Spontaneity can't be predicted, it can't be repeated, and repetition is the key to all control. That's where we are."

"In a way the circle's complete," I said.

"How do you mean?"

"The Neanderthals," I said.

"Ah, your favorite subject. And what insight have you gleaned from their sad life today, I wonder?"

"Do you think they were spontaneous?"

"If you put it like that, the answer's probably no."

"In the two hundred thousand years they lived in Europe they didn't develop in any way whatsoever. They were still doing exactly the same things, in exactly the same way, when they disappeared as when they came. They even inhabited the exact same places. There was a tribe in France that lived in the same cave for forty thousand years. They only moved on when it started to collapse. Imagine one and the same family living on the same farm for forty thousand years. It's completely unthinkable. But not to them. They were making the same tools, hunting by the same methods, eating the same food. Nothing about them changed. Fascinating, don't you think? The fact that our closest relatives were incapable of change. The fact that progress was a completely unknown concept to them. No improvisation, no spontaneity, it just didn't exist. The first humans were an inconceivable revolution when they turned up. What set us apart from the Neanderthals was exactly what we're now trying to get rid of."

"Is this where you say it's not that long since the first humans arrived?"

"Yes, but it really isn't that long! And at that time there were many different kinds of humans living side by side. It's got to happen again. Think, say, three hundred thousand years in the future. By then there should be other kinds of humans here too. Maybe even in sixty thousand years."

"Well, give them my best."

"Ha ha. But you know how many Neanderthals there actually were, don't you?"

"No, tell me."

"At most around twenty thousand. Perhaps as few as ten thousand. Somewhere in between. And that was the lot! So imagine what Europe looked like then. Completely devoid of humans, only animals and birds, and forests and plains, and these fifteen thousand inflexible Neanderthals dotted about a few caves around the continent. That's it."

"Your utopia."

"Not far off. But do you know what the biggest difference was between the first humans and the Neanderthals?"

"No hot dogs?"

"The humans had jewelry. They wore the teeth of the dead around their necks. Meaning they were thinking in symbols. There's something more than this. And to the Neanderthals that was a completely impossible thought."

"I wonder what the idea was," said Geir. "The teeth around their necks."

"What it says is there's something more."

"Yeah, that's what makes me wonder. Teeth are just teeth. The way the Neanderthals existed in the world seems more reasonable to me."

"There's a decent chance we've still got Neanderthal genes in our DNA somewhere. Not in Africans, because there weren't any humans when the Neanderthals left Africa. But in Europeans, certainly. I don't think the Neanderthals died out. I think they mixed with humans and merged into them."

"You do, huh?"

"Yes, why not? It's not unlikely, is it? And so far the Neanderthals were here longer than us. They didn't know that, of course."

"I don't suppose they did."

"So we've gone from a world without mystery to one that's full of mysteries, then back to one without again."

"It's amazing the state actually gives money to people like you to sit around and ruminate, and write books about what you've been ruminating on."

"There was a small subspecies of humans on an island called Flores in Indonesia. They lived in a cave there. By all accounts no more than fifty to a hundred individuals. They were only about a meter tall."

"Midgets?"

"No, a completely distinct species of human. They lived there well after humans came along. The people who live there now tell strange stories about small people coming and stealing their vegetables. I've actually heard one of those stories. This man said the women slung their breasts over their shoulders when they ran. Where the hell would a detail like that come from? The way he described them they were like little trolls of some kind, creatures of mythology. Goblins, or something. But then they found the skeletons in the cave. Tiny little people."

"Where do you get all this?"

"Late-night TV documentaries. I watch them a lot. I've no idea how much is true and how much is nonsense. But it fascinates me all the same."

"Obviously."

"It's got to do with the utopian as well, I think. Things actually were different once. Not just the environment, but being human itself was different too. I want alternatives, that's all. Anything would do, really."

"So you'd like to be a Neanderthal, is that what you're saying?"

"No! But the fact that history is over, that there's no future anymore other than the repetition of what we've got now, makes me feel insanely claustrophobic. I don't necessarily have to do anything different, or be anything different, that's not what I mean, but I do want the possibility of a completely different life to exist."

"We live in the age of Vision Zero. It means we have zero visions."

"That was neat."

"I know."

I stood up and went into the living room. Geir came after me. *Bolibompa* was finished, they were watching something for older kids now. I switched it off and glanced at Geir.

"Should we get them bathed and off to bed?"

"Why not."

"Who's for a bath?" I said.

"Come on, Njaal," said Vanja, slipping down off the sofa. Njaal followed her, then Heidi too. I picked John up and carried him to the bathroom after the others. I put him down on the floor, got the detergent from on top of the cupboard and sprinkled the white Ajax powder into the bottom of the bath, got the scouring pad from under the sink, moistened it, and began scrubbing the enamel. As it dissolved in the water, the white powder not only became liquid, it turned yellow too. I was fond of yellow. Yellow on white, yellow on green, yellow on blue. I liked lemons, their shape as well as their color, and I liked the great fields of rape that spread their intense yellow out across the Skåne landscape in the spring and summer, beneath the tall blue sky, amid the green. And I liked the white Ajax powder that turned yellow when it dissolved in water.

As I scrubbed, the children undressed, and I sensed how the room behind me was all arms in the air and little bodies bent double. I turned the shower on and rinsed away the detergent and the hairs that were left behind from the last time they were in the bath, put the plug in, flicked the diverter valve, and stuck a finger into the thick spout of water that came plunging like a little waterfall from the tap.

"In you go!" I said.

Vanja and Heidi climbed in, Njaal was a bit uncertain and looked up at his father, who had been standing silently the whole time watching them, while John put his arms in the air in front of me. I pulled off his T-shirt, his shorts and his socks, and once I'd got his diaper off and dropped it into the bin under the sink I lifted him up and into the bath, his legs dangling like a little monkey's.

"In you go, then, Njaal," said Geir.

"You can sit here!" said Vanja, indicating the space between herself and Heidi.

Njaal hesitated. But after a moment he gripped the side of the bath, lifting first one leg then the other over the edge and into the water. His limbs were as delicate as his features, his brown eyes and fair hair, the slight blush of his skin. He was a sensitive boy, his eyes were attentive, but he was full of energy as well, and the two sides of him seemed to collide. There was a lot of Christina in him, not quite as much of Geir, at least not in any way that was immediately apparent.

Geir had turned away from a lot of stuff, but that wasn't to say it wasn't still there inside him, only that it was concealed. Now and then I wondered if it was concealed from him as well, and in what way it then existed. Geir's mother had always tried to keep him as close as possible, making him feel guilty when he wasn't there, a possessive, dominating woman. She had been ridden with anxiety, as far as I could gather, and it seemed to me that freeing himself from her had required quite a vast effort. He had scant respect for feelings and the emotional, he hated anything that wasn't rational, everything that said one thing and meant another, he was rational almost to the very extreme, and since he was always on his guard, always examining the reasons behind any emotion, he was a total cynic. He didn't care what other people made of him. More than one of his friends had broken off contact with him for not making any bones about what he thought. On one occasion I'd come close to doing the same. Somehow or other I'd managed to offend him without realizing, and the next time we spoke he launched into me, going straight for my weakest point, the children, in this case Vanja. At first I didn't realize what was happening, he was laughing and joking about her sensitivity and the problems she was going to have later in life with me and Linda being her parents. He was specific and very pointed about it, but I didn't understand what was going on, not even after we'd hung up, apart from finding myself thinking that I didn't want to talk to him anymore. A few minutes later he called back to apologize. He said he'd been offended and that he hadn't meant what he said. I accepted his apology but still didn't call him for a few days because what he said had been so cruel. He must have considered it and meant what he said in order to say it, I thought to myself, regardless of how irrational his behavior had been. But it all blew over, we stayed friends, and I'd learned something. The odd thing was that he'd said exactly that during the first few days after we met each other in Stockholm. If you offend me, you'll never know about it, he said. He was proud and self-respecting, it might even have been his foremost characteristic. And true enough, I'd offended him without realizing, or rather I knew, but had no idea how. Then, toward the end of my first year in Stockholm, he simply left one day. Christina called a few days later to say he'd gone to Turkey. It was only half true, the fact was he'd gone on from there to Iraq, so I discovered by chance a few weeks after.

Geir in Iraq?

A human shield?

Without a word to me?

It didn't stop me exploiting the fact to make myself interesting in social gatherings. The imminent invasion of Iraq was a matter everyone was talking about, and now I could say I actually knew someone who was in Baghdad at that very moment, and not only that, he was there to be a human shield.

A little more than three months later, he called me. He was in Stockholm, did I want to meet up? He was buzzing with vigor when we met at a restaurant in Gamle Stan, beamingly happy, a completely different person from the disillusioned man who, sunk into despair, had left the city a few short months earlier. It felt like he'd been off in outer space and gained a completely different perspective on life as it was led on Earth; what had tormented him earlier, tormented him no more. From the war he had brought back endless amounts of data, raw material he would spend the next six years working from, and which now, as we stood here in the bathroom of a Malmö apartment this evening in August 2009, had become a finished documentary book. Not one day had he taken off from that work, as far as I knew. Every weekend, every holiday, he had worked. When I began writing my autobiographical novel, our lives had become almost parodically similar, everything was suddenly about what we were doing in our little rooms, practically cut off from the rest of the world apart from our families. I read what he wrote, he listened to me reading out loud what I wrote, but the relationship was not symmetrical, for whereas I had lived my life with the flock, reading the same books as everyone else, thinking the same thoughts, he had headed off on his own even at the age of twenty, and the knowledge he had thus acquired independently was what I drew on, to such an extent that what I was writing now would have been unthinkable without him. Even though it was an autobiographical novel I was writing. It was uncomfortable in that I had turned out to be so weak and amenable to influence, and the fact that I had been compelled to borrow from him in order to become stronger and better effectively undermined my sense of self even more. At the same time I didn't feel inferior to him when we were together or spoke on the phone, if that had been the case we couldn't ever have been friends. It was actually the exact reverse, it was the very fact that I didn't need to adjust myself according to him, didn't need to take into consideration what he might believe or think about what I said, that was the important thing. I felt ashamed with everyone I met, and by that I mean pretty much everyone, there was always something there that made me feel I wasn't good enough, something I couldn't live up to, or some mark I overstepped, if only in thought. The fact that I'd started to write about this, the way I actually saw myself, was madness, sheer madness, since it meant exposing myself to the only thing I was really afraid of: the disapproval of others. Without our regular phone calls I would never have managed, during them I built up a kind of defense, and my transgressions seemed almost to lose their force accordingly. So yes, his influence being as great as it was gave me freedom and independence, which were strangely and despairingly closely bound up with the opposite, constraint and dependence.

But what is influence exactly? Parents showing the world to their child and explaining how it is ordered? An Iago whispering in Othello's ear? And when does influence go from good to bad? Or, put differently, what is independence?

The most shameful thing that can happen to a writer is to be caught plagiarizing the work of another writer. The second most shameful thing is for one's work to imitate that of another writer. Being unoriginal is not shameful in quite the same way, but it is equally degrading – to call a novel unoriginal is one of the worst things a reviewer can say about it. That it is shameful for one's work to imitate that of another writer, and not shameful, merely degrading, to write something that is deemed unoriginal, is a crucial distinction that speaks volumes of the importance we attach in our day and age to the cult of personality, how imperative it is that something may be traced back to a single, wholly independent individual, who in many respects is considered sacrosanct insofar as the distinctive characteristics he or she has developed are not permitted to occur anywhere else. The important thing is not what such a voice says, but that it says so in a way that is peculiar to itself.

The reader, however, is unconstrained by such insistence on independence or individuality, on the contrary, literature's entire system is based on the reader submitting to the work and vanishing within it. Admiration of, and submission to, the individual was by no means a dominant characteristic of our culture prior to the Romantic era and may be understood only as a result of a fundamental shift within the social world whereby the I took on a whole new aspect compared to just a few generations earlier. Yet the Romantic I, swelling above its banks, whose foremost feature is to be unique, is no unambiguous marker of this alteration of the I, for the very reason that it presupposed that every other I, which is to say the readers, or, as our own language would have it, the consumers, subordinated themselves and accepted their status as nonunique. The Romantic or political genius, Goethe or Napoleon, functioned in much the same way as kings always have, representing sovereign power, excess, pleasure and pomp, living their life on everyone's behalf, and the celebrities of our time are one extension of that. This is a mechanism of social security in that we are brought up to believe we are unique and genuinely assert our own selves whenever we utter or do something, whereas in actual fact we are as good as identical, and in order not to be crushed by that truth, which naturally would pulverize any conception of who we might be, we elevate to a superior level all those individuals who in some way stand out and excel, who go beyond what is normal, whether by running exceptionally fast, jumping exceptionally far, writing exceptionally well, singing exceptionally beautifully, or simply possessing exceptionally good looks.

Should we wish to remove someone from such a pinnacle and return them to earth, the most effective regulatory mechanism is parody: he is not unique, someone else exists who talks like him, looks like him, behaves like him. And we laugh. Should we not only wish to remove someone from such heights, but furthermore destroy him or her, we need only to demonstrate that whatever he or she has done or said is a copy of something someone else has done or said. Identity is thus a kind of taboo because it is found all around us, though cannot obviously be named, since it refers to something else that is greater and more dangerous. In a number of primitive cultures shared identity was indeed taboo, as is shown by prohibitions on imitating another person's gestures or voice, and through the ritual killing of twins. The frequent occurrence of the doppelgänger motif in literature during the second half of the nineteenth century, and the great horror that was attached to it, is an expression of the same thing, though almost with renewed intensity, as if the threat of the identical had come closer with the advent of the urban masses of the cities. In the century that followed this was the one great issue, the relationship between the one and the *all*, between authenticity and identity. It is impossible to comprehend World War I without this background, or indeed World War II, which was a direct repercussion of the first. The consequence of that enormous disaster was that the unique and the local were irretrievably lost. Or rather, they exist still, but are hidden from us and may no longer be invoked, existing no more as a value, a goal, or a utopia, which is to say as something superordinate, but only as something subordinate, in the life of the individual and in the form of a paradox: each individual I is unique and inalienable, though in exactly the same way as every other. We elevate some individuals among us but are unable to acknowledge the fact, and we are permeated by others, unknowing that this is so, or unwilling to recognize it. Yet it is in terms of influence that this becomes tangible and visible to us in its entirety, in the striking difference between acceptable influence, that which the culture deems desirable to reproduce, and unacceptable influence, that which cannot or must not be reproduced. The harmless form of influence concerns that which belongs to us all and which runs through the social and intellectual domains – if I read Foucault and am enthused by what I read to such an extent that I absorb it entirely and make it my own, beginning to think and write in the manner of Foucault, I have made no transgression, nor have I lost anything, for Foucault is of such status now that his thoughts belong to everyone, in the same way as Kant's or Hegel's, or for that matter Plato's or Aristotle's, comprising a kind of intellectual foundation, a place from which our thinking might issue, by now quite impersonal, albeit attached to certain names. Our entire world of ideas is made up of similar such places, this is what our culture is. We vanish within that culture, though without losing our identity in so doing, since our identity is formed by the culture, for instance through general conceptions of what comprises a subject, an atom, the air, or a home, expressed in every dimension of the language and the culture. The fundamental principle of that identity of which our we is comprised, and which is also the locus of what we call morality, is unoriginality, receptiveness to influence and subordination. Identity is synchronistic, which is to say complete at any given time, and yet changeable. Its borders are temporal; what was generally seen to be true two generations ago – for instance that it is acceptable to punish a child physically or that homosexuality is shameful – is no longer so, and if we were to put those assumptions forward today we would either be ignored or condemned. What applies in the area of morality applies also to science; the structuralist model of understanding that was ubiquitous in the arts during the sixties, for instance, is now invalid and no longer applicable. This we-identity is non-individual, which reveals itself not least in the fact that the same people who in the sixties believed it was acceptable to punish a child physically, or who found homosexuality shameful, or considered the structuralist model of analysis to be an adequate tool by which to understand the various expressions of culture, no longer hold the same views, or, if they do, no longer make them public. The fact that we nevertheless think all our opinions and beliefs to be personal and individual, reached by way of our own mature consideration, completely ignoring the role played by time, is one of the most important social mechanisms of all, since without it the apparent relativity of morality and science would dissolve all imperative and we would be destroyed in a chaos of independence. This is why we cultivate independent expression in art, that which is unique and particular, and only there do we apply such a powerful mechanism of sanction as the concept of plagiarism, whereby we are able to sustain the idea of our individuality. If this had not been the case, there would have been no difference in meaning between socialization and plagiarism. All learning takes place through imitation; as children we imitate the language and behavior of our parents, as we grow up we imitate the language and behavior of our friends and teachers, and once we reach adulthood we imitate the language and behavior of those around us at that time. Nearly every instance of language uttered in the public sphere is nonindependent and unoriginal, which is to say devoid of any personal mark of the sender. The most widespread form of public language is journalism, which stands out by its very anonymity, and it is impossible to trace back the language used in any newspaper article to the individual journalist who wrote it, all is written in the same way, in the same style, and moreover they write about the same events and source information from each other without the notion of plagiarism ever occurring to anyone. They imitate each other, one article is copied from another, and this is so because it is *we* who are writing. The same is true of manuals and instructions for use, and dissertations, and textbooks. Only in fiction is there any expectation of a unique "I," whose greatest and most important constraint is not to imitate, not to copy anyone else or say what they've said, at least not in the same way. The more distinctive a writer is, the greater he or she is perceived to be. Many people seem to think that literature has to do with the creation of knowledge, or the generation of insight, but such things are merely a by-product, something that may accompany literature or not; the most important aspect is its individuality, which lies in the inimitable tone of the particular. But this individuality is not without limit, it can occur only within the boundaries of the we; when it transgresses those boundaries, stepping outside and expressing something utterly unreasonable, it will be condemned or ignored. A writer who for instance advocates the physical punishment of children or who condemns homosexuality in our day, fifty years after these were generally accepted viewpoints, needs to be extraordinarily inventive if he or she is to be accepted, which is to say forgiven, whereas a writer who for instance denies the extermination of the Jews in the Holocaust would never be accepted or considered to be great, regardless of how exceptional a level of literature he or she might otherwise achieve. These two premises of literature, that on the one hand it should be as individual as possible, meaning it should express the inimitability of the singular I, and on the other hand that it should exist within the boundaries of the general, meaning it should express the we, are at odds with each other, since the more unique I am, the further I am from the we. The fact that Knut Hamsun could pen Adolf Hitler's obituary and include in it the most outrageous sentence in all of Norwegian literature, we bow our heads, and the fact that Peter Handke, perhaps one of the world's three best living authors, if not the best, could speak at the funeral of Slobodan Milošević, thereby disqualifying himself completely from anything that might be called the cultural majority, are two obvious expressions of the inherent opposition between the unique I and the social we, otherwise known as morality, that literature embraces. Only a writer could have penned the Law of Jante. The fact that the Law of Jante found such widespread resonance is ironic, since what Sandemose's rules express is the very tyranny of the majority, but it is no more ironic than readers cultivating the value of the individual while collectively submitting to one. But precisely by being so closely joined to a particular individual, the voice of the best literature concerns not only the collective, as an example of an I-possibility all I's consume, but also in fact the one, which is to say the actual person in that actual place and in that actual time, and that identity in itself bears with it an insight not found anywhere else. For this reason, literature is inalienable. Because regardless of how consumed we are by each other, regardless of how collectivist our I's happen to be, they are in fact alone, experiencing everything alone, and that experience, that of being human, of existing in the world, cannot be expressed generally, within the horizon of the we, since in that case no we exists. A newspaper article or a TV report is always about one or more people in some other place, an experience none of us knows. A novel or a poem is also always about one or more people in some other place, but is presented in a language that renders its experience unique, and that unique experience intervenes in a completely different way in our unique existence. It is not about recognition or validation, but about truth.

But what is the truth of our social existence? Writing about socialization and plagiarism is one thing, quite another is to witness someone mimic you in a parody, imitating your voice, your gestures, your pose and bearing, the sheer unpleasantness of that, or to sit writing in the knowledge, deep down, that what you are writing is not something you have thought of yourself, not something you have drawn from your own chest, but something you have taken from someone else, and not just anyone else, someone belonging to the great we, but someone close to you, someone you need to be able to look in the eye. The full force of the social world resides in this. Not in the superordinate structures, the great community, the we that is all of us, for these are abstractions, but in the direct encounter, one person face-to-face with another. The force is in our gaze. This is the truth of our social existence. The social world is local, it belongs to the individual, in any given situation. Indeed, every gaze is unique, it belongs to the individual, and for this, and nothing else, we are responsible. This is the truth of our social existence, and therefore it is also the truth of our morality. A morality that proceeds from the community of an all, that proceeds from we, is dangerous, perhaps more dangerous than anything else, because committing to an all is to commit to an abstraction, something existing in the language or world of ideas, but not in reality, where people exist only as separate individuals. In this sense, Knut Hamsun and Peter Handke's morality is utterly superior to that of their critics.

The I of literature resembles the I of reality in the way the uniqueness of the individual may be expressed only through what is common to all, which in the case of literature is the language. All I's of literature make use of the same words, the only difference, that which separates one literary I from another, is the way in which those words are ordered, and the fact that it is possible, in that nonuniform distribution, so very marginal when seen from afar, for an I as vital and significant as Emily Dickinson's to emerge, is remarkable indeed. And it becomes no less remarkable when we consider that practically no one read her poems while she was alive. The overwhelming loneliness and longing she apparently felt is long since dead and buried as we read them now, all that remains is their articulation, which we awaken the very moment we allow our gaze to fall upon the words she wrote such a long time ago, and succumb to them. From that moment she sings within us. But what did she get from it, one might wonder, given that she never could have predicted that her poems would find readers throughout the world, be considered among the very best of the period to which she belonged, and be read long after people would normally have forgotten all about her and her life, though presumably they were written without thought of any reader at all? Why articulate what it feels like to be alive, rather than simply feel and think?

Why write?

I am alone as I write this. It's the twelfth of June, 2011, the time is 6:17 a.m., in the room above me the children are asleep, at the other end of the house Linda is asleep, outside the window, some meters into the garden, the early sun of dawn is slanting down on an apple tree. The leaves are mottled with light and shade. A short while ago a small bird sat in the fork of the tree, in its beak was something that looked like a worm or a grub, it paused there for a moment, throwing its head back as it tried to swallow. It's gone now. Behind that same fork in the tree where it sat the girls' bathing suits have been hung out to dry; all day yesterday they were in the wading pool a bit farther down the garden, half hidden by a willow. The grass outside, which is mostly in shade, is still wet with dew. The air is filled with the twitter and song of birds. Six months ago I sat in exactly the same place, in the early mornings, the children sleeping above me, Linda at the other end of the house. There was a fire in the stove then, and outside it was pitch dark, the air filled with whirling snow. For more than three years I have spent my mornings in the same way, sitting here or at home in the apartment in Malmö, bent over the keyboard, writing this novel, which is now drawing to a close. I have done so alone, in empty rooms, and as I have worked, my publishers have published what I have written, five volumes so far, about which I know there has been a lot of talk, much written and said in newspapers and blogs, on the radio, in journals and magazines. I've had no interest in that discourse and have kept out of it as much as possible, there's nothing there for me. Everything is here, in what I am doing now. But what is that, exactly?

What does it mean to write?

First of all it is to lose oneself, or one's self. In that it resembles reading, but while the loss of the self in reading is to the alien I, which, by virtue of being so obviously apart from the reader's own singular I, does not seriously threaten its integrity, the loss of the self in writing is in a different way complete, as when snow vanishes into snow, one might think, or any other monochromism with no privileged point, no foreground or background, no top or bottom, only sameness everywhere. Such is the nature of the written self. But what is this sameness of which it is comprised and within which it exists? It is the singular language of the self. The I comes into being in the language, and is the language. But the language is not the property of the I, it belongs to all. The identity of the literary I resides in the choice of one word rather than another, but how poorly held together and centered that identity is. In a way it resembles the one we have in dreams, where the conscious self distinguishes just as little between us and what constitutes our surroundings and experiences, and our I is in effect deposited inside a room in which the green bench to our left is quite as central to who we are as the wriggling fish to our right, or the Neptune-like figure rising out of the water that at that same moment floods the floor beneath the sky across which a red biplane passes. The difference between dreaming and writing must surely be that the former occurs without our control, in one of the body's unconscious modes, and is without purpose, whereas the latter is controlled and goal-oriented. This is true and yet not, for the crux of the similarity has to do with the absence of any localization of the I, the fact of it being dislocated and no longer centered, and the question that is thereby raised, for is it not the property of being centered that in actual fact makes up the I? The very act of holding together? Yes. But the truth of the I is not the truth of one's own particular being. What rises between all the various fragments, far out in the realm of all that is not held together, is also the hum of the own, the peculiar timbre of the self that resonates throughout our lives, that part of us to which we wake up in the mornings, beyond any thought we might happen to think, any feeling that situation might give rise to within us, and which is the last part of us we release before succumbing to sleep. And is it not this hum of the own, this distant reverberation of the self, that pervades all music, all art, all literature, and moreover all that is alive and able to sense? It has nothing to do with the I, even less with the we, only with our very being in the world. When I look at the little sparrow outside, the way it perches on the branch in the sun and throws back its head to swallow the worm or the grub, I cannot imagine that it should be completely without awareness of its own being. Perhaps that awareness is even stronger than ours, since it cannot possibly be overshadowed by any thought. The thoughts that hold together the I can be dissolved in the acts of reading and writing, though in two different ways, in the first instance by entering that which is alien and comes from without, and in the second instance by entering that which is alien and within us, which is the language at our own disposal, in other words the language in which we say I. In writing we lose control of that I, it becomes incalculable, and the question is whether the uncontrollable and incalculable properties of the singular I in actual fact are a representation of its true state, or at least the closest we can get to any representation of the actual self.

What do we say when we say I?

A famous diary from 1953 begins as follows:

Monday
Me.

Tuesday
Me.

Wednesday
Me.

Thursday
Me.

To me, this is a lesson in literature. The I behind this "me," on its own and uncommented upon, may refer to anyone at all, such an I is without identity and open. The issue of who the writer is, when the reader has nothing more to relate to, cannot be resolved. It may be your downstairs neighbor, the man from the kiosk on the square, your child, August Strindberg, Sølvi Wang, or Niki Lauda, to mention just a few of the names that for some reason spring to mind at this moment. The I is absolutely anonymous, in the sense of being nameless. But a nameless I may nevertheless, by virtue of the words surrounding it, convey a clear sense of a certain character, a kind of I-mood that prompts us to relate to it as if to a real person of flesh and blood, even in fact allowing us to come closer to it than to any real person, because the language of the literary I is explicitly tied to inner thoughts and feelings, the I when the I is alone, a dimension that vanishes in the physical encounter, where the body's frame is a barrier, not hostile or protective, but simply as it is, possessing its own language, besides the encounter between I and you also establishing a we, with its own particular rules and regulations, a social world, which only the intense infatuation of love can dissolve, though never completely, the social attaching also to that connection; no couple in love behaves uniquely. Against this can be said that the literary I, no matter how naked or how intimately it presents itself, is social too, by virtue of the expectation of a you that any I contains, and therefore is always already a we. Indeed, this lies in the very nature of the I, which is an appeal – we have no need to utter I in the presence only of ourselves – and in that appeal there is always another, and thereby a we. This applies too to the I of this diary. An I, or me, on its own is anonymous, neutral, and without character, but precisely by playing on the you, in this case the expectations we have of any I in a text, this particular I is able to infuse itself with meaning and say something about what an I is, without stating anything beyond "me." What happens when it is repeated four times? In a sentence, together with all sorts of other words, we wouldn't notice, but unencumbered, naked and accorded a line all to itself, the utterance becomes preposterous. Me, me, me, me: I, I, I, I. It expresses narcissism. But at the same time, by its nakedness it is as if that narcissism is being exhibited, and in this lies a conscious mind, someone saying, I know what I'm doing. What is the nature of that knowledge? I know it's narcissistic, but I'm doing it anyway. That is, I am not hiding myself. I'm telling it like it is. I am at root narcissistic. But who am I? As of yet, the I is all of us. That is, every me is narcissistic, but this it admits, and in this admission lies a duality: narcissism is a weakness, something unwanted; if it were not, then we would not attempt to hide it, so the fact that narcissism is being exhibited here is an admission of weakness, at the same time that admission also lifts up the I and distinguishes it, because it is candid, and candid narcissism stands in opposition to hidden narcissism in that the former aspires to truth, whereas the latter seeks to conceal the truth.

There is also something aggressive and hostile in the repetition of this "me." Fuck you, it says. You can believe what you want. Here, I, and only I, prevail.

"Me" completely on its own is anonymous, neutral, and without character. Repeated four times it becomes a literary and social program, since after having read the first four diary entries, one understands that this is a me in opposition to the social world, which it considers to be hypocritical and insincere, unlike its writing, which aspires toward that which is true and sincere by sticking to its own, which is to say the me that opens out toward us by putting itself on display, at first anonymous, neutral and without character, and which by virtue of the repetition then sheds the neutral and the characterless, and in its fourth instance stands trembling, truth-thirsty, reality-craving, superior.

And then it is literature.

But if I had begun this novel in exactly the same way it would not have been literature. Although the pronoun "me" does not in any way belong to Witold Gombrowicz, the author of that diary, and he likewise has no right of property to the repetition of that pronoun four times, meaning that legally or morally there would not have been anything in the way of my making use of that exact same opening, this would not have been the case with regard to literature, since the entire value of that opening lies in its uniqueness and its expression of uniqueness. If I had used the same words, Witold Gombrowicz's me would have superimposed itself onto my own, and my "me" would thereby have become a parody, expressing lack of originality where Gombrowicz expresses the opposite, originality, and thereby I would have undermined what the utterance is saying, that truth lies in the unique I, and only there, since the I that would have been saying this would not have been unique and primary, but Gombrowiczized, socialized, plagiarized.

My literary I was most likely Gombrowiczized, because his diaries had such a great influence on the way I thought about identity, sociality, and literature, but it was also Larssonized, Proustized, and Célinized, if not to say quite Sandemosial and thoroughly Hamsunified, and if I were to attach an image to those influences it would perhaps involve a boy, let's say he's fourteen years old, living next to a river, with a section of rapids about three kilometers down from the house, and the rock over which the water rushes, swollen and shiny as steel, is smoothly eroded and covered with algae, meaning that a person can swim out above the rapids and allow themselves to be swept along by the current, something he often does, this boy, together with his best friend and all the others who congregate there in the summer evenings, there being hardly a better feeling in life than this, to sense the might of the river, the increasing velocity, the surge of descent as he is swept away and slung into the depths downstream, plunged into the turmoil of tiny bubbles, allowing himself, if he wishes, to be carried into more gentle waters, there to clamber up onto the land again, or else swim back upstream as far as he is able, until the current becomes too strong and he is brought to a standstill, unable to progress any farther no matter how hard he struggles, eventually to be swept away downstream again. To sail down those rapids is like writing, carried from one point to another by forces beyond your control, but what you experience on your way is experienced by you alone, since I cannot imagine the other kids could have seen or felt the same as he, and if those evenings, with their setting suns and as yet warm rocks through swiftly cooling air, where great swarms of insects hung suspended in pockets of light, the resounding rush of the river and the joyful shrieks of boys and girls, the almost electrically illuminated trees, behind which an old-fashioned gravel track led to a manor farm presumably built in the nineteenth century in connection with the sawmill at the falls, and beyond the manor farm the sunlit, tree-covered slopes above which the sky slowly dimmed, eventually, towards midnight, opening to the light of the few stars bright enough to pierce the pale night of summer – if those evenings, with the slant of farther slopes on the other side of the river, dark and shadowy at the bottom, shimmering orange at the top as if ablaze, and an asphalt road with a bit more traffic along whose straights and bends the kids who lived there would cycle or race their mopeds to call on each other – if all this remained in their memories it would be in ways completely different to the way it did in his, this fourteen- or fifteen-year-old boy with no greater joy in life than this, to be within this space that resounded with the clamor of its thunderous waters and the exuberant voices of young humans, lit by the sun or dimmed by its absence, so strangely desirable that the very thought of it fills him with joy even now, twenty-eight years later. The feelings that come to him on this reflection may be no less intense than those of the others who were there, this is certainly possible, since different things will attach themselves to us, and his experience is by no means more significant to him than to the others, it is simply different. It is unique. And a starting point for a hundred novels at least. Boy at river below sawmill one evening in summer. A writer of Sandemose's ilk would most probably have zoomed in on the girl in the red bikini both he and his friend desire, then followed the three of them through life, since here we have a very fundamental psychological as well as social structure, two on one, and archaic in nature, the taboos surrounding it are basic. A Proustian writer would probably have ignored the physical-concrete aspect of the situation and emphasized its reminiscence in memory, which by virtue of being a representation is connected with all other representations, which is to say that it shares the characteristics of the work of art, the reproduction of something no longer here but which nevertheless remains within us, in the almost dreamlike haze that is such an important element of our reality, where the girl in the red bikini, dipping her toe in the river in the shade of the trees, perhaps resembles one of Rembrandt's young Dutch women of the seventeenth century, Susanna, for instance, or that of one of the figures seated or standing on the smooth rocks, dressing or undressing, are fleetingly reminiscent of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes's paintings from the latter half of the nineteenth century in which the human has a near-sculptural quality, certainly not psychological, and where the various poses, which lead the mind back to the high classical phase of Greek Antiquity, four and three hundred years before Christ, when the self did not turn inward to seek harmony there, but outward, might claim this to be a constant quality of the human, rather than something cultural or relative, which would also be the case here with these youthful Scandinavian figures on the rocks by the river. A Hamsunite, where would he or she have gone with this? To the drone of the moped as it rounds the bend beneath the fell? To the rush of the river, the sudden bashfulness in the eye of a girl as she glances down? Or to the house of the fat mini-mart owner on the new estate from the sixties and his efforts to make a living independently of the supermarket chains? The tattered remnants of aristocracy in the family who perhaps own, perhaps no longer own, the manor farm by the river? Or perhaps to the self, the self observing itself, suspiciously monitoring, cracking down at the slightest hint of pretense, in that impossible desire for authenticity that once led Nagel to suicide in a town thirty kilometers from this place in distance, ninety years in time. Oh, here were already priests and the daughters of priests, *lensmenn* and their sons, blood that rushed in the veins, hearts that pounded in the chest, here were the most refined and the coarsest of emotions, all a writer would have to do would be to start.

I first read *Pan* when I was fifteen years old, in the house that lay three kilometers from those rapids, and the forceful feelings it described found resonance in my own. Maybe that was why my love life proceeded so miserably in the years that followed, my understanding of girls, falling in love, and having relationships being too rooted in the late nineteenth century. But the novel that made the deepest impression on me in those years was Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Reading it was a feverish experience. I had no idea why, and still don't. I never identified myself with the Count, he who drained the blood of others, but with his victims, who after having been bitten by him lost not only their blood but also their independence. Knowing me, I most likely read *Dracula* as a novel about submission and liberation from submission. Not that I ever thought that explicitly, I never thought at all when I was reading, but it was what I felt. The sheer sense of triumph and joy that gathered in my chest when finally they drove the stake through the vampire's heart would seem to indicate that was the case. And rather than seeing the writer as a vampire sucking the blood of those around him, which is a tantalizing trope for the business of writing about other people, at least as this is perceived by the public, I saw the writer as someone in danger of losing his independence, a person held captive and paralyzed by the power of another, who fawningly acts like him, pale, bloodless, and ghostlike. Perhaps because I have always had such a weak ego, always felt myself inferior to all others, in every situation. Not only the brilliant individuals I have met, who with their charisma, intelligence, and talent have outshone all others, but also taxi drivers, waiters, train conductors, in fact every kind of person one can possibly meet out there. I am inferior to the man who washes down the stairs and the corridors in the building in which we live, he possesses an authority greater than mine in that situation, so if he says something about the stroller, for instance, and the bikes left outside our door, in a voice that carries even the slightest hint of annoyance, I tremble. I am inferior to the female assistant in the shoe store when I go in to buy shoes, she has me in her hands, so to speak, full of an authority to which I yield. But the worst for me are waiters, since their role is so obviously to serve and be there to please, it is their job to submit to the wishes of their customers, and the fact that I feel inferior to them, at their mercy even, the fact that they can see that I'm not a good diner, for instance, and don't quite know how to taste a wine, or what it's supposed to taste like, matters in which they are expert, is a humiliation every time. And it goes on. All the journalists I meet, even those twenty years younger than me, are my betters, and I always do what I can not to bore them, I often say things I don't even mean simply in order to present them with something. When I moved to Stockholm at the age of thirty-three, outwardly a man, inwardly still a sixteen-year-old, and met Geir Angell there, who I hadn't seen since the spring we went out drinking together a few times in Bergen twelve years before, it was one of the first things he said to me. You've got the most warped self-image of anyone I've ever met, he told me. You've got absolutely no insight into yourself. Hasn't it ever occurred to you that it's the others who are boring? That it's the others who are unoriginal and haven't a thought, that they're the ones who are imitative and full of platitudes? No, I said, because it's not like that at all. Listen, he went on. I saw you when you were twenty. You were totally different from anyone else I knew at that time. You were out on your own. It didn't surprise me in the slightest when I saw you were getting a novel published. Who else back then did anything like that? No one. There was an intentness about you that . . . well, no one else had. Those sad eyes of yours. If only you could have seen yourself! Ha ha ha!

And now you've written an amazing novel. You'll write another, and another one after that. You've got to stop measuring yourself against people who are only bureaucrats in their own lives and in those of others. And you've definitely got to stop thinking they're the ones who are interesting while you're the nonentity. They're the nonentities, and it's glaringly obvious to anyone.

I continued to deny it but felt flattered nonetheless, who wouldn't?

I resisted. What he said felt like a poison spreading through my veins.

Not only did he listen to what I told him about my life, he also found it interesting and wanted to talk about it on our endless wanderings around Stockholm. How everything had centered around my father when I was growing up, my attempts to please him, the terror that was always there, the circumstances of his death. My relationship with my brother, which had been complicated when he got together with a girl I was in love with, and which was close and distant at the same time. The confidence I shared with my mother, her analytic approach to reality. My various romantic realtionships, though these were not numerous. The way I was in awe of women, to such an extent that I was unable to approach them. How twice I had slashed my face in fits of despair. My vanity. My fear of coming across as feminine. My joy at being drunk, my infidelities, my constant feelings of inferiority in every respect. My triumphs, which could not outweigh my failures, neither in number nor in their sheer intensity. He took all of this and composed a picture of my psychological and social character he then analyzed and discussed. He construed me as a kind of baroque entity, abnormal and warped, whose inner being was utterly out of sync with its outward expression – completely the opposite of how I saw myself, which was ordinary to the point of self-erasure, this very ordinariness being my problem as a writer. I enjoyed football, both playing and watching; I enjoyed lightweight American films and could still read comics now and again; I watched the weather forecast on TV, or the news, because of the gorgeous women who sometimes appeared on the screen, and could develop small crushes on them; I enjoyed much the same music as when I was twelve, and if I liked a book or a painting I would never know why and would have to resort to words and thoughts I had picked up from others and which thereby were wholly lacking in authenticity. I had nothing special to say about anything, because I was a nobody, with nothing distinctive about me. Yet by simply talking about myself to someone who was not only genuinely interested but also analyzed everything, identifying or establishing connections between all the various parts, that ordinariness was turned into something extraordinary and unique, even to my own mind. It was as if my self had been kept frozen and had now begun to thaw. It creaked as it stirred, so long had it lain stiff and immovable. I soon got the feeling my inner being was inexhaustible. It was a good feeling. The idea that things I said could be interesting was a new experience. I'd always found myself dull. What was interesting was connected with the feeling of inexhaustibility, because there were no limits to the inexhaustible, and limits were what had kept everything out of reach and frozen. I almost never confided in anyone, thinking nothing I had to say could be of interest to anyone, and from that perspective, which was the social perspective, the expectations of the you as constructed by the I, confidence was a nonstarter for me, and this was basically how I was with everything. I was mute in the social world, and since the social world exists nowhere else but in each individual, I was also mute toward myself, in my inner being. Only once before had I felt such inexhaustibility, and the situation had been almost the same: another person had seemed to be genuinely interested in what I saw and in what I had to say about myself. That person was Arve, he was ten years older than me and had acquired such insight into the world it meant he could laugh at everything. He was on a completely different level to anyone I had met until that point. Arve was supreme, in a way, independent in the true sense of the word. He was also demonic, or at least played the demon with me, forever tantalizing. What did he tantalize me with? Freedom. What was freedom? To be free was to transgress. To identify everything as being subject to constraints, stuck, ossified, and to remove oneself from that. Not necessarily the social world as a set of rules for behavior, which then Bohemian-like could be ignored, but the mind-set those rules entailed. What Roland Barthes referred to as *doxa*. But Arve hitched up with wife Linda, who I had very quickly fallen in love with, and I closed the door on everything that had happened, including what I had learned from him in his capacity as freedom's demon. None of it mattered anymore. I returned to my own life, that's how it felt, as if for some days I had been living another life entirely, only then to find it wasn't for me, it simply wasn't mine. I had no business encroaching on the wild. I was pleasant, thoughtful, and responsible, apart from the times I was drunk, when a strong urge always rose in me to let people down. Eventually I did, and when that came to light, a year later, I ran away to an island and lived there completely on my own for several months, during which I felt I needed to make a decision and stick to it for the rest of my life. I needed to become a good person. It was in the winter and spring of 2001. In the spring of 2002 I left everything behind and uprooted to Stockholm. There I met Geir and eventually Linda. While meeting Geir gave me a viewpoint on myself and a space in which it could be articulated, in other words remoteness, which was invaluable, meeting Linda gave me the opposite, in that encounter all remoteness was dissolved, I became closer to her than I had ever been to any other person in my life, and in that closeness there was no use for words, no use for analysis, no use for thoughts, because when all is said and done, which is another way of saying in life, when it presents itself in all its intensity, when you're there, at the center of it all, with your entire being, the only thing that matters is feeling. Geir gave me the chance to look at life and understand it, Linda gave me the chance to live it. In the first instance I became visible to myself, in the second I vanished. That's the difference between friendship and love. That the two things came into my life simultaneously meant for a while everything was turned upside down, all of a sudden, almost from one day to the next, I found myself plunged into something completely new. Everything was wide open, nothing was impossible anymore. And in the sky, in that fantastic summer of 2002, the sun shone, sinking red into the Mälardalen every night, as if shrouded by a veil of blood, its last rays glittering gold on all the city's towers and spires, and I was immortal. Seven years later, toward the end of the not-quite-so-fantastic summer of 2009, here I was with Geir again, in the bathroom of our apartment in Malmö, watching the four kids splashing about in the bath as the sky outside, which I couldn't see but whose light I could sense through the rectangular windows, gradually darkened.

"Looks like we've got the hang of it," he said.

I turned my head to look at him. He was smiling.

"How do you mean?" I said.

"Kids."

"What are you talking about, Daddy?" said Vanja.

"We're talking about being *fedre*," I said.

"What's that?" she replied.

"It's what Geir and I are," I said, leaning forward and turning off the tap. "Fathers."

I wondered if his pleasure came from seeing Njaal with other children, a relatively rare occurrence with Njaal being an only child, and the fact that he seemed to be handling it so well, or whether it was down to Geir himself having organized the trip, since normally it was Christina who took care of everything to do with Njaal, while Geir mostly sat in his study writing. He had never immersed himself in the daily routines I dealt with, the clothes and the laundry, food and cooking, children's play and bedtimes, it was his choice and he had always been quite clear on the matter, that he didn't want anything to do with any of that, and yet I often thought he must feel he was missing out on something occasionally, not the practical things but what came with them in terms of involvement. I didn't think that was the case, but the sudden pleasure I saw in him as they sat there playing in the bath perhaps suggested it. I wasn't going to ask him, it was one of those things I was reluctant to bring up, sensing it would be touching on something I didn't want to touch on. It would be an infringement.

What was so dangerous about closeness?

Getting close to someone meant seeing things the other person didn't, whether it was because they didn't want to, or because they couldn't. Geir had an explanation for everything, but that didn't mean that everything about him was explained. He controlled every situation in which he was involved, with the exception of those that included children; the intimacy they afforded, so unaccountable in nature, was something he was unfamiliar with, and this unfamiliarity was plain to see. I had always thought he wanted it that way, but when I saw the smile on his face as he watched Njaal with the others, the sudden sense of pleasure that came over him, it struck me that perhaps he felt the lack of complete familiarity that Christina for instance enjoyed to be something lacking in his life.

What would he say if I told him this?

That it wasn't true?

That it was true, but it was the price he paid for being able to do what he wanted?

That it was his problem, not Njaal's, and therefore unimportant?

That it was no price at all?

After writing this yesterday morning, I took Heidi and John to the nursery, where I was putting in a shift. The staff told me I could get off early to go to Vanja's last-day-of-school event if I wanted, so I took Heidi and John with me and went to the church a few blocks away where it was taking place. Compared to the last-day assemblies of my own school days, which had taken place in a chapel with hymns and a priest in full garb in an atmosphere that was starched and solemn, the last thing we had to endure before the summer, which seemed to us to be ready and waiting outside, Vanja's last day was like something from a different world. A choir of nine- or ten-year-olds sang pop songs by the likes of Christina Aguilera and Mariah Carey; two kids of the same age played piano; some others, slightly older, perhaps twelve or thirteen, performed a rap. After each performance the church erupted into exuberant applause. It was like an audition for *American Idol*. The priest spoke about how important it was to be joyful, he told them fame and fortune didn't matter and that everyone was equal. There was no mention at all of God, Jesus, or the Bible. After the sermon, which lasted all of five minutes, the pupils who had stood out most during the year were called forward. They received diplomas. Some for their fantastic grades, some for their fantastic personal qualities, which, judging by what was said, consisted of taking responsibility for others and caring. The whole hour-long event concluded with the graduates from the ninth grade being called forward in turn to receive a flower. As I walked back with Heidi and John holding my hands, we came up behind a group of kids, maybe thirteen or fourteen years old. All were crew-cut, dressed in jacket-and-trouser combinations, boisterously backslapping, laughing, and shouting exaggeratedly, as many had done in the church. They had clasped hands when greeting each other, applauded and whooped when one of their own, or someone they respected, took the stage to perform. This macho-like behavior, which seemed so out of place in their ungrown bodies, several sizes too big as it were, and which for that reason came across as rather comical, was nevertheless genuine in that this was their ideal, and nothing else. These boys wanted to be hard, strong, and tough, and they were in the majority. The others, pale and spindly youngsters with glasses and smidgeons of gel in their hair, hadn't a chance against the swagger of the immigrant-community kids. After we got back to the nursery and I was busy filling the dishwasher and wiping the kitchen counter, the nursery head asked me how the event had gone. I said it was like being in the United States. That I'd never seen anything as Americanized before. The best students singing and performing for the others, diplomas awarded to those who had stood out. And the absurd sermon given by the priest, who said everyone was equal, while everything that was going on around him said the opposite, with some students singled out as being more valuable than others and put on display in all their glory. Yes, said the director. When I was a kid, the last day of school was a solemn occasion. We sang the national anthem. But that was banned. They said it was racist to sing the national anthem. Can you imagine?

I could indeed. Equality was the supreme principle, and one of the consequences was that expressions of the singularly Swedish were seen as exclusive and discriminatory, for which reason they were shunned. When it came to religion, one had to tread carefully, church had long since been separated from state, and now things had got to the stage where priests no longer mentioned God or Jesus or the Bible when addressing schoolchildren, since this could cause offense to the many who came from Muslim homes. It was this same ideology, hostile to all difference, that could not accept categories of male and female, he and she. Since *han* and *hun* are denotative of gender, it was suggested a new pronoun, *hen*, be used to cover both. The ideal human being was a gender-neutral *hen* whose foremost task in life was to avoid oppressing any religion or culture by preferring their own. Such total self-obliteration, aggressive in its insistence on leveling out, though in its own view tolerant, was a phenomenon of the cultural middle class, that segment of the population which controlled the media, the schools, and other major institutions of society, and it existed, as far as I could tell, only in northern Europe. But what did this ideology of equality actually entail? A recent study said that differences between pupils in Swedish schools had never been greater than they are now. The gap between the ablest children, for whom the future is bright, and the least able, whose futures lie outside the zones of influence and wealth, is widening year by year. The trend in the study is clear indeed: the strongest pupils are those from Swedish backgrounds, the weakest are from immigrant backgrounds. While we might be concerned not to offend people from other nations and other cultures, and go so far as to eliminate everything Swedish, this happens only in the symbolic world, the world of flags and anthems, whereas in the real world everyone who does not belong to the Swedish middle class, which is hostile to all difference, is kept down and excluded: most immigrants in Malmö, welcome as they are, live in ghetto-like public housing projects outside the center, in miserable apartments, areas where unemployment is massive and prospects are dim. It is also the case that the middle class, hostile to all difference, prefers not to send its children to schools attended by children from immigrant communities, thereby further reinforcing the segregation, with a knock-on effect on the next generation. Many immigrant children have parents with no education, and what the Swedish school system formerly considered to be a priority, lessening differences by providing equal opportunties to able and less able students alike, has now been completely invalidated as a guiding principle, the result being that the haves receive more, the *have-nots* less. Equality in Sweden is confined to the middle class, they alone are becoming more equal; elsewhere the only equality is in the language, managed by the same middle class. In Sweden something happening in language is much worse than something happening in reality. An instance of one moral code applying in language and another in reality used to be called a double standard. This was what was going on at Vanja's last-day-of-school event; the ideal of everyone being equal, and fame and wealth being unimportant, applied in the language of the priest, whereas the reality surrounding that ideology said the opposite: the most important thing is to be rich and famous. Every child there harbored that dream, it was in the air. And the more I see of it, this self-blind and self-satisfied ideology of equality, believing as it does that the conclusion it has reached is universal and true and must therefore govern us all – although in fact it is valid only to a small class of the privileged few, as if they comprised some little island of decency in an ocean of commercialism and social inequality – the more the significance of my life's struggle diminishes, for what difference does it then make if I spend more or less time with my children, if I change their diapers or don't change their diapers, if I do the dishes or don't do the dishes, if I spend time on my work or don't spend time on my work? Oh, how then, for crying out loud, can we make the lives we live an expression of life, rather than the expression of an ideology? All the thou-shalt-nots by which our small middle-class lives were constrained, all the things we weren't supposed to say or do, or else were obliged to say or do, how I longed not to give a damn and do as I pleased.

But that wasn't possible. I become panic-stricken at the thought of anyone feeling annoyed, I want everyone to feel comfortable and am willing to give up everything that is mine in order for that to happen. If someone does not feel comfortable, I close my eyes to it or withdraw, since the only way I can deal with people not feeling comfortable is if they do so somewhere other than right in front of me. Out of sight, out of mind. It can even get to the point where for long periods I won't open letters I receive for fear they might be unpleasant, since what other letters are there but letters from reality? Something's burning in the Rosengård District, but the papers aren't reporting on it because reporting on it might lead to other problems, might put racist ideas in people's heads, so they close their eyes, shut their mouths, turn away. As such, I am the very epitome of Swedishness, but to be Swedish is also to possess something else, something alien to me, which is social adroitness. The ability to talk about matters great and small in a personal way without ever getting personal, which Swedes master to perfection, is something at which I am utterly inept; either I blurt out something so private that people look down or become ill at ease, or else I go on about something so remote from myself that everyone else quite naturally is bored to death. There is a colloquial elegance about Sweden that is collective and very much a part of the social world, something sophisticated and impressive, quite absent in Norway, where such casual refinement is always individual, attaching to those who have been fortunate, either in something they've just said or in their lives altogether.

A siren suddenly screamed out of nowhere, rising sharply, then stopping abruptly outside the building. I leaned forward and looked out; most likely it was over the road at the hotel, which with its many guests sometimes had to call for an ambulance. Businessman with a heart attack, I usually thought to myself; what else could happen to a person staying at a hotel?

This time it was a police car.

"What's going on?" Geir wanted to know.

"A police car outside the hotel. Maybe they caught that dyslexic thief, the one with the misspelled youth."

"Ha ha."

"Should we get them dried now?" I asked, and looked at him inquiringly.

Geir shrugged and threw up his hands.

"Looks like they're still having fun, if you ask me," he said.

"Can you keep an eye on them for a minute then? I just need to check my e-mails."

"Gunnar haunting you?"

"Not only."

I went past him and into the bedroom, sat down on the chair, and clicked into my in-box.

There was a new message, from Jan Vidar.

Hi Karl Ove

Sorry to get back to you so late on this, came home Sunday and have been a bit busy since, a lot going on at work. I'm not shocked, and not angry either. Why *should I be? Past is past, and writing about it isn't going to change anything. Besides, there's nothing there that can't see the light of day as far as I'm concerned. I think I've got a fairly good idea of who I am and the way I was, and I really don't care too much about what other people might think anymore. So if it benefits your story you can do what you like, it's all fine by me.*

Apart from that I must say the book knocked me out. Maybe because it's all so close to home – or maybe it's the way you write that does it, I don't know, but others besides me are bound to get off on it. Fantastic and gut-wrenching at the same time. So incredibly exact about what it was like. Lots of stuff I'd forgotten – suppressed, maybe . . . but it all came rushing back full power. Fantastic, the way it set off so many thoughts about how and why.

Anyway, there I was, in the wilds of Finnmark, reading more than I was fishing. Came across an old peat hut and spent a lot of hours inside with your book. Incredible place, Bilbo Baggins could have lived there . . .

Hope it works out with your uncle and the rest of the family. And that they get the point.

If you're up for a coffee or a beer next time you're around, just give me a call. It'd be nice.

All the best to you and yours too.
Jan Vidar

It had been a long time since I'd felt as glad as I did after reading something. But there was also a tinge of what felt like grief in that joy, because with him coming across as generously as he did here, it became clear to me that I hadn't done him justice. I was indebted to him. I had no problem with that; the sliver of despair I felt had to do with the time that had gone, it was there, in the past, *back then*, and I wished I could make up for that imbalance. Another thing which occurred when he said the novel had knocked him out was that I then assessed the forthcoming book in that light, and it was so radically different, having so little of the narrative thrust of the first book that no one would ever be able to say the same about it. In other words, it was less of a book, and that thought deflated my spirits.

I sat there for a minute in front of the computer in the bedroom, staring out the window, first at the railing of the balcony, then at the front of the hotel on the other side of the road, the three elevators which slid up and down in their unpredictable patterns, as the gleeful sounds of the children in the bath swelled and diminished in the background. I felt a sudden and very strong sense of closeness to Jan Vidar. The emotions of that time welled inside me, I saw the faces of his parents and his sister, recalled the smells of their home, and the landscape that had been ours, with all of its little places, glowed with the intensity of the most compelling memories. At the time it was just a landscape, almost insignificant, certainly when compared to the landscape in which I had grown up, which even then had been saturated with emotion, but now it too had become the Landscape, laden with significance and meaning. The same thing occurred with respect to those who had lived there. The number of people we come close to during our lives is small, and we fail to realize how infinitely important each and every one of them is to us until we grow older and can see things from afar. When I was sixteen, I thought life was without end, the number of people in it inexhaustible. This was by no means strange, since right from starting school at the age of seven I'd been surrounded by hundreds of children and adults; people were a renewable resource, found in abundance, but what I didn't know, or rather had absolutely no conception of, was that every step I took was defining me, every person I encountered leaving their mark on me, and that the life I was living at that particular time, boundlessly arbitrary as it seemed, was in fact my life. That one day I would look back on my life, and *this* would be what I looked back on. What then had been insignificant, as weightless as air, a series of events dissolving in exactly the same way as the darkness dissolved in the mornings, would twenty years on seem laden with destiny and fate. The people who had been there then would become even more important, infinitely significant in as much as they had not only been shaping my perception of who I was, had not only been the people through which my own face emerged and became visible, but embodied the very understanding of how this particular life turned out the way it did.

I thought about all of this. And then I thought about how I had always considered time to be vertical. Time was to me a kind of ladder one climbed, whose rungs were ages – at the bottom one's time at preschool, then school, *gymnas*, university, and so on. That thought had never been explicit to me, and I had never pictured it as such in that way, but somewhere in the depths of my conceptions some idea of that nature must have existed, subconsciously shaping the way I perceived things, and perhaps the most surprising thing I discovered while writing this novel was that everyone who had appeared in my life, even my friends at nursery, my mother's co-workers at Kokkeplassen, the neighborhood kids in Tybakken, the cleaning lady we had there, my old teachers, and everyone else who had been there in my vicinity from when I was six months old to when I was thirteen, existed simultaneously with me now, and had always done so. Moreover, everyone I had known from my time in Tveit and in Kristiansand, at school and at the *gymnas*, existed on exactly the same level, in that same horizontality. Not one had sunk into the depths of history! All had lived their own lives, lived through exactly the same things as I myself, and had been contactable throughout this time, through all these years. They were a phone call away.

It had never occurred to me before. I had thought my life to be lived only in my immediate and most intimate surroundings, and that every place I ever left had gone from my life at that same moment.

Naturally, I didn't really think that to be true, had never even entertained the thought, but something inside me had certainly experienced things in that way, that the places I left, and the people who populated them, died away after I was gone. For that reason it had not been them I had written about, but my recollections of them. The fact that they still existed in their own right, at the same time as my writing about them, had not occurred to me.

At the time they took place, the events of my life had possessed a weight of which I had been wholly unaware. Now that I could sense that weight, paradoxically it was gone, as if my life and the person I had been were now fixed, and that nothing of what had taken place then could change the fact. It was only a feeling I had, but it was strong. I was somewhere else. Now it was my children who were living through days heavy with destiny and fate. Although I knew this was so, I had difficulty putting myself in their place, seeing things through their eyes, not the way they saw them now, but the way they would later realize they had been seeing them. To me, the life we lived together was a long series of everyday events, and all I could do was behave accordingly, as if caught in their trap. The idea that this time too would one day be gone often filled me with consternation. Now was the time I could be close to them, my children, now was the time I could give them all my love and attention. In only a few years – and a year in the life of a forty-year-old passed with the hurtling speed of a locomotive compared with how to them it crept along – they would be beyond it all, adults in whose past, the time and events by which they were formed, I had never quite been present. This and nothing else would be what they judged me by. But even when they judged me I would still be the person I was, with the knowledge of what everything had been like and why, something to which they would not, and perhaps never would, have access. So what I hoped for was for them to grow up in a world that received them well, and in that way to gain independence from me and us.

I got up and went back to the bathroom. The sky rumbled abruptly over the city.

"Did you hear that?" I asked.

"It's thundering," said Vanja.

"Time to get dried," I said. "Come on, out you come."

One by one I lifted my three children out of the bath, draped a big towel over each of them, and quickly rubbed their tummies and backs before sending them out to make room for Geir and Njaal. I got some underwear out of the drawer in the bedroom for Vanja and Heidi, and a fresh diaper for John from the little bathroom, then handed nightgowns to the girls, who had already climbed into bed, before helping John with his pajamas.

"When's Mommy coming home?" said Vanja.

"Tomorrow."

"I want Mommy now!" said Heidi.

"It won't be long before she's home," I said. "First you go to sleep, then you go to *dagis* tomorrow, and then when you come home she'll be back."

"Mommy," said John.

"You'll see," I said. "She'll be back before you know it. Vanja, do you want to choose a book?"

I sat down on the bed. Heidi and John sat down next to me. The sky rumbled again. Vanja and Heidi both looked at me, Vanja from the bookshelf over by the wall.

"It's nothing to be frightened of," I said. "It's a nice sound, don't you think?"

Heidi shook her head. Vanja took a book and brought it over to us, then sat down slightly behind me.

The air in their bedroom felt dense and clammy, my head was still thumping slightly.

The book was about a little girl who was very timid and unadventurous, she was in nursery school, and one day they were on a trip, she got separated from all the others and met a pack of wolves, who at first were scary, yellow eyes among the trees, but then when they came up to her it turned out all they wanted was to play. The game they liked best was one where they were patients in a hospital, they could lie there on their backs without moving while she went around and tickled them. The next morning they took her back to the nursery, and on the last page she could finally do what she hadn't had the courage to do before, which was to jump down from the roof of the little playhouse.

Their little breathing bodies cuddled up to me, absorbed by the story. The thunder rumbling closer in the sky. The drumming of the rain on the balcony and on the square below. The innocence, all that was pure and fine in them.

I got up. They wanted more, but I told them one book was enough, it was late and time to sleep, they had to be up in the morning. I lifted John up and carried him over to his crib, pretending to drop him from on high, catching him again as he fell. He laughed and said, again, Daddy. I said no, turned to Heidi and told her to climb up into her bed and Vanja to get into hers, and then I would come and tickle them.

I sang Heidi a song about a mommy troll putting her children to bed, and another for Vanja about a little songbird, and the one about sailing without a wind for John. They seemed ready to sleep, but a bit overtired too.

"Can the door stay open like that?" Vanja asked.

"Of course," I said.

"What if the lightning strikes here?" she wanted to know.

"It can't," I said.

"Will we die?"

"No, no, no. The first thing is it can't happen, because lightning always strikes the highest point. What's the tallest building here?"

"The hotel?"

"Exactly. So if lightning strikes here it'll strike the hotel instead. And the hotel's got lightning conductors, so nothing will happen there either."

"But if," she said. "Will we die?"

"No, we won't. We're safe here. And now it's sleep time for little tots. We've got to be up early in the morning."

"Night night," said Vanja.

"Night night, Vanja," I said. "Night night, Heidi."

She didn't answer. I went over to her bunk and peeped in. She was fast asleep. Sometimes she could just fall asleep from one moment to the next.

I smoothed my hand over her head. She was snoring slightly.

"Night night, John," I said.

"Night, Daddy," he said.

"Heidi's snoring," said Vanja.

"Yes, she is," I said. "She's fast asleep. And in a minute you'll be asleep too."

"But she's snoring!"

"Just ignore it, you won't hear her then," I said, stepped out and closed the door behind me.

"DADDY!" Vanja shouted.

The door.

I opened it again.

"I forgot, that's all. Go to sleep," I said, left the door ajar and went into the living room. I heard Geir's voice in the other room, opened the balcony door, stepped out and sat down in the chair.

Oh, the air was so cool and delightful.

A diagonal bolt of lightning cracked out of the heavy gray cloud and vanished again. I lit a cigarette. Another lightning bolt, to the south this time, sliced through the sky. The thunder came rolling in. Raindrops splattered white against the black roofing and were felt six floors below, and on the roof of the building opposite it looked like they were rebounding. Another peal of thunder, this time accompanied by a crackling fracture, so loud that no other sound compared, it seemed almost to make the entire city shudder.

It was fantastic.

I inhaled, put my feet up on the railing and stared out. Lightning lit up the sky in different places, now to the south, now to the north.

Fantastic.

Next to me the door opened. Geir put his head around.

"How about a beer?"

"That wouldn't be bad," I said. "Just the one, though."

"If I meant two, I'd have said so," he replied, closing the door again. I got up and went inside after him.

"Just need to call Linda first," I said.

He nodded as he opened the fridge door. I went out to the mirror in the hall, picked up the phone from its charger on the table underneath, pressed her number, and stepped over to look in on the children. Vanja was lying on her side and looked up at me.

"Who are you calling?" she asked.

"Aren't you asleep yet?" I said.

"I can't," she said.

"Is it the thunder?" I said, and at the same time Linda's voice came on the other end.

"Hi!" she said.

"Hi," I said. "How's it going?"

"Fine. How's everything at home?"

"Fine," I said, going into the bedroom. "The kids are, anyway. Heidi and Vanja have been playing with Njaal."

"That's good," she said.

"It's thundering like crazy here," I said. "The whole sky's lit up with lightning."

"How exciting," she said. "Are you and Geir all right?"

"Yes, I think so. We were out at the cabin. Now we've just been in all evening. Gave the kids a bath. Heidi and John are asleep. Vanja's awake. They're missing you."

"I'm missing them too!"

"You'll be home tomorrow, though," I said.

"Yes," she said.

There was a silence. I bunched the duvet up against the wall, then lay down with it under my back for support. Thunder cracked again, closer now.

"Did you hear that?" I asked.

"No," she said. "What was it?"

"Thunder. *Åska*, as the kids say. When I first came to Sweden I thought it meant ash, like from a volcano erupting. Which is a whole lot more dramatic, I suppose."

She laughed.

"I miss you," I said.

"Honestly?"

"Yes. But you're coming home tomorrow."

"Yes," she said. "How's it going with Geir, anyway? What are you doing? Sitting around talking?"

"Basically."

"What about?"

"All sorts. My uncle, mostly."

"Any more e-mails?"

"Yes. A long one. He's threatening to take me to court. He says he can prove I'm lying. I don't really know what to do about it. I have no idea whether he's right or not. If I've exaggerated things, I mean."

"But it's a novel, Karl Ove."

"Yes, but the whole point is it's meant to be true."

"Who says you have to have seen things the same way?"

"That's not the issue. It's the facts that matter. But it goes a lot deeper than that. It doesn't make sense otherwise. It feels like I've gone to hell. I can't explain it. It's just hell. And then I start getting scared about all the other people I've written about. You, for instance."

"There's no need to worry about me. You've nothing to fear there."

"You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. At least, I think I know pretty much what you think about me, and about us. Not everything, of course, and not in detail, but more or less."

"What if it's worse?"

"I can deal with it. As long as it's true."

"I hope you're right. But there's your mother as well."

"She'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. She'll cope. I know she will."

I got up and opened the balcony door, leaving it slightly ajar. Fresh, cool air tumbled into the room. The rain was beating down, pelting against the wooden decking.

"Are you outside now?"

"No, just at the door in the bedroom. How's the weather where you are?"

"Nice. Blue skies. We've been swimming all day. I've been lying in the shade reading."

"Sounds great."

"But I miss you all."

"It's funny," I said, "but when you're not here they always seem to behave a bit better. I mean, they don't pester in the same way, or fight like they usually do. At the same time, they're not quite as much at ease. I'm sure of it. They stick it out with me, in a way, they know what rules apply and abide by them, but what you have is what they miss. It doesn't matter how nice and amenable I am, or how strict and distant. It's not the same kind of intimacy."

"Is it so bad?"

"No. It's strange, that's all. They hold something back. Not John, of course, but the girls do. It's my role, and I think it has to be like that, but I get something different back from them than what you do. Something less."

"Sometimes I wish they were like that with me. They're all over me when we're together. It's like they have to be right up close all the time. Pestering and going on. You can actually sit and read the paper when you're with them. I can't do that. They crawl all over me if I try."

"You need to set a limit."

"When I'm on a high, it's fine. When I'm down, it can be unbearable."

"I know. I live here too."

"Anyway, let's not talk about it. Are they asleep now?"

"Yes. I said before. Apart from Vanja."

"That's right, you did."

"Do you want a word with her?"

"No, not when she needs to go to sleep."

"What time will you be back tomorrow, anyway?"

"Sometime in the afternoon. Three or four-ish, I think."

"Christina will be here by then. I was thinking prawns. Is that all right? And white wine?"

"Yes, fine."

"See you tomorrow, then."

"Yes, see you tomorrow. I love you."

"Love you," I said, then hung up, closed the balcony door, and sank back onto the bed with the phone still in my hand.

All I wanted now was to be in the midst of my family, to live my life there, and so strong was that desire that it filled me with impatience, as if it would soon be too late.

I got up again, dropped the phone back in the charger in the hall, went to the bathroom and took a leak, washed my hands, discovered there was no towel on the hook next to the sink, went back into the bedroom and found one in the knee-high pile of clean washing beside the bed, dried my hands on it, and hung it up, before going back out onto the balcony, where Geir had sat down in my chair, and for a few seconds I stood there staring at him, nonplussed.

"Anything the matter?" he asked. "Your beer's on the table."

"No, nothing's the matter," I said, and sat down on the other chair. I was so attached to habit that everything seemed wrong from there. Only by an effort of will was I able to remain seated. It was no big thing, and yet something inside me had to be held down in order for me to stay put.

Lightning flashed in the sky. I counted the seconds until the thunder followed. It wasn't far off.

The sound that came was like a rockfall, an irregular, tumultuous crash that made me look up into the sky as if it could be seen – it was impossible for the instincts to comprehend that such a noise wasn't from something material, but arose on its own.

"Cheerful as ever," said Geir.

"Are you criticizing me too now?" I responded.

He laughed.

"No, that's right, I forgot. I came all this way to comfort you and cheer you up, didn't I?"

"You make me sound like a seven-year-old."

"It wouldn't be far off. I've never seen you so out of yourself. You're in shreds, man. And all because your uncle's angry at you. It's beyond me. I've never cared one way or another if anyone wanted to be angry at me. That's up to them. You're taking it pretty badly, I must say."

"It's not just that long nose of yours that makes you look like an elephant. It's the thick hide you've got as well."

He laughed. I lit a smoke. It helped, him being there.

"In the nineties there was some trouble with elephants in South Africa," I said. "Whether there were too many of them or whatever, I don't know, but anyway the authorities set up this program. They shot all the adult elephants, captured the young ones, and moved them to a different part of the country. Those elephants are adult now. And they're deeply traumatized. They're aggressive, hostile to humans, and antisocial. They've got all the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The point is they're sensitive. They saw their parents killed, and elephants always react when one of the herd dies, they become beside themselves with grief, circling the place where the dead elephant lies or lay for days on end. They're very social animals. So with seeing what happened and then being moved to a different area, the young elephants freaked out. They're not well. They're angry and destructive."

"So what are you trying to say? That I'm sensitive even though I'm thick-skinned, or that a traumatic childhood will always leave its mark, whether you're an elephant or a Tromøy goat?"

"Neither. It just came to mind, that's all. It made an impression on me. And I thought it might interest you, having written about PTSD and all."

"It's a bit gushy for my taste. And I'm not that sure whether elephants suffering from it too adds or subtracts."

"Adds. It becomes universal."

"It limits our scope as well though, doesn't it? If elephants can be traumatized, then trees can too. There they are, all depressed in the forest after that nice little fellow alongside got chopped down on Christmas Eve. On the other hand, what's to say we can't just care less? As Nietzsche says, empathy merely increases the amount of suffering in the world. Instead of just one, there's two."

"He was a hard case. But all told probably the nineteenth century's most sensitive man."

I took a swig of the watery beer. The can was cold against the skin of my fingers. Its metal yielded with a snap when I tightened my grip. I put it down on the table, lit another cigarette with the stub of the first, leaned back in the chair, and let out a sigh.

"Another one of your east-European sighs," said Geir.

"I got an e-mail from Jan Vidar," I said.

"Yeah?"

"He had no issues about being in the book."

"I never thought he would."

"No. It made me feel happy."

"But it doesn't help?"

"Of course it helps. It doesn't change anything for Gunnar, not by a long shot. But at least he didn't say anything about being unreliable. Neither did Yngve actually, come to think of it."

"That's not what it's about, you can see that, surely? He just doesn't want you writing about your dad, period. He must have had it in for you for years. You and your mom. The way he made out in that one e-mail that it was like a sociological demonstration of the sum conflicts between town and country, urban and agrarian, bourgeoisie and peasantry, rich and poor. The Hatløys unworthy of the Knausgaards. Ha ha ha! Who ever heard of Hatløy and Knausgaard? Who knew there was any difference? It's Olsen and Fredriksen. Only not for Olsen, because Olsen's Olsen, and Fredriksen's something else altogether!"

"That's just it. Every family has its own story, and even if everyone else has too, it's still theirs. What I've done is make ours public. Now everyone's going to be able to read about it, and it won't be just the family's anymore then. I'm giving it all away. And it's not mine to give. That's the crux, I suppose."

"It is. But it's hardly against the law, is it?"

"Legally, you mean?"

"What else?"

"I don't know. Libel is, but then they've got to prove that what's written is incorrect. That's what Gunnar says he can do. If he can, and the court upholds that, I'll be found guilty. Otherwise it's all down to invasion of privacy, as far as I understand it. But privacy can be invaded even if what's written is true. Then it would have to be weighed up against freedom of speech and so-called artistic expression. Dad and Grandma are dead too. That's probably a part of it as well. In which case he's offended on behalf of the dead."

"Think of it. You're calling witnesses. He's calling witnesses. The whole damn book's going to have to be read out loud. The proceedings are going to take weeks. The papers will be writing about it every day. You'll become a millionaire out of this, Karl Ove. The book's going to be selling like hotcakes."

"How come what I see as absolute hell on earth, the worst thing imaginable, can sound so appealing when you talk about it?"

"I wouldn't know. Maybe it's my healthy, unsentimental outlook on life?"

"But what if he really can demonstrate that what I've written isn't true? What if I really am found guilty?"

"All the better! Everyone wants to read a book full of lies about real people!"

"Come on, be serious for a minute. It is actually serious."

"Certainly! But OK. What do you want me to say? Bad boy! Boo-hoo! Bad man! Come on. We've got the legal aspect. That's a gray zone. You might be found guilty, you might not. It's all relative. Then we've got the human side. That's where you're suffering. Your uncle's taken your father's place, and you're scared of him. It's all to do with you, your childhood, and your psychological makeup, not the novel. You've got to keep the two things apart. I'd say your anxiety here is verging on the pathological. In a way, you're a wreck. No offense! But that's how I see it. You write about all this, and it's got to come from somewhere. You look at your mom's family. You look at your dad's family. You try to understand. There's nothing wrong with that. You shouldn't believe there is. It's not wrong. It may feel like hell now, but that's a different matter. That's basically how I look at it."

"You can look at it like that. But as soon as doing what you have a right to do starts to affect others, it all changes."

"You are going to publish this book, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then there's nothing more to be said. You've made up your mind. Made your decision. It's going to affect others. So what? Did you kill someone? Did you assault someone? Did you steal from someone? Did you write anything bad about them? No. You've written very kindly about Gunnar. You've got to try to see things in their actual proportions. Gunnar's not your dad. You're not a child."

"No."

"End of story. Comfort and support enough for one day. How about another beer?"

"All right."

He got up and went past me, his face pale in the dim light of the storm. The raindrops were smaller now, they fell in curtains outside the balcony and over the city. To incur the wrath of another person was bad enough in itself, but nothing compared to my no longer knowing what had actually occurred. What was actually true. I couldn't rely on myself and my own recollections, they were infected by the writing. I knew that from earlier, that writing about a recollection changed it, all of a sudden you no longer knew what belonged to the recollection and what belonged to the writing. I didn't know what was true. In order to find out what was, I had to rely on external factors. Which was to say what others had seen and could recall.

There was a tremendous crash as the sky cracked above my head.

What the hell was that?

I jumped to my feet and went inside, my heart beating like a frightened animal's. I'd never heard thunder that loud in my life. The lightning must have struck right where we were.

Geir was at the window looking out. Njaal lay fast asleep on the bed by the wall.

"Did you see that?" Geir said, astonished. "The hotel took a direct hit."

"No, I didn't. But I heard it."

"Thunder and lightning at exactly the same moment."

"Daddy!" cried a voice from the children's room. I went in. Vanja and Heidi were sitting up in their beds. Heidi was crying. John was asleep on his side, his mouth pressed open against his arm. His hair was damp with sweat.

"I'm scared," said Vanja.

"Me too," said Heidi.

"It's all right, nothing's going to happen, little loves."

"I don't want to sleep on my own," said Vanja.

"But Heidi and John are here," I said.

"It's not the same," she said. "I want to sleep with you."

"Me too," said Heidi.

I looked at them for a moment.

"All right, then," I said. "Come on."

Heidi held her arms out and I lifted her down from the bunk bed. They scuttled out into the hall. By the time I came after them into the bedroom they were already tucked under the duvet.

"We don't want to be on our own," said Vanja.

"Is it going to thunder again?" said Heidi.

"It might," I said. "But it's not dangerous. And I'll be coming to bed as well soon. OK? Do you think you'll be all right on your own for a few minutes?"

They nodded.

"But the door has to be open!" said Vanja.

"Of course," I said. "Night night."

I went back out into the living room. It was empty. But the door onto the balcony was open, so I stepped outside.

"Everything all right?" he asked from my chair.

"I think so," I said, sitting down in the other one. "But I think I'll be off to bed in a minute. John's probably going to be up at five. And if I don't get my sleep, everything's bound to go off the rails. But stay up and have a drink, by all means."

"Very generous of you," he said.

"The Elephant Man sat on his own a lot," I said.

"Didn't he wear a paper bag over his head?"

"No, no. A paper hat. He had a whistle as well. Here comes the Elephant Man! he'd shout, and blow his whistle when he was out for a walk. It was never a dull moment with him."

"You'd better get off to bed. You clearly need a rest."

"You're right," I said, getting to my feet. "Have you got everything you need? Sheets, bedding?"

"All sorted."

"Goodnight, then. Sleep as long as you want in the morning, no need to get up with us."

"Will do. Goodnight."

I went inside, paused in the doorway of the kitchen for a second, decided to leave the dishes until the morning, disconnected the phone, and went into the dim light of the bedroom, where Vanja and Heidi lay with eyes closed, their breathing regular and heavy, like two little animals. Vanja was lying crosswise. I lifted her up and laid her down straight, side by side with Heidi. She didn't stir. I got undressed and lay down next to them. How small they are, I thought to myself, staring at them for a moment before closing my eyes and drifting into sleep, the night inside us that seems so vast and boundless when we are within it yet can never be greater than ourselves.

A few minutes after five thirty John was standing by the side of the bed shouting at me to wake up. I put on my clothes from the day before and took him into the kitchen. Outside, the sun was coming up over the horizon. Its rays were sharp and penetrated the room. Everything became visible in its light, the bits of food on the floor, the trail of coffee stains that ran from the counter on the right to the sink on the other side, the globules of fat that specked the surface of the sausage water in the saucepan, the two bloated sausages that lay at the bottom, split open, the two empty milk cartons next to it, the open packet of margarine, so soft it was almost a fluid, its yellow color much deeper now than when it had been taken from the fridge. The Wetex cloth, stiff as a shell when dry, draped over the lip of metal that separated the twin bowls of the sink, like some odd fitting that was a part of it, originally white, now a grimy gray. The glasses and cups, plates, and bowls that were piled up in the sink, spilling out over the stainless-steel draining board like some encroaching plant of glass and crockery. The two empty jars of pasta sauce left unrinsed behind the tap, insides red with what remained of their contents. The transparent plastic cheese wrapper, which to a distracted eye made it look like the label with the logo on it hung in midair above the chopping board that had been pushed back against the wall. The beetroot juice the wood had absorbed. The withered plants in the window, dead for months, so much a fixture now that no one thought of throwing them out anymore. The table, with its glasses and plates, the jug of water with its tiny bubbles, the dried-up crumbs and other detritus that pointed to where the children sat, the empty bags of fruit that lay dumped, like little hangars of plastic among the drawings and drawing pads, crayons and felt pens, not to mention the two shelves on the wall next to the window, swelling like some coral reef with objects the children had collected and kept over the past couple of years, from sweet dispensers in the shape of princesses or Disney figures, little boxes full of beads, bead boards, sticks of glue, toy cars, and watercolors, to oddments of jigsaw puzzles, bits of Playmobil, letters and bills, dolls, and some marbles with little dolphins inside that Vanja had wanted when we were in Venice the previous summer. The shelves were a kind of station; once something was put there it was out of circulation and stayed there. We had a number of such places where the lives of objects came to a sudden end, most notably the long counter in the hall, presumably once used as a kind of sideboard for serving food before it was taken into the dining room, since it had those kinds of cupboards above and below, which were now crammed with all manner of stuff we must once have thought we needed but no longer knew we had, some three cubic meters of discarded lamps, used and unused lightbulbs, candles, piles of printer paper, rolls of undeveloped film, heaps of photographs, loose as well as collected in the little yellow folders in which they had been delivered, cookery books, assorted children's clothing, woolen tights from winter, odd socks, odd gloves, a pink Hello Kitty rain hat, a number of T-shirts, most likely outgrown, a hoodie, a thick sweater, napkins bought in abundance from IKEA, flowerpots, cables from old computers, extension cords, ballpoints and lighters, old paperbacks, washed but unironed tablecloths, invitations and advertising brochures, glossy weeklies, unused sparklers, a collapsed rice-paper lamp shade, the children's birthday train with wagons with numbers on them in which you could put little candles, balloons and whistles, bits of their wooden train set, including a station building and a locomotive, drawing pads, DVDs, CDs, tea towels – all in all a mountain of stuff that from time to time sent Linda into panic mode, the sudden feeling of utter chaos it could bring about would be too much for her. Not infrequently she came home with organizers and storage boxes to help her get on top of things; different boxes for different objects, a shelf for my mail, another for hers, with our names on them, like other people had, people who were tidier than us, but these systems would collapse after only a few days and everything would be chaotic again. It could get on my nerves too, and about once every six months or so I went through the lot, sorting and tossing, whittling down these bulging piles, only for them to swell again within weeks. It was as if they were alive, drawing objects toward them and consuming them, growing bigger and stronger all the time.

Happily, the children didn't seem to be bothered. Conceptions of inner and outer chaos were not yet relevant to them, they approached the world as an unproblematic place most of the time, which was probably right, I thought to myself now. The material world was neutral, we wove our inner psychological landscapes into it, coloring it with our conceptions until it couldn't help but be messy. But it was a practical issue, nothing to do with morals. We weren't bad people for being messy. Our messiness was not a sign of poor moral fabric. I could tell myself this, but it didn't help, the feelings it stirred in me were too strong; as I moved around in all our mess it was as if it were accusing me, accusing us, we were bad people, unfit to be parents.

"What do you say, John, do you think I should clean things up a bit while you're having your breakfast?"

He looked up at me and nodded. I let the blinds down, lifted him into his chair, gave him his cornflakes and milk, which he seemed happy with, and began emptying the dishwasher.

"Coffee, Daddy," said John.

"Yes, in a minute," I said.

"No, now!" he said, jabbing his spoon in the direction of the coffeemaker.

"All right, then," I said, and switched it on. The shadows from the blinds were slats of darkness on the table, between them the light shone with particular intensity, almost scintillating, so strongly that the shadows had no definite boundaries but were as if diluted by the light at their edges.

John kept looking at the coffeemaker then back at me as I finished emptying the dishwasher and began rinsing the plates and glasses, cups and saucepans, before loading it again and switching it on.

There was a patter of bare feet against the linoleum in the hall. Heidi appeared in the doorway and blinked at us with bleary eyes.

"Hi, Heidi," I said. "Did you sleep well?"

She shook her head as she came in and sat down on her chair. Her hair was sticking up, her face streaked, as if it had yet to regain its elasticity after the inactivity of night.

I put a bowl and spoon out in front of her, the box of cornflakes and the carton of milk. I got myself a cup, poured the now brewed coffee into a thermos and took it out with me onto the balcony, where I sat down with a smoke, leaving the door half open so I'd know if anything happened inside. Gazing out over the kilometers of rooftops I remembered I'd had a dream. I'd been sitting in the same place. The sky had been black and crisscrossed by planes. Some had been very close, great jumbo jets with every detail of their fuselages plain to see, others merely lights passing beneath the stars. The feeling it had given me had been intense and fantastic. Fantastic, fantastic it had been, and then I'd woken up.

I leaned back and put my feet up on the railing. The sun, bright and blazing, had warmed up the air around me considerably, and its rays burned against my face, sparkling in the window, the tabletop, and the shiny metal of the thermos.

Low-flying planes sweeping between tall buildings, sometimes skyscrapers, sometimes ordinary towers, were something I dreamed about recurringly, perhaps two or three times a year. Sometimes I was on board myself, other times I looked at them from a distance. Even in the dream I found myself marveling at how beautiful and unreal they were. Occasionally, I saw great plane disasters too, entire scenes in which they came hurtling from the skies to crash into a building or a street, exploding into flame. For that reason, the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 was like watching a dream to me. All the elements were there. The skyscrapers, the great shining airplanes, the impact, the flames. But while these dreams were oddly concentrated, always centered on some single point around which all my feelings in some way seemed to be gathered, the true-life event was quite differently open and expansive, and I felt I could both remove myself from it and connect with it.

The job of the terrorists was to penetrate into our subconscious. This had always been the aim of writers, but the terrorists took it a step further. They were the writers of our age. Don DeLillo said this many years before 9/11. The images they created spread around the globe, colonizing our subconscious minds. The tangible outcome of the attack, the numbers of dead and injured, the material destruction, meant nothing. It was the images that were important. The more iconic the images they managed to create, the more successful their actions. The attack on the World Trade Center was the most successful of all time. There weren't that many dead, only a couple of thousand, as against the six hundred thousand who died in the first two days of the Battle of Flanders in the autumn of 1914, yet the images were so iconic and powerful that the effect on us was just as devastating, perhaps more so, since we lived in a culture of images.

Planes and skyscrapers. Icarus and Babel.

They wanted into our dreams. Everyone did. Our inner beings were the final market. Once they were conquered, we would be sold.

I took another slurp of coffee, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, stood up, pressed an index finger against one nostril, and with a swift, forceful exhalation expelled a glob of mucus from the other out over the balcony.

"You do your morning ablutions al fresco, I see," said Geir. He was standing in the open doorway watching me. "Lovely!"

"I'm glad you appreciate it," I said, and sat down again. "I did that on a beach in Greece once when I was nineteen. There was an American girl lying there sunbathing, she turned to her friend and said, Did you see that? How disgusting!"

"She wasn't far off the mark, if you ask me," he said. "Is there any coffee around?" His voice was rusty, it had been idle all night.

"Sure," I said. "Cups are in the cupboard in the kitchen. Coffee in the thermos here."

I was about to go in and check on Heidi and John, and I would have to get Vanja up at some point as well, but I stayed put, thinking it would be rude to leave him on his own just as he'd come out to chat. I shoved the thermos across the table, stubbed my cigarette out on the side of the upturned flowerpot, whose terra-cotta red was almost obliterated by a blackness of soot and ash, like the wall of a fire-ravaged house, then dropped the end into the little hole in the top. But I hadn't done it properly, smoke began to curl up into the air. I reckoned it would burn out on its own, and lit another as Geir came out and sat down.

"Are they all right in there?" I said.

"Think so," he replied. Blinking up at the bright sun, he unscrewed the lid of the thermos, removed it, and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"You don't need to take the lid off every time," I said. "All you have to do is unscrew it a bit."

"Engineer all of a sudden, are we?" he said, leaning back and putting the cup to his lips.

"I'm an engineer of the soul," I said.

"That's the smuggest thing I've heard anyone say in ages," he said, and closed his eyes completely after taking a slurp. He opened them again and looked at me as he put his cup down on the table. "I'd say garbageman of the soul would be more accurate."

"Refuse disposal officer, if you don't mind," I said. "You know they call the garbage room in the basement here the Milieu Room, don't you? That makes 'milieu manager of the soul' the most correct title."

"Milieu consultant of the soul."

"That's it."

"Your ashtray's on fire, in case you hadn't noticed," he said.

"So I see," I said. "I was hoping it was going to put itself out. Doesn't look like it though."

I lifted the flowerpot up, and all the cigarette butts that had been crammed inside its thick earthenware walls tumbled out into the saucer. A couple of them were still burning and I stubbed them hard before trying to put the pot back on top. The sheer number of cigarette butts meant I couldn't get it to stand level, even when I tried grinding it into place. Eventually, I lifted it up again, swept the cigarette butts into a pile with my hand, and put one edge of the pot down on the saucer, flicked the cigarette butts that had already fallen down again back into place, and was finally able to put it back like it had been before.

"Looks like it's going to be a nice day," said Geir. "What should we do? Any suggestions?"

"We could go somewhere, I suppose," I said. "After I've taken the kids to the nursery."

"Sounds good. Not to a beach, though. I hate that."

"A town, then? Lund? Trelleborg?"

"Lund. I've always wanted to go to Lund."

"Lund it is, then."

I got to my feet and stubbed the half-smoked cigarette against the side of the ashtray.

"Let me get them dressed and ready."

When I went inside and into the hall, Heidi was standing on the little kids' chair in front of the cupboard, rummaging through the top shelves. She was the only one of the three who chose what she wanted to wear. Now it was the blue top with the white flowers that she was after, and a denim skirt, apparently, with a pair of pink Hello Kitty tights.

"That'll look nice," I told her as she climbed down and put her arms through the holes of the sleeveless top.

"Take the chair back into your room when you're finished," I said, and cast a glance into the kitchen, where Njaal was sitting without a shirt on, his legs dangling in the air as he ate his cornflakes, Geir leaned against the counter watching him, arms folded against his chest. I went into the living room, where John was sittting on the sofa dropping a buzzing locomotive onto the cushion next to him, picking it up, dropping it again.

"Time to get dressed," I said. "Stay there and I'll get you some clothes."

I found a yellow T-shirt with a red ladybug on it in the cupboard, and a pair of green pirate-style trousers with a drawstring at the waist, took a clean diaper from the bathroom, where I also wet a facecloth with warm water and rubbed some soap into it, washing him as he stood with legs apart on the floor in front of me to get rid of the faint, yet pungent, salty odor of urine left by his diaper. It was a smell that stigmatized, belonging to children whose parents were less than rigorous with hygiene. Once it was done, I went out and dropped the used diaper into the bin under the sink, took a towel back in with me, dried him, put his clean diaper on, and his clothes, and straightened his hair with my hand.

"There you go!"

"Socks!" he said.

"You can put your sandals on today, the weather's nice. You don't need socks."

"I want socks!"

I went into their room and rummaged around for two matching socks in the drawer. There must have been forty socks or more, and amazingly no two seemed to be alike. I took them all out and dumped them on Heidi's bunk, laying them out as if on a shop counter to be sold, and began sorting through them systematically. Yellow, green, blue, red, pink, purple, turqoise, brown, white, black, gray, orange, and every shade in between. Striped, spotty, patterned. Some with cars on them, others with rabbits or dogs or cats. But all were different. I had to go into the bedroom and rummage through the pile of laundry on the floor. Socks were always at the bottom, they percolated down through the layers, as if consciously seeking the ground, and after finding five I took them back into the children's room to see if they matched up with any of those I'd laid out. Luck was on my side. I now had a single pair of purple socks. While they were slightly on the feminine side for John in my view, I took them into the living room with me and put them on his outstretched feet.

I found a dark red sweatshirt with long sleeves and a unicorn with long hair and big eyes on the front, and a pair of thin, mint-green cotton pants, and took them into the bedroom, where Vanja was still asleep, the duvet kicked aside. Her spine was visible, a faint rise under the skin of her slightly hunched back, from whose upper part the shoulder blades curved away on each side of the fair hair that veiled her head and neck so finely and was such a radically different material to the skin. The hair was to the body rather like the petals were to the stalk of a flower.

I lifted her onto my lap. Her skin was so warm, the way it is only after a night's sleep. I held her tight with my arms, opened the neck of the sweatshirt with my hands and put her head through. She put her hands into the sleeves herself and wriggled them into place, then pulled the bunched-up garment down over her belly. I put her feet into the trouser legs, first one, then the other, and inched the trousers up to her hips, then she arched her back, I gripped the waistband and pulled them up over her bottom.

"There we are," I said. "Do you want a *macka* to take with you and eat on the way?"

She shook her head.

"A nectarine," she said.

"But we haven't got any," I said. "An apple."

"OK," she said.

I followed her through the hallway. The whole of one wall was built-in cupboards, whose light-brown color and fittings harked back to the fifties. Some were so full that clothes and shoes fell out if you opened them. Baggy coveralls, ankle-length boots, thick sweaters, everything from winter was here, as well as all the other stuff we didn't need on a daily basis. Behind the jackets and coats on their hangers under the hat shelf there were hooks in the wall where we hung all the backpacks and tote bags that over the years had accumulated to such an extent that they no longer really hung there at all, but were more like a growth. In the children's smooth backpacks were sandwich boxes whose contents, when we forgot to empty them, molded away, and the thought of their organic matter following the laws of the organic while buried among layers of synthetic materials, independently, without being in contact with any like matter, was something that fascinated me, at least after the box had been discovered, its contents thrown out and its plastic surfaces scrupulously cleaned. All over the floor, though mainly up against the wall, under the row of cupboards on the one side, the mirror and a long white bench on the other, were toys and dolls, scattered like debris from a plane crash. Normally I tidied up and did the cleaning if we were having visitors, but this time it was only Geir and I hadn't bothered. Besides, I'd been too worried. But today Linda would be back, and Christina was coming too, so there were no two ways about it. It would have to be done after I took the kids to the nursery, I told myself, following Vanja into the kitchen. The sun had moved upward and across the room in the short time we'd been awake, and its light no longer shone horizontally into the kitchen, but slanted down onto the wall where the counter and the dishwasher were. Vanja went to the cupboard and opened it, took one of the big red apples from the plastic bowl we kept our fruit in, and handed it to me.

It was a Red Delicious, most likely genetically modified, for the white flesh never went brown in the air the way the apples of my childhood always did, and they never seemed to rot, either. It was scary and went radically against all my conceptions of right and wrong. The fact that I still bought them was because Red Delicious had been such a luxurious apple when I was growing up, something special that we normally only ever had at Christmas, when they nestled, shiny and red and magical, in the fruit bowl, simultaneously hard, crisp, and succulent, the way no other apples were.

"What are you giving it to me for?" I said.

"The label," she said, putting her finger on the little sticker with the fruit company's logo on it, a little red-and-black ladybug on a white background.

I took the apple in my hand and scratched at the label with my fingernail, but it was so short it wouldn't catch, and I had to press through the skin of the apple in order to remove it.

"You ruined it!" Vanja said as I handed it back to her. "I want a new one!"

"Well, you can't have one!"

My reaction was so firm she gave up at once, put the apple down on the table, and marched off. I followed her. When she went into their own room, I went into the living room, where Heidi was sitting on the sofa drawing, John was sprawled on his back with his feet up, gazing at the ceiling, and Njaal was crouched on the floor putting Brio train tracks together. I sensed Geir was in the other room and went over to the sliding door and looked in. He was standing in front of the bookshelf with a book open in his hands.

"What have you got there?" I said.

"A book about Joyce," he said, holding it up so I could see the cover.

"Oh, that," I said. "Someone who knew Joyce in Trieste. A ship's captain, I think. Not literary at all, as far as I remember. They became friends and he wrote a book about him years after."

I turned toward Heidi.

"Time we were off," I said. "Go and put your sandals on."

"Is Njaal coming?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"Njaal's on holiday. Aren't you, Njaal?"

He didn't answer, his brown eyes looked at me nonplussed.

Heidi got down. I followed her out into the hall, brushed her teeth, then Vanja's and John's, said goodbye to Njaal and Geir, and went out onto the landing, not unnoticed by the neighbors, I imagined, for the children's noise levels were always in the upper reaches whenever we were on our way in or out, and the sound they made ricocheted off the walls and down through the floors. I had often heard them on the sixth floor while standing waiting for the elevator at street level.

That'll be the Norwegian's family setting off, I imagined them thinking. They're running late today. Or else, That damned Norwegian and his kids again.

Arriving at the nursery, Vanja keyed in the code, I opened the gate. The children already there were out on their trikes, the staff were sittting about on the benches. Heidi clung to me, her arms around my legs.

"I've got to go now. Mommy's picking you up today."

"Is Mommy coming home?" said Heidi.

I nodded.

"And it's Friday today. You can all have ice cream."

I lifted my hand and gave the staff a wave, pressed the door opener, opened the gate, and went back the same way we came.

It was hot in the sun, but in the patches of shade I passed through the air was cool and had a dampness about it, as if the autumn had come too early and decided to wait there so as not to disturb the grandness of summer, master of all seasons.

I veered right into Hemköp and went in through the doors that automatically slid aside, grabbed a basket before going through the two barriers that likewise opened automatically, glanced up at the monitor above the fruit display, and saw my image looking up and to the right, something Heidi and Vanja had yet to understand, for how could they be looking to the side when they were staring straight at the screen? Vanja and Heidi would sometimes do a little dance there on the supermarket floor, while John waved to himself from the trolley, we were like a traveling circus with dwarfs. I put some tomatoes in one of the plastic bags that weren't entirely transparent but grayly translucent as if they were full of smoke. The tomatoes were from the Netherlands and still attached to their little green vine stems, in contrast to the Swedish ones next to them, which lay packed together, red and shining, with neither vine nor stalks, presumably the reason why they cost five kronor more per kilo. After putting the bag of tomatoes in the basket, I picked up a shrink-wrapped cucumber and placed it next to them, then went over to the cheese display and tried to decide between a Danish Gouda, which was cheap, a Swedish Grevé, which Linda preferred, and a Norwegian Norvegia, which tasted much the same as the Grevé but cost almost twice as much. We had guests, I told myself, we could save money another day. Besides, the advance on the novel would be paid soon. What difference did forty kronor make?

With the Norvegia cheese in the basket, I went on to the bread. The bakery was one of the supermarket's biggest sections, I guessed they had somewhere between fifty and seventy different kinds of bread, maybe more, all arranged on displays that stood like islands in the middle of the floor. In Sweden bread came sliced and wrapped in plastic. That way it had a long life, but was always soft and lacking both crispness and the very particular good taste of fresh bread. Here, though, they also had a shelf of fresh-baked loaves, mostly with names evoking a simpler, more natural life, words like *rustic*, *country*, or *farmer's* were splashed all over them, and they emphasized the grain varieties too, unlike the sliced breads wrapped in plastic, which were more inclined to words such as *sport*, *energy*, and *health*. When I was growing up, in an age that to my children would one day appear as remote as the 1950s of my own parents had to me, bread came in paper bags, and its consistency and taste changed from day to day, from the delicious freshness of the first evening, when the crust was still crisp and the crumbs soft and moist, until the last hard crust was devoured two or three days later, with all possible degrees of taste and consistency in between. I remember many other families put their bread in a plastic bag as soon as they brought it home, which kept it moist a lot longer, but the crust would lose its crispness. We kept ours in a paper bag, meaning the crust stayed crisp, whereas the moisture disappeared. There weren't nearly as many different kinds of bread back then, I could think of only five off the top of my head: *Kneippbrød*, *grovbrød*, *wittenberg*, *loff*, and one that was introduced when I was maybe eight or nine, *grahambrød*. That was it.

I had become a man of yesteryear, and it had happened fast, I thought to myself, and turned to the shelves of fresh-baked bread. They had seven rolls for ten kronor, so I took one of the paper bags meant for loaves and put seven rolls inside, scrunched the top end together and dropped it in the basket, then moved on to the milk and dairy, grabbing a packet of coffee and a one-and-a-half-liter Pepsi Max on the way.

I also remembered the supermarket where we used to buy our bread. I remembered what it looked like outside, and what it looked like inside. I remembered when it was built, the enormous flat expanse of concrete they laid next to the road only a few hundred meters from our house, and the shop that rose up bit by bit on top of it, with its name proudly displayed on the side, like on a boat: B-MAX. To us it was Bemaks, a place on the same footing as other places in the vicinity, like "*ubekilen*," "the fell," "the main road," "Gjerstadholmen," "the floating jetties," "the bridge." Even after the supermarket changed its name, it was still referred to as Bemaks. It was my first supermarket; before that there was nothing. Not a single recollection of a single shop. I was about five when they built it. God knows where my parents did their shopping before.

Besides Bemaks, we soon had Stoa, the cash-and-carry where we went maybe twice a year to buy in bulk. Ten-kilo sacks of sugar for preserving fruit or making fruit syrup in the autumn, a crate of lemonade for Christmas or the summer holiday, economy bags of flour, that kind of thing. Dad was fond of it, I think, he liked shopping for food, not in the local shop, where people would recognize him and where it was only ever the day-to-day items we tended to buy, he left that to me or Yngve or Mom, but in the bigger supermarkets outside the center, where you bought in bulk, he liked that. I think he liked the idea of throwing his money around on those occasions, the big man about town, that must have been it. Or maybe it was the opposite he was looking for, the security of gathering provisions, keeping a stock.

I stopped at the dairy section and took a carton of milk; it was for the children, so I chose the one with the highest fat content, 3.5 percent, then moved on and picked up half a dozen eggs the box said came from "cage-free hens indoors," prompting me to scan the other kinds to see if there were any from "mistreated hens crammed together in cages," which didn't seem to be the case, and so I carried on toward the checkout, along the deserted aisles, between the refrigerated counters and the shelves of shampoo, through a small section of "organic sweets," then the glitzy inferno of normal sweets, which took up about the same amount of space as the bread.

But from all the numerous times I'd been to Bemaks, and it was from Bemaks I caught the bus to school, to Bemaks I came running with a shopping list in my hand from Dad at least twice a week through all those years, I had retained only one real memory. It was one time when I was there with Mom. I'd seen a special offer sign saying the yellow boxes of Nesquik, the chocolate milk powder, were down to only one krone. It was so cheap I felt sure Mom could be talked into buying some. Only one krone, only one krone, I kept saying as I dragged her over to where the cardboard sign was. But it says minus one krone, she said. They cost one krone! I insisted. No, she said, it means one krone off. There's a difference. And so I had to do without Nesquik that day. But the memory has stayed with me.

Why would that be? There were myriad things I'd seen and done there, a whole galaxy of events.

I stood in line at the checkout to the left. There were only two people in front of me, both with so few items they held them in their hands, as was often the case at this time of day. In the afternoons the place came alive with customers dragging the new wheelie baskets along behind them. It was one of the saddest sights I knew, all semblance of human dignity evaporated the moment a person went with that of all options. The feeble, characterless action of trundling instead of carrying. The fussy little wheels, the long black handle, the basket that followed on behind like a small dog. The clatter of the wheels was earsplitting from the moment one became aware of it.

The very thought deflated me.

Life was there to be felt, that was what we strove for, but why? For our headstones to say, "Here lies a person who liked to sleep"?

When I opened the front door I found the apartment completely silent. For a moment I wondered if they'd gone out, but then I heard a noise from the children's room and guessed it to be Njaal playing while Geir sat reading somewhere.

"Anyone home?" I called out.

"Ah, there you are," said Geir from the living room.

"I bought some bread rolls if anyone wants some," I said, took my shoes off and put them in the cupboard, picked up the bag and went into the kitchen. The dishwasher was finished, so I dumped the shopping on the table, switched it off, and opened the door, the steam billowing out into my face, making me step back instinctively.

I took the cutting board out and put it on the table, found a bread basket in the cupboard, and tipped the rolls into it. Fresh rolls with lots of butter and yellow cheese, I could hardly think of anything better. But my tastes were simple. The salt of the cheese and the butter against the mild wheat flavor of the bread, and the thin, yet hard, crisp crust that broke into pieces the moment you bit into it was something I'd never grown tired of. So my mouth was watering as I cut into one of the rolls and covered its surface with butter and three thick slices of cheese.

"Njaal wants one too," said Geir, coming to the table.

"Help yourself," I said.

"Don't speak with your mouth full," he replied.

"Have I told you what Vanja's excuse is whenever she does something wrong?" I said.

He shook his head.

"She says it's our fault for not bringing her up properly. And not only that, she says it's too late now."

"She may have a point there," Geir said, angling the knife and scraping it across the surface of the butter, causing it to collect at the blade like a lateral moraine.

"Of course she has. I just hadn't thought it would be so obvious to her, that's all."

Geir spread the butter over his bread, picked up the cheese slicer, and cut off a slice.

"No fingers on the cheese!" I said.

"Seriously?" he said. "You mean there's a rule against it?"

"Isn't there?" I answered. "You're the sociologist."

"Amazing how much I get to be the sociologist here, isn't it?"

"I only mentioned it once yesterday, and once now."

"Well, it's twice too often," he said, taking the two halves of the roll into the living room. I went after him, cramming the last bite into my mouth.

"I was thinking of cleaning up a bit before we go out. If it's OK."

"I'll give you a hand, if you want."

"Great."

Njaal sat with his elbows on the table, bread in hand, looking at me while he ate.

"When will Vanja and Heidi be coming back?" he asked.

"This afternoon. About three o'clock, I imagine."

"And what are we going to do today?" he said, and looked across at his father.

"We're going to Lund," Geir said.

I started picking up all the towels, trousers, tops, and socks that were lying around the living room.

"Can I take my bike?" said Njaal.

"Of course you can," said Geir. He gathered some apple cores together on a plate and stacked some plastic cups. I went into the bathroom and pressed the clothes down into the laundry baskets, which were already full. I straightened up again. Maybe I should check and see if the laundry room was available in the basement?

No, it would only complicate things.

I left the bathroom and picked up the dolls that were scattered around and put them in the dolls' bed in the children's room. One of them had blue marks drawn on its face, they looked like a tribal tattoo, a rather unnerving contrast to its innocent baby features, which made me turn it facedown. I gathered up all the soft toys and dumped them on the end of Heidi's bed; she was so small she only took up a third of its length. Mostly, they were dogs, cats, and rabbits, but there was a lynx too, as well as a panda, a lion, a tiger, a parrot, a crow, a lamb, a cow, an elephant, and a crocodile. I positioned them so they were all looking out into the room, above and below each other, and that was unnerving too, perhaps because there was something accusatory about the combination of staring eyes and silence, or else it was because they looked like dead creatures with faces and eyes that seemed to be watching us from the other side. I picked up the toys strewn about the living-room floor and put them away in the round brown ottoman and the three mesh baskets we used for the purpose, while Geir picked up all the children's books and magazines he could find.

"I want to help," said Njaal.

"You can pick up the toys in the hall and put them . . . I don't know, where should he put them?" Geir said, looking up at me.

"I'll get you a basket," I said, went and got it and put it down on the floor in the hall. But after putting a few odd toys in it, Njaal decided he would rather play with them instead. Geir tousled his hair as he went past with a pair of purple plastic shoes in one hand, I noticed, and I stepped aside to let him through, then emptied the dishwasher in the kitchen; the heat had nearly left the dishes now, but remained in the cutlery.

"It always looks a lot worse than it is," I said to Geir. He was standing in the doorway now, looking like he was about to ask for another job.

"I find the impression of mess and the mess itself to be quite congruent," he said. "But maybe that's because our place is always tidy. I put everything back right away. It never gets a chance to get out of hand."

"I'd like it to be like that here too," I told him. "Only there's always something that prevents it. It just isn't possible, apparently."

"I like it here," he said. "There's something relaxing about messiness."

"As long as it's not your own," I said.

"Exactly," he said. "Christina always says I need some chaos around me in order to get things done. Like the war in Iraq. It doesn't get more chaotic than that. Then I can get to work cleaning it all up."

"That's not a bad theory," I said, closing the cupboard where we kept the glasses and cups, then opening the one next to it where the plates were. "You've got no chaos inside you at all, so you need some outside instead. I'm the opposite, chaos on the inside and a need for tidiness on the outside. Only I fall short on the last part."

"You recreate your chaos, I recreate order. We're as much geometry as we are psychology."

"I know," I said. "Does that mean the living room and hall are OK now?"

"Not quite. I don't know where things go."

"Wherever you think's suitable. As long as it's out of the way."

With all the dishes put away, I filled the dishwasher again with what was left, sprinkled some powder in the little compartment, snapped the cover shut, closed the door, and put it on the sixty-degree program. After that I went into the living room, got the vacuum cleaner from behind the door, pulled out the cord, plugged it into the socket, and switched it on. The bag was full, so there was practically no suction at all, I had to put the nozzle on top of everything that was heavier than dust and hair for it to be sucked up. Beads, crumbs, scraps of paper, the odd fruit pastille, little unidentifiable bits of whatever. A small insect scuttled along the baseboard; in Swedish they were called *silverfisk*, what the Norwegian was I had no idea and had no recollection of ever having seen one before I moved here, though I couldn't be sure, it sounded wrong that there should be an insect that was only found here. They looked like a little tail with feet, tiny in size, and they lived wherever they could keep themselves hidden; in piles of clothes, underneath mattresses, in the folds of blankets, and in laundry baskets. If I went to the bathroom at night they could be in the middle of the floor, dark against the light-colored linoleum, immediately darting for cover in the nearest place they could find, like behind the baseboard. I squashed the ones I could, but their resources were clearly inexhaustible, since they never at any time seemed to be fewer in number.

Silverfiskarna. A novel by Vilhelm Moberg.

I reached under the sofa with the head of the cleaner, sweeping it back and forth a couple of times, then moved on to underneath the table, which was the area I really wanted to get at, the children had at least one meal a day there. When that was done, I sucked up the dust that had accumulated around the doorsills and behind the doors before switching it off, pulling the plug out, and finally, the highlight of any vacuuming session, pushing the button that made the cord come swishing back at high speed into the belly of the device.

"All done," I called out, returning it to its place.

Geir came out from the children's room.

"Are we finished?"

"It'll have to do. We can always do a bit more when we get home."

"No need. It looks fine as it is. Shall we get going?"

I nodded.

"Just need to check my e-mails first."

Njaal came sneaking up on Geir from behind and walloped him on the backside as hard as he could.

"You little terror," Geir explained. Njaal shrieked with laughter. "I'll get you for that," said Geir, reaching out and grabbing him as I squeezed by into the other hall, past all our beach things, which had been dumped against the wall, a green parasol, two folding chairs, a kind of sunbed, baskets full of beach toys, as well as our two big suitcases, one a hard plastic shell, the other soft and made of some kind of fabric, gray and black respectively, and the two drying frames, folded and leaned up against the wall, with yellow and green towels draped on them from when we were at the beach the previous weekend, and the children's beachwear. The light was dim in the bedroom, the air dense, so I opened the door onto the balcony and left it ajar before sitting down and switching on the computer. I heard them laughing and carrying on while I waited for the computer to start up, stared at the blinds without seeing them, it was Gunnar I was thinking about, and the fact that Linda was coming home and that I had to remember to buy white wine somewhere before we came back.

Right.

I opened my e-mail account.

Gunnar.

Should I wait? I could wait, surely? Wouldn't the day be ruined otherwise?

If I waited, though, I wouldn't be able to think about anything else.

I opened the message and started to read.

He had signed himself as my father's brother.

I sat for a moment without moving.

"Are you coming or what?" Geir called from the hallway.

"Just a minute," I said back, hardly managing to raise my voice so he could hear me. "I've got a new message here."

I heard him approach.

"Didn't hear you," he said.

"Another e-mail," I said.

"Gunnar?"

I nodded.

"Mind if I have a look?"

"Be my guest," I said.

He stood behind me while he read.

"So shall we go now, then?" he said after a while. "You can't let this throw you. There's nothing new in it."

"True. But now he says he's got a lawyer. And he's using the word *vendetta*."

I got to my feet.

"It's really getting to you, isn't it?" said Geir.

"Yes, it is," I said.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go to Lund."

"I need to speak to Yngve first," I said.

"OK," said Geir, and followed me back out of the bedroom. Njaal had been standing with both hands on the door handle looking in at us. I took the phone out of the charger and pressed Yngve's number as I crossed the floor, opening the door of the balcony before it even started ringing.

"Hello," said Yngve.

"Did you get that e-mail?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "I'm writing a reply right now."

"A reply?"

"That's right."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Listen. He's putting forward a whole load of accusations against me. It's completely unreasonable what he's doing. I'm going to tell him so."

"What do you think you're going to achieve by that?"

"I don't know. But I need to tell him now that he's gone too far and it's not going to be without consequences. He can't say whatever he likes just because he's angry. Besides, I'm not you. And nor is Mom."

"I'm really sorry I got you into this mess," I said.

"What you did is the reason he's reacting, but it's not your fault he's taking it out on us. And you can hardly be to blame for his reaction being so completely out of proportion either."

"I'm sorry all the same."

"We lose an uncle, that's all."

I went in and dropped the phone back in the charger, then looked at Geir, who had sat down on the chest, or whatever it was called, that we had in the hallway.

"I just need to read it again," I said.

"No, you don't," he said. "Come on, I don't want to be sitting here all day. You've already read it, for Christ's sake!"

I didn't say anything, but went back in and sat down in front of the screen again.

"Right, we're off!" Geir called out.

"I'm ready now," I called back, switched off the computer, got up, and went into the hall. They were outside on the landing, waiting at the elevator. I put my shoes on, got my sunglasses from the study, then remembered we needed to go out the back way, and went into the kitchen again.

"Now what?" Geir shouted after me. I didn't answer him, lifted the trash bag out of the bin under the sink, tied a knot in the top, picked up the other full bag I'd left up against the wall on top of some newspaper, and went out to the elevator. Njaal, who was wearing a pair of khaki shorts and a white sleeveless top, held his nose as we went down.

The elevator came to a gentle halt in the basement, I held the two trash bags in one hand and opened the door with the other. I rummaged in my pocket for the key, then realized I'd forgotten to lock the door upstairs. But then again, what did we have of any value? Three computers, that was it. The TV was from the eighties, only a very nostalgic thief would want to run off with it.

"Yes?" said Geir.

"Won't be a minute," I said. "Just wait here."

My fingers finally got hold of a key, allowing me to retrieve the bunch from my pocket. I tapped the key card against the panel until the green lamp flashed and there was a click as the door unlocked. My energy was almost gone as I walked the fifteen meters down the passage to the door, after which came the stairs, then another door into the refuse room.

I stopped and placed my palm against the cold wall, wanting to put my face against it as well, and if I'd been on my own I might have. Instead I put my hand, which had already absorbed some of the coldness of the wall, to my forehead. Geir and Njaal stopped in front of the door and stared at me just as I was about to go on.

"Is this it?" Geir asked.

"Yes," I said. "It took me weeks to find my way around down here with all these doors."

"There are four," he said. "How difficult can that be?"

I didn't answer him, opened the door, and went up the stairs.

"You can wait here," I said. "I'm only tossing the garbage out."

The stairs on the other side of the heavy steel door were black and slippery, presumably from the liquid that forms in the bottom of garbage bags, deposited by months, perhaps years, of minor leakages. The smell was pungent and mellow at the same time. Ventilation ducts were suspended from the ceiling, the rest was bare wall. I opened the lid of the nearest garbage container, which was big enough to conceal an entire dismembered family, and slung the bags over the side. I felt sick, my whole body was aching. I couldn't trace it back to anything specific – something in particular that I'd done wrong – it had to do with everything, me in my entirety, and for that reason it couldn't be helped. Even if I did retract the damn book it wouldn't make any difference. Apart from pleasing Gunnar and making him think he'd put me in my place, perhaps even crushed me, and that justice had been done. His demands were justified, his rage was justified, and it was the sheer force of it all I was unable to withstand, it pinned me to the ground, took me apart, rendering me and everything about me worthless. Worthless. Even my own children vanished in his rage, even they lost their worth, for I was the only father they had, a person unable to keep himself in check, whose outline was blurred, so fundamentally lacking in empathy, he could destroy the lives of others without even knowing.

When I came out of the refuse room they were waiting in the light of the open door. Which is to say that Geir was standing there, holding the door open, while Njaal had gone outside into the yard that lay in the deep shadow of the tall building at whose foot he stood. He stared at a small white van that was reversing. Probably deliveries to the back door of the Chinese takeaway; the delivery man would knock on the door as hard as he could with a length of piping left there for the purpose, and if he was lucky one of the people who worked there would come out after a minute or two. Boxes containing canned soft drinks, canned goods, and noodles.

Njaal ran across the yard and out onto the sidewalk, where the light was bright and warm.

"Mind the road!" Geir shouted. "Stay on the sidewalk!"

Njaal sent us a look as if to say he was being underestimated.

"I know!" he shouted back.

"All right," said Geir. "It looked like you didn't, that's all."

He twirled his key strap around his finger.

"Are you going to start whistling now?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"Your body language is so cheerful."

"It's a nice day. The sun's out and I'm on my holidays. Of course I'm cheerful! Not even a misery guts like you can alter that."

He started whistling.

Fifteen meters ahead of us, Njaal had stopped next to their car, a red Saab from some time in the nineties, which meant it was anything from ten to twenty years old. I hadn't a clue about cars, and the nineties were like yesterday to me. That twenty years had gone since they started was incomprehensible.

"Ouch!" said Njaal, putting his hand against the bodywork.

"You didn't think of parking in the shade?" I said.

"Like you would have done, you mean?" said Geir.

"If I were as anal as you, yes."

He laughed and unlocked the car, strapping Njaal into the child seat while I got in the front of the boiling-hot vehicle. In front of the three cars in the parking area at the bottom of the cul-de-sac was a tree, its leaves glittering in the sunlight, and on the other side of it lay Föreningsgatan, along which I'd walked a couple of hours earlier with Vanja, Heidi, and John.

Geir got in, shut the door, and put the key in the ignition. I fastened my seat belt, discovering the sunglasses I'd slipped into my pocket. I put them on. They were Polaroids and I'd bought them on the Lido in Venice the previous summer. I liked them, there was something of the seventies about them. Vanja had said I looked like a thief. I liked that too.

Geir pulled his seat belt across his chest and clicked it into place, released the hand brake, threw the car into gear, and pulled slowly away down the road. There was something rash about his driving; not that he drove too fast or took chances, it was more his movements when he was behind the wheel, the abrupt way he looked over his shoulder when changing lanes, the suddenness with which he flicked the indicator, as if only just remembering at the last minute, or the way he kept glancing to all sides on straight stretches of road. Most people I knew drove as if they were at one with the vehicle, as if the instruments and controls were an extension of their own bodies, but Geir drove like he was operating some unfamiliar machine.

"Which way?" he said.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I usually just go straight on until there's a sign out of Malmö. It tends to work OK; the motorways take you out of town, and they all connect up in one way or another."

"You don't say," he said. "Well, I like to know which way I'm going. Still, render unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's."

"I'll render you in a minute," I said.

"I refuse to laugh. Not even a smile for that."

We passed the Konserthuset, following the wide, avenue-like road in the direction of Värnhemstorget, a ribbon of glittering cars reflecting the sunlight from their various parts, a wing here, a windshield there, a bumper or a door handle.

Geir pressed a button on the inside of his door and my window slid down. The wind rushed in as if through a funnel.

"You've got the technology, I see," I said. "What year's this thing from, anyway?"

"Two thousand one."

"Two thousand one? I reckoned it was from the nineties. You mean it's only eight years old?"

He nodded. I looked up at the signs above the roadway.

"The highways are that way," I said. "Any will do, it doesn't matter."

"Gothenburg or Stockholm or Ystad or Copenhagen or Trelleborg?"

"Take your pick. The worst that can happen is we end up having to go back."

He sighed.

"Go with Gothenburg, then, if it means that much," I said.

"I will, then."

We approached the big junction where four different roads converged, all multilane. I glanced at the faces in the cars alongside, the way they were all in their own worlds, as if unaware that they were barely half a meter away from other people, separated from them only by a transparent sheet of glass.

The lights changed, the first cars pulled away, and a few seconds later the movement was transmitted to us. Our line of vehicles snaked onto the on-ramp, its members accelerating onto the motorway according to individual preference, soon drawn out over several hundred meters of road. Geir kept to the inside lane, observing the speed limit, meaning that we were continually overtaken as meter upon meter vanished beneath us and the landscape outside changed from the built-up topography of the city, almost devoid of vegetation, to the more open lots of industrial sites and car dealers, fenced off from each other by tall wire mesh.

"What did I tell you?" I said with a nod toward the sign telling us the Lund exit was a kilometer up ahead.

"I never said you couldn't get lucky," said Geir. "How are you doing, Njaal? All right?"

"Yes."

"Shall we have an ice cream when we get to Lund?"

"Yes."

We passed from rural landscape to industrial sites, then residential areas, and eventually found ourselves in the city center, which was markedly smaller than Malmö's; the buildings were lower, the streets narrower, the pace slower. Geir's head was going back and forth between the side windows and the windshield as he scouted around for a place to park, hopefully still keeping an eye on the traffic around us.

"There's a big parking lot in the center, I seem to remember," I said. "If you keep going straight, I'm sure we'll find it."

Instead of doing as I said, he signaled right.

"But it's down there!" I said. "Look, just around that corner!"

"It's no entry. You see that big round sign there?"

"Oh, is that what it means?"

He looked at me.

"You are joking, I take it?"

I shook my head and he burst out laughing.

"I was pretty impressed that you could pass your written exam after only reading up the night before. Now I understand things a bit better."

"I keep telling myself I should brush up a bit on road signs. Only I can't bring myself to do it. I have my license now, don't I?"

"Here we are," he said, and signaled left, turning onto a short ramp that led into a parking area.

After the rush of wind from the road, the air into which we stepped seemed oddly still. It shimmered in the heat above the asphalt, but was otherwise as calm as the waters of a small inlet, and we were beneath the surface, if that was what it was.

One day in the middle of the nineteenth century in one of the villages that line the Vestland fjords, during the hay harvest, the sun shining as it was now, when all the villagers were hard at work in the fields, a disaster occurred. Everyone died, and no one was spared to tell what happened. They were found the next day. A young man who was meant to be working for his uncle that day discovered them. The house was silent when he got there, he went in, his uncle's wife lay dead on the floor of the kitchen, her face twisted almost beyond recognition, her eyes bulging, the blood had run from her ears and nose. He rushed out, up the steep hill, whose grass was only half mown, and there he came upon a group of men who looked like they were resting, only they turned out to be dead too, presumably struck down on the spot, with exactly the same appearance as the wife in the house. Bulging eyes, blood seeping from their orifices.

It was the beginning of a novel. Something had happened, no one knew what, and after a few generations it became just a tale, eventually, in our day, all but forgotten.

But then it happened again. And someone, the novel's protagonist perhaps, stumbled upon the tale and uncovered the connection.

Yes. The unfathomable depths of the fjord beneath its blue-green surface, the green sides of the valley, so exceptionally intense in color, the white-clad tops of the fells under blue, cloudless sky. The grass tickling against moist skin, the steady hum of insects. The scythe that sang as it mowed, the clatter of its metal against the sharpening stone, the feeling of vast silence beneath it all, evoked by the fells and the fjord and the sky together. And then, disaster.

I stood there, staring down the street as Geir opened the trunk, took out Njaal's yellow balance bike and assembled it. The black jeans I was wearing stuck to my skin, and my feet, encased in tight black man-made fiber and the black leather of my shoes, were so hot and slippery with sweat it was like they hardly belonged to my body at all, but were creatures in their own right. Two blotchy red brothers, perspiring stokers of coal.

Njaal got on his bike and gripped the handlebars tightly, feet planted on the ground. The bike was made to look like a lion, with a face painted on at the front and a little tail at the back.

"That's a cool bike you've got there, Njaal," I said.

He was so proud he didn't know where to look.

"Yes," he said eventually.

Then he set off, paddling along, scooting faster and faster across the parking lot. Geir checked to make sure the car door was locked, put his keys in his pocket, and went after him.

"Not too far ahead, Njaal!" he shouted. "And keep to the sidewalk!"

As he reached the curb he stopped abruptly by putting his feet down hard on the ground.

"Impressive technique," I said.

"Yeah, he's really good," said Geir.

"What do you want to do? Are we hungry?"

"Let's see the cathedral first, eh? Then grab some lunch afterward."

"Sounds good."

It was the air that had gone. Sucked up from the earth by some thunderous implosion, first a rumbling in the distance, then louder and louder, the wind picking up as the noise increased, until suddenly, as they stood bewildered and anxious, everything went totally silent. Not a sound was heard. They looked at each other, all was still and they found themselves unable to breathe. They dropped to their knees. Clutched their throats. The blood thumped in their veins. Their stomachs turned. Eyes wide and staring. They fell to the ground, twisting and writhing like worms. And all in silence. The life vanished from them, one by one, and there they lay, motionelsss one and all. Everyone in the fields, everyone in the houses. All the birds, and all the animals. And then, perhaps seven or eight, maybe ten minutes later, the air returned in an earsplitting tumult, as when a dam is opened and the water comes crashing down on the dry riverbed.

But what then?

What would happen then, and why?

Njaal scooted along, now behind us, now in front, as we walked toward the cathedral that rose up so serenely over the rooftops as if it were the most natural thing in the world. All around us people strolled with their shopping bags, and on a square we crossed they were sitting on benches and at café tables, some with bikes parked in front of them, students most probably, while cars rolled sedately by, their tires rumbling gently over the cobbles. There was an ambience of peace and tranquillity about the town, bordering on the slumberous. It was hard to imagine that Malmö was only minutes away by train, life there was so very different. Malmö was a working-class city, built not for the eye or the mind, but for the body, with its long rows of identical brick buildings, its streets a busy turmoil of life and contrasts. Lund was complete, and probably nearly always had been, built up around a small number of more or less permanent structures established by the church and the university, institutions concerned with preservation, whereas Malmö had been built up around production. In Lund it was the town that shaped the people, in Malmö the people that shaped the town. The fact that Bergman's main character in what was perhaps the best of all his films, *Wild Strawberries*, journeyed to Lund, was surely by no means incidental, for the journey is the journey toward death, and while life may be fluid, death is stable and immutable, and of all places in Sweden Lund would have to be closest to such a state. The people of Lund were of course just as alive as the people of Malmö, and their town just as alive; the difference was between the expected, that which is already established and which people merely populate, and that which is created in the moment. It was a matter of forms and roles.

"The people in your subdivided community have fled from exactly that in Malmö," said Geir as we crossed the area in front of the church. "They've built themselves a little Lund out there. You're right to call it death."

"The average age must be seventy," I said.

"Ugh!" he said. "How the hell you could ever be so stupid as to buy that little dolls' house out there, I'll never know. It's exactly what I've spent my whole life trying to get away from."

"And with so little success," I said.

We stopped and looked up at the church exterior, whose Romanesque weightiness appeared not to strive toward the heavens in the way of the great Gothic churches, appeared not to want anything but this, endeavoring instead to make the best of its own place. The distinction here was not between down and up, but between in and out.

"Fantastic church," said Geir.

"Do you want to go in?"

"Yes. Where's the entrance? This way or that?"

"We went in the other side when we were here," I said.

We walked around the side of the church. Geir turned and called out to Njaal, who was perhaps forty meters behind, scampering along on his yellow lion bike. On the other side was a park. Green trees rose from green grass and stood motionless with their swells of foliage, through which not a breath of wind passed. Njaal came biking past.

Where were the children? Had I forgotten them? Were they at home in the apartment?

No. I'd dropped them off at the nursery.

Or was that yesterday?

No. I was certain of it. We tidied up after I got home. They weren't there then, they were at the nursery.

"There's a door over there," said Geir. "It can't be the main entrance though."

"No, they usually put the main entrance at the front in the olden days," I said.

"Your irony only reflects poorly on yourself," said Geir. "You're the one who's been here before." And then, abruptly: "Njaal!"

"Yes," Njaal shouted back, by now some way farther down the path that led through the park.

"Come here!" Geir called. "We're going inside!"

"OK," said Njaal, and came paddling back toward us. I gazed at the enormous blocks of stone, which had once been light in color, but which now in places were almost black. At the base they were green.

"Leave your bike here, we're going inside the church now," said Geir.

"I want to take it with me," said Njaal.

"It's not allowed, you little terror. No bikes in God's house."

"No balance bikes, anyway. Pedals would have been different."

"What?" Njaal looked up at me.

"Karl Ove's only joking," said Geir. "Leave your bike and come here!"

He did as he was told and we went into the church, which seemed so much bigger and vaster than it looked from outside. Here there was any amount of striving to the heavens.

I wasn't in the mood for churches and wandered around halfheartedly, sitting down on a pew after a short while, not even trying to identify myself with what the surrounding imagery expressed. Geir and Njaal disappeared from sight, when they appeared again they came up to tell me they'd been down in the crypt. I went outside for a cigarette, Geir wanted to look around a bit more, so I sat down on the steps and stared out into the park, the smoke of my cigarette a wispy cloud about my head while I thought about the new idea I had for a novel, how it might connect up with what little I already had. The dystopia. The world that never was. The man who grew up in a place where Nazism constituted the social order. Why Nazism? I'd seen a picture not long before, from a Nazi propaganda poster, depicting a bridge in a mountainous landscape, and it was so stirring and filled me with such an odd sense of longing that I wanted to investigate it. To create just such a world. I knew instantly that the lower-middle-class horror of the subdivision gardens in some way joined up with that image. I'd read another article, in *Dagens Nyheter*, about the biological manipulation of animals, dealing partly with an experiment in the sixties when a team of scientists had implanted electrodes in the brain of an ox and succeeded in making it walk and stop – a picture showed how the ox, which had come running toward the scientist, had halted abruptly in front of him when he flicked a switch on the box he held in his hand; and partly with an ongoing experiment with a fly in which they had implanted a light-sensitive gene from an eel which allowed them to steer it, albeit not minutely or with any exactness; every time someone directed a light at the fly it took off. What these experiments stood for was horrendous and shook me to my very foundation. The problem was that it belonged to our time, structurally, politically, socially, the whole mentality of it, and that its myriad meanings would evaporate as soon as I tried to insert it into another, counterhistorical reality. Perhaps what I had were two different novels. That would become apparent to me as I went along, I thought to myself. The world was so big and diverse that opposite forces were always at work somewhere, no particular outcome was ever guaranteed, the future was wide open and uncertain, and if the sun went down in that future, it would go down on us, not on those who were to come; for them it would rise.

"There he is, all on his own, the friendless wretch," said Geir behind me.

I turned.

"Are we ready for some lunch now?" I said.

He nodded and I got to my feet. My legs felt like they were shaking, but it was only a sensation. I tossed my cigarette onto the gravel as Njaal got back on his bike and we walked off, me with my inner being in turmoil, Geir in good cheer, I assumed, since he was twirling his key strap again and trying to tell me how marvelous the church had been inside. Friendless, he'd said, and the situation I was in returned to me. Gunnar's awful e-mails. The lawyers poring through my manuscript. The court case that lay ahead. The newspaper headlines.

"You seem a bit miserable," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Sorry. I'm not the best of company."

"Are you going to start apologizing for that now as well? As far as I'm concerned, you can be as miserable as you like. Everything has its value."

"No, the moods of others can hardly be said to seep in and affect you," I said. "You're always yourself, regardless."

"What you're saying is I'm thick-skinned. You said that yesterday too."

"But you are."

"If you say so. How about that place?" he said, indicating a restaurant maybe twenty meters up a side street we were passing.

"Can't we sit outside?" I said. "So I can smoke?"

"Sure. On the square, then? There were some outdoor cafés there."

We went over and sat down at a table inside a roped-off serving area. A girl in her early twenties was sitting at a neighboring table with a woman I supposed was her mother, about fifty years old. Apart from them the place was deserted. The girl was typing on her phone, the mother smoking and staring out over the square.

"Do you want pizza or spaghetti?" Geir asked Njaal, who had produced a toy car from somewhere and was now playing with it on the edge of the table, his chin supported by his hand, elbow on the table.

"Spaghetti," he said.

"Good," said Geir. "How about you?"

"I don't know really. Carbonara, I think."

"Nice choice. I'll go with the carbonara as well."

He put the menu down on the table. The waitress came over and we ordered. While we waited for the food, Geir expounded on the concepts of sensitivity and insensitivity. He pointed out how odd it seemed that I, with my wish to write about all that was authentic, and who had written so freely about death and the body, had not written about sex. I was too sensitive, he considered.

"I'm discreet, that's all," I said. "Besides, as I see it sex is overamplified in our culture."

"Overamplified?"

"Yes. Do you remember what you told me once, about the guy who vanished in a huge avalanche and was buried alive under meters of snow?"

"I do. You often come back to that, don't you?"

"Yes, because he disappeared to go jerk off. It's a superb illustration of our sexual urge."

"The way it exerts itself on every situation?"

"No, the minuteness of it. It's so incredibly small. A tiny little ejaculation in a huge mass of snow. Sex is completely out of proportion, we give it so much space and attach so much meaning to it, but in actual fact it's nothing. Totally verging on zero."

"I may be a fool, but I'm not an idiot!" he said in English. "We're talking about the way it is. Not the way we want it to be. You want life to be big and meaningful. Noble, even. Sorry. It is small and lonely. It's never going to be better than that orgasm in the snow. Sex and death, that's all there is."

"Then why do you even bother talking to me, if that's the case? Shouldn't you be at home jerking off? Or sticking your head in a bucket and putting a gun in your mouth?"

"What do you know? I often jerk off when I'm talking to you."

"So that's where those funny noises come from. I thought it was the dog slobbering over its dinner."

"We haven't got a dog."

"No, exactly. The truth's always something else."

"Good point," he said, and smiled the way a person who is basically rather pleased with themselves may sometimes smile, as if they can hardly contain their pleasure.

The waitress came over from the counter with a plate of pasta in each hand. I looked at the table, there was a basket of bread on it, and a small bottle of olive oil; had she put them there without my noticing?

"Two carbonaras," she said, putting two plates down in front of us. "Yours is on its way," she said to Njaal.

"Have some bread while you're waiting," said Geir, handing him a piece. He took a bite as he watched a pigeon wander about between the tables, then glanced up at me.

"It's all about the difference between is and ought to be," I said.

"Do you remember what Pessoa says? 'How can I face Leopardi's atheism with gravity and pain when I know this atheism may be cured by sexual intercourse?'"

"Yes, but that's just it. I can accept reducing things down in order to get to some form of truth, but what I don't understand is why that reduction always has to end in sex."

"The reason you don't understand it is because you're an aesthete. You shun what is base. You shy away from the body. You know what Luther wrote?"

"No."

"Dreams are untruthful. Shitting the bed, that's the only truth."

After we'd eaten, we strolled toward the botanical gardens. In the middle of the park there was a small pond full of water lilies, and next to it a little café where we sat down and had coffee in the flickering shade beneath a tree. There were some ducks whose young – which last time I was here, with Linda in the early summer, had been small and fluffy – had grown considerably while they had retained their youngness, the offspring of both animals and humans had awkwardness in common, as if, because of their sudden size, something monstrous had come over them. Of course, Njaal wasn't bothered about such things, he chased them around for a while, trying to get close enough to pet them, but every time he got near they scuttled away, their heads held still on relatively slender necks, and eventually he lost interest and began tossing stones into the pond instead, until Geir told him to stop, and he sat down in the gravel by the table to play with his car again.

I thought about something Vanja often asked, about why grown-ups never played. She couldn't grasp that we found it tedious, and the conclusion she drew was that in that case she never wanted to grow up. Life was running around and laughing, playing with long-maned plastic ponies and little Japanese figures with big eyes, swinging on swings, spinning on carousels, climbing in trees, splashing in wading pools and pretending to be a whale, a shark, a fish. Not sitting in a chair reading a newspaper, looking serious.

Or, like now, sitting still at a table and talking, with long pauses in between where nothing was said and no one did anything.

The people at the other tables, mostly elderly, conversed in low voices, now and then there was a chink of cutlery, a fork against a plate, a spoon against a cup, which then died away in the still air under the treetops.

It felt like we were in the depths of summer. As if we were a part of some Impressionist painting, for no one had captured that feeling better than the Impressionists, and the question was whether it had actually been they who created it. Whether such a feeling had even existed in the world before they came upon it, with all their conceptions of color, light, and shade, their endeavors to reproduce the exact moment. Before that, painting had always been geometric, had always been concerned with the solidity of objects and people, and with the borders between them. That which is here, the ways in which entities that are here are connected, and that which is there, which is to say beyond here, is what such paintings investigate. But in a world sunk into shadow, specked with flickering light, where one thing merges into another, the questions are different. What is visible and what is invisible, what is clear and what is obscure, what can we see and what can't we see, and, not least, what is this feeling that so compellingly pervades what we see? A writer such as Marcel Proust would be unthinkable without Impressionism, since his entire work is built around the relationship between recollection and oblivion, light and shade, visible and invisible, and the compelling feeling the world, especially the sunken world, yet also the prevailing world of the present, awakens in him, is shaped, if not brought into being, by the eye of the Impressionist. With Cézanne, the question is: what does it mean to see? With the Impressionists, the question is: what does it mean to experience seeing? Regrettably, their radicalism has completely disappeared from our cultural consciousness, now all that remains are the fine colors and the flowers, a fate Proust avoided, his own fine colors and flowers existing in words, and he could certainly never be suspected of appropriating beauty by copying an appealing motif, which incidentally would be one possible definition of *kitsch*. The fact that art has become so cerebral that everything to do with feelings is left to the simpleminded, is perhaps the best argument there is against progress, for the very reason that such a standpoint, which it seems must take precedence over our human experience, is so stupid and unintelligent as to be truly simpleminded itself. When the imperative of craftsmanship in art was abolished, it was because the idea that art should be about reproducing the world as exactly as possible was deemed old fashioned and therefore no longer necessary. So it was abolished. But one doesn't have to think too hard in order to understand that this wasn't the reason that painters and sculptors spent all their time during their crucial formative years of youth copying others or mechanically reproducing models or objects. They weren't doing it so they could learn to copy reality, because the reproduction of reality has a cutoff point any reasonably talented student would achieve fairly quickly. They were doing it so as to learn how not to think. This is the most important thing of all in art and literature, and hardly anyone can do it, or even realizes it is the case, because it is no longer taught or conveyed. Now everyone thinks art is to do with reason and criticism, that it's all about ideas, and the art schools teach theory. Which is decay, not progress.

Geir drew his chair back in the gravel and stood up.

"Do you want some water?" he said.

"Yeah, I think I will," I said. "Can you get me a top-off as well?"

I picked up my coffee cup and handed it to him. It had stains all over it, mostly spots but streaks too, the way my coffee cups always did for some reason, I had no idea why. Other people's coffee cups tended to be shiny and untarnished on the outside. I supposed it was because I held my lips in a certain way that allowed coffee to dribble between them and the cup, but while I didn't understand how this could be the case, I was unable to do anything about it; no matter how hard I pressed the cup to my lower lip, there were stains all over it by the time I was finished.

"Where are you going, Daddy?" said Njaal, looking up.

"Just getting some water."

Njaal got to his feet and went after him, wriggling his hand into Geir's. I got my phone out of my pocket and called Linda. She answered right away.

"Hi, it's Karl Ove," I said. "Are you home?"

"Yes. I just got in the door. Where are you?"

"We're in Lund. Sitting in the botanical gardens."

"How nice."

"Yes, it's pleasant. But you're picking the kids up, right?"

"Yes. I'll go over in a bit."

"OK, I just needed to make sure. Anyway, we'll be getting back soon, so I'll see you later."

"Did you buy the wine and the prawns?"

"I'll get them when we get back."

"I can get them if its easier."

"No, it's OK. I'll do it. See you soon."

"OK. Bye."

"Bye," I said, then pressed the red key and put the phone back in my pocket just as Njaal and Geir emerged again from the little pavilion-like structure that housed the actual café. Njaal was holding a glass in both hands, taking small, cautious steps, it was an important job he'd been entrusted with, while Geir walked behind him with a cup of coffee in one hand and a glass of water in the other.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll pay for the water, seeing as you got lunch."

"Ha ha."

He sat down, took the glass Njaal had been carrying, and downed its contents in one. His face glistened slightly with perspiration.

"Is it time we were heading off soon?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "I called Linda. She just got in."

He checked the time on his phone.

"Christina should be arriving soon as well. Drink your coffee and we'll get going."

"One more smoke," I said. "Then we'll go."

Njaal picked up his bike and got on. I took the last cigarette out of the pack and lit up, crumpled the empty pack in my hand and looked to see if there was a garbage can close by. There wasn't.

"You're not to bike in the park here," said Geir. "Wait until we leave."

"Why?" he said.

"People are eating! You wouldn't want people biking around in your lunch either, would you?"

"No," he said with a chuckle.

Geir looked at me.

"You've gone quiet," he said.

"That's what Arvid always used to say, I remember. In Bergen. You've gone quiet, have you shit your pants or something?"

"Here we go again."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I was thinking about what we were talking about yesterday. About being a dad."

"Yeah?"

"My principle is whoever wants something the most should do it. And whoever that is decides everything. When Njaal was born, Christina could hardly sleep at nights in case she missed something. She had a superb job at the opera, but she quit that to spend as much time with Njaal as possible. Her doing all the practical stuff isn't because she's a woman, it's because it actually means something to her. If she'd been eager to do something else it all would have been different."

"Yes," I said.

"Not only does she put more into it than me, she also gets a lot more out of it. It's highly meaningful to her."

"I remember running through the streets to send off a roll of film for developing when Vanja was born, and then running all the way back. I didn't want to miss anything either."

"But you wouldn't want to stay home full-time for three years, would you?"

"No."

"It's so easy to get swallowed up in all the softness and warmth, so easy to think that's all there is. But we don't create anything in that space other than more softness and warmth. I see it as a weakness. That's why I have no respect for men who just wander into all that. Everyone hails them for doing it, but all they're actually doing is shirking a responsibility. A major responsibility, at that. I agree with Karen Blixen when she says you can't go chasing the Holy Grail with a baby carriage. You can't have both. There's only one kind of masculinity. You're either more of a man or less. That's fucking it. There's no such thing as masculinities in the plural. Oh, how I despise that word. It makes me want to throw up. There are certain words that absorb everything about an age that you don't like. That's one of them. I can't take it. The same goes for women too, of course. There's only one femininity. Mind you, if this were the sixties, when men went to work and women stayed at home, I could well imagine me staying at home with Njaal. It's the thought of a prevailing ideology, a consensus idea governing my life, that I can't stand."

"But if that's true, it's just a protest. I mean, if the point is just to do the opposite of everyone else, then you're just as trapped as all the others."

"You're right. I take it back. The point is just that it's totally absurd for other people to be telling me what I'm supposed to be like with my own son. You know, when I was in Iraq, during the war there, while the bombs were coming down, I was interviewed by a journalist from *Aftonbladet*. Do you know what he asked me?"

I shook my head.

"Who does the dishes at home? Can you believe that?"

"What did you tell him?"

"I refused to give him an answer. Anyway, we've got a dishwasher."

"You call that little tin can a dishwasher?"

"Don't underestimate it. We never argued over anything as much as we did over whose turn it was to do the dishes. As soon as we got a machine to do it, it was problem solved."

"Small machines for small problems."

"Why do you think he asked me that? I'll tell you. He wanted to know if I was a good person or a bad person. If I did the housework, I was a good person. If I didn't, I was a bad person."

"Mm," I said. "Shall we get going? I'm done now."

We got up and left the café area and walked back through the park. I stopped where a tree had been cut down and stood for a moment reading the sign that had been put up next to it. It said the tree had died from a disease that had hit almost every tree of its kind in Skåne.

Bloody hell.

I walked on and caught up with them at the entrance gate. We followed the fence for a bit before crossing the road and entering a picturesque little street of small, low houses with flowers growing up their walls. As we got closer to the car, and thereby the apartment in Malmö, I felt a rising sense of unease, back to the apartment meant back to the book. I smoked a cigarette, it was something to do, and doing something took attention away from my thoughts, if not much then a little bit at least, and that was better than not at all. I smoked, I stared at the things around me, trying to think about them instead, and checked my phone that no one ever called.

"When was Linda picking the children up?" Geir asked, the parking lot maybe fifty meters ahead of us.

"About now, I should think," I said. "Why?"

"So someone will be home when Christina gets there."

"She has a cell phone, doesn't she?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Is she getting the train from Båstad?"

"No, the way I understood it she was getting a lift with someone who was coming this way."

Christina had taken a course for school photographers and was going to be taking photos of school classes in the Stockholm area all autumn. She had done the same thing the year before, and the money she had earned during that period had kept them going all year. Geir no longer had his job at the university, and the unemployment benefit he had been getting for a while had stopped. The book he had sacrificed everything for, which wasn't yet finished, and which on my advice he had submitted to first one publisher, then another, so that they might be involved at the earliest possible stage of the process, had been turned down by both. I had no idea how they managed to get by, but he said it was just a matter of discipline. They did all their shopping at Willys, where they bulk-bought discount goods, and with anything else, such as books, CDs, and DVDs, he would spend hours looking for the cheapest price online. I had no idea what they did about clothes, but Christina was a trained designer, and my guess was that they bought secondhand and that she mended and adjusted.

Geir pressed the key, the car lights flashed with a beep. I opened the door and got in while he opened the trunk for Njaal's bike. I tipped my head back and closed my eyes. Outside, the sound of Geir rummaging in the trunk was neutral, a noise like any other, rising and spreading out into the air, but inside it was different, it was the sound of something going on in the car, in some way belonging to it. The difference was immense. What was going on outside seemed safe and unthreatening, whereas what was going on inside was something one was defenseless against.

Outside the car windows, Malmö began to materialize. The big housing blocks on the edge of the city, which in Malmö were of yellow brick, loomed up. Rows of windows, rows of balconies, and between them parking lots and lawns. The quiet residential areas of detached homes where the well-off lived were on the other side of the city, by the sea. That's what money bought, lots of space and distance from others. But not too much space and not too much distance. In the forests you could have as much space as you wanted and there could be miles to the nearest neighbor, but no one with money would ever dream of living there. Space and distance were valuable only if there were other people nearby who had a lot less space and lived a lot closer to each other.

We drove past supermarkets, car dealers, shopping centers, gas stations, rows of buildings gradually appearing on each side, the shops to begin with selling cheap and simple commodities, becoming increasingly expensive and more exclusive the closer we got to the city center. Here were people, milling along the sidewalks, striding past the windows, cars passing in the streets with windows of their own, traffic lights and pedestrian crossings, squares and sidewalk cafés, little parks, big parks, a canal, a railway station. Hotels with flags flapping at their entrances, sports shops, clothes shops, shoe shops, electrical dealers, furniture shops, lamp shops, carpet shops, eyewear shops, bookshops, computer shops, auction houses, kitchenware dealers. Picture-framing shops. Chinese restaurants, Thai restaurants, Vietnamese restaurants, Mexican, Iraqi, and Iranian restaurants, Turkish and Greek restaurants, French and Italian restaurants. McDonald's, Burger King, pizza joints. Cafés, cinemas, a concert hall. Theaters, an opera house, nursery schools, record shops, bus stations. Unemployment offices, linen shops, a hospital, an old people's home, doctors' offices. Opticians, ear specialists, heart and lung specialists. Dentists, orthopedists, psychologists, psychiatrists, pipe-fitting firms. Funeral parlors, DIY shops, home interior shops, photo shops, banks, yoga studios, pubs, flower shops, health shops, amusement arcades, tobacconists, camping and outdoor stores, children's clothes shops, baby shops, massage institutes, car rental firms, pet suppliers, toy shops, churches, mosques, schools, information points. Hair transplant institutes, law firms, advertising agencies. Hair salons, nail studios, pharmacists, clothes shops for fat people, surgical appliance shops, workwear dealers, garden stores, exchange bureaus. Musical instrument shops, computer game shops, bus card kiosks, radio, TV, and hi-fi dealers, sausage stands, falafel bars, suitcase and bag shops. The whole of this enormous world, teeming with detail, was divided into intricate, finely meshed systems that kept everything apart, at first by its very division into sectors, which meant that rubber tap washers, for instance, were to be found in a different place than nylon guitar strings, and a novel by Danielle Steel in a different place than a novel by Daniel Sjölin, which was a kind of rough, initial sorting, then by infusing the various goods or services with value, thereby grading them in ways no school could ever teach, and which therefore had to be learned ad hoc, outside any school or institution, and which furthermore were forever in a state of flux. This was the difference between a pair of McGordon jeans from Dressmann and a pair of Acne jeans, or a pair of Tommy Hilfiger jeans and a pair of Cheap Monday jeans, Ben Sherman or

Levi's, Lee or J. Lindeberg, Tiger or Boss, Sand or Peak Performance, Pour or Fcuk. It was what sort of signals a novel by Anne Karin Elstad sent out compared to a novel by Kerstin Ekman, and how both of these related to a collection of poetry by Lars Mikael Raattamaa, for instance. The reason why reading Peter Englund was a bit more exclusive than reading Bill Bryson, albeit not by much. The reasons why one could no longer express fascination and enthusiasm about Salman Rushdie without seeming culturally adrift, left behind in the late eighties, while V. S. Naipaul was still accepted. The knowledge that meant I could go into a clothes shop and buy the jeans or suits that were now held to be superior, though not by all, select the books in the bookshop that gave me the greatest degree of cultural credibility, purchase the music in the record store that was deemed more than averagely sophisticated, even when it came to traditions and genres I didn't know much about, like jazz and classical, I'd picked up enough to get by, perhaps even in some lucky circumstance to pass for a true connoisseur. This was the way with almost everything. I knew perfectly well what kind of sofa sent out what kind of signals, and the same was true of electric kettles and toasters, running shoes and schoolbags. Even tents were something I would be able to appraise, at least to a certain extent, in terms of what kind of signals they sent out. This knowledge was not written down anywhere, and it was hardly accepted as knowledge at all, it was more an assurance regarding the way things stood, and it fluctuated according to the social strata in such a way that someone from the upper classes would be able to frown on my sofa preferences and the sofa knowledge I was thereby demonstrating, just as I in turn would be able to frown on the taste in sofas of people belonging to a lower status group than myself, not in any way denigrating them as human beings, because I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing, but their sofas. I might not say so out loud, for fear of seeming judgmental, but I would think, God, what an awful sofa. Such knowledge, which applied to nearly all brands and their practical and social significance, was immense, and, I occasionally thought to myself, not that different from the knowledge so-called primitive peoples once possessed, where they not only knew the name of every plant, tree, and bush in their surroundings but also what kind of properties they had and what use could be made of them, or the knowledge people of our own cultures possessed only a few generations ago, for instance in the eighteenth century, when most people also knew the names of all the plants and trees in their vicinity, and the names of all those who lived in the villages they lived in, both the living and several generations of the dead, just as they were familiar with and able to identify by name all localities, great and small, in their surrounding area. Naturally, they knew the names of the tools they used and the work they were appropriate to, and of all the animals, their various parts and organs. This knowledge wasn't something they considered, nor was it ever made a show of in any way, since basically they were unaware of its existence as such, so closely was it bound up with their own being. Such is the case too with the immense knowledge we ourselves possess, of the difference between strong and mild mustard, for instance, a grilled or a fried sausage, a sausage with cheese in it or one with bacon wrapped around it, a bread roll or the kind of potato pancakes we Norwegians call *lomper*, raw or roasted onions at the gas station's grill stand, or of the difference between the various kinds of mustard in our supermarkets, like the French Dijon mustard, or English Colman's, or the particular variety that belongs to Skåne, not to mention wines, which are so culturally expressive and so extremely saturated with social meanings. Like the people who went before us, we don't give a thought to the knowledge required for us to get through the day, we don't see it, it's a part of us, it's who we are. Our world is this: Blaupunkt over bluebell, Rammstein over rowan, Fiat over foxglove.

One of the three parking spaces at the top end of Brogatan, by the back entrance to our building, happened to be free as we drew up, this was hardly ever the case and I said to Geir we were in luck.

The sun, which when we left had been above the building housing the job center, was now above the bank, and its rays, slanting down toward us, were filtered through the foliage of the tree that grew in the nameless square meters of space between Brogatan and Föreningsgatan, causing the car roof and bodywork to flicker in the play of light and shade that manifested itself in iridescent nuances of red, from very bright and intensely lustrous to a darker dullness.

I got the key out of my pocket and crossed the area behind the building, which was in shadow most of the day, for which reason the temperature there was markedly lower than it was only a few meters away, tapped the orange key card against the panel, pulled the door toward me, and held it open until Geir and Njaal had gone in. I followed them down the stairs, they stopped at the door that led into the basement passage, which I opened in the same way. The air was cool and smelled of brick, fusty in the way of everything that was under the ground. Through the door at the other end, just as we entered, came the Polish woman who lived two floors below us, a blue IKEA bag in one hand, her grandchild in the other. I sent her a nod but she didn't see us, or pretended not to, and we went through to the stairs, where I pressed the button for the elevator, which was at the floor above us and came gliding down after only a few seconds.

"Now we'll see if Mommy's arrived," said Geir.

"And Vanja and Heidi," said Njaal.

John's stroller was parked outside the door, and as I went in I saw the little pile of shoes on the mat in the hall.

"Hello!" I called out.

"Hello," Linda called back from the kitchen. I stepped a bit farther inside so Geir and Njaal could come in. As I bent down to take off my shoes, first Linda then Christina appeared from the kitchen. Njaal bustled past me. Linda had all the radiance of when she was happiest, I noticed, a glow of sociability about her, particularly visible in the luster of her eyes, which was stronger than usual, but also in the skin of her cheeks, which had a slight blush to them. Her entire being smiled. I straightened up and we hugged each other.

"I missed you," she said softly.

"Good to have you back home," I said, my head lowered to her neck.

"Hi, Karl Ove," said Christina, and looked up. She was crouching in front of Njaal, asking what he'd been up to.

"Hi," I said. "Good to see you."

She got to her feet and we hugged fleetingly. Behind us, Linda and Geir did likewise. Njaal tugged at Christina's dress, wanting her to go into the living room with him. She smiled at me apologetically and went with him.

"Were they all right when you picked them up?" I asked.

Linda nodded and put her hand against my hip.

"So when did you get back?"

"About an hour ago, I suppose. I bought them each an ice cream."

"Good idea," I said. "I haven't got the prawns yet. I was thinking I'd pop out."

I went to the kitchen, took the coffeepot and the filter holder over to the sink, and tipped the used filter into the bin before emptying what was left from earlier into the sink, rinsed the pot a few times, and then filled it with fresh water, which seen through the unwashed glass didn't look fresh at all but took on a faint yellow tinge.

Linda sat down at the table and took an apple from the big, almost flat blue dish we'd once borrowed from her brother and never returned. It was ceramic and decorated with an Arabic-looking pattern in black that set off yellow apples and bananas especially well.

"Helena and Fredrik give you all their best," she said, biting into the apple.

"Thanks," I said. "Are they doing all right?"

She nodded as she munched.

Geir went through the hall, glancing at us as he passed, before going into the living room and by the sound of it sitting down on the sofa.

"It's nice to be home again though," she said. "I've never been away from the children that long before."

"That's positively sick," I said. "You were only away three days. That's nothing."

"It was enough for me," she said. "Anyway, I got talking to a man on the train. It turned out he was head of a school. He wants me to be a substitute teacher. I got his number. I've got a job!"

I poured the water into the coffeemaker, put a filter in the holder, measured out six heaped spoonfuls, then switched it on.

"Is that what you want?" I asked. "I thought you wanted to write, and make radio programs."

"But I never really get going with any of it. It's so incredibly taxing, making a radio program all on your own. I need something simple. Something more clearly defined. With this I'd go to the school, teach, and then go home again."

"What are you going to teach?"

She gave a shrug.

"Whatever they give me. As long as I can read through the syllabus beforehand, I should be all right."

"True," I said.

"You don't sound very convinced," she said.

"Yes, I am," I said. "It'd be fantastic if you had a steady job, of course it would."

I took an apple too, and sat down opposite her at the table.

"You can't think about much apart from those e-mails, can you?" she said.

"Not really," I said.

"You musn't worry."

"I can't help it. It won't go away. I know it's irrational. But it feels like someone died. The intensity of it, I mean. Something terrible that's there all the time. Even when I'm not thinking about it, it's there."

"You've got to shake it off. You can't write four books in a year and then let yourself be totally swallowed up by this as well."

"But I can't help it, that's what I'm saying."

"Do you want me to read what he's written? Maybe it would help, make it easier to talk about?"

"Yes, if you want."

I got to my feet and went to the bedroom, where the computer was still switched on, put the apple down on the desk, and opened the browser. Linda came in just as the first message appeared on the screen.

"This is the first one," I said, picking up the apple again. "You can scroll up to the others."

She nodded and sat down. I went into the living room, where Vanja and Heidi were playing with some Playmobil on the bed we used as a kind of divan up against the wall, with a blue-and-white-patterned throw to cover it, while Njaal stood with a plastic sword in his hand, making fencing moves in front of Christina, who turned her head toward me and smiled, a bit uneasily, I sensed.

"Have you seen John anywhere?" I said.

"I think he's asleep," she said. "He was before, anyway."

Njaal was directing all his attention to her, presumably in reaction to the complication of Vanja's and Heidi's presence. They had each other, he was on his own, and so he fenced with his mother instead.

"I think there's a pirate's eye patch in the toy box over there," I said. "And a hook for your hand. Is that right, Vanja?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Come and look then."

"But we're playing!"

"Njaal can find them," said Christina. "Can't you, Njaal?"

"Haa!" he said, lunging forward and striking her thigh with the flat of the sword. It wasn't made of plastic or wood, but of some other material a bit like foam rubber, only harder, and it had started coming apart all the way up the "blade."

I went into the other room, where Geir sat leafing through a book.

"Do you want some coffee?" I said.

"Yes, please," he said.

"It'll be ready in a minute," I said, and sat down in the chair across the table while munching what was left of my apple. Usually I ate them whole, core, stalk, the lot, and had done so ever since I was a boy, and there was something about that, to do with the slightly bitter taste of the stalk and the seeds, and the stringy consistency of the core, that for some reason always reminded me of childhood, as if the deviance of that action, for that was how I perceived it, as a rather deviant thing to do, opened up new spaces of experience compared to the norm, which was the taste of the white, succulent flesh of the fruit. These spaces were not large expanses, more like tiny stabs of the past prickling the consciousness, the feeling of fingers passing over the surface of a dark blue down jacket on the road outside the house in the dim light of morning, or the rain as it began to fall on a Sunday morning, patches of snow still left here and there at the roadside, bicycle wheels plowing through a sludge of gray mud on the gravel track.

"What are you reading?" I asked, placing my arms on the armrests and, since he wasn't looking at me, staring out the window at the small section of the balcony and the rooftops beyond it that was visible through the slats of the blinds.

"Daniel Defoe. About the Great Plague in London. Have you read it?"

He looked up, and I glanced toward him.

"What do you think?" I said. "The chances of your picking a book out here that I've actually read aren't that great."

"Here it is, Njaal," I heard Vanja say from the next room.

"Thank you," said Njaal.

The next minute Heidi was standing in the doorway. She was wearing a white summer dress with a red print on it.

"Can we watch a movie, Daddy?" she said.

"Not when we've got visitors. Play with Njaal. We'll have some nice dinner soon."

"What are we having?"

"Prawns."

"Prawns?"

"Yes."

"Are they nice?"

"I think so."

She gave me her skeptical look. I loved it when she did that.

"Njaal's playing with Vanja," she complained.

"Come on," I said. "Two minutes ago you were playing with Vanja. It can't have changed that much since then. Join in."

"What?"

"Go and play."

She turned her head and stared into the other room. I got up and went to the kitchen, where the coffee stood black in the pot. I closed off the filter so it wouldn't drip after I took the pot away, then poured the coffee into the thermos, the red Stelton we'd been given as a present by Axel and Linn, though what the occasion had been I could no longer remember.

Linda came through the hall.

"Do you want some coffee?" I said when she came in.

She nodded. Her face wasn't as lively as it had been only minutes before. Now she looked drained, paler.

"It's awful," she said. "How can he say such things? I'm afraid for you, Karl Ove. He wants to hurt you."

"Come on!" I said. "I pissed him off, that's all."

"No, he's lost it. He's lost control of himself. It feels dangerous. He's completely unstable."

"No, no. It's unpleasant, that's all. Everything's going to be fine. I promise. Did you want some coffee?"

She nodded, and then I remembered that she had already nodded in response to the same question. I got four cups out of the cupboard, they were brown on the outside, with a faint tinge of red and white on the inside, and the four saucers that belonged to them were also brown. They were meant to go with some kind of Italian coffee, as far as I remembered, but they were just as good for regular filter coffee, and if I was displaying my social incompetence in that respect it was only to Geir and Christina, whom I'd never suspected of laughing at us behind our backs after they'd been to see us, though of course you could never be certain.

No, I was pretty sure they hadn't.

I took the thermos and the cups with me into the other room, where Geir was sitting, put them out on the table, and sat down. Then I remembered Linda needed milk, so I got up again and went back into the kitchen to get it, got the carton out of the fridge and checked the expiration date, which said it was on its last day, so I opened the carton and smelled inside, just as I heard Geir ask Linda if she'd read Gunnar's messages, and since there seemed to be nothing wrong with it I took it back with me into the other room and put it down next to the thermos on the table, while Linda told him how awful she thought it all was.

"What if it goes to court?" she said. "You might have to stay in Norway all autumn. What am I supposed to do then? Imagine this place. Am I going to be left on my own with the kids? And how will you deal with the pressure?"

Geir gave her one of his most sardonic smiles and glanced at me as she went on. Linda noticed, of course, and I could see how a sudden rage welled up in her, which the presence of guests meant she had to keep inside, and her eyes clouded over. She flashed me the blackest look before getting to her feet and going out into the hall. I sent Geir a look of reproach, but it seemed like he misunderstood and thought it was Linda I was annoyed with; whatever the reason, he simply smiled again, or maybe he was just smiling at the whole thing.

"Help yourself to coffee," I said, and went after Linda, who was already in the bedroom by the time I got to her.

The spring Linda and I got together we went out a couple of times with Geir and Christina, it was when we were still obsessed with each other, kissing and touching, unable to keep our hands off each other, and even when I met Geir on my own, for instance in the place I had then, I was still immersed in the thought of her and just sat there blushing with joy, listening to whatever Geir was going on about without any of it actually seeping in, for I was no longer a person, or so it felt, I had become something else, a creature floating in the sky, high above the world and everything in it. I was the sky man, she was the sky woman, and together we were going to have a sky baby. But then we came back down. The sky life stopped and something else began.

Linda wrote about it in a short story, the two lovers lying in bed talking, she saying she had once seen a strange bird in her childhood, and describing it to him, never before had she seen such a bird, and never since, and it turned out that he had seen one exactly the same in his own childhood, for this is how it is to be a sky man and a sky woman, everything joins up, everything becomes meaningful. But in the story this was the conclusion of something, and she compared that conclusion with the last day spent in a summerhouse, when everything is packed away, the windows closed and the door locked. And this was how it was too. We had been somewhere together, a place filled with light, and now we were going somewhere else. She was afraid of that, it was a darker place. And because she was afraid of it she tried to keep me where I was. This was new to me, something I hadn't known before, and it made me afraid too. We started arguing, and the walls of her apartment, into which I had moved, closed in on me, its rooms became smaller and smaller. Our arguing turned her into my father, I was afraid of the loudness of her voice, her sudden fits of anger, and had no idea how to handle it, so I was cowed by her, and when it passed I would be on my guard, trying to act in ways that would placate her, wary of the slightest sign of displeasure, and it was that subjection, the fact that I was always trying to assuage and appease, that made our relationship increasingly difficult, because at the same time I was trying to get away from it, I needed to gain some measure of independence, to become my own person, find my own space, and I started getting just as angry with her whenever we argued, maybe even angrier, because I needed to come free of myself too, the bonds within. She went to college, I tried to write, on weekends we tried to be like before. One Sunday we ran into Geir and Christina in a restaurant, Linda and I were going somewhere else afterward, we invited them along, and they came with us, Linda hissed in my ear that Geir was doing it on purpose, hadn't I noticed he was doing it on purpose, he wanted to ruin things for us. I didn't understand what she meant, we spent nearly all our time together, wasn't that enough for her, couldn't we ever see anyone else?

One time, Geir came over to her apartment, we were going out, he walked around the place, shamelessly examining everything in it as if he wanted to tell her he could read her like an open book. I could see how angry it made her, it was a provocation, but I didn't know what to do, surely a person could have a friend as well as a partner without them wrecking things between them? Geir had grown up with a mother who suffered from anxiety, a woman who had lost her father when she was still a child, and for the rest of her life she clung to those closest to her, she was a master of the art, Geir said, shunning no means to get what she wanted, and making people feel guilty was the least of them. So the fact that I was suddenly less available than before, the fact that I suddenly needed to stay in all the time, was something he interpreted in the context of that same pattern. He had needed to break free, and now he despised everything to do with intimacy, everything that smacked of commitment and bonds. At the same time, he committed to Christina. And Christina was in many ways like me, someone who endured and stuck things out, a person who pleased others, at the same time, like me, being essentially solipsistic or solitary, she could have been the last person on earth and been quite happy with that. I could too. Inside me was this enormous distance from other people, at the same time as I was hugely impressionable and open to influence, and could allow myself to be tied to someone and remain incapable of freeing myself. A friendship never ties, because if it does it ceases to be a friendship. But a relationship ties, because its foundations are deeper, rooted in the emotions, in the very fulcrum of life, and a relationship is in every respect a common bond; if we are not bound to each other, then what we have is not a relationship but a friendship. Whenever I got an engagement somewhere, Linda would say what about me, have you thought about me, left on my own here, what am I supposed to do? Even when there had just been the two of us, I would turn things down and back out of things because she couldn't be on her own, and when the children came along it became ten times worse, and if I did go away regardless, I would have to carry the responsibility for her being on her own and having to cope with the children without me, I would be one of those men who ran out on his family, the kind who think only about themselves, their jobs and careers. I didn't want that, and so I would decline and stay at home. Even the shortest absence was a problem, like the two hours I spent playing football every Sunday; when Linda wasn't feeling good she would be angry at me before I left, it was unfair of me to leave her on her own with the children, I was leaving her with far too much of the burden, she worked her fingers to the bone, she was exhausted, it was touch and go whether she could manage anymore. I told her it was the only thing I did outside the house. I never went out at night, never went to the cinema, never met up with any friends, we were together twenty-four hours a day, and those two hours of football were something I looked forward to all week. But she never did anything on her own, she said, that was a luxury denied to her, to be able to just go out whenever she felt like it. It was a poor argument, I could come back at her and say there was nothing I wanted her to do more than that. Feel free, I would say. You can go away three days a week, if you want. I can look after the kids on my own. It's no problem. I can do that. To which she might then say it was easier for me to have the kids, that they demanded less of me than of her, that I could just sit there and read the paper while I was on my own with them, whereas if it was her they wouldn't leave her alone. That's true, I might say, but that's no argument. What you're saying is that even if we have the children an equal amount of time, even if we're completely democratic about that, your burden is always the heavier because you're together with them in a different way than I am. But then what do we do? Does that mean they should be with me 70 percent of the time and you 30 percent, so as to even things out? Well, that's fine with me. I can have the kids 100 percent of the time. I can have them all the time. It's fine. And you know that. Fine for you, maybe, she might say then, but not for them. And then she could change tack and say I was always playing football on the weekends when the kids weren't at the nursery, and that we ought to be doing things together. True enough, I would say in response, but I'm back by twelve o'clock, which gives us the rest of the day to do stuff. And anyway, we spent our whole time together, all of us, the entire rest of the week besides, apart from when they were at the nursery, so the two hours I was playing football couldn't possibly harm. But that was different, she would say, because that was ordinary weekdays full of obligations, over the weekend we had the chance to do something nice together, as a family. If we didn't, I understood, we weren't a family. And so it could go on. Sometimes I got so angry I consciously tried to punish her, to make her feel guilty and show her how miserable everything could be if all we had were obligations, but it would only rebound on the kids. Sometimes I went off and played anyway, of what she said, which meant I was a bad husband and father who ignored his responsibilities and left his family in the lurch, and when I got back it was usually to an apartment full of tantrums and chaos, and Linda would imply: look at this, this is what happens when you're selfish. One such

Sunday, after I'd been playing football for two hours in the pouring rain and I got on my bike to cycle back, already in low spirits at the prospect of going home, I was suddenly struck by the liberating realization that Linda wasn't there. Her mother was with us that weekend. And that fact, the relief I felt at being able to go home to her mother and not to her, was the same as admitting that we had come to the end of the road. No husband should ever dread coming home. I had to get out. I was in shreds, not when I was on my own, but with Linda, and why should my life have to be like that? I could put up with not feeling up to the mark, but this was worse, I was in a terrible state. I was taking care of pretty much everything at home for long periods, at the same time as I was trying to work, something she didn't have to worry about, and here she was saying things weren't equal, because her share of the burden was more demanding. But I've got a job besides! I could almost yell at her. I've got to earn money! She could have had a job too, but because she'd had three children she'd been away from the labor market so long it was almost impossible for her to get back in. This was a sensitive area, and I had to tread carefully. It was true she'd been at home the first six months with Vanja, but the next six months it had been me who had taken over. She'd stayed at home with both Heidi and John, but we had three children by then and she had to concentrate on the little one, meaning there was plenty for me to do too, and as luck would have it I worked from home and was always on hand, and besides, I confined myself to working only five hours a day, which she didn't have much respect for. I wasn't a pilot or a surgeon with regular working hours and clear obligations to fulfill, I was a writer who'd been writing the same thing for years without getting anywhere. Her referring to this as career building was an insult to careerists. And the idea that she was being kept out of the labor market, and denied any way into it ever again, kept out by a male society hostile to women, wasn't exactly true either, because for as long as I'd known her she'd never been anywhere near any labor market. She was a writer and a trained radio documentarist, and the fact that she hadn't made a documentary since leaving college wasn't just down to her having stayed at home with the kids, because now they were in the nursery and she still wasn't making documentaries. Life with the children drained the energy out of her, she couldn't manage having to work as well, yet we spent equal portions of time looking after the kids, and I somehow did manage to work. Was this a woman trap? Did she spend more time changing diapers or going to the playground than I did? She believed yes, and no matter how much I did, regardless of how far I went to accommodate her, it was never enough. My frustration at the way my life was being dominated, and the shame of that, was enormous, and I couldn't tell anyone I knew, because they wouldn't believe that I was in a relationship that didn't allow me the time to play football two hours a week and where even the minutes I spent sitting on the balcony with a cigarette were something Linda would deny me or use against me in her arguments to the effect that all I ever thought about was myself, since those few minutes of peace were not available to her, she had to be there all the time inside, whereas I could just sneak off on a break whenever I felt like it. That I should yield to that and allow myself to be boxed in by it felt demeaning and was certainly not a matter I would wish to air with anyone. Anyone, that is, apart from Geir. He listened to it all. I assumed Linda knew, and that she maybe even guessed Geir was advising me to get out, since the life he lived was exactly the opposite, elevated above day-to-day obligations, but it wasn't like that at all, because what he told me, and was constantly reminding me about, was that it was all anxiety talking, not Linda. Anxiety eats people up from the inside, it's bigger than them, monstrous even, impossible to appease, and it eats away at relationships because the only thing it wants is for everyone to be snuggled up close all the time.

"It's anxiety, it's not Linda," he said. "Linda's intelligent, capable, talented. She knows the score. My mom was proud of me when I finally broke loose. And she was proud when I went parachuting or went off somewhere and drank myself senseless. Because she could see why. That was a side of her too. But the anxiety was that much greater. She was terrified and did everything she could to make me stay with her. Those were emotions I couldn't take into consideration, cry as she might. I think it probably had an effect on my empathy. Fortunately, my dad doesn't suffer from anxiety at all. I don't even think he knows what it is. I've never seen him scared or anxious about anything. But they're still together. I wasn't married to my mom, and we didn't have children, so I could just leave, which was the right thing to do. It's different for you. You and Linda are married. When Linda's feeling on top of things you can do what you want. When she isn't, when the anxiety gets to her, she needs you there. It's tearing you apart. But you're still there."

That was basically what he would say. It helped me see things from the outside, and to see the difference between the roles we occupied and the people we were. She was always Linda, the woman I'd been more in love with than any other, with whom I had three wonderful children, and when she was on a high she never saw a problem in anything, she was generosity personified, of course, get yourself away, my gorgeous footballing man, we'll be fine, maybe we'll go over and see Jenny or Bodil, or someone else perhaps, or go for a walk in the park, why don't you give us a call when you're finished, we could all go somewhere and do something nice? Or maybe you'd like to do some work? When she was on a high she had no difficulty working either, she would write while the kids were at nursery, and I would read what she wrote, it was as buoyant and exuberant as she was herself, and had the same kind of unfathomable depth, which I no longer tended to see, since it vanished so easily in our everyday routines, but which, whenever I caught sight of it and the person she was, either in something she had written or in herself, when we were together, seemed to come back. But there was no balance between these two aspects, either in her life or in ours, for the frustration I felt with respect to the one grew increasingly in strength, I was living a life of compulsion, and whether it came from inside or out made no difference, it was compulsion all the same, obligation, and that wasn't how I wanted it, and this not wanting was sooner or later bound to become a not being able. I was approaching that limit, and I supposed I was merely waiting for some factor that would finally give me release. In our arguments I'd already begun to threaten her with leaving. It would mean our sharing everything equally, down the middle, she would have the children 50 percent of the time, I would have them the other 50 percent, and she would have to earn her own money, and I mine. When I said this she would fall apart and beg me not to. Don't go, please don't go. And I didn't because I knew it would destroy her life, how would she ever manage on her own? And then, when the argument was over, there would be hope. Always a promise of change.

Her reacting the way she did to the look Geir gave me on this particular day in August 2009 had to do with all of this. Geir's look said, I see what you mean, Karl Ove. She's relating Gunnar's threats to herself, what am I supposed to do, how am I going to cope, and, by extension, how could you do this to me? In that look, she recognized the way I saw things and felt herself left bare. Geir and I were ganging up on her. It wasn't like that at all, but she had been left bare, certainly, since I confided in him the way I did. It wasn't a betrayal because I had to be able to talk to someone outside our relationship, but it felt like a betrayal in the way it had been made visible all of a sudden. Another thing I sensed she was reacting to was that I allowed Geir to influence me to such an extent that his opinions became my opinions, that to a degree he was brainwashing me, and that the distance that had opened up between Linda and me, which was due to my frustration, was a part of that. Geir was whispering in my ear about my life and her role in it, and before long it would make me leave her. I didn't know if this really was what she was thinking, or whether it was my own paranoia that had led me to such ideas, but there was no way to find out because there was no way we could talk about it other than when our arguments were coming to a head, at such a point she once yelled at me that she couldn't understand why I didn't just move in with Geir seeing as how I spent the whole time on the phone with him, words that as soon as the argument was over and we'd made up again, she in tears, I with my anger stuck like a stone in my chest, she said she hadn't meant. She actually liked Geir. I believed her because now, finally, after seven years, I had begun to understand her. She liked him when she was feeling strong and had the energy in her to be relaxed and casual about things, including her feelings for me, whereas when she was down things looked different to her, because then she was afraid everything was going to be swallowed up and she was going to lose all that she had, and that feeling was so powerful it affected all her opinions, assessments, and perceptions. So there was nothing underived other than anxiety or joy, emotions so powerful inside her that they could turn good into bad and bad into good in the space of a moment. It had torn so much apart that I no longer cared, I'd used up so much energy to accommodate it, regardless of how unreasonable it could appear to me, that all of a sudden I could do so no longer: she could weep and be as despairing as a person could be, and all I could do was look at her and tell her I wasn't going to say anything until she stopped crying. She could scream at me, and I would say, Are you done yet? That I was no longer tangled up in the emotions, but detached, standing there looking at them, perhaps made her feel even more scared, and the fear she felt was justified, because I was reaching a point where I couldn't handle it anymore, I felt myself to be at the very limit of what I could endure, so removed from the life I wanted to live that I could hardly think about anything else.

Then the e-mails started coming in, the pressure from outside, and I no longer stood with my back to her and the family, looking out, I swiveled around, quickly, in the space of an hour, and was then standing with my back to the world, facing them, Linda and the children, for the first time in a very long time. She went off to visit Helena, I missed her because I needed her, I needed to feel her warmth. Only then it got torn apart by the look Geir sent me, all that was contained in it, and I despaired, all of a sudden it felt like it was too late, as if somehow the dynamics of destruction carried on without me after I stopped. I had stopped too late, swiveled around too late, and it had taken on its own momentum. This was the feeling I had when I followed Linda into the bedroom that afternoon in August 2009, but there was more, so much more than that: I had put all my frustration into the writing, it had filled an entire novel, it was about us, she and I, and although I suddenly needed her again, suddenly wanted her again, suddenly wanted to live my life there again, my past, my frustration, and my yearning to get away wedged itself in between us, because soon she would have to read that novel, soon it would be published.

She was at the computer when I entered the room, staring stiffly at the screen as if in deep concentration, but I recognized that look, it was a sign of the opposite, an inner turmoil she was trying to conceal.

"What's the matter?" I said, sitting down on the bed.

"Nothing," she said.

"Why did you come in here, then?"

"To check my e-mail."

I felt I should get up and put my hand on her shoulder, but I knew she would react as if it were something alien and just leave it there to show me how removed she was from me, and not, as she normally would have done, since such signs of affection had become so infrequent and would always come as a surprise to her, return the gesture.

It pained my heart. I had denied her the only thing she really needed from me.

"Was it that look Geir gave me?" I said.

She glanced at me, then turned her attention back to the screen in front of her.

"No, not at all," she said. "I didn't see any look."

"What is it then?"

She sighed.

"I got such a bad feeling from those e-mails. And I can see how much it's getting to you. I just started thinking about what the autumn's going to be like. If it goes to court. There won't be room for anything else. And there's you and Geir sitting there, and . . . well, wallowing in it, in a way."

"I wouldn't call it wallowing exactly," I said.

"You asked what the matter was. That was it. I don't want to discuss it."

"OK," I said, and got to my feet. "Are we friends?"

She nodded.

I put my hand on her shoulder. She didn't react.

"It'll pass," I said. "It's just right now, that's all. And I won't be able to cope without your help. I can't fight on two fronts. It'll do me in."

"I'll do my best," she said, looking up at me and putting her hand on mine.

"I'm glad," I said.

Njaal and Vanja came bombing in from the hall. Linda took her hand back.

"I'll go out and get those prawns, then," I said. "Is there anything else we need? Wine, bread, lemons, mayonnaise, prawns."

"We've got mayonnaise, I think, don't we? In the fridge?"

"It'll be ancient if we have. I'll buy some more. Is there anything you'd like?"

The children started bouncing on the bed.

"Maybe those yellow berries, that fruit or whatever it is they've got there, you know," said Linda. "In those small baskets. I can't remember what they're called. Do you know what I mean?"

I nodded. Somewhere Heidi was on her own and sad, I thought to myself.

"OK," I said. "I'll get some ice cream and strawberries as well, I think."

"Get some candy for the children, then."

"Will do," I said, and went through into the hall. I stopped in the doorway of the children's room; John was fast asleep on his belly, spread-eagled, his head resting on one arm, saliva dribbling from his mouth. I stood looking at him for a moment, then went back into the living room, where Heidi was sitting on the toy box, Christina must have put the lid back on, with a doll in one hand and a small blue plastic comb in the other.

"Do you want to come shopping with me, Heidi?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Yes, come on," I said. "It'll be nice."

"No, I said."

"OK," I said, and smiled, then went into the other room, where Geir was sitting on the sofa reading, while Christina was sitting in the chair across the table, skimming through a photo book.

"Just popping out to get the prawns," I said.

"I'll come with you," said Geir, getting to his feet.

"No need," I said. "Just buying prawns, that's all."

I didn't want him to come, it would be too much the two of us, seen from where Linda was. But I couldn't say no to his face. He would have to grasp the intention.

"It'll be nice to get out," he said, looking at Christina. "Is there anything we need?"

"I don't think so," she said.

Linda came in from the hall. From the look on her face and her movements I could see she wasn't upset any more.

Maybe she and Christina could have a chat for a bit if we went out.

"I'll pop out for the shopping, then," I said.

"Can you take Heidi or Vanja with you?" she said.

"Heidi didn't want to go. I can ask her again, though."

I poked my head around the door.

"Put your shoes on. We're going shopping."

She looked up at me.

"Do I have to?" she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Why doesn't Vanja have to?"

"Because I want you to come. Come on."

She got to her feet and went past me, put her sandals on, and stood waiting by the door while I put my own shoes on, patted my back pocket to make sure I had my wallet with my cards in it, then my front pocket, feeling its lumpy nest of keys, grabbed my sunglasses off the hat shelf, and opened the door.

Heidi was shy with Geir being with us in the elevator, she looked down at the floor. She could be shy with me too; sometimes if I caught her eye and smiled, she could look away with a sheepish little grin on her face. She was hardly ever like that in social situations and had been confident right from the start, but often in what was almost the opposite situation, the more intimate context, when the attention of a single person was directed toward her. With Vanja the opposite was true, she liked attention from one person and would even go looking for it, whereas in new social situations she would be shy and withdraw.

Shyness is a protective mechanism, and the interesting thing was that they were protecting different aspects of themselves. Did those aspects need protecting because they were particularly fragile or because they were particularly precious?

It was interesting too that they should both protect themelves by lowering their gaze, bowing their heads, turning away. Shyness was directly linked with the eyes, it was always their eyes they hid from view. They could respond if someone asked them something, but with their eyes cast down. So what were they protecting themselves against, what was it about being seen by another person? It wasn't being seen as such, since there they were, in plain sight, their physical selves present in the space, rather it was being seen to be who they were, and that was contained in the eyes. They were protecting themselves against someone looking into their eyes and seeing who they were, what was inside them, and the eyes were the entrance to that, for which reason they had to be concealed. Animal young behaved differently; if, for instance, a person suddenly came into a room full of kittens, the kittens would scurry away and hide, but what they hid would be their physical selves, since they were vulnerable to attack and could be killed and eaten. Perhaps the children's instinctive reaction to such intrusion was the same, yet in some more cultivated version, translated from the physical to the social world, from the body to the soul, which trembled with the fear of being taken.

Down on the ground floor, Geir pressed the button to open the elevator doors and Heidi took my hand as we walked the few meters to the front door, which closed slowly behind us, the barely audible buzz it made before clicking shut gradually drowned out by the sounds from outside, cars rumbling through the traffic lights, the voices of the customers sitting outside the Chinese takeaway, each with their own little box of noodles or rice in front of them, the voices and footsteps of those passing by, on their way to and from the city center.

"It's that way," I said, pointing across the square. The air felt warm, the sun angling down from above the Hilton hotel, a bit fuller in color now, a richer yellow than earlier in the day.

"I like Malmö," said Geir. "I wouldn't mind living here."

"What's stopping you?" I said.

Heidi took a little skip at my side. I gave her hand a little squeeze, and then another, and smiled when she looked up at me.

"Moving costs money. And money's in short supply, as you know."

"Everything's a lot cheaper here," I said.

"True," he said. "But we'd have to do an apartment swap, rather than buying, so there's not much chance, I'm afraid."

"I can see that," I said.

We went down the steps and crossed the square in front of the fountain, following the sidewalk along the street where the buses and taxis passed, then taking the first left toward the shop we were going to. It was called Delikatessen and apart from prawns they also sold lobsters, oysters, mussels, fish and crabs, as well as meat from selected suppliers, poultry, game, and well-hung beef, and cheeses too, and just about everything else one might associate with good eating, such as exclusive olive oils, red and white wine vinegars, olives, herbs and spices, salt flakes from France, freshly baked French bread and baguettes. On Saturday mornings the place was always full of people, Malmö's upper echelons, or so I imagined, getting the shopping in for their social gatherings in the evening, but when we opened the door and stepped inside, the place was empty apart from two assistants in chef's hats and white aprons, busy clearing away before closing time, so it seemed.

"I want to sit there," said Heidi, pointing at the tall bar stools that surrounded two tables by the window.

I pulled one of them out and lifted her up onto it, nodding at the same time to one of the assistants who had stepped up behind the glass counter ready to serve us.

"We'd like some prawns," I said.

"Certainly," he said. "How many were you thinking of?"

"We're four adults and four children," I said. "The children won't eat much, so maybe two and a half, three kilos? Something like that?"

"I'd say two and a half ought to do it," he said, snatching a white bag from a pile behind the counter with one hand, picking up his scoop with the other.

"Let's make it just over two and a half, then," I said.

"Right you are," he said, and began scooping the prawns into the bag while I cast a glance at Heidi, who was sitting with both hands flat on the tabletop, watching the assistant. Geir stood with his hands behind his back at the counter, looking at the oysters.

I went over to Heidi, lifted her up, and carried her over to the counter just as the assistant put the bag down on the shiny scales. The pointer shot up to a kilo and a half and dithered there for a moment.

"Can you see the lobsters over there?" I said. "They live at the bottom of the sea."

"I know," she said.

"Aren't they splendid?" I said.

She nodded.

Hauled up from the depths of the ocean and placed on display here, with their black peppercorn eyes and long, bright red tentacles.

"What's that?" she said, indicating the red plastic nets full of mussels lying on their bed of crushed ice.

"Mussels," I said.

"What?" she said.

"*Musslor*," I said. "*Blåmusslor*."

"Are they alive?"

"Yes."

"But they don't have eyes!" she said.

"No," I said. "The shell is like their house. They live inside it."

The assistant put a second bag on the scales. It weighed in at 1.3 kilos. His powers of assessment were impressive, I thought to myself, putting Heidi down and stepping up to the till on the counter at the other end of the narrow room.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Some bread, perhaps. One of those baguettes over there. And maybe one of those," I said, pointing at one of the large, stone-shaped loaves.

"Certainly," he said, dropping each into separate bags. I took my card out of my back pocket.

"Can you think of anything else we need?" I said to Geir.

"No," he said. "Unless you were thinking of a crème brûlée for dessert?"

I shook my head.

"Ice cream and fruit."

"As ever," he said.

"Are you getting tired of it?" I asked him, glancing at the assistant as he entered the amounts into the till.

"Tired, me? Not at all. I'm a traditionalist. As long as you've got those wafers you always buy to go with it, that'll do me."

"You can't get them in Malmö. They're a Stockholm thing."

"I might have known," he said.

The assistant told me the amount.

"OK," I said, and put my card into the reader. I entered my PIN, which was no longer 0000, but nearly as easy to remember, since it consisted of the four figures in the top right corner of the key pad, 2536, took the two bags he handed me across the counter, waited for the message to appear on the display telling me the transaction was accepted, pulled out my card, put it in its little wallet, and slid it into my back pocket again as the assistant tore off the receipt and handed it to me.

"Thanks, have a nice day," I said, and stuffed the piece of paper into my other back pocket, which was a kind of archive for all my receipts.

"Same to you," he said.

"Come on, Heidi," I said. She was still standing at the shellfish counter looking at the display, but turned and came running to put her hand in mine, and we went out onto the sidewalk, where the air between the four-story buildings was warm and still.

"Where to now?" said Geir.

"The liquor store. Then Hemköp after that," I said.

"No need to break the bank for our sake," he said.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Besides, I like spending money. The more the merrier."

"Tell me about it," he said.

"What's a sausage at slaughtering time," I said. "That's what Mom used to say when we did the Christmas shopping and there was something I was pestering her for. She never had much money, but if there was ever anything I needed, clothes for instance when I was at the *gymnas*, or later, when I was in college, she always gave me the money for it. I never understood that. If she didn't have any money, how come she could suddenly afford to give me some? Now I've figured it out. Money's relative. It's an incredibly vague entity. Whenever I buy clothes for the kids I always buy a great big pile, because they can't go without. Then I'll grab a couple of CDs while I'm at it, because I need music when I'm working, and that's where the money comes from. Or I might blow a couple of thousand on a fantastic pair of shoes. What happens then is there's no more money left in the account, or very little. So I go through all our pockets, all the cupboards and drawers, and scrape together what I can find, maybe pick up the deposit on all our bottles or something, and then I buy some milk, bread, and spaghetti, and ignore all the bills. After a while, the reminders start coming in, and if I've got the money I pay them off, if I haven't I'll ignore them until the next step. It's not that long ago that someone came around with a statement of claim or whatever it's called, which I had to sign. Eventually, it'll come to enforcement and they can seize your property. But long before that happens I'll have money coming in again and be able to pay. I never connect the clothes for the kids or the CDs with suddenly having no money left, or someone coming to the door with a claim, that's something else entirely."

"We could never live like that," said Geir. "In our house everything's planned and by the book."

"That doesn't surprise me," I said. "But it does make things a whole lot easier. It takes it out of you, not being able to manage things properly."

We came onto the square and Heidi let go of my hand and ran up to the fountain. Geir and I followed her.

"I'm not sure you're right about that," he said. "I'd love to just let things go sometimes. But I can't."

Heidi had put an ice-cream wrapper in the water, it bobbed gently up and down on the ripples made by the fountain. I recognized the wrapper, it belonged to an ice cream called Strawberry something. Strawberry Delight? Strawberry Dream? Pink ice cream with a white chocolate coating.

"To will is to have to will, as Ibsen put it," said Geir.

"Now is the time to shut up! was something else he said. But there's a saying I believe in. Or not a saying, exactly, more a popular belief, to the effect that losing money is a good sign, meaning more will be coming your way. I totally believe that. The more you tighten your finances, the narrower the channels become that the money goes through. If everything's wide open, there's always going to be room for more."

"If you ever get the Nobel Prize, it won't be for economics," he said.

"It's not a bad theory, is it? I could actually be on to something! I could write about the emotions of economics, instead of the mathematics of economics."

"You're the most optimistic person I know," he said. "A depressed optimist. That's what you are."

"It's got nothing to do with optimism. It's all about accepting the way of things. This is how it is. Either you've got money, in which case you buy stuff, or else you haven't, in which case you don't."

"But you've just been talking about all the stuff you buy when you haven't got any money."

"But I have got money! If I'd saved it to pay the bills next week, I wouldn't have had any."

Heidi floated her ice-cream wrapper all the way around the fountain. When she appeared again she waved at us.

"Come on," I said. "We've got to get going."

"I'm all wet," she said.

"You'll dry in the sun," I said, taking her hand in mine and walking on just as a double-decker bus stopped outside the entrance to the Hilton.

"I still remember what a fantastic feeling it was to find an ATM in Bergen that wasn't connected to my own bank, so I could take out money I didn't have. It was like Christmas. Or when someone unexpectedly agreed to lend me a couple of hundred kroner."

"Or twenty thousand."

"You'll get it back as soon as my advance comes in. Don't worry."

I had borrowed twenty thousand Swedish kronor from him, which he had taken from a savings account of his that he never touched, money set aside for harder times. Linda had borrowed a similar amount from her friends, who also had money put away for the future. When Linda and I started a joint account together, we arranged for an amount to be transferred automatically into a savings account once a month, but either there wasn't enough money in the account for the transaction to go through, or else we spent the savings as soon as they went in.

Linda wanted so badly for us to have a savings account with money in it to support our future and our children's future. It had enormous symbolic value to her. It was what proper families did, and she wanted more than anything else that our family should be a proper family. Her romantic dreams were about ordinary life.

We stopped at the crossing. Over by the Hilton, retirees from the bus were shuffling off along the sidewalk. A classic American convertible with the top down came cruising along Södra Förstadsgatan, its engine purring. In Arendal in the seventies American cars were as cool as you could get. Here it just looked out of place, some clueless idiot out showing off.

"Linda's right too," I said. "Even if you don't think so. But if it's going to be hell for me, it's going to be hell for everyone else too."

"Why wouldn't I think so?"

I gave a shrug.

The light changed to green and we ambled over the road in a little throng of pedestrians.

"I saw the look you gave me when she started talking about how awful it's going to be for her," I said. "I suppose that's what I meant."

"What sort of look was that?"

"You know, kind of a telling look."

"You think I'd give you a telling look about something relating to Linda while she was there? I'd never dream of such a thing."

"Well, it looked like it to me, anyway," I said, letting go of Heidi's hand for a second while I wiped my palm dry against my trousers, then taking hold of it again. "She saw it too, I think. That's why she went off like that."

I pushed open the door of the Systembolaget, the state-run liquor store, gave it an extra shove so Geir could come through too, grabbed one of the gray baskets with the black handles, and went through the little automatic barrier, already scanning the signs above the aisles to see where the white wine was.

"I can understand it's not going to be much fun for her if everyone in Norway hates you all of a sudden and you're in the hot seat like some criminal. But she's not the one getting the worst of it, is she? So yes, that's the way I look at it."

"Daddy?" said Heidi.

"Yes?"

"Is this soda?"

She pointed to a display stand with various shelves that could be spun round. They were full of green bottles of Jever's nonalcoholic beer.

"No," I said. "It's beer. Do you want soda?"

She nodded.

"All right, we'll get some in Hemköp after we're done here. OK?"

She nodded again. We found the white wine section and stopped in front of the shelves. They were arranged according to price, the cheapest on the right, then more expensive the farther left you went. It suited me fine; I knew nothing about wines, so whenever we had guests for dinner I just went with one a bit left of center and hoped for the best.

I put three bottles of Chablis in the basket and looked at Geir.

"Will that be enough?"

"I should think so."

I looked around for the cognac, locating it in one of the intersecting aisles closer to the checkout. I went over and stood there for a moment looking at all the labels, unable to recall the system of quality grades, the O's and the X's, and the differences between them, and ended up putting a half-bottle of a brand I hadn't tasted before in the basket before joining the line behind a man of about fifty who gave off a blend of the characteristic sportiness a polo shirt and a pair of khaki shorts can lend to a tanned frame, and the alcoholism his fatigued features and lackluster eyes otherwise seemed to indicate. He bought two cartons of white wine.

"First came the volcanoes, then the dinosaurs," said Heidi.

"That's right!" I said.

"And then came the people."

"Yes."

"But the dinosaurs didn't know they were called dinosaurs."

I looked down at her. She was staring at a man in a wheelchair who had joined the other line, his basket resting in his lap. It sounded like something I could have said. But I couldn't remember having done so.

"Who told you that?" I asked her.

"What?"

"About the dinosaurs."

"No one. Why is he sitting in a wheelchair? Is he sick?"

When we had traveled home after spending last Christmas in Jølster, Heidi had suddenly fallen ill on the journey, and by the time we got to Flesland, Bergen's airport, she was so feeble we had to borrow a wheelchair for her. She still talked about it. It was one of the events that stood out in her life so far.

"I don't know," I said, and put the basket down on the little counter before the checkout as the man in front of me placed the divider bar behind the second of his cartons on the conveyor.

"I don't suppose prawns are anything special to you, are they, now that I come to think of it?" I said to Geir as he went past the till, presumably to bag the wine as it came down the conveyor. "It's probably all you eat when you're on Hisøya."

"You might have thought of that before," he said.

"Paying by card?" said the assistant.

"Yes," I said.

"Six hundred and twelve, then," he replied.

"Yeah, it was a bit stupid of me," I said, inserting my card into the reader. "You might have said so, though."

"We're here to spend time with you. We could have boiled onion and it wouldn't make any difference. For goodness' sake, man."

Two people in the other lane looked across at us.

I didn't care for this, and turned away so all they could see was my back.

We were speaking Norwegian, that must have been it. Unless they happened to think we were a pair of gay men out with our surrogate child. Or our niece. Weren't gay men often close to their nieces?

"Thank you," said the assistant.

Why on earth would they think that?

It was enough me looking like an idiot, with the beard and the long hair. I looked like a has-been heavy-metal musician rapidly heading for his fiftieth birthday. Oh, the fleshy face, the chubby cheeks, the deep furrows, and that wispy beard.

Heidi clung to my leg all of a sudden. I looked around. There was an old terrier sitting against the wall in the bagging area at the end of the checkout, its leash wrapped around the leg of a chair.

"It's all right, I'm sure he's friendly," I said. "Walk on the other side of me as we go out."

She did as I said. As soon as we were outside she changed sides again.

We strolled along the sidewalk, the flagstones cast into shade, the warm air seeming even warmer now after the air-conditioned environment of the liquor shop, then passed into sunlight as we crossed the side street, which was edged by leafy deciduous trees. They were invisible in the same way as all the parked cars were invisible, something one usually failed to notice, apart from at the end of April and the beginning of May when they blossomed white, as if dressed with snow, all the way down the street.

My anxiety suddenly intensified, it felt like it came streaming from every extremity to lump together in my abdomen, and I looked down at Heidi walking beside me, the small steps she took as she gazed toward the windows of the shopping center on the other side of the road. I was in pain, such terrible pain. It was like everything had come apart. And although I knew the reason, the book I had written and the reaction it had provoked, I had no idea why the emotions it sparked should be so powerful, it was as if they had been separated from their origin and were now running wild. This was the anatomy of guilt. Guilt was in everything, spreading vaporously through my organism, pervading my very fabric with its ruin and destruction. It was a guilt that could no longer simply be traced back and attributed to the terrible thing I had done, it was now rampant in its own right.

We passed between the sidewalk advertising on one side and the bike racks on the other, then went into the supermarket, where, to our right, the cell phone provider 3 had set up a stand that seemed to be mostly made of cardboard, manned by two young men of about twenty who stood there trying to grab the attention of passersby so they could ask them which provider they used. If they asked me, I invariably mumbled something vaguely dismissive, I wasn't at all comfortable, their energy was so incredibly cheerful and positive, mine so dismissive and negative. Who was that? Vanja always asked. What did they say? What did they want?

Now they were both engaged in discussion with a woman of about fifty, and we walked past without hindrance into the big store, with its checkouts on one side and the combined kiosk, gambling station, and post office on the other. I grabbed a basket, went through the barrier with Heidi, who looked up at the TV monitor that hung from the ceiling as we came toward the camera.

"Do you want a banana?" I said.

She nodded, let go of my hand, and stared up at the monitor's reaction as she put first one, then the other arm in the air. I picked up one of the ripe bananas whose skin was speckled brown, which they had put out for children to take in a small box next to the regular, hard, yellow-green bananas, peeled it, and handed it to her.

"We need lemons, mayonnaise, soda, and mineral water," I said.

"Don't forget the ice cream and the fruit," said Geir.

"You're right," I said.

"You don't look that well, are you OK?" he said.

"Does it show?"

He laughed.

"You look worried to death."

"I'll be all right," I said. "It's probably just that I'd much rather it all wasn't happening. I don't want to upset people. I don't want to offend anyone. I don't want to wreck anything for anyone."

I put five lemons in one of the smoky bags, which seemed immediately to yield to them, suppressing its faint transluscence in favor of the yellow of the fruit where it bulged against the plastic, bringing even the pores of the outer rind to the fore.

"I know," said Geir. "But it's done now."

"Yeah, and it hurts like hell," I said, looking away to see where Heidi was. "Come on, Heidi!"

She came running, curled her hand into mine, and walked at my side as we went down the aisles, past the fish counter and the ready-made meals, the cheese and charcuterie counter, with its cheeses the size of barbell weights, salami sausages like baseball bats, past the island displays of bread, the rows of cookies, to the slanting shelves of carbonated drinks, where I put two one-and-a-half-liter bottles of Loka mineral water, one with citrus, the other without, into the basket, followed by four glass bottles of Fanta.

"It makes no difference your telling me I've done nothing wrong," I said. "I can tell myself that. I've written about myself and my life with my father, what can be so terrible about that? That's what I tell myself. But it doesn't help in the slightest. It has no bearing on the matter. Arguments don't help. Legal arguments don't help. Literary arguments don't help. I've overstepped a mark, and it's got to me."

"If the sociologists could understand that, maybe the discipline would have a future," said Geir.

"Understand what?" I said, looking up from the tubes of mayonnaise, which reminded me of my childhood, and the jars of mayonnaise, which I considered somehow more sophisticated.

"Social boundaries, the things that regulate what we do and allow us to exist side by side with each other, aren't abstract. They're not thoughts. They're concrete, as you say. If you overstep the mark, it hurts. That's what you're sensing now."

"Sensing? But it hurts like I killed someone. Oh! And not just anyone, but someone close to me. That kind of feeling. Like something irreparable has happened."

I glanced around. Heidi was nowhere to be seen.

"Jar or tube?" I said. "Real or light? French or Swedish?"

"Take one of each," he said. A tube of Swedish light, and a jar of real French."

"You're a genius," I said. "I'd never have thought of that."

"Where's Heidi got to?" he said.

"She'll either be at the ice cream or down by the pet toys."

We set off toward the middle aisle. A child screamed somewhere, but it was a baby, six months old at most. As we got to the corner I looked up the aisle. There she was, with a pet toy in her hand, the kind that squeak when you press them, just as she was doing.

"Come on, Heidi," I said. "We've got to pay now."

She put it down and came running back to us.

"Can we have a rabbit?" she said.

"We already had a rabbit," I said. "It didn't really work out that well."

"Can't we have another one?" she said. "One that's nicer?"

I laughed.

"You were so afraid of it," I said.

"No, I wasn't."

"A little bit," I said.

"I wasn't."

"We'll have to see," I said.

The rabbit had come from one of the nursery staff. It was Linda's project. Cage and rabbit were transported home and put in the corner of the kitchen. The rabbit was frightened, and we were too. None of us dared take it out of its cage. John dropped all sorts of stuff in there. After two days we had to take it back. Hopefully, the episode had had no adverse affect on Vanja and Heidi. The arrangement had been that we could borrow it and see how it went, so it wasn't that big a failure, not like the aquarium, when all the fish had died one after another over the course of the spring.

It hurt to think about it. The things we did were their childhood.

I stopped at the ice cream, picked out a tub of Carte d'Or with real vanilla, which I supposed was what the little black specks in the yellowish ice cream were, shards of vanilla pod, and put it in the basket. I looked at Heidi.

"You can decide what kind of ice creams you want. Have a look in there," I said, indicating the other counter where they had popsicles too. "Look at the poster and see which ones you want."

She studied the various sorts.

"That one," she said, pointing to a Piggelin. "No, I mean that one," she said, and pointed at a Daim.

"That's the biggest one they've got," I said. "Are you sure?"

She nodded, and I put three Daim and an ice-cream sandwich in the basket.

"There we are," I said. "Now we can go up and pay."

"Fruit?" said Geir.

"I'll get some from the stall outside the apartment. It's cheaper there. And better too."

We got in line, there were about ten other people in front of us. I put the basket down on the floor.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I forgot the wafers."

I hurried over to the far side of the supermarket and stared at the rows of wafers, there had to be fifty different varieties, but none of the fluted kind I wanted, or at least I couldn't see any. Maybe they had some more on the other side? Then, suddenly, on a lower shelf I hadn't noticed before, at a right angle to the other shelves, and separated from them by a two-meter-wide passage, in their blue-and-white packaging, were the Belgian wafers I'd only ever seen before in Stockholm.

Perfect.

I grabbed two packs and hurried back to the checkout, where Geir and Heidi were now sixth in line.

"Your evening's just been saved," I said, putting the wafers in the basket. "Belgian waffle wafers."

"Now I'm a happy man," he said.

I picked up the basket and kept hold of it in my hand as step-by-step we progressed slowly toward the till; there was no way in the world I was going to end up the sort of person who shoved their basket over the floor with their foot while they flicked through a newspaper they had no intention of buying, putting it back in the rack as soon as it got to be his turn. I took four lightbulbs from the shelf next to the conveyor; the bulb in the hall by the kitchen had gone, I remembered, and the one above the toilet in the bathroom.

Heidi slipped off to the end of the conveyor as our turn approached, clambering up onto the counter that was intended for bagging your purchases, then looking up at me in case I shook my head. I didn't, so she stayed put, watching the first items bought by the man in front of us come sailing along on their black conveyor-belt river, gently sliding ashore onto the sedate metal, there to be buffeted by the items that followed, in patterns of movement not unlike those made by sticks and plastic detritus in the quiet pools that came after swift-flowing sections of water, only much slower.

He placed the divider bar on the conveyor, thereby signaling that it was our turn, and I lifted the basket up onto the ledge that was there for the purpose, putting the items one by one onto the conveyor, the big bottles of mineral water upright so they could be easily scanned, but the motion caused them first to wobble, then to fall, one against the other, like a pair of drunks. The assistant was the young man with the funny voice and the crutch, he glanced up at me and uttered his mechanical *hej*. I infused my own with a degree of enthusiasm, thinking vaguely it would add some touch of humanity to his plight, this conveyor-belt reality he occupied, but forgetting to take into account my otherwise dismissive and disinterested body language that completely invalidated any hint of warmth there might have been in my voice.

"*Hej*," I said, taking my Visa card out of my pocket.

"One hundred and sixty-five, ninety," he said.

"OK," I said, noticing the top edge of the Hemköp customer card I hadn't used for some days, pulling it out and swiping it through the reader, though I wasn't sure why, it verged on the compulsive, because although I'd spent vast amounts of money there over the past few years and saved up tons of bonus points, as the monthly statements I received in the mail informed me, I'd never cashed them in, and since they ran out after a certain time the action of swiping the card had become fairly meaningless. On the other hand, I thought I might as well start now.

I inserted my Visa card, entered my PIN, and accepted the amount.

"A bag might have been practical," Geir said.

"Damn, I forgot," I said, and tried to catch the assistant's attention, though he seemed not to notice.

"Can I have a bag as well, please?" I said.

Would he say it was OK and dismiss the extra cost with a wave of his hand, or would he enter the amount and make me get my card out again?

"That'll be two kronor," he said.

You little shit. Fuck you.

I did my shopping there every single day.

"OK," I said, inserting my card again, entering my PIN again, accepting the amount again. By the time it was done, Geir and Heidi had filled the bag with our items and we could go back out into the warm, late-summer afternoon.

We bought strawberries on the square, and Heidi carefully carried one of the overfilled cardboard cartons all the way to the elevator, Geir and I trudging along behind with our shopping bags. In the elevator I realized I'd forgotten to get flowers. A bunch of white roses would have been nice for the table, setting off the fiery red of the prawns and the yellow of the lemons. Never mind, we would have to do without. I couldn't be bothered to go out again, even if the florist's was only across the square.

The elevator came to a halt and I shoved the door open with my elbow, holding it there for Geir and Heidi, who still had the little box of strawberries in her hands, cautious as if she were holding a small animal. Geir opened the door and as soon as I was inside I dumped the bags next to the row of shoes and went off to the bathroom, the one farthest inside.

"Mommy, Mommy, I carried the strawberries," Heidi called out.

I felt a brief tingle of happiness in my chest, at the same time registering that Vanja and Njaal were still in the bedroom as I pressed the bathroom door handle down. I dropped my pants and sat down on the toilet seat. Next to me was an issue of the Swedish football magazine *Offside*. Argentina was due to play in the Andes, where the air was so thin it was by no means unusual for players to pass out, they even had oxygen tanks ready to go!

I could hear Vanja's voice next door, then Njaal's. I guessed that Vanja was showing him her computer game, the one she got for her birthday. It was about dogs, and the idea was to get them to do various things. Most of the functions were still too difficult for her, but some she managed, like making the dog jump on and off a log to snatch different objects as they came flying through the air. Heidi had been given the matching version with cats, but she was still too little to get anything out of it and was happy enough watching her older sister play.

A small silverfish had paused on one of the floor tiles, perhaps twenty centimeters in front of my feet. It looked like a trilobite or some other small fossilized creature from prehistory. Such a simple creation. There was something crude and matter-like about it, as if it were a tiny blob of clay or a catfish that had been given feet.

I leaned forward to squash it under my finger, but the moment I moved it darted away toward the wall and vanished through a gap under the baseboard.

There were probably quite a few under the laundry baskets. And most likely in all the dust that had collected under the window in the corner, too. A little colony of silverfish.

Footsteps sounded in the hall, and since Vanja and Njaal were still in the bedroom it had to be Heidi. The children hardly ever used this bathroom, so even though the door was unlocked there was no reason to fear they would come in. It did happen on occasion, because they were by no means entirely predictable, though only rarely. With Linda it was different, if I heard her coming I would grip the door handle and press it upward in case she tried to press it down and come in. The first time Yngve had come to see us here he had asked for a key, finding it unthinkable to go to the toilet without being able to lock the door. It had been just as unthinkable for me too, or at least deeply alien, and for the first few weeks I had felt exposed and vulnerable, but then I got used to it. Somehow I always knew where everyone was and if anyone approached I would hear them. That we didn't have a key was because of Vanja and Heidi, so they wouldn't lock themselves in. It was about the only safety measure we had when it came to the children; all the sockets were open, all the shelves and cupboards unsecured, and the stove too, and the sharp knives and scissors lay within easy reach in one of the bottom drawers. Nothing had happened so far, and nothing would, because parents have a keen sense of what their children might conceivably get up to, and one thing I was certain I would never see was Vanja or Heidi with a big kitchen knife in their hands, or John crawling about on the stove like a little monkey. Moreover, I always knew exactly where they were, and almost always what they were doing. Of course, all these assumptions could be invalidated in the space of a few horrible seconds, but I didn't believe that would ever happen, and I never felt less than comfortable about their safety at home.

Outside the door, Heidi passed by and went into the bedroom. I picked the magazine up again and carried on reading. Once, we caught a ling in the sea off Torungen, I suddenly remembered. It had been windy, but the air had been warm; it must have been sometime in the summer. We were in the boat Dad bought when I was eleven or twelve, a seventeen-foot Rana Fisk with a twenty-five-horsepower Yamaha outboard. Yngve was with us, his hair blown to the side, and of course Dad, that dark figure of which I was so watchful. Waves chopped and dashed against the yellow fiberglass hull. The line, running barely visible through the air, down into the blue water. The first glimpses of a fish, which instantly lent depth to all the blue, rather like the first stars in a sky still light in early evening. A dense green shape, now here, now there, whiter with Dad's every pull.

What was it?

A long, regular body, yellow-gray and white, with a hideous face and wide, bulging eyes.

"It's a deepwater fish," Dad said. "A ling, I think."

Inquisitive and filled with pity, I stared at it. Its stomach had burst, he said, and dropped it onto the floor of the boat, where it lay lifeless, before he cast his line out again, and then I remembered I was holding one too, and tugged it hard, gripping it tight between my fingers.

The feeling of floating on the surface of such enormous depths.

Dad.

What had I done to him?

A stab of distress and terror went through my chest. A moment later, when I turned on the tap and looked at myself in the mirror, I saw no sign of my inner turmoil. If I hadn't seen that same face, those same eyes, so many times before, and associated them so closely with who I was, they could just as easily have belonged to someone else.

My eyes looked sad, my features stark and, with the deep furrows that lined my cheeks and brow, mask-like.

I twisted the thin pole with the little knob on the end and opened the blind, looked across at the hotel, above which the evening sun angled down, there were people sitting on the steps of the square and on the half-meter-high wall my children always wanted to balance on whenever we went to the park just along the road, and at the same time I took the towel from the peg and dried my hands. There was no getting away from the guilt I felt, it had transplanted itself from the abstract reality of the mind, where it could be countered by abstract means, to the physical reality of the body, where it could not be countered at all because the body had no means of defense but itself, and could only run, walk, sit, sleep, and a few other such things. It felt as if I were a room, and inside that room with me there was something horrifying. It was no use running, because if I ran, the whole room ran with me. There was no escape, for the simple reason that it was there. It didn't matter if what I'd done was reasonable, if I was within my rights or not, because it was *there*, indisputable, inescapable, and all I could do was wait until it was something that was there no more.

The door behind me opened, and I spun round.

It was Heidi. There were tears in her eyes.

"What's the matter, *lilla tjejen*?" I said, hanging the towel back on the peg.

She came up and wrapped her arms around my legs. I lifted her up and kissed her cheek.

"Won't they play with you?" I asked.

She shook her head and stared stiffly into space.

"Come on, you can stay with me and we'll make some dinner."

"I don't want to," she said.

I went out with her on my arm.

"How about a film, then?" I said. "Or *Bolibompa*? It'll be on in a minute."

She nodded.

I went through the hall and into the living room, where I put her down on the sofa – I could hear Linda, Christina, and Geir talking in the other room – and looked around for the remote. Normally it was on the bookshelf where the children couldn't reach it. But it wasn't there.

Oh, for crying out loud.

John started wailing in the bedroom. I heard Linda get to her feet, and a second later I caught a fleeting glimpse of her as she passed the open doorway while I scanned the long windowsill that ran the length of the far wall. It wasn't there either.

Heidi looked up at me.

"I can't find the remote," I said.

She stared toward the table in front of her. There it was, halfhidden under the newspaper Linda must have been reading while we were out.

"There it is," I said. "Now, let's see!"

Linda came in with John on her arm. He was curled up like a little monkey, pressing his cheek to her chest.

"Put *Bolibompa* on," she said.

"That's what I'm doing," I said.

When the sound came on and the picture appeared, John turned his head to see. Linda put him down next to Heidi, and he accepted this without protest. TV was like a drug to them.

"What time do you think we should eat?" said Linda.

"I don't know," I said. "Around seven, maybe?"

"What about the children? I can't see them shelling prawns."

"That's a point," I said. "I didn't think of them when we were shopping. Do we have anything? I can have a look," I said.

Njaal and Vanja came charging through the hall.

"Is *Bolibompa* on?" Vanja called out.

"In a minute," I called back, went into the kitchen, and opened the fridge. There were some eggs. Carrots, potatoes, yellowing broccoli. Half a bag of fish cakes. The freezer next to it was mainly full of things Linda's mother had made for us, and various cuts of meat she'd bought, besides some peas, a few half-empty bags of chicken drumsticks, a couple of loaves of bread we'd frozen and forgotten about. But oh, thank goodness, there on the bottom shelf was a pizza! I looked up at Linda, who was standing behind me.

"They'll be more than happy with pizza, don't you think?"

She nodded.

"I'll make it for them now," I said. "They can eat in front of the TV."

I took the pizza box out and put it on the counter, switched the oven on, found the scissors in the drawer, tore off the long strip along the side of the box, tipped it so the pizza itself, round and surprisingly heavy, slid out into my hand, snipped open the see-through plastic it was wrapped in, which was stiff and had a kind of crinkly crispness about it, nothing like the see-through plastic of the bags we bought our fruit in, which were looser in some way, or the thin cling film for wrapping food up before putting it in the fridge. Nor was it anything like the slightly thicker, more durable plastic that covered the corn-on-the-cob we sometimes bought, or the six-packs of beer.

"In that case we might as well eat after they've gone to bed," said Linda.

"Sounds good to me," I said, taking the pizza out through the opening I had made in the wrapper and allowing it to rest in my palm, as if my hand were a serving plate, while with the other I pulled out the metal drawer underneath the stove and took out a mottled brown or, more accurately, blackened baking sheet on which I placed the pizza before sliding it into the oven, crumpling the wrapper and taking it to the bin under the sink, which was so full I had to press the garbage down with my fists in order to make room. Just as I had done so and was about to close the cupboard door, momentarily occupied by the thought of the garbage rising slowly up to the lid again, the phone rang.

I went warily into the hall. Someone had intruded into our home, he or she was here now, ringing their presence out into the room. I paused at the table under the mirror and picked up the phone. It was an 04 number, meaning it was from someone in Malmö.

"Yeah, hello?" I said.

"Hi, Stefan here."

"Hi, Stefan!"

"How's it going, all right?"

"Fine," I said, noticing the two bags of groceries I'd dumped next to the shoes and forgotten all about. "How about you?"

"Fine, too. We were thinking of going to the beach tomorrow. Would you like to come with us? We can just take Vanja along, if that's better for you."

"Sounds great," I said. "Only we've got visitors at the moment, so I think we're going to be spending the day with them, I'm afraid."

"Oh, I see. It's short notice, I know. Still, not to worry."

"Some other time."

"Definitely. Speak to you soon, then."

"Yeah. Take care."

"Thanks, same to you. *Hej då*."

"*Hej då*."

I hung up, took the two bags with me into the kitchen and put them down on the table, put the paper bags of prawns in the fridge and the two loaves on the big cutting board, bent down to the oven and looked at the pizza that lay inside, illuminated in its little compartment as if it were on TV, but of course it was nowhere near ready yet, I had only put it in a few minutes ago.

Bolibompa's signature tune came from the living room. I went and stood in the doorway. Christina was sitting in a chair with Njaal in her lap, Linda on the sofa with John in hers, and Heidi snuggled up to her, Vanja on a chair in the middle of the floor. All the blinds were down, but there was still so much sunlight in the room it was hard to see the picture on the screen.

I ought to have sat down with Vanja in my lap. But I couldn't let Geir sit on his own in the other room. I could see what it would look like from his point of view, each of us sitting there with a child in our lap, watching children's TV. It didn't look good.

I went up to the back of Vanja's chair, put one hand on her belly and kissed the top of her head. She didn't so much as look up at me, concentrating all her attention on the television, and so I stepped past the table and went into the other room, where Geir was standing at the bookshelf.

"Going out for a smoke?" he said as he turned around.

"Good guess," I said. "Are you coming with me?"

He nodded, poured himself a cup of coffee, and stepped outside. I filled my own cup with what was left and followed him out. He had taken my chair again, and again my inner being protested at the way everything was wrong with the angle at which I now had to sit. Maybe it was the fact I had my back to the door that made me so uncomfortable. I put my feet up on the railing and lit a smoke.

"Njaal and Vanja are getting along all right," I said.

"Yes," he said. "They're doing great together. Christina's happy too."

"Is she?"

"Yes, she likes being here. Plus it's a joy for her to see Njaal having such a good time."

"I don't understand that," I said. "About being here, I mean."

"I like it here too."

"It must be the mess of the place."

"Yeah, it's that as well. There's a nice, relaxed feel about things. It feels free."

"I'm glad you think so," I said. "Personally, I'm anything but relaxed."

"You're not stressed by us being here, are you?"

"No, not at all. It's all this business about Gunnar."

"There's nothing you can do about it. Just let it go. What happens happens."

"Yes," I said.

Our top-floor neighbors in the building farther along were sitting out on their balcony eating. They were perhaps twenty meters away, but up here among the rooftops it was close enough to be encroaching, and when I was on my own and they were sitting out I could hear everything they said if I concentrated and they didn't lower their voices the way they might if they knew I was there. On the other side, at the end of our own building, I could stare right into the kitchen of an elderly couple, they often sat there smoking, and after three years their habits were nearly as familiar to me as my own. I assumed they looked at me in the same way; at any rate, our eyes occasionally met and we always looked away. Such visual encounters were strange, our entering fleetingly into each other's minds in that way, they into mine, certainly, they meant we somehow knew each other, balancing continually between seeing and knowing on the one hand, and looking away and not wanting to know on the other. Opposite, in the apartments belonging to the same building as the balcony couple, I could likewise gaze in on the private lives of families, couples, and singles, usually without interest, merely noting what I saw, but every now and then something happened that insisted on occupying me for a moment, for instance the time one couple, the corner of whose kitchen was as much as I could see, suddenly were a family with a little baby. When the child was visible, half seated, half lying in its baby bouncer, it was as if it were presiding over them, because everything they did was in some way related to its wants and needs, which was a completely new thing.

"You've done nothing wrong," said Geir.

"But I have, obviously," I said. "I'm trying to live with it."

"Your dad's dead. Your grandma's dead."

"And your empathy's dead."

"Look who's talking."

"Imagine there's a life after this," I said. "If we take that thought seriously. Only the body dies. The soul lives on in the world to come, in whatever form. What if it's true? I mean, really true. It struck me the other day. What if there is life after death? It'd mean my dad's out there somewhere waiting for me. And he's going to be angry as hell."

Geir laughed.

"You can relax. He's dead as a dodo."

"Gunnar isn't, though."

"But what can he do? OK, he can sue you. But for what? Defaming your father's name? He wasn't exactly Jesus, was he?"

"Gunnar says I'm a Judas. In which case he must have been Jesus, since he's the one I'm betraying."

"If he was Jesus, that makes your grandmother the Virgin Mary. And your grandfather was Joseph, the carpenter. Besides, Jesus didn't have a son to betray him."

"I wonder if it was actually Brutus he meant. He was a kind of son. Brutus Juliussen. Et tu, Brute? No, I only ate one."

"You don't have to say everything that comes into your mind, you know. Kids do that. Adults can put their utterances through quality control first."

"I remember crying when I read about Julius Caesar. His death. I always did whenever I read biographies. Because of course they all die. Thomas Alva Edison. Henry Ford. Benjamin Franklin. Marie Curie. Florence Nightingale. Winston Churchill. Louis Armstrong. Theodore Roosevelt."

"You read Theodore Roosevelt's biography when you were a kid?"

"I did, yes. There was a series. About twenty of them, I suppose. One on each. Most were about Americans. A lot of presidents. Walt Disney, I remember him. Robert Oppenheimer. No, I'm joking. But Abraham Lincoln, at any rate. And when they died, no matter how, I always cried. But in a good way."

"Because it wasn't you!"

"No, no, it wasn't that. It was more that they'd overcome all this injustice in their lives and eventually succeeded in what they wanted to do. It would have been a lot sadder if they had died before achieving what they were meant to. Like Scott. Scott was bad, I was out of it for days."

"He probably wasn't happy about it either."

"Whereas Amundsen's death was a bit more ambivalent. He did what he set out to. And then there was something decent about him vanishing while trying to save someone else."

I stubbed out my cigarette and got up.

"But what about Nansen, what did he actually do? I mean, what did he achieve? Were there any discoveries? Did he reach somewhere first? I never actually got what it was about him."

"You may as well ask," he said, getting to his feet. "He crossed Greenland on skis, and was frozen in by the ice on board the *Fram*."

I opened the door and went inside.

"I think I got frozen in one winter," I said over my shoulder. "The house was like a fridge."

"Then there was all that stuff about his refugee passports," Geir went on behind me. "And Quisling, of course."

"There we go again. Gunnar called me a quisling too."

"Who's Nansen then?"

"I suppose he is," I said, and sat down again. "It can't be my dad, anyway. He was useless on skis."

When *Bolibompa* was finished, I moved the IKEA camp bed that Njaal had slept on the night before into the children's room so we could sit in the living room in the evening and not have to worry about waking him up. After that I got started on the dinner while Linda and Christina put them all to bed and Geir sat on a chair in the kitchen so we could keep on gabbing. I put the prawns in a big green bowl, sliced the lemons, and laid them out on a green dish, cut the bread and arranged it in a basket, took four plates and four wineglasses out of the cupboard, got the butter and mayonnaise from the fridge, carried it all out onto the front balcony, where the sun was still shining in that hazily unreal way it does on a summer evening when the shadows grow long and the day draws to an end, yet the air is still warm. When people finish their jobs and turn toward home with the sun still blazing, yet slowly sinking in a great blue sky.

The children's voices drifted through the half-open window of their room and out onto the balcony. They were loud and giggling, as boisterous as they were only at bedtime. I set the table, then stood for a moment with my hands curled around the metal railing, looking down on the square below. The shadows of the buildings opposite almost covered the entire area. But the wall beneath me was lit up, the windows sparkling in the sun.

In the kitchen I rinsed the strawberries and put them in a white bowl, and got the wine and mineral water out of the fridge.

"That's about it," I said. "A glass of wine while we're waiting?"

Geir nodded and followed me out. As I opened the door and stepped out onto the balcony, a great big seagull took off from the table, twisting its body away as it flapped its wings, and the next second it was airborne and gone. In its beak was a prawn, and a few others lay scattered next to the bowl and on the wooden decking.

"Did you see that?" I exclaimed.

"How could I miss it?"

"The cheeky bastard."

"What do you expect? A bowl of prawns left out on a deserted sixth-floor balcony. It's an open invitation, isn't it?"

I sat down, pressed the corkscrew into the cork and twisted it a few times before pulling it toward me until it released from the neck of the bottle with a gentle *thwop*. The dark green glass misted. It was such a fine color. Cool green, bottle green, fjord green. And then the pale yellow of the wine in the shiny glass.

"*Skål*," said Geir.

"*Skål*," I said, taking a sip and lighting a cigarette. The taste that assailed my palate as I bent my head to the unmoving flame of the lighter reminded me of summer nights in Kristiansand when I was still a teenager and filled me with the urge to drink until I dropped.

"Nice wine," I said.

"Lovely," he said.

That was one of the things Gunnar had accused me of, drinking and smoking dope when I was still at *gymnas* in Kristiansand. Partly, I supposed, he believed it to be a sign of poor character, meaning I was unreliable and possibly also deranged, certainly not a decent human being, and partly it was meant to explain why I apparently hated Grandma enough to write six books about her to tarnish her name. I understood what he'd written, it was all somehow within the bounds of a logic I knew, but he hadn't written to me, he'd written to the publisher. Did he think they would pull the novel because its author had drunk beer in his youth, and maybe even smoked dope, and for that reason was surely a despicable person? It didn't matter, I still felt that was what I was, a despicable person, but it was my emotions that hadn't changed since I was sixteen, not my reasoning. My reasoning saw things differently. I knew who I was and what I was worth. I knew, too, that being human meant being inadequate, to be human was to err and never quite be good enough. When I looked around me, that was what I saw. Weakness everywhere, shortcomings and flaws, often congealed within a character in the form of self-righteousness, smugness, and conceit. Humility, a word so often bandied about in public contexts, was something hardly anyone knew the meaning of anymore. Only those who had every reason to be conceited, those of real caliber, showed no trace of conceit, only they were humble. Conceit and self-righteousness were part of a defense mechanism without which a person would be crushed under the weight of their own weaknesses, shortcomings, and flaws, and that fact underlay almost every discussion I witnessed, verbal as well as written, in newspapers and on television, but also in my immediate surroundings, in the private sphere. Such weakness could not be admitted, since so much would be lost, and the form of those discussions and the power of the media resolved it by endowing it with their strength. That was why opinions were so important in society, through opinions we appropriated a strength and supremacy we did not possess. That was the function of form here, to obscure the weakness of the individual. Any joining together, around a set of morals, a bureaucracy, an ideology, obscured the weakness of the individual. I knew this because it was what I saw, but when I encountered such things myself, that knowledge was preempted by my emotions, which mechanically fell in with them, slinging me off into the nightmare of feeling myself guilty or inferior. In my dealings with the tax authorities, the bank or credit companies, I was consumed with guilt. Sneaking around the subdivision gardens I was consumed with guilt. Dropping off and collecting the kids from nursery I was consumed with guilt. I knew that I was not inferior to anyone I met there, my weaknesses and shortcomings were no greater than theirs, but they weren't representatives of themselves, they were representatives of a system in which there were rules, and those rules were very simple: if you followed them you were a good person, if you didn't you were a bad person. I tried to follow them, but because I was undisciplined I often found myself breaking them. I knew the reason, it wasn't because I was bad, sloppy, or lackadaisical, but knowing why could in no way make up for what the eyes of the system saw, which was someone who didn't follow the rules, and this I incorporated into the person I was. Whenever I saw a real work of art or read real literature, all this was brutally shoved aside, for there was another dimension to being human, something quite different, of a different quality, dignity, and significance, it was what had inspired medieval man to build such enormous cathedrals against whose magnificence they became what they actually were: lowly, insignificant, and inconsiderable beings. Tiny little farts of life, one could say. Yet they had built them! They were creators of astonishing, otherworldly beauty, but they were farts too. This was the truth of being human. It was important and unimportant at the same time. Weakness was important, and greatness was important. But not what lay in between. The kind of weakness that hid away in the crowd and believed itself to be strength, that saw neither weakness nor greatness, was what I, driven from counter to counter, allowed myself to be intimidated by and to which I submitted. The yearning to drink until I dropped was the yearning to remove myself from it all, if only for a few hours, and the yearning to write something fantastic, something truly splendid and otherworldly, was part of the same thing. It wasn't an escape from trivial everyday things, because life itself is trivial, but an escape from trivial life's invasion of my self, which forced on me the idea that I wasn't a good and decent person but a fool, conceited and inadequate, and which had been forcing that same idea on me ever since I was sixteen and started drinking in Kristiansand, under my uncle's ever-watchful eye, or so it felt. What I yearned for and had been oblivious to at that time, but which twenty years later I had managed to identify and which was totally unrealizable, was what Hölderlin had expressed when he penned that simple plea: "Come out into the open, my friend."

What was "the open"?

It was freedom, it was utopia.

But what did it mean?

Certainly not that we should talk about everything, account for everything, abolish the borders between ourselves, others, and the world, because that would only be to set up new borders somewhere else and to let the human prevail, and what would happen then, and happen soon, was that reality would be gone.

What Hölderlin meant no one can know for sure anymore. Like all the other Romantics, Hölderlin was a child of the French Revolution, of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and that radical transformation of the old societal order must to them have seemed like a sudden opening through which a whole new potential was revealed. The prevailing order, society's order or the world order, makes all other ways by which life might be organized seem threatening, dangerous, or corrosive, for which reason such possibilities are not real alternatives, until its own inconsistencies bring it toppling down, to be replaced by a new order, which then becomes the prevailing order that for all the world must not be tampered with. But reading Hölderlin it is difficult to understand "the open" as a political category, concerned with class, relations of production, or material conditions of life. No, the open as Hölderlin sees it was, I imagined, an existential category. Hölderlin was a poet, and what was utopian to a poet was a world without language. Poetry tried to enter into the space between language and the world so as to stand before the world just as it was in itself, but conveying that insight, which perhaps was the oldest of all insights, or committing it to paper, could only be done by the intervention of language, and what had been won was then Orpheus-like and instantly lost. In the world outside language, one could only ever be alone.

But what kind of world was that?

A world without language was a world without categories, where every single thing, no matter how modest, stood out in its own right. It was a world without history, in which only the moment existed. A pine tree in that world was not a "pine," nor was it a "tree," but a nameless phenomenon, something growing up out of the ground, which moved when the wind blew. Indeed, if one stood on top of a hill one could see how these living organisms swayed this way and that as the wind passed over the flat ground, and one could hear the rushing sound they made. This sight, and this sound, could not be conveyed. As such, it would be as if they didn't exist. But they did, and do. All it takes is one step and the world is transformed. One step and you enter the world of no names. It is blind, and you see the blindness. It is chaotic, and you see the chaos. It is beautiful, and you see the beauty. It is open, this is the open, and it is meaningless, this is the meaningless. It is also divine, indeed this is the divine. The little blue box with its red sun and the coarsened black surface of its sides, inside, the white matchsticks with their red, bead-like heads of phosphorus rest as if in a bed, is divine as it lies there motionless on the kitchen shelf with its thin covering of dust, faintly illuminated by the light of day outside the window, which slowly darkens as a black blanket of cloud drifts in over the city, and the first electrical charges snap through it at hurtling speed, following their unpredictable paths, thunder rumbling heavily in the sky. The wind as it picks up, and the rain that begins to fall, this is the divine. The hand that grasps the box, pushing the tiny bed out with the tip of an index finger to extract a matchstick, is a divine hand, and the fiery flame that flares up as the hand strikes the red phosphorus bead against the coarse surface, becoming, in the space of a second, a steady, much gentler flame, is the flame of the divine. Yet it burns in the shelter of our language, it burns in the shelter of our categories, it burns in the shelter of all the relations and connections those categories establish. The thought that a state of human innocence once existed, an uncomplicated nearness to the world, in what mythology calls the Garden of Eden, the place from which we come and to which we long to return because there we were at one with our surroundings and with God in a kind of original state of nature, is treacherous in that it implies time, a before and a now, whereas in reality only the now exists, in reality there is but one time for everything: the flame of the divine is burning now, the Garden of Eden exists now, all it takes is one step and you are there. But that step is impossible for us to take, for we are humans, and it is a step that can lead us only into the inhuman.

To be human is to be several. To be social. The social world is a community. The boundaries of the community are the boundaries of the language. When Hölderlin finally stepped into the open he vanished into madness. In his poems he is not mad, but nor are they in the open, they stand within the social world, looking in at the open. This is what religion has always done. Olav Nygaard called his collection of poetry *Ved vedbande*, which is to say at the boundary of the divine. Not within the divine, but at its edge. When religion is dismissed as superstition, and poetry becomes marginalized and no longer believes in its own significance, the open vanishes from the sphere of the human, which closes in on itself, since nothing outside it any longer exists.

Is that a loss? As long as what is outside the human sphere remains impossible to reach, as long as the world in its essence can never manifest itself to us, but merely reveal itself in our language and categories, in other words as something within the human sphere, and the world without language, outside the sphere of the human, is a utopia in the actual sense of the world, a nonplace, why should we strive toward it? Why not simply turn away?

The reason is that it is where we are from, and where we are destined to return. It is because the heart is a bird that flutters in the chest, it is because the lungs are two seals through which our air smoothly passes, it is because the hand is a crab and the hair a haystack, the arteries rivers, the nerves lightning. It is because the teeth are a stone wall and the eyes apples, the ears mussels, and the ribs a gate. It is because it is always dark inside the brain, and still. It is because we are earth. It is because we are blood. It is because we must die.

Death, that great restorer of stillness, is outside the sphere of the human too and cannot manifest itself to us, for as it comes to us we cease to exist, much as language ceases to exist as it comes to that which is without language. Death is what the human sphere borders, the absence of language is what our human world borders, and it is against its darkness that we and the world shine. Death and the material world are the absolute, unattainable to us, for as we become them we cease to be ourselves. Our world, shining against the darkness of the it, is however not absolute, but relative and inconstant. Natural science is relative, morality is relative, social science, philosophy, and religion are relative, everything within the sphere of the human is relative. The distinction between discovery and invention is not great, and when it comes to their consequences is nonexistent. Did red and white blood cells exist in the seventeenth century? Yes, they did, but not to the human mind. They were in other words a part of the world but not of our reality. That reality is our world, and for that reason the world of the seventeenth century was different from the world of today, though the sky and the earth and the twinkling stars are of the same nature and material now as then. Darwin wrote a book, and whereas biological nature before Darwin existed spatially, after Darwin it existed temporally. The world was the same, reality changed. To describe the world is to establish reality. This is the same thought Harold Bloom expresses when he writes that Shakespeare invented man. When Shakespeare's characters step forward on the stage and reason with themselves, as if aside from the action yet still a part of it, haunted by doubt or stricken by love, at odds with themselves or astonished at themselves, man is then no longer merely a creature of action, a seat of emotions, but also a locus in which these emotions are confronted by a reflective self. It is the appearance of this self that arises from Shakespeare, in Bloom's opinion, prompting him with some justification to claim that Shakespeare invented humanity, since only when something becomes visible to others besides the single individual does it become real. Reality, our human reality, consists of all that is visible and may be perceived within and between us. Whenever that changes, reality changes too. This is why Greek Antiquity has been such a point of reference in Western civilization for more than two thousand years, and continues to be; so many of our conceptions about the world and about humanity were founded in that culture. History, philosophy, politics, natural science; everything comes from there. The only aspects of our own culture that don't come from there are religion, which is Jewish, and the machine, which is our own. That a culture as supreme as the Greek, with all its theoretical advances, looked on religion with such mild disdain is not surprising, though their dismissive attitude toward technology most certainly is, not least given their increasingly skilled craftsmanship. Yet if we accept Arendt's idea that the ancient Greeks sought freedom in the public domain and found the essence of humanity to be there, in what could be laid out in front of everyone, whereas in everything concerning day-to-day subsistence, the material needs of human beings, they saw constraint and necessity, their lack of interest in mechanics and technology, in practical knowledge, becomes easier to understand. The Greeks invented democracy but were unable to conceive of the water closet. Quite as extraordinary is the fact that these people who invented history were unfamiliar with the diary. Still, it surely was not the case that everything to do with the home lay in shadow, a kind of unarticulated zone of reality, with only what went on in public having actual existence by virtue of being formulated there for all, because the private sphere too enjoyed its own stage in Ancient Greece, in drama, more precisely the comedies, which dealt with the less elevated stuff of life and were founded on recognition. The freedom that lies in laughter is quite different from that which lies in the expression of virtues, which is perhaps why Arendt doesn't mention it, since it strives toward nothing, establishes nothing, changes nothing, distinguishes nothing, but exists simply for the moment, having no other purpose than to make it tolerable.

What do we laugh at in comedy? The answer is everything we deem to be base and normally conceal: the life of the body, excrement, copulation, bodily noises, and all human properties that pretend to be something they are not, impossible for a person to admit to: envy, conceit, avarice, self-righteousness, self-effacement, unscrupulousness, ambition, demanding esteem when none is appropriate. The striving to be something other than what one is, is the theme of comedy. Comedy exposes, and the humor lies in the gap revealed between the world as it wants to be and the world as it is. In that exposure lies an insight to the effect that the social world is a game that proceeds according to certain rules, some things are hidden, some are shown, and that in a way we live an illusion. The game depends on everyone taking part, the illusion that everyone believes in it. Comedy breaks that contract and as such it is the truest and most realistic of all genres. It is liberating in the sense that what it says is: this is what it really means to be human, and all of us are human. Yet it also constrains, a hindrance to anyone who wishes for something else and who believes it possible to elevate himself above this lowly world of excrement, copulation, envy, conceit, and constant misunderstandings, in other words anyone who insists on *ought* and *should* instead of *is*. Laughter is in this respect a powerful social force, one of the strongest corrective mechanisms of all; few things are more humiliating than being laughed at in public, and in order to avoid it a person must keep his head down and stay with everyone else. In this way, laughter on the one hand exposes the social game, and on the other keeps it going. Laughter is counterrevolutionary and anti-utopian: he who laughs at everything laughs also at the dictatorship of the proletariat, and if everyone laughs at the revolutionary there will be no revolution. If everyone had laughed at Semmelweis, mothers and newborn infants would still be dying of childbed fever. If the Germans had laughed at Hitler, he and his ideas would have been rendered harmless. But they did not laugh, they were earnest, they wanted something, the supreme, and in the supreme tragedy prevails, and tragedy is no laughing matter.

But if comedy is the truest and most realistic of all genres, drawing all things and all people into the real world, the body and its illusionless reality, how are we then to understand tragedy? Tragedy concerns the same thing as comedy: the rise and the fall. So why is the fall comical in the comedy and tragic in the tragedy? How come we don't laugh at Oedipus? He thinks he's something other than what he is. How come we don't laugh at Hamlet? He doesn't know who he is or what to do; ignorance and restlessness are his plight. How come we don't laugh at little Hedvig who shoots herself? Hasn't she misunderstood everything?

In that which is at one with itself there is no distance, and since distance is laughter's and comedy's point of departure, nonidentity its prerequisite, the only thing comedy and laughter cannot disturb is identity. That which does not pretend, which is not something else, that which is what it is. Dostoevsky's masterpiece *The Idiot* is about just that. The novel was born as a comic genre with Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, in which the author allowed the idea of the great, cultured world to be played out in the small, mundane world, which is to say the world as it was, with windmills, sheep, decrepit steeds, donkeys, and drunken bandits, through which rode a thin and ailing old man and his fat little companion. With *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert pursued that novel's demystifying, reality-oriented aspect; in this case it is the idea of romantic love that collides with the world as it actually is, and which drives the main character to her death. Both *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* are cynical novels insofar as they do not believe, yet scorn those who do. That what *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary* believe in is made so clearly illusory, thereby positioning the novels on the side of truth, and that both are lovingly portrayed, recognizing the universally human nature of their weaknesses and flights from reality, does nothing to alter this. *The Idiot* is the opposite of *Don Quixote* and *Madame Bovary*. *The Idiot* is an anti-comedy. It turns the logic of comedy on its head, exposing the cynical world, scorning those who laugh at the emptiness of life, doing so by means of its confrontation with the unaffected human. Oh, what is it about the unaffected as a human quality that causes everyone in its vicinity to despair, unease to swell, chaos to loom, for no other reason than its mere existence? Prince Lev Nikolaevich Myshkin believes that what he sees, what is shown to him, is what it is, and that whatever is said is meant sincerely. He is oblivious to the ulterior motive, he does not understand irony, he is blind to the roles people play. He has no idea that the social world is a game. He is at one with himself, and assumes everyone else is too. But they are not, and his ignorance of this is sufficient on its own for the game to disintegrate, in that he gives them a vantage point from which to view it from the outside, a place outside the social world from where it becomes visible to them, thereby exposing its arbitrary nature. Roles are meaningful within the framework of the game, but as soon as the game is revealed to be just that, a game, they become meaningless. Who do you then become? The person you are? What does that mean? Myshkin is himself, the person he is. He is genuine. He is indivisible, no one's twin, no doppelgänger. For that very reason he is doomed to remain outside humanity. A society comprising genuine individuals taking everything at face value is a society in which nothing can be concealed, nothing kept secret, no real variation established. In other words, the genuine is the opposite of the social. The social world classifies and groups, excludes, suppresses, elevates. The social world is a system of differences, a world in which everything and everyone is graded and differentiated. The idiot nullifies all differences, in his realm everyone is equal. It is not his goodness that causes the social world such problems, but his authenticity. From a revolutionary perspective in which the complexity of the literary character is seen to develop from Odysseus's simple, archaic smartness to explode, as it were, in Hamlet's wild and contradictory Renaissance self, heralding the modern individual we know, Dostoevsky's Mishkyn represents a regression, something deeply reactionary and unmodern, if not directly archaic, a kind of pre-Homerian man, on whom both Odysseus's ingenuity in fooling the Cyclops with his clever name game and Plato's cave allegory would be lost. Indeed, is Myshkin not somewhat reminiscent of that Cyclops, the one-eyed enemy imprisoned by his literal understanding of language, unable to comprehend that Odysseus is not being straight with him when he tells him his name is Nobody? Dostoevsky was a deeply reactionary author, firstly in the fact that he was searching for meaning, in all seriousness and with eyes open, secondly in the fact that he was searching for it not in politics or ideology, in science or philosophy, but in religion, and that he found it there, in simplicity. The great threat in all of Dostoevsky's novels is nihilism, the spinning, flashing tombola of the social world on the fairground of meaninglessness, in the black night of emptiness, and what he defends himself so fiercely with, time and again, is the holy and the simplicity of the holy. Dostoevsky cherishes simplicity. His novels are hugely complex and chaotic, a tumult of characters and voices, not a quiet moment in one of them, quite without the slow and sleepily hypnotic passages, the lazy days of summer in which little or nothing happens, that occur in Proust, for instance; Dostoevsky is all pace, a series of highly intense, near-hysterical scenes on the brink of madness, but in all his depictions of a violent and uncontrolledly spiraling world, in his best books there is always, sooner or later, a light, and surrounding the light is silence. Dostoevsky's light is not dim and soft like an oil lamp, nor bright and dissecting like our modern strip lighting, but white and almost all-obliterating, like flaming magnesium, one might imagine, which burns away details and nuances and gives one the feeling that it is not what is illuminated that is important, but the light itself. That difference, between the light and what is illuminated, is the difference between premodern reality and modern reality, and where the former is singular and simple, the latter is plural and grotesquely complex. Dostoevsky turned toward that light, he wanted to believe in it, but the will of that wanting, which only a person living in the complexity of the illuminated knows, made it impossible, it being the very opposite of belief. Wanting to believe is impossible, a contradiction in terms. Had he believed, he would not have written. But he could feel it.

What was it he felt he wanted? What is the light in Dostoevsky's novels? It is grace. And grace is the undifferentiated, that which is without difference. It cannot be grasped by language because language is in its very nature differentiating. In that way, Dostoevsky's grace resembles Hölderlin's concept of "the open," but whereas Hölderlin's open pertains to the material world of rivers and clouds, Dostoevsky's grace pertains to the social world. In that world grace nullifies all distinctions, in grace all are equal. The radicalism of this is huge and almost unthinkable. Yet it is this, and nothing else, that Christianity is about. There is no difference between anyone. The most despicable person is as worthy as the best. Jesus said, whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. He is a man, as you are a man; he is you. Strike him not. Such a thought is inhuman in that it comes from outside the social world. Indeed, it is a divine thought. Adolf Hitler is as worthy as the Jews he gassed to death. In this our identity dissolves, being established by our very differences, and this is what makes Christianity unfeasible, we cannot think ourselves into oblivion, it would be too much to lose, since it is all we have. Nor can we remain the same without losing everyone else. The undifferentiated is not a category, it is a place in which all meaning vanishes; regardless of what you possess and how inalienable it is to you, it has no value there. This is what none of us grasps. And no matter Dostoevsky's intentions when he wrote his masterpiece, what Myshkin brings with him none of us wants, it is almost a nightmare vision. The idiot is he who gapes and laughs with those who laugh at him, his face a question mark. The idiot is the cynic's antipode. Between them lies the choice. The cynic asks, But who will forgive? The idiot replies, I will.

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The sun that shone directly down on the balcony where we sat was so warm that beads of sweat trickled from my hairline, though it was well into evening, and so bright I wondered whether to go in and get my sunglasses. I wondered too if I should pinch a couple of prawns, their faint salty smell and the sight of the pink, armored creatures in itself awoke in me an urge to taste their fresh oceanic flesh. But I decided not to. Wearing sunglasses during a meal was bad form, and digging in before everyone had come to the table was even worse.

Geir sighed.

"What are you moaning about?" I said.

"Who's moaning? That's your department."

I lit a cigarette and leaned forward in my chair, resting my forearms against my thighs.

"All right, so I'm moaning. Can I make amends with a joke?"

"Jokes and moaning, it's all the same in your case."

"What did Stevie Wonder say when he walked past a prawn trawler on the quayside?"

"I don't know, what did he say?"

"Hi, girls!"

Geir grinned and put his feet up on the balcony. I leaned back in my chair and swept the perspiration into my hair with my middle and ring fingers, making sure the burning cigarette between my index and middle fingers didn't make contact.

The sounds from the children's room had died down; most likely they were listening to a story. I took a sip of the wine. I'd never told anyone that I preferred a soft drink. Nor that I favored drinking tea with prawns, even in the summer, the way I'd done when I was growing up, ever since then I'd always felt the two things went together.

A prawn's eye had separated from its head and lay on its own on the side of the bowl. It looked like a peppercorn. Their tentacles, strewn about their chubby bodies, resembled whiskers. That live prawns were pale and sleet-colored, bordering on the transparent, much like dirty windows, hardly seemed credible when you saw them cooked, their color being such a strong and splendid characteristic you could hardly imagine that nature should squander it on something dead. The lobster, on the other hand, in its somber, steely armor not unlike certain suits of armor in the Italian Renaissance, black and articulated, was certainly finer living than when the boiling water so swiftly extinguished its life and the red-orange color seeped into the shell. To be sure it was a delicate thing to behold, and more elegant, but compared to the beauty of the black and all its associations with power and strength, the refinement of red was nothing. How different in the case of the prawns. Alive they looked almost like office workers of the ocean, in death like a company of ballet dancers.

Below us a bus stopped with a sigh at a red light. The traffic that streamed along the street, which continued out to the grassy coastline and the beach, slowed to a halt on the other side of the lights. Now it was the turn of those coming from the north, but the street on that side was deserted. The pedestrian crossing, ticking with the appearance of its green man, or green person as I supposed it was called now, was deserted too. A sliver of the feeling that could come over me at night, when the lights changed in the empty streets without anyone there to see them, implanted itself in my mind like a note slipped under a door. The image it conjured, which I could so vividly entertain, was of a world without people. All the houses empty, all the streets deserted, no cars, no buses, just the lights changing back and forth at the crossing down below, and at other crossings throughout the city. There would be movement, vegetation creeping forth everywhere, albeit at its own inimitably slow pace, pushing up through the concrete and the asphalt, gradually subsuming everything around it, and there would be animals in the streets. But none would heed the lights and their ticking men. They would belong to an empty system. The beings that once inhabited that system, which had created these lights in order to regulate their own movements, existed no more and would never return.

I leaned forward and stubbed my cigarette out against the upright of the railing in front of me, dropping the end at my feet for want of an ashtray, the discreetest thing I could think of to do with it. It lay there like a man under a tree, I thought to myself, and downed the rest of my wine, putting the empty glass on the table next to my plate, then looked up: at the other end of the balcony, some ten meters away, the door had opened. It was Christina. She smiled and raised her hand halfway in the air, as if we wouldn't be able to understand she was there if all we saw was her body, and she needed a gesture to convince us.

She closed the door behind her with one hand, sweeping her long hair to the side with the other, and came toward us.

"How nice," she said. "And such a lovely evening for sitting out!"

"Is he asleep?" asked Geir.

She shook her head and sat down on the chair up against the wall, blinking at the sun.

"But he's in bed at least. It's such an adventure for him to sleep with the other three."

"Do you want some wine?" I said, holding up the bottle toward her.

"No, thanks," she said. "I'd like some Ramlösa, though."

I put the wine down, picked up the bottle of mineral water, and poured. The glassy, bubbly liquid, fizzing faintly, settled itself in the transparent receptacle. Some of the bubbles released from the surface leaping four, five centimeters in the air, visible in the light of the sun which made them sparkle.

She put the glass to her lips and drank.

"Are mine in bed too?" I asked.

She nodded and swallowed, lowering the glass, though without putting it down on the table, holding it in one hand, her elbow resting against her thigh.

"Yes," she said. "But John's standing up in his crib and wants to join the others."

Christina had a reserved quality about her, not in the substance of what she said or talked about, more in the way she spoke; it was as if she didn't want to let go of her gestures, I sometimes thought. The same was true of her facial expressions, which she always seemed like she wanted to keep under control; not that they were forced in any way or false, because they weren't, it was more like she was wary of giving too much away, as if that would be dangerous, and was always holding some part of herself back, something she kept inside. In many ways she was Geir's complete opposite, he was much more casual about himself, his body language, and his expressions; his need to control had the external world as its object, which he organized meticulously, the material aspects, where nothing was left to chance, as well as the immaterial, the realm of ideas, where he was unable to write anything at all without accounting for its origin in a footnote.

Christina was always well-dressed, not in a showy way but classy and elegant. It wasn't surprising, seeing as she was a trained fashion designer. I always studied what she was wearing when we met, it filled me with a kind of satisfaction, perhaps it was the sureness of her choices that did it, the way everything complemented each other without calling attention to itself, because that would have been an unnecessary demonstration, the way the little details, like a scarf or a belt, brought out the maximum in all the other elements, raising them and presenting them, as it were, at the same time as they were foregrounded, by the chunkiness of a buckle, for instance, and yet backgrounded in that the buckle also served to set off something else. Color, cut, material, pattern; all were measured against each other with a sureness that could only be intuitive. This was something she was good at, something she didn't need to make an effort to achieve. In that respect she managed what few people can, which was to erase the discrepancies between what was new and what was old, between what was expensive and what was cheap, by looking away from those properties and looking instead at the inherent properties of each item, each accessory. Labels didn't exist for her; brand didn't come into it when I thought about her clothes. Of those I'd seen, I was especially fond of a light brown leather jacket she sometimes wore, there was something extremely appealing about it, though I had no idea what exactly. What was the source of that feeling? It was something I vaguely associated with the seventies, even if it wasn't especially seventies-looking in itself. Perhaps it was more the wamth of its tone, and the cut, but at the same time it possessed an almost aggressive quality, as leather jackets often do, and that combination might have been what I found so appealing. Big buttons. Feminine, in an unfrilly kind of way. Elegant. Yes, that was the word. The jacket was elegant.

She dressed Njaal in the same way. Nearly all other kids were H&M kids, or KappAhl kids, their clothes followed the seasons and the tastes dictated by those stores, ours too. If Njaal wore anything from H&M, it never stood out as H&M but was absorbed by other, independently selected and subtly coordinated items. He was elegant too, though quite unlike any Little Lord Fauntleroy, on the contrary, he looked like a child of our time but in his very own way, just as Christina was a woman of our time but in her very own way. Twenty years from now, if we looked at photographs from today, she and he, mother and son, would clearly belong to the first years of the new millenium, the same way as everyone else, none of us would be able to escape that, but in a purer, more stylish way, much like John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Kennedy are so obviously fifties and sixties, but with a completely different air of significance and elegance about them from our parents, uncles, and aunts from the same era, despite their being contemporaries.

The sureness of Christina's dress sense didn't correspond well to the way she came across as a person, in the sense that she wasn't nearly as sure of herself, or as superior, as she was in her choice of clothes. I didn't know her that well, and naturally we'd never talked about what went on in her mind, or about her appearance, but from what I'd seen I imagined the relationship between her inner and outer selves to be less than harmonious, I had the feeling her inner life was much greater and more expansive than her outer self suggested. She was cautious about how much of herself she revealed, not necessarily consciously so, most likely not, but her unwavering reticence seemed to indicate this was the case; she didn't want her inner self to be made visible to others, brought forward where it could be exploited by other people's attentions and thoughts. Why not? Was she hiding something? Was there something she felt ashamed of? Or was she just a very private person?

I recognized the same characteristic in myself. I had no way of knowing if that sense of recognition was relevant, for all I knew she might feel and think quite differently, but if it really was like I thought, then I knew exactly how she felt. If that was so, she had grown up in a family from whom part of the person she was had to be hidden. If that was so, her childhood had been all about freeing herself from that, enabling her to exist and act in her own right, to accept that part of her that was hidden and allow it to come out into the open, but so powerful is that dynamic, so deeply integrated in the singular identity of the self, that it's as good as impossible to eradicate: it is you. Because what happens, or at least what happened in my own case, is that the part of you that cannot be expressed, which has to be hidden, leads its own life inside, and this inner life, to which you grow accustomed, becomes a way of living, something good, you become more than sufficient in yourself and have no need for others. What ought to unfold, folds inward. For Geir, to whom she was married, there was no such imbalance between what he thought and what he said, between what he did and what he felt. He was a social being through and through, he lived his life with others, even when he was on his own. For that reason Geir needed Christina a lot more than she needed him. She could live a whole life alone if she had to, that was my assumption. He, however, could not; without the constant emotional exchange that went on between his self and the social world, he would perish. He needed the outer world, she did not; she had all she needed inside herself. She was a person who felt a strong sense of duty, she did what was asked of her; he was not, he did what he wanted. I too felt a strong sense of duty, that was what the outer world basically was for me, obligation, whereas my inner world to a much greater extent was freedom. Only during the past few years had I begun to understand that retreating into the self was perilous, something that removed me from life. And only during the past few years had I begun to understand that it was something I shared with my father. He was a fundamentally lonely person when I was growing up, in the way he kept to himself in the house, shutting himself away in his own little studio in the basement, and in the fact that he had no friends. The social world was a game he mastered but took no part in; perhaps he found nothing of value in it, nor, I suspect, in anything else. The things that make a difference, those that are replete with meaning and significance, were, I think, wholly absent from his life. He bore the mark of remoteness in everything he did, and the only thing which countered that were the upsurges of rage and resentment that would come over him, which so agonizingly brought him close to me, physically and mentally, and which, one could imagine, to him had the very purpose of keeping everything at bay, maintaining remoteness.

In a diary we found among his things after he died, he wrote about "the solitary individual." He wrote that he could tell the solitary individual apart from others, and it would seem he counted himself as one. He wrote too about conventions in more southern cultures, which were more inclusive and social than the Scandinavian, and it was impossible to read this as an indication of anything other than that he longed for such a life. The fact that he started drinking must have had something to do with that. Freedom, independence, community. The most radical difference in his lifestyle before and after he left our family, besides his alcohol consumption, was social contact, all the new people who suddenly came into his life. It was a new beginning, one last try, but the alcohol was not only a blessing, a bestower of grace, because soon he felt the desire for it when he got out of bed, or rather not desire, it was a need, he was compelled by it. On weekends he drank from the time he got up until he went to bed, during the week he managed to keep more of a grip to begin with, refraining from alcohol in the mornings, popping home at the lunch break to drink a bit, then drinking all evening, gradually it became harder and harder to resist, and eventually he gave in to it completely and no longer cared. But it started down there in his studio, the urge he felt to be alone, to keep the nearness of the world at bay, so impossible to reconcile with his longing for the social world, which could not be admitted or even acknowledged, not until the very end, when everything was already gone. He was trapped, increasingly confined, and he lost everything, due also to an outwardly directed aggression and destructiveness, as I understand it, which eventually he turned inward, and that was his decline, totally removed from society, back in the house where it all began, alone with his mother, in a steady flow of alcohol. The priest who held the funeral service said something I'll always remember. One must fasten one's gaze, he said. One must fasten one's gaze.

One must fasten one's gaze.

He could have said the little things are important; but he didn't. He could have said that loving thy neighbor is most important of all; but he didn't. Nor did he say what that gaze must be fastened upon. All he said was that it must be fastened.

It made sense to me then, as we sat in the chapel and wept that morning, his body lying there in its coffin a few meters away, and it makes sense to me today, as I sit here writing these words. I know what it means to see something without fastening one's gaze. Everything is there, the houses, the trees, the cars, the people, the sky, the earth, and yet something is missing because their being there means nothing. It could just as well be something else that was there or nothing at all. This is what the meaningless world looks like. And we can inhabit the meaningless world quite adequately, it being a simple matter of endurance, and indeed we do so if we must. It can be beautiful, though we may wonder in relation to what, it being all that we have, without such a thought making any difference, without it really bothering us. We have not fastened our gaze, we have not connected ourselves with the world, and could just as well, taking things to their logical conclusion, depart from it. The connections that hold us back, which cause us to thrash in our chains, as it were, have to do with expectations and obligation, with what the world asks of us, and sooner or later we come to a point where we realize the imbalance of our honoring the world's demands while the world fails to honor ours. At that point we become free, we can do as we please, but what has made us free, the meaninglessness of the world, also deprives that freedom of its meaning.

But if the world is meaningless, what good does it do to fasten our gaze on it? What kind of foolish middle-class delusion is that?

The question is how we define meaning. If we take the challenge of fastening our gaze seriously, it must be the case that it is not the object itself that is important, nor the person, in fact it can be any object or any person, in any place, at any time. The important thing is the eye, not what it sees: the link between the person seeing and what they see, regardless of what that might be. This is so because nothing means anything on its own. Only when an object is seen does it become. All meaning comes from the eye seeing. Meaning is not a property of the world, but something we attach to the world. The eye internalizes the extrinsic, but since the extrinsic remains so to the eye, something outside the self, it often believes that the meaning it sees belongs to the object or the phenomenon, which it then denounces, elevates, or remains indifferent to without understanding that what it denounces, elevates, or remains indifferent to is something within itself. It is by way of this internalization of the world that meaning becomes possible. All significance arises in the eye that sees, all meaning in the heart. Attaching meaning to the world is peculiar only to man, we are the givers of meaning, and this is not only our own responsibility but also our obligation. My father failed to live up to his obligation and he fell. It was not a punishment, but a consequence. That's pretty much how I look at it today, thirteen years after he died. I believe the priest was right, it really is all about fastening one's gaze, but I believe too that such a plea is related to the similar plea that calls on us to be good. No one disagrees about this, though for many it remains unattainable, related to the equally utopian though more popular call underlying so much in our society that tells us we must be rich. Certainly. It's easy to be rich if you've got lots of money, and being good is easy enough for those who are whole, but for those who are not whole, good isn't even within their horizon; indeed, perhaps no horizon exists for such people, no up, no down, no good, no bad, only anger or pain or loathing, because something inside them is broken, truly fucked up, and they are so deeply entangled in all sorts of unmanageable emotions, struggling for life with their backs to the wall, unless they've resigned themselves and given up completely. So many struggle for life, so many give up, and the rest, who know nothing of such pain or anger, watch TV in the cozy warmth of their own goodness. When I think about that, about what we have made of the world, a single great living room in which we sit and stare at what other people are doing, I think of what Dad once said, spitting sarcasm, as we sat outside at the barbecue, he, Mom, and me, the very incarnation of family happiness and *hygge*: "Now we're living the life, aren't we, eh!" And when I think about that, I think to myself that he did the right thing. To hell with meaning, to hell with everything, I'm going to drink until I drop. Drink myself into a stupor, drink myself into darkness, drink myself into the empty void, for desperate diseases need desperate remedies. I drink and I fall, I fall and I drink. Everything stinks, everything is shit, people are morons, to hell with them, I'll drink myself stupid, stupider than them. People are small, but I'll drink myself smaller. Because when I drink, as I shrink and become smaller and smaller, my shadow on the wall gets bigger and bigger, until the moment I die, slumped there in the chair with my nose broken and blood on my face and shirt, and from then on I will be nobody and my shadow will be everything.

My father failed to fasten his gaze, and he was not a good man. But he was his own person, and if he'd wanted to, wanted to fasten his gaze and be good, I think he could have done so. Something inside him was broken right from the start. To me it doesn't matter: he was the way he was. I've never been able to see my father as a person in his own right, the way I see myself, he exists only by virtue of his relationship to me, as my father, and his actions are mysterious to me and yet sovereign. Whether he suffered or not isn't something I wonder about. My father was a king without a country, and who cares for a king to suffer? That he died a clown, his nose reddened by blood, in his mother's armchair, changes nothing. To me, he will be king until the day I die. He comes to me still in dreams, in all his former splendor, the terrible ruler of the basement, for insights are worthless to the subconscious; it's like one of those boxes filled with crushed ice in which they transport living hearts, kidneys, lungs, livers, from the hospital where the donor died to the one where the living body waits. In this box, from which dreams rise in the night, dead emotions live on outside the body in which they once grew, and there among them my father still reigns.

The relationship between parents and children is a bit like that between customs officers and airline passengers; the customs officers watch the passengers through a window as they come through arrivals and can study everything they do, while the passengers, glancing at the same window from the other side, see only themselves. A child can learn nothing from his parents; the best he can hope for is not to repeat their mistakes. Dad wrote in his diary that he had been beaten as a child, and now he was a father who beat his own children. More than any other, such a statement stands as an argument against the idea that humans are rational beings. He experienced the pain and humiliation of being beaten at home, so why did he pass that pain and humiliation on? Perhaps the very ability to empathize, the ability to recognize that others feel the same as oneself and that those feelings can be just as important and may be taken as seriously as one's own, gets beaten away. To begin with we are near the world, I believe, but if our trust is broken we seek refuge deep within ourselves, cut off from what goes on outside, and the remoteness thereby established is then so very, very difficult to surmount. But a connection of that nature, between abuse in childhood and remoteness from the world in the later personality, only seems obvious in a system in which the rules of reasoning alone are valid, not in reality, which is quite differently open and oblivious to logic. My own aversion to intimacy and all outbursts of emotion, and the fact that all the relationships I've been involved in have sooner or later seen me occupy the middle ground of detachment and levelheadedness, has little to do with that aversion being in any way metaphorical, a symptom of a relationship to a father or a mother having broken down. No, my aversion to intimacy and outbursts of emotion is due to my actually being averse to intimacy and outbursts of emotion, I can't stand them, don't want to be anywhere near them, and the remoteness I crave in such instances is a blessing, occasionally even the highest conceivable blessing. Sexual desire is the only thing that displaces that need for boundaries and distance, only in that desire am I able to surmount my fear of intimacy and need for remoteness and thereby be close to another person. At the same time, and this seems fairly obvious, that fear of intimacy rears up again, doubly potent, in that the person this sexual desire is meant to overcome my remoteness to is the person to whom I am nearest, with whom I share my life, since then there is no longer any remoteness and sex then becomes infused with resistance. Socially I can overcome my remoteness to others when drunk, then it goes away, but in no other circumstances. A hug is anathema to me, a pat on the shoulder or back a threat. But in such cases it is not remoteness that is the problem, and lack of empathy is not a defect, the problem is the intimacy; I genuinely cannot deal with it, and the same goes for people's empathy. Why can't they just stay away and leave me alone, I think to myself. Is that too much to ask? The loneliness Dad wrote about is not something I know. As such, I am more broken than he, in that I entertain no expectations of interpersonal closeness and empathy, this not being something I crave, which, I suppose, makes it easier for me than it was for him, and less likely that I will end up following in his footsteps and drinking myself into the grave. Why on earth would I drink if I had all my time to myself?

Swallows flitted back and forth high up in the sky. I knew it was a sign about the weather, but that was all. Either it would be fine when the swallows flew high, or else it would rain. That much I could work out. I knew too that they were flying that high because that was where the insects were. But had the insects sought such heights because there was an area of low pressure or an area of high pressure on its way? And what did they actually do up there?

"How's the novel coming along, Karl Ove?" Christina asked. "Or maybe it's finished?"

"Pretty much," I said. "I just need to change some names."

"And then write four more," said Geir.

"Some minor complications have come up," I said, looking across at her. "I don't know if Geir said anything?"

"He has mentioned something about a relative not wanting it published. Is that it?"

"Yes. He keeps sending e-mails to the publisher, threatening to go to court and the newspapers. He's got the idea my mother's behind it all and made me write the book to get back at my father's family for him having left her."

She smiled gently and put her glass down on the table, shoving a plate aside to make room for its foot, which partially vanished from sight beneath the slightly elevated rim of the plate, whereas the slender stem that connected it to the bowl of the glass was a thin column of light in the sun.

"They can't be taking it seriously then?"

"No, not that. That's just a kind of background theory, it's not the main issue. The main issue is he finds the novel libelous. He says it's a pack of lies, that none of it's true."

"He's pissed off," said Geir.

"Yes, he is," I said.

At the other end the door opened again. Linda came out and, after closing the door behind her, stood for a second, shielding her eyes with her hand as she peered toward us. She was wearing a blue-and-white-striped sweater and dark blue shorts; with the wooden decking and her saluting gesture it made her seem quite nautical. I smiled.

"Is there a chance he can actually stop the book?" Christina asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "He might give it a try, I don't know."

Linda stood beside us.

"This is looking nice," she said, and pulled out a chair at the opposite side of the table from me.

"Why don't we get started?" she said. "Just dig in."

"Thanks," said Christina. "It looks delicious."

"Come on," I said. "It's prawns."

"I haven't had prawns all summer," said Christina. "We usually do." She laughed and looked up at Geir. "We have them at your dad's."

"We do," said Geir. "They like their prawns down there."

"Up," I said. "You're in the south now, remember."

"Were you talking about your book?" asked Linda.

Christina grabbed a couple of prawns and put them on her plate. The shells were so slippery and frictionless they slid on the smooth surface, and one of them ended up with its curling tail hanging over the opposite side from where she'd put it. Geir took a piece of bread, glanced around for the butter, located it, and picked it up. I lifted the bottle of wine and poured some into Linda's glass, nodding in reply.

"It's awful, really," I said.

"Thanks," she said.

"Weren't you expecting it?" Christina asked.

I shook my head, dropped a piece of bread onto my plate, and took a sip of wine while I waited for Geir and the butter.

"No," I said. "Nothing even close. I thought maybe he might be a bit peeved, but I hadn't anticipated anything like this. I've been really naïve, as it turns out. I thought I was writing about stuff that happened, and I hadn't imagined people could object. I realized it might annoy a few people, I was prepared for that, and maybe they'd want their name taken out, but I never envisaged anyone would want to stop it. Or get so ridiculously worked up."

"I've read the e-mails," said Linda to Christina. "He comes across like a madman. He scares the life out of me, anyway."

"He's not dangerous," said Geir. "If he was dangerous he'd have tossed an axe in the trunk and driven down here long before now."

"Don't say things like that!" said Linda.

"The worst thing, though, is that he's saying what I've written isn't true. That things didn't happen the way I describe them. Not just that it's innacurate or whatever, but that I'm lying. He says he can prove it."

Geir took a handful of prawns and dropped them onto his plate. I picked up the butter dish and put it down in front of me, drawing the knife toward me across the dark yellow surface which by now had been softened by the sun, then spreading the small curl that had gathered on the flat of its blade over the bread. The crusts were brown, verging on black, quite smooth on top, with a powdering of flour here and there, though porous in the cross section, tightly enclosing the soft white substance of the bread itself. I picked up the slice so as to find a better angle with the knife, whose remaining deposits of butter I wanted to spread onto the bread, just as one of the hotel's three external elevators began to glide upward through its transparent tube taking it to the very top of the building. Christina sat leaning forward, as if absorbed in some piece of sewing, shelling her prawns. I knew the feeling of tiny, delicate prawn eggs on one's fingers, they had their own very particular consistency, not unlike wet sand, and quite as hard to brush away, only a bit stickier. Linda, who as yet didn't seem to be ready to concentrate on the meal, as if she'd decided to rest for a moment on its outskirts, perhaps still with the rumpus of headstrong children whirling about inside her, raised her glass.

"*Skål*, and welcome!" she said.

"*Skål*," said Geir.

"Thanks for having us," said Christina.

We clinked our glasses and drank. I put my glass down and made sure to make eye contact with the others, as I had learned was customary only after arriving in Sweden seven years previously, an insight that was accompanied by the realization that, in all the years before that, people had sought eye contact with each other during every toast, apart from me, who had sat there completely oblivious, my ignorance exposed on every occasion without my even knowing.

"I don't want to spoil the evening going on about my uncle," I said, and noticed that the elevator had now stopped, the doors then slid aside, and a fat man and a slightly thinner woman got in at the same moment as one of the other elevators began to ascend. "But just to finish up what I was saying, about him claiming he can prove I'm lying."

I took a fistful of prawns and dropped them next to the bread, then picked one up between my fingers, pinching my thumb and index finger together at the seam of the head and body, and removed the head.

"It was as if suddenly I no longer knew what was true and what wasn't. It was really unpleasant – is really unpleasant. We're talking about things I've lived through. All of a sudden I start wondering if I'm just making them up. Do you know what I mean?"

She nodded. I pinched the shell that covered the belly of the prawn, bulging with its roe, most of which I managed to squeeze onto the edge of my plate before gripping the top of the shell and removing it with a swift upward movement, the way you might lift up a visor and put it to one side.

"The only thing I'm completely sure of is that my dad drank himself to death. If I'd written it like that, it wouldn't have mattered. As a simple fact, I mean. But I've gone into detail in describing the place where it happened. That was his childhood home. I've written about my grandmother, right down to the smallest detail, and she was his mother. He grew up in those rooms. Of course it's an infringement, because it's a private space. His space. And there I am, turning up for a few days, then writing an entire novel about it. A novel that might even be lies. Or a distorted truth. I can't trust myself. I don't know what's true and what isn't. And now I'm doing this to his brother. I've always looked up to him, he's always been an important person in my life, a representative of something."

I passed my thumb over the underside of the little grub-like scrap of prawn meat to remove the few remaining specks of roe, then placed it on my bread, at the very corner, before beginning the same process all over again with a new prawn.

"That's what makes it all so agonizing. Because everything he says resonates against something I carry inside me. It's already there. And when it comes from outside, it just consumes me."

"What's happening in purely practical terms, then?" Linda asked. "You're changing all the names, of course. But is there anything else you have to do?"

"No."

"I don't even think you should change the names," said Geir. "Why should you?"

"You'd understand if you thought about it," I said. "It's his name. I've no right to exploit it for my own purposes."

"OK, so maybe in his case," Geir replied. "Though basically I think you should keep them all. But what about your dad's name? And your grandmother's? That's not OK."

"That's as far as I can go," I said, placing the second prawn next to the first. The transformation from living creature to waste was remarkable, the little pile of shells, heads, roe, and the antenna-like tentacles that lay next to the fine and delicious shellfish.

"Let's say it goes to court, then," said Geir. "Where's the case against you? That you wrote about your dad? Why should he be protected? Why should his name be kept untarnished? What if an incest victim wrote a book about his dad, would the court be supposed to stop them publishing because the dad's brother doesn't want his name dragged through the mud? As if it wasn't already sullied by what he did?"

"But that's a criminal matter," I said. "That's different."

"True. But he still did what he did to you. Are you supposed to keep quiet just because it can rub off on your uncle, because they were related? That's absurd. What's worse, the action or the description of the action? Is the description of the action an offense but not the action itself?"

"I don't think that's what Karl Ove means," said Christina. "I think it's the description of the space it took place in that's causing the offense. The fact that your door's being opened and everyone can look in."

"That can't explain why he's so angry," said Linda. "There must be something else besides."

"Why does he think your mother is behind it all?" Christina asked. Her bread was almost covered by pale fleshy prawns with their streaks of red. They lay there on the thin layer of butter, like people on a beach seen from a plane preparing to land, I thought to myself.

"I've no idea," I said. "But he was still a child when Mom and Dad got together. Ten years old, something like that. His big brother got married and moved away. That must be quite an upheaval for a boy that age. Who was she to him? Presumably the same person she was to his parents. My guess is they didn't want Dad to marry her, that they didn't think she was good enough, or right for him. At any rate, they didn't go to their wedding. That's a statement. I remember Dad making an issue of it when he married for the second time and they still didn't go. It was obviously something that had affected him. It meant a lot. Gunnar must still carry all that with him, their rejection, and the reason for it. Maybe not in the form of arguments or thoughts as such, but emotionally, and thereby as a kind of truth: that's how she was. Then after they got married and had children they must have been able to tell that Dad wasn't happy. That's certainly something I can see now, looking back. And because he was theirs and came from them, the obvious thing for them to think must have been that it was her fault."

"So he lost a brother?" said Linda.

"Yes," I said, placing another prawn on my bread, which would soon be covered. My mouth was watering and I removed the shell as quickly as I could. "And then he lost him again when he started drinking."

"And a third time with you writing about him."

"I hadn't thought about it like that," I said. "But you're right. I've taken him away from him, and now I'm saying he was mine, that he was like this and like that."

"Did they get along at all, your mom and your dad's parents?" Christina asked. She lifted her bread to her mouth and took a bite, and her movements were so small that for a moment there was something squirrel-like about her, but then, perhaps because I was looking at her, or perhaps because she felt some sudden twinge of happiness, she smiled and everything that was small dissolved.

I smiled too.

"Can I just ask you something?" Linda intervened.

Christina nodded.

"How come you're not having any wine?"

Christina laughed and put her hand in front of her mouth. Geir grinned, the biggest smile he had. And Linda smiled too.

"We're expecting," said Christina.

"I knew you were!" said Linda.

"Seriously?" I said, looking across at Geir. "You never said!"

"We're saying it now."

"I can tell too," said Linda. "There's a bulge."

Christina looked down at her tummy and placed her hand on it. When she looked up again, her eyes were full of joy.

"When's it due?" asked Linda.

"Late December," Christina replied.

"That's fantastic," said Linda.

"Congratulations," I said, raising my glass.

"We were inspired by you two," said Geir. "When we were here New Year's Eve and saw John. The thought of having another little one like him. He was such a little bundle of happiness, reaching his hands out to us."

"It'll be good for Njaal," said Linda.

"Yes," said Christina. "It'll be great for him being a big brother."

"Have you told him yet?" said Linda.

Christina shook her head.

"We've told my parents. And Geir's dad."

"Have they found out if it's a boy or a girl yet?" Linda asked.

"No," said Christina. "We don't want to know either."

"We're keeping the excitement," said Geir.

"I can't get over you being here two days already and not saying a word," I said. "Or maybe I can, come to think of it. Do you remember me telling you we were having Heidi?"

Geir nodded.

"You were expecting Njaal, but you still didn't let on. Not for another two months, in fact."

"And?"

"That's far too disciplined for me. We could never keep anything like that secret. How long did it take before we told everyone we knew?" I said, looking across at Linda.

"Two days, maybe," she said.

"It's the Strays looking at the Hamsuns," said Geir.

"And you're the Strays, I take it?" I said.

"Of course," said Geir. "We look on everything you do with wide eyes. We're the ones with our house in order."

"I'm so pleased for you both!" said Linda, looking at Christina.

As I looked at her, the radiance inside her now visible in her eyes, everything fell into place; of course, that was it! She had been withdrawn, but not like she had turned herself away from the world, from something in it she didn't want, more as if there was something good there inside her.

"We've even got the names ready," said Geir, his eyes looking into Christina's.

"Are you sure you're ready to divulge, after six months?" I said.

"If it's a girl, she's going to be called Frøydis," said Geir. "And if it's a boy, he'll be called Gisle."

As we sat there, on our narrow ledge above the city, eating and drinking, the sun gradually sank in the sky, redder and redder, the darkness rising and enclosing us imperceptibly from the streets, where the air seemed to become grainier, the colors of everything there, the cars, the people, the buildings, fading slowly into gray. We talked about the baby they were expecting, we talked about the children we had, we talked about what were now already the old days, the time we lived in Stockholm, and we talked about Gunnar and his e-mails. I was hesitant about the latter, but the unease I felt about the whole situation had to be calmed, and the only way I knew of doing that was by talking about it. After the wine had been drunk and the food eaten up, Linda and I cleared the table and took the things into the kitchen. I put the coffee on and got the ice cream out of the freezer.

"What a lovely evening," said Linda.

"Yes," I said.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yes, fine," I said. "Well, sort of. But it's nice to have company."

I put my arms around her. We stood there for a moment, then she went to get the lantern she had once given me as a birthday present, an old-fashioned kind made of metal and with little windows of glass, inside which a fat candle can burn, or in this case, because we'd run out of candles, an array of tea lights.

I stood in the living room and watched her go past with the lantern glowing in her hand in the dim light. Then I carried the ice cream out, and the fruit, the wafers, and the coffee, all on a tray, together with the cups, plates, and spoons.

The darkness in August is the finest darkness of all. It lacks the luminous transparency of June's, the sheer ripeness of its potentialities, yet is quite unlike the impenetrable depths of autumn's or winter's darkness. What was with us before and now is gone, spring and summer, lingers on in August's darkness, whereas what is to come, autumn and winter, are a time into which we can only peer, a time of which we are not yet a part.

The light of the lantern flickered on the table, shimmering in our faces and eyes. The darkness swelled, and the streets below were quiet. The elevators went up and down, the traffic lights continued to change, and now and then people came walking from the pedestrian street, ambling families or young people on their way out, perhaps to a park where they would sit and drink, or to some outdoor café. There was a force field of excitement about them, or perhaps it was me, because what they were doing was so familiar to me, and I could still feel the pull, to be out on the town with the feeling that tonight anything at all could happen.

But that feeling also belonged to the darkness of August, I thought to myself. In that darkness too there was promise and expectation. Something closes, something else opens. Life is there for the living. Through autumn and winter, spring and summer, fuller with every turn. Wasn't that what was happening? Never had the darkness of August felt more replete than now.

Replete with what?

The beauty of time passing.

After we finished dessert and I had fetched the cognac and drunk a glass of it, I went inside to piss. On the way, I poked my head around the door of the children's room where they lay sighing like little animals in their own little worlds. The voices of the others drifted in from the balcony, I heard Linda's voice, and her laughter too, and I thought about what it must be like to be a child and fall asleep to the sounds made by one's parents. The sounds of life outside themselves. I pissed, and it felt good. I looked at myself in the mirror as I washed my hands. The deep furrows in my brow, the lines that ran down my cheeks, the wrinkles around my eyes, none had been there when Vanja was born. But I felt the way I had always felt, the same now as when I was twenty, and perhaps that was the reason that what I saw in the mirror was not a forty-year-old man, though my age was clear and conspicuous, but myself, Karl Ove.

I dried my hands on the towel, went into the bedroom, and opened my e-mails, as always with my heart pounding and gripped by an intense feeling of dread.

There was a message from Amazon, and one from Tonje.

I opened Tonje's.

Dear Karl Ove,

I'm sorry I haven't sent word before now. Your assumptions are quite right. I had a pounding headache and a nerve in my eyelid twitched for three days while I read your novel. Since then I've tried to figure out where that reaction came from. To begin with it was the fear of being held up in full view. Gradually, the reading itself became a burden. All the little stories I'd forgotten about suddenly came to life again, as you did too, the person you once were to me.

After having read it I found I could relax a bit more. Tore is right, I am a princess, if only in the book. But I'd like to try to see it in terms of principle, if I can. After all, I've no idea what you're saying about me in Book 5. And I can't just say everything's fine as long as you stick to writing nicely about me. So I've decided not to intervene in any way. It's your project. Use my full name by all means, all or nothing. I don't feel I can give you any viewpoints on the book, I'm sure you understand that. But it touched my heart to read it. Dearest, dearest Karl Ove.

All my best,
Tonje

My relief as I read her message was so immense, and the last line so unexpectedly warm and loving, that tears welled in my eyes. I closed the message and sat for a moment in front of the computer. I wanted the emotions to subside a bit before going back out to the others. The mere fact that I'd received an e-mail from Tonje felt like I was deceiving Linda. As if I had a secret life outside the family. But I did too, I'd had a life before them, and though I wasn't in the habit of thinking about it, I certainly had while I'd been writing the first book. I had resurrected the life I once led, I had resurrected all the people I knew and was connected to back then, resurrected them in my mind, and with the past come to life in that way, I had gone about among them, my family, without saying a word about it, without letting on in the slightest, and yet there it was in their midst.

After maybe ten minutes I got to my feet and went back. I would have to send Tonje's e-mail to the publishers, partly because they needed to be sure of everyone's response now that the fuss concerning the manuscript had spiraled the way it had, and partly because I wanted them to see that I wasn't totally unreliable, because although Gunnar's letters were out of control I couldn't help but assume that the publishers were thinking there was never smoke without fire and that there was most likely at least a grain of truth in Gunnar's accusations. I was a writer, I made a living out of making things up, and most likely, so I imagined them thinking, Gunnar's reaction to my description of those real-life circumstances was tainted by my novelist's temperament, which tended toward exaggeration, perhaps even strongly so. I especially suspected Geir Berdahl of such thoughts. The accountant's veracity versus the writer's unreliability. That Tonje had reacted the way she had, and had sufficient faith in me to give me free rein as to how she and our relationship would be described in the books that followed, was no proof of anything, but it was at least a different take.

Still, it would have to wait until tomorrow. Now I was going to sit out in the dark with Linda, Christina, and Geir, illuminated by the light of the lantern, drinking cognac and talking about whatever subject happened to crop up.

When I returned to them Linda was telling a story. It was about the first summer after we moved here. The apartment, the balcony, the city, all had been new to us. Nearly every evening we sat out here after the children had been put to bed. The summer had no end; well into September we were still sitting outside in the evenings. We'd bought a baby alarm, the transmitter was in the children's room, the receiver on the table between us. Whenever they stirred, whenever they made a sound, the receiver came on and we could hear it. One evening it crackled with the sound of a child crying. I went into their room, but whoever it was, Vanja or Heidi, must have settled again right away, because when I came in they were fast asleep. I went back outside, only for it to start again. This time Linda went in. The same thing happened: they were asleep. It was creepy, the sound of a child crying, coming to us through the hiss and crackle of the receiver, a small, distant voice. I found myself thinking it was like a dead child crying from the afterlife, its sound waves picked up by the transmitter. I didn't mention the thought, Linda was already beside herself, she bustled back to the children again, this time with receiver in hand so she could see with her own eyes that the crying she was hearing wasn't from one of her own. While she was away I tried to figure out what was going on. We were in the middle of a city, with hundreds of people in our immediate vicinity, and somebody among them clearly had the same make of baby alarm as us.

I told Linda when she got back. It calmed her down. But then a moment later she looked at me and said, But there's no one taking care of that child.

As she told the story, the creepiness we had both felt at the time was gone. It had become a story. But Linda had just written a short story about that very incident. In it the creepiness was intact, perhaps even more intensely. That was how she was, it was her talent, she could distill life down to points of extreme intensity and densely concentrated meaning. I often felt tears come to my eyes when I read the things she wrote, and this particular story was no exception because the person she was so immediately became apparent to me.

"We bought that baby alarm before we went to Gotland," I said. "Do you remember? Our trip there?"

"Yes," she said. "I remember you used to run to the shop with your backpack on to get breakfast in the mornings."

"Run?" said Geir. "How far?"

"Ten kilometers," I said. "For a few months there I was in superb shape. Only I didn't realize. Everything's relative. You manage one thing, but there's always something else you can't. So I focused on that."

"Vacationing with kids and no car, it's a genre on its own," said Linda.

"A sonnet of life with small children," I said. "It doesn't get much harder than that."

"It was lovely, though," she said. "I was pregnant with Heidi. And Vanja was so little! To us she was a big girl. But she was just a tiny tot!"

"She was," I said. "It's horrendous how time flies! It feels like such a long time ago, back in my boyhood almost."

We spent two weeks there in a rented house on the edge of the woods, and in the middle of those woods, which reminded me in every respect of the woods at Hove, pine trees that went all the way down to the shore, in the middle of those woods were these peculiar white rock formations they call *raukar*. Oh, what an exhilarating sight they were! Every afternoon, while Linda and Vanja were at the house, I would run there to look at them. Like statues they stood, tall as a man, white among the straight, upright pine trees. There was something totem-like about them, and the associations they had for me were of indigenous peoples and a world without cars, without asphalt, without concrete, without glass, without machines. A world consisting only of what grew and people living among it. I ran there and it filled me with emotions, and then I ran back to my little family.

Now it was no longer something that had just happened, but something that had happened a long time ago, the same way as this, this evening on the balcony, years from now will be something I looked back on, removed from the life I will be living then. A memory is a ledge on the mountainside of the mind; there we are, drinking and chatting, and on the ledge below us my dad sits in his chair, dead, his face smeared with blood. And on a ledge below him we are sitting in a rest stop somewhere in the Agder region, Mom, Dad, Yngve, and I, we've been picking berries all morning, now we're eating our picnic, and next to us is a river, its waters green and white and icy cold, descended from the high fells to our rear, and on the other side, at the edge of the road, coated with dust, stands our red Opel Kadett.

But as yet it was not a memory, not some constituent of the past, but still simply the point to which we had come, an evening that was now drawing to an end.

"You must be tired," said Linda to Christina, who nodded, yes, she was, and with those words it was over, for we were all tired and the children would be waking up at five o'clock in the worst case, half past five at best, so the time had come to clear the table, load the dishwasher, turn off the lights, brush our teeth, and go to bed.

I lay on my back under the covers, waiting for Linda to come in from the bathroom. When she did, and lowered herself into the bed, as if into water it seemed to me, I put my arms around her and held her tight, feeling her body against mine, her warmth, sensing her smell.

"I love you," I said. And for some strange reason I cried as I spoke the words. But I did so silently, my eyes simply filling with tears, and she knew nothing of it.

The next day we went to the beach. Linda made meatballs and buttered some bread, I made an omelette and filled a thermos with coffee and another with squash, we put it all in a cooler, packed a big blanket, towels, and bathing suits, and the girls' inflatable armbands that were so very important, helped them into their summer dresses and sandals, gave them each a cap to put on, rubbed their sunscreen in, put John in the stroller, and set off. Until that summer Ribersborg had been synonymous with the beach for us, but there was no shade there anywhere, and Linda – who was sensitive to the sun and hid herself under wide-brimmed hats and behind sunglasses all summer, as well as always choosing the shady side of the street and always sitting under the parasols if we were out at a café, unlike me who couldn't get enough of the sun – had taken us all to the beach at Sibbarp instead one day when the summer began, because although it was quite a bit farther there were trees there that grew right down to the beach, and pools of deepest shadow under their leafy crowns, and since then we'd always gone there whenever we wanted to swim. Sibbarp was too far to walk, we had to take the bus from Bergsgatan by the Konserthuset; it took just under half an hour to get there. Njaal, Heidi, and Vanja went first, then came Linda with the cooler bag slung over her shoulder, Christina with a backpack on her back, and Geir carrying a tote bag in his hand, while I brought up the rear, pushing John in his stroller with a big bag full of clutter. It was hot and there was no shade at the bus stop, so it was a relief when the bus came after ten minutes. It was almost full. Geir and Christina found seats at the front, Christina sat with Njaal on her knee, while Vanja and Heidi found two next to each other farther back after the open area in the middle of the bus, and Linda and I sat behind them, Linda with John on her lap. We passed through the city, skirting the hospital and the concourse area on the other side of the Pildammsparken, where the old and particularly striking sports stadium was, shaped like an elongated bowl or a flat-bottomed boat, built in the days of functionalism, unfortunately rather unsuited to football because of its running track and the insufficient incline of its stands, which was why a new stadium had been built next to it. In the same area was the Baltiska Hallen, as well as another big indoor arena with artificial turf. I'd been there a lot the first winter we lived in Malmö, there were some journalists who met a couple of afternoons a week to kick a ball around there and they'd let me join in.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead and realized we were crossing Bellevuevägen. I was so unfamiliar with the city I didn't even know yet how the various districts were connected. We must be near the subdivision garden, I thought to myself. The very thought of the place plunged me into darkness. I looked at Linda and John. His face was sweaty, his eyes kept opening and shutting like the mouths of a pair of expiring fish. In a few seconds he would no longer be able to resist the compelling onslaught of sleep, so overpowering at that age.

Vanja twisted around and found my gaze and asked when we'd be there. A few minutes yet, I said. How long is a minute, she wanted to know. Sixty seconds, I said. How long is a second, she wanted to know. From now until now, I said. That wasn't long, she said. Don't start counting, I said. She looked at me. Why not? she asked. I shrugged. You can if you want, I said. She began to count. When she got to thirty-eleven I corrected her. We came through the center of Limhamn, the main street was full of cars, the sidewalks on both sides filled with milling people. What comes after thirty-nine, Daddy? said Vanja. Forty, I said, turning my head to Linda. Is he asleep? I asked. She nodded. We carried on along the shoreline and soon wide-open areas of green appeared, dotted here and there with clusters of darker deciduous trees, and a moment later the bus swung into its terminus. Linda carried John to his stroller, he woke up and started wailing, I lifted the stroller out, she tried to get him into it, he kicked and struggled, I took over, and he calmed down after twenty seconds or so and I managed to get his legs into the stroller and was able to pick up the bag and follow the others while he laid his head back and immediately fell asleep again. I broke into a trot and caught up with Linda. Vanja, Heidi, and Njaal walked in front of us, scurrying along like three little dogs. The harbor was packed with small boats, and there were lots of people on and around the jetty. The grass we crossed was popular too, people were strolling, some were playing games, I heard the buzz of a radio-controlled plane, others were sitting around on blankets. The air was teeming with ladybugs, a couple landed on my white T-shirt and I flicked them away. We crossed the open lawns, passed the kiosk, and followed the gravel path that led off along the inside of the beach to the northern end where the trees were. We went past a woman in a bathing suit, she walked in that cautious way you do when you're not used to having bare legs, and three young men, perhaps twenty years old, visibly wearing underpants under their low-slung bathing shorts. Linda was walking beside Christina now, the children were already way up ahead, running to see who would get there first. Geir stopped and I came up to him.

"Did you see her?" he said.

"Who?" I said.

"That woman in the bathing suit. It was all wet around her breasts. Soaking wet. But dry everywhere else. So she hadn't been swimming. It was milk. Breast milk."

"I didn't notice," I said.

Something kept crunching under my feet and I stopped to see what it was. Ladybugs. They were all over the ground. Dead ladybugs on the path and on the grass. The air was alive with them. I walked over to the trees, spread the blanket out in the shade, and started helping Heidi with her bathing suit and her water wings while Linda got Vanja changed. John was fast asleep in the stroller, chin against his chest and hat over his eyes. Three ladybugs had settled on his T-shirt, one on the brim of his hat. I felt them crawling in my hair and shook my head.

"Do you want to go out and swim with them while I get things organized?" I said to Linda. She nodded and got changed while I turned to the picnic. The blanket was already covered in ladybugs. I looked up. Great swarms filled the air. I looked down at my chest, four more had landed there. I flicked them away, picked up the blanket and gave it a shake before spreading it out again and setting out the containers with the sandwiches, meatballs, salad, omelette, and olives.

"I've never seen so many ladybugs," I said.

Geir batted at the air. Christina walked to the shore holding Njaal's hand. Now that I knew, I could see she was pregnant. She flapped her free hand. Njaal copied her. Linda shook her hair. Heidi and Vanja stood hand in hand at the water's edge and stared out at the sea. The blanket was crawling with ladybugs again.

"We can't eat here," I said. "They're everywhere. Look at them," I said, indicating the swarms that seemed to be swirling all around.

"Maybe it's better over there," Geir said. "It's more exposed, so there'll be more wind."

We went over to where the grass came to an end, only to find the air just as thick and the ground covered with them.

"We might as well stay put," I said. "They're harmless enough."

Back in the shade I tried to ignore them as best I could. I lit a cigarette and poured myself a cup of coffee. Seconds later, a ladybug was floating in it. I picked it out, inhaled and blew a cloud of smoke out in front of me, wondering if ladybugs like mosquitoes would be repelled by cigarette smoke. Geir had gone down to the shore, now all five of them were there. Linda stepped cautiously out into the water with Heidi and Vanja on each side of her. They reached up to her hips. Her skin was white as marble. The air was alive with flitting black dots. They were settling on the containers, and on the blanket again. They crawled on my shoes, shorts, and T-shirt. It was creepy. Ladybugs were among the most appealing of insects. So delicate and flowerlike in their beauty, they were the very antithesis of the monstrous. Mosquitoes could occur in huge swarms and be everywhere, there was nothing unnatural about that, but with ladybugs there was something ominous about it, as if something had gone wrong, as if something that ought to have been closed had been opened, and as I looked out over the sound, where the gigantic structure of the Öresund Bridge rose up disconcertingly near us to the south and the contours of the Barsebäck nuclear power plant were visible to the north, the blue sky above the glittering blue sea teeming with tiny black dots I knew to be ladybugs, I thought to myself: this is how the world ends.

The Name and the Number

Some months ago I received an anonymous threatening letter in the mail, it was written to my brother, so what I got was a copy, though my brother wasn't mentioned by his actual name but by our mother's maiden name. Yngve Hatløy, it said. The sender no longer considered him worthy of the name Knausgaard and had given him another name instead. I myself had been deprived of a name entirely, being mentioned throughout by my profession only, albeit sarcastically. "The storyteller," that was me.

The writer of this letter stated the following:

> *How bitter the thought that an abortion in 1964 could have given so many people a simpler life in 2010. We would have been spared the Hatløys. And your father would have been alive today.*

Yngve was born in 1964. The contention that everything would have been better if Yngve had been aborted then, and that Dad would have still been alive if that had happened, was not only conveyed to Yngve. The writer also wrote to Yngve's daughter, a child. The book I have written is the reason we are no longer worthy of the Knausgaard name. I am not, my brother is not, our children are not.

Great is the power of the name.

The strange thing is that names have always been an issue in our family. When my father was young he experimented with different spellings of his name, writing his first name with an *i* or a *y*, an *å* or an *aa*. I've seen this in books and papers he left behind. Later, he took another surname and was known by it for the last ten years of his life. My mother took my father's surname when she married but subsequently reverted to her maiden name. So when I was eighteen both my mother and my father had different surnames to the one my brother and I shared.

When I began writing this novel I did so with the intention of writing about Dad, and since the nature of fiction is to make what applies to one person apply to all, in the sense that a certain dad becomes "Dad," a certain brother becomes "brother," and a certain mom "Mom," I used his own name. At first his original family name, then his assumed family name. After a time I sent the manuscript to those concerned. My father's family, represented by my father's brother, threatened to take me to court and stop the novel coming out if the names weren't changed. I did as they wanted, changing the names of my uncle, his family, and everyone else on my father's side. But I couldn't change the name of my father. If I called him, say, "Georg Martinsen," then it would no longer be my father I was writing about, the way he was to me, a body of flesh and blood that was also my own flesh and blood, because the name is the only element of reality that can exist unchanged in the novel, everything else is a reference to something, a house or a tree, not in themselves a house or a tree; only the proper name can be the same in the novel as in reality. I could change the names of everyone else, but not his. It was also because I was writing about myself and my own identity:

who would I become if my father was someone called Georg Martinsen? What effect would that have on my own name and identity? So I refused. On the day of the publishing house's annual press conference I had met with the publishing director, Geir Berdahl; he had written a letter to my uncle and itemized all the changes we had made in the novel on his insistence. The final point stated that my father's name would not be used. The evening before, the culture editor at the *Bergens Tidende* had called Berdahl, apparently they knew each other from some earlier time, he had got wind of the issue and my uncle threatening to take the matter to court. I had been incautious and mentioned it in an e-mail to a person I knew well who was employed by that newspaper, who had then passed it on. This was the situation when Berdahl read his letter to me. Until then I had refused to give up my father's name. But at that point I felt I could stand firm no longer; on the other side of the door of the office in which we sat, the room was filling up with journalists, and I was so scared of the consequences of what I had written that it seemed to me the only possibility I had was to say OK, you can send the letter, I'll change my father's name.

But I could not change it. I could not call him by any other name. So I solved the problem by not using his name at all. Neither his first name nor his surname appears in the novel. In the novel he is a man without a name.

*

When I see the names of those I grew up with, they bring back to life not only the entire landscape there, and all the days and evenings we spent running around in it, filled with autumn's heavy darkness or spring's gossamer light, but also the individuals they were. Geir Prestbakmo, Karl Martin Fredriksen, Dag Lothar Kanestrøm, Marianne Christensen, and, later, Per Sigurd Løyning, Arne Jørgen Strandli, Jan Vidar Josephsen, Hanne Arntsen. In each case the names represent them and the time in which I knew them, and is a kind of capsule in the mind in which all sorts of things, important and unimportant, are stored. But that is what their names are to me. To those people themselves the same names are perhaps something else entirely. Whenever they speak or write their names they are referring to themselves. This "self" is something apart from what everyone else sees when they present themselves, it is the inside of the seen, full of thoughts and emotions to which no one else has access, the inner life as it unfolds from birth until death.

A name is intimately connected with this secret and particular self; so entwined are the name and the individual's sense of identity, in fact, that one thinks of the name as belonging to the self, even if it was not given with that purpose in mind, there being no need for a person to refer to themselves by name in order to know who they are, but in order to represent what they are to others. Instead of saying "that little crybaby with the buck teeth" they said "Karl Ove." And since the proper name points both inward and outward at the same time, it is an exceptionally sensitive thing. There is a remnant of magical thought in the fact that the word is what it refers to, or may awaken it. I *am* my name, my name *is* me. If anyone abuses it, they abuse me. The most basic form of teasing among children is for the teasers to twist the name of their victim, knowing full well that doing so strikes at the very core of who they are. One of the biggest social blunders a person can commit is to admit to not knowing the name of the person they are talking to, for although one might be perfectly aware of who they are, and recognize their face, their dialect, their gestures and expressions, and can recall any number of situations one might have experienced together, it doesn't help; if you can't remember the name, you can't remember her, since without a name she is no one.

The vast majority of the people we see are nameless, all those sitting behind us on the bus or the subway train, those who pass us on the street or stand in line in front of us at the supermarket checkout. We know each has a name, because everyone has, we just don't know what it is. In the event that one of them becomes our friend, he or she is then moved from the nameless masses into the sphere of the named, by whom we are all most closely surrounded. Yet there is another sphere outside that one, comprising names known by everybody: the famous. We say of any member of this group that he or she is a name. Such a name cannot merely be taken, but is something bestowed, which can only happen by virtue of a person becoming particularly prominent in some way. Anyone who runs, cycles, or skis fast enough may thus be bestowed with a name, anyone who sings beautifully enough, or who is sufficiently good at playing the guitar, anyone excelling in their field, the history of ideas, for instance, and anyone graduating to any important position in society. Such a name does not primarily represent the person themselves, but rather their achievements or role. Yet as soon as a person's name has become public because of some achievement, curiosity is at once aroused as to what else that name represents: the private self. It is a characteristic of our time that public selves have increasingly come forward to present to us their private selves, which thereby have become public too. This is not to say that we are witness to a degeneration of the public sphere, as is often suggested, but rather to a wholly necessary regulatory mechanism in any media society.

Apart from material necessities, the most important need of any human being is to be seen. Anyone who is not seen is no one. The worst punishment in old Nordic culture was to be proclaimed *fredløs*, which is to say cast out from society, forbidden to associate with others. If such an outcast ever showed themselves in public they would be shunned, perhaps even killed; the outcast was a nobody, and it meant nothing whether they lived or died; but why kill a person as long as they could merely be shunned? We strive to be seen. Yet to be seen can involve a number of things; in a peasant society, being seen would be something else entirely compared to a media society. Whoever is seen in a media society is seen by all. And when being seen means being seen by all, it gives rise to an impossible craving, since being seen by all is the preserve of the few. When the few display not only what makes them prominent and which is unreachable for the vast majority of us, in other words their public personalities, but also their private personalities, which are not unreachable but by contrast are an embodiment of the ordinary, the sphere in which all of us live, the public personality is then no longer unreachable, no longer merely an object of admiration and desire, but a person with whom we can identify, and the gap between ordinary private life, in which the name denotes the individual and nothing else, and public life, dissolves almost completely: essentially, they are just like us. We see ourselves in them, and this is another way of being seen. In this there is security, for while the desire to be seen is great in all of us, it is countered by an equal force pulling in the opposite direction, which is the desire to be like everyone else. To be like everyone else is to be one among the crowd, and to be one among the crowd is to be safe. As humans have experienced throughout their existence, in any flock facing danger the important thing is not to be seen, not to attract attention. To be seen is vital, but not to be seen is vital, too. Nothing feels more perilous to us than to be exposed to the attention and gaze of others. By opening up the private side of their name, the ordinariness shared by us all, a person becomes both a part of the community and one of the select few seen by all.

The notion that to be seen is to be seen by many, in the media, as a name with a particular aura, has become so prevalent that almost everyone I know has begun to treat their name as something that not only denotes who they are, replete with meaning beyond their control, but also as an advertisement of their own idea of who they are, setting up profiles on Facebook and furnishing their name with a certain air by inserting it in certain contexts, not unlike the way in which a brand is built up or a pop star constructed. To be surrounded by media doesn't just mean that we look at images of other people in other places and in that way keep ourselves abreast of what is going on in the world, it also has an effect on the way we see ourselves and seeps imperceptibly into our identities, which gradually recalibrate toward the expectation of an observing "everyone" or "all," eclipsing the particular gaze in the particular situation, where everything is tangible, with all the consequences that implies with respect to the image we hold of ourselves.

While the expectation of being seen by some specific other – the neighbors, for instance, or what Tor Jonsson called "the village beast" – may be shut out physically by lowering the blinds, or dealt with by going away, the expectation of the abstract other, the all of society, is impossible to eliminate, since it lives inside us and is something to which we continually relate even in our innermost dwelling spaces, which we furnish to satisfy that expectation, the kitchen, formerly a place in which to prepare and eat food, now being done up at huge expense to look like a showroom despite hardly ever being seen by others. This inner all, whose flame is kept alive by the presence of TV screens in every room and which ensures that we are always seen and are somehow held under our own surveillance, means also that we begin to resemble each other more, it being the same god to which we submit and to whose requirements we adapt ourselves in a system of social control far subtler than that imagined by Orwell in his famous dystopia.

The name has always occupied a space between the concrete and the abstract, the individual and the social, but when it begins to be shaped and charged with meaning in places removed from the physical world, in that way entering the world of fiction, albeit unseen by the majority, at the same time as this fictional world is expanding and taking up an ever greater part of our lives – the TV screens are now not only in our own rooms, but also on the walls of our trains and under the luggage bins of our planes, in the waiting rooms of our doctors' offices and the halls of our banks, even in the supermarkets, quite apart from our carrying them around in the form of laptop computers and cell phones, in such a way that we inhabit two realities, one abstract and image-based, in which all kinds of people and places present themselves before us with nothing in common but being somewhere other than where we are, and one concrete, physical, which is the one we move around in and are more palpably a part of – when we arrive at a point where everything is either fiction or seen as fiction, the job of the novelist can no longer be to write more fictions. That was the feeling I had: the world was vanishing because it was always somewhere else, and my life was vanishing because it too was always somewhere else. If I was to write a novel it would have to be about the real world the way it was, seen from the point of view of someone who was trapped inside it with his body, though not with his mind, which was trapped in something else, the powerful urge to rise out of such fusty triviality into the clear, piercing air of something immeasurably greater. Ascent was art, fiction, abstraction, ideology; confinement was in the world of things and bodies, the material soon-to-be-rotting universe all of us comprise. That was the idea, or the urge: reality. And the sign of such reality, its only transferrable component, was the name. Not as dream or image, but as the sign of the individual human. I was of course aware that the novel, being composed of signs, could not be reality itself, but merely invoke reality, and that the reality it invoked would be just as abstract as the one from which I was trying to escape; and at the same time I knew too that what the novel can do, and which perhaps is its most important property, is to penetrate our veils of habit and familiarity simply by describing things in a slightly different way, for example by being insistent with respect to some particular state of affairs, let's say describing a child's pacifier over a whole page, whereby the real child's pacifier would subsequently present itself differently, in that its pacifying – that aspect of it that makes us see only its function and not its form, which is quite sensuous in its combination of soft, droplet-shaped rubber with the hard plastic of the grip, this blend of nipple imitation and toy, created to satisfy the cravings of the child, who likes both to suck and to chew, and to look at and grasp objects with bright and simple colors and rounded forms – would thereby be modified, or by juxtaposing things not normally juxtaposed, since it was not reality that had vanished, but my attention toward it. I could not relinquish my grip on it, this was my intuition, or my explanation of the fundamental lack of meaning I felt in my life, and it may well have been just another explanation, another theory, in itself abstract, but it did not feel that way, and if there's something I've learned to trust over the course of the forty-two years I have lived, it is my feelings. In the novel I began to write, the authentic names were therefore the key. I was aware that a number of people could not be named, since they would not wish to be associated with the events I was going to describe, my uncle being one, and I had no problem at all giving up those names, although for a short time I resisted when one of them didn't want to be in the book in any way at all, not even under another name, because at that point I had no idea how the novel was going to be received, viewing it simply as an experiment in realism that would reach only a very small number of interested readers and be hurled against the wall out of sheer boredom and frustration by anyone else who might venture into its pages. I was, however, totally against changing the names of those in the next most immediate sphere, those I played with as a child, for instance, or went to *gymnas* with. The whole point of the novel was to depict reality as it was. A growing-up shaped by the boy who lived here and did this, the girl who lived there and did that, the boy I heard about at that particular time, the girl I kissed that Friday night, not shrouded in literature's pall, not ingeniously illuminated in prose's darkened studio, but described in full daylight, swathed in reality. I wanted to get to what was raw and arbitrary about that reality, and to that end the name was essential. Obviously, reality would be altered into something else in the process of being depicted, but my hope was that what was fantastic about the phenomenon itself, the fact of existing alongside a certain collection of people where everyone knew each other or had heard of each other, in a certain period of time in a certain geographical area, and where basically anything at all could happen, but where things eventually turned out according to reality's own exactness and precision, that some of this, the starry luster of growing up, familiar to us all, would shine through the literary form. Every name that went from being real to being fictional weakened that feeling and pulled the novel into the shimmer of enfeebled reality it had been written to engage against. Geir G. said it didn't matter to the reader, he or she wasn't going to connect the names with anyone anyway and wouldn't know if it was authentic or not. But the authentic is a timbre, impossible to imitate.

In a novel the name works like a face: on the first encounter it's new and unfamiliar, but spending even a short time in its presence you start associating certain characteristics with it, then gradually, if it remains near to you over time, a history, eventually an entire life, in that the faces with which you're familiar absorb all that you know about them without you necessarily being aware of the fact; in the case of an old friend walking toward you, that knowledge is patent, melted into the face, each and every aspect that to you comprises "him" or "her." In the best instances the name of a character in a novel is so precise as to summon something essential to the epoch, and in exceptional cases may even become an emblem of the universally human. The inauthentic life of Emma Bovary, the ruthless ambition of Lucien Sorel, the loss of meaning felt by Hamlet, the ideological unyieldingness of Brand. The Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann points out in an essay how the literature of our own time strikingly comprises no such names.

Don DeLillo is one of the best novelists of our time, yet how many recall even a single name among his many characters? Bachmann writes that Thomas Mann was the last great conjurer of names: Hans Castorp, Adrian Leverkühn, Tonio Kröger, Serenus Zeitblom. These are names that sponge up characteristics and meanings that belong not merely to the individuals they denote, but also to the culture of which they are a part. Thomas Mann was the last great bourgeois novelist; together with Marcel Proust he marks the end point of an entire epoch, perhaps also, and certainly in the case of Proust, its consummation. In no other work of the bourgeois period does the name play so great a part as in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Here the name is no longer an instrument by which to achieve some particular effect, and no mere furnishing of the novel's interior; rather it is a major theme, and thereby it loses its innocence. However, this loss of innocence occurred not only in Proust's novel; while Proust was working on *In Search of Lost Time*, in Paris, Kafka was writing his novels and stories in Prague, and in them the name has changed radically; he called his main character Josef K, or more simply K. The abbreviation of the name removes everything that the name usually brings with it, the individual and the local, which thereby become plain in its absence. The individual and the local are what we can identify with, a name inspires first and foremost a form of intimacy, and when the intimacy of the name is gone, our intimacy with the character is gone too and the character is left surrounded by uncertainty and mystery: the name in Kafka is an antiname. At the same time, the character bearing the name leaves a very clear and definite impression, he is a "someone" rather than a "no one." The reduction is by no means arbitrary, the particular things that vanish with the name, everything that binds the character to others and itself, and to places, represent his history. If history is gone, only the moment remains, and what is a human being in the moment? What is a character without its history? What is this something we sense, this impression of another human, when it is unattached to action or origin? The question is not entirely adequate in light of what goes on in Kafka's prose; this we see if we compare it to that of another, slightly earlier author, Knut Hamsun, who in his first novel also writes about a person without history or home, who exists in an environment to which he is fundamentally unattached. Hamsun's character is nameless, but this does not mean that he is an antiperson, merely that his name is not given. The difference between Hamsun's unnamed and Kafka's antinamed character is palpable and determines how the two novels are read. Hamsun's urge toward individuality was great, occasionally immense, and what he opposed most of all in his first phase was literature's reduction of the individual, the unique never being allowed to be simply unique, but always a sign of something general and universal, and that the two were connected by means of formulas and schemata. "A man who deals in horses, for example," he wrote in his manifesto *From the Unconscious Life of the Mind*, "A man who deals in horses is nothing else but a horse dealer. He is a horse dealer in every word. He cannot read a folktale or speak of flowers or take an interest in cleanliness; no, he must always brag, always pat his wallet, curse like a barbarian, and smell of the stables." Literature as Hamsun saw it was simple, schematic, structural, cohesive, harmonious, explained, whereas the life he saw around him was complex, unsystematic, incohesive, arbitrary, unharmonious, unexplained. How could the writer transport the language out of the system into life as it was lived? This was the question Hamsun posed in Lillesand in the autumn of 1890. It was a confrontation with realism or an attempt toward a new, truer realism, and what he did to that end was to remove all categories he found establishing particular connections and which in themselves steered the reader's understanding of the character: so no childhood, no parents, no native soil, no friends, no environment, no history – and no name. He was striving for the unique, and sought therefore to move toward the now, the world prior to meaning, *prior* to interpretation, which is to say toward the forever as yet unexplained. If the name is the character's face in the novel, then the character in Hamsun's novel ought to be faceless, yet he is not; his "I" is so strong, so willful, and brings together so much in its being that it becomes like a name itself, with which the reader quickly becomes intimate, though without at any point becoming ensnared in the emblematism Hamsun so despised. He wanted the character not to be representative of time or epoch, but of itself, and if there was any semblance of representation in that it was of the unique human. Kafka's design in removing origin, history, and environment from his character was almost the exact opposite; what he endeavored to demonstrate was not the individual's uniqueness, its development and individuality, but the forces by which it was constrained and governed, not in terms of the near, the personal, and the intimate, but of the common and the general, in which they appear quite as faceless as his main character. The K is like a blindfold. Josef K, we say, and think not of a certain person's character, the way we do when we say Othello or Odysseus, but of a certain state, dim and obscure, labyrinthine, unfathomable, faceless.

The main character in Hamsun's next novel was just as removed from his history as the I of *Hunger*, and quite as alien to his surroundings, but did possess in contrast a name. Yet the name, Nagel, signified no particular place of belonging, neither in terms of class nor geography, and was perhaps first and foremost an anagram – certainly it would seem reasonable to take it to be a play on the Norwegian *galen*, mad. Whereas Emma Bovary's fate consists of her confusing the romantic and the real, Nagel's is that he sees through the romantic, sees through art, sees through the circus of small-town life and the drama of the wider world: everything is pretense, this is his insight. Including death, into which it all propels him; it too has an element of performance about it, not in the form of tragedy, more like a farce. The notion that nothing can be taken seriously is an infrequent starting point for a novel, which presumably on some level has to take itself seriously in order to be written. *Mysteries* is perhaps not the most successful of novels, yet it does contain some quite unrivaled passages in which Hamsun ventures still further into the now and describe the almost completely unattached stirrings of a human mind at any given moment. Of all that goes on in Nagel's mind, little may be traced back to a particular self, or rather it would seem hard to say what this self in actual fact consists of, not least because so much of what runs through it comes from outside, in the first instance by the fact of being language, which is the same for everyone, and in the second by being made up of fragments of general culture, and what reveals itself then, perhaps for the first time, for never before have I seen a stream of consciousness so rendered with all it contains of high and low, important and unimportant, is how the world flows through the individual to such a remarkable extent that one has to wonder if anything like individuality even exists, and, if it does, in what ways it might manifest itself. And if it does not exist, what does a name then represent?

"Names! What's in a name?" Joyce asks in the ninth chapter of his *Ulysses*, the part that takes place in the national library in Dublin, where Stephen Dedalus, the young man with the rather less than realistic-sounding name, discusses Hamlet and Shakespeare with some intellectual acquaintances. This question of the name was originally posed by Shakespeare. Shakespeare, says Stephen, was not Hamlet, but Hamlet's father, the dead king who appeared as a ghost before his son. Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude, was then Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, who according to Stephen was unfaithful, while Hamlet himself was Hamnet Shakespeare, dead son of William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway. Underlying this discussion is the fact that the novel opens by describing a conversation between two young men in a tower, one being Stephen, who has just lost his mother. The other, Buck Mulligan, says to him, "The aunt thinks you killed your mother," to which Stephen replies, "Someone killed her." The tower is the castle at Elsinore, Dublin Bay the strait between Denmark and Sweden, and Stephen is Hamlet. But Stephen is also Telemachus journeying in search of his father, Odysseus, which is to say Leopold Bloom, the Jew. And Leopold Bloom is besides Odysseus also Virgil when in the night he walks side by side with Stephen, which is to say Dante, through the streets of Dublin, which is to say Hell, and he is the writer Henry Flowers, who sends audacious letters on the sly to a woman whose acquaintance he has made by way of an advertisement. But he is moreover the father of a son who died, which in this universe makes him Shakespeare, father of Hamnet. And his wife is not only Penelope, who is besieged by men in Odysseus's absence, but also Anne Hathaway, which is to say Queen Gertrude, since just after four o'clock that day she is in bed with her impresario, making a cuckold of Bloom. *Ulysses* is a novel about change, but also a novel about everything always being the same, and the dimension with which it is most concerned, the mystery it grapples with so unrelentingly, is time. The action takes place during the course of a single day in Dublin, and the now is a kind of gateway standing open to the past, which rises and falls imperceptibly in everything, and to the future, which is slung through it. "Hold on to the now," Stephen tells himself in the library, "the here, through which all future plunges to the past," words that contain at once a philosophy of life and a poetics. In the discussion of Plato and Aristotle there, Stephen suggests that Aristotle would have considered Hamlet's musings on death, this "improbable, insignificant, and undramatic monologue," to be quite as shallow as Plato's. The apotheosis of ideas, the heaven of shapeless spirit, is anathema to Stephen; what he believes in is the material world in all its abundance, and what Joyce does in *Ulysses* is to investigate how ideas and the immaterial manifest themselves in the material, proceeding from the idea that they are found only there, in the now, in the bodies and objects that exist here at this moment. If life is a journey forward through time, the past is its phantom. "What is a ghost?" Stephen asks. "One who has faded into impalpability, through death, through absence, through change of manners." That such a transition occurs through death is the normal understanding, through absence a logical extension, but in the last phrase, "through change of manners," we leave the individual death and enter the collective: a ghost is that which time has abandoned. This is Joyce's overarching theme, treated first in the small and, compared to *Ulysses*, relatively intimate format of the short story "The Dead," toward the very end of which he uses the same expression as he would later have Stephen think: "His own identity was fading out into a gray impalpable world." The gray impalpable world into which his own self vanished was that of the dead. The palpable world the dead had once built up and inhabited, dissolved and disappeared. In *Ulysses* that thought is launched into the world, we might say, transplanted from the framed confines of the closet drama into teeming, ordinary life, on an ordinary day in an ordinary city, in which it is active on all levels and in every context, though without dominating any, since with the action taking place during the course of a day, and the text unyieldingly in the moment, nothing is overriding and everything is dissolved in the now. This is true of history, it is true of mythology, true of the dead, true of philosophy, true of religion, and especially, perhaps primarily, true of identity. None of these categories is splintered or dissolved, but simply viewed through the prism of the moment, which can only handle little bits at a time. A glimpse of the dead mother here, the smell of the room in which she lay, a thought from Thomas Aquinas there, a sparkle of sun on a pane, the rush of the waves, a brewery horse on its way down the street, a sentence in a newspaper, a snippet of an aria, a fawning librarian, the books on the shelves thought of as coffins. This is what it is to exist in the world. To understand it or think about it, you have to step back from it. So too with *Ulysses*. All the little bits, all the structures dissolved in the now, come together in bigger bits, which is Joyce's answer to the question: What does it mean to be human? The novel has three main characters: Stephen Dedalus, the young man on his way up; all his energy is spent on wrenching himself free of what holds him down, his father, a drunken charmer, his mother, whose death weighs on his mind and racks him with guilt, his friends, against whom he competes, and his education, which is familiarity with the thoughts of others – his adventurous suggestion of Hamlet's mediocrity is a way of elevating himself in what we refer to, with some measure of resignation, as youthful arrogance, in actual fact but a necessary vigor; Leopold Bloom, the middle-aged man (who in our day would be considered relatively young, would wear sneakers and regularly shave his head; he is thirty-eight years old), in the middle of life, an advertising agent with no upward trajectory, an ordinary man doing the best he can; and Molly Bloom, singer, some years younger than her husband, spending most of her time in bed and merely referred to, until concluding the novel in her own voice, a long inner monologue completely unlike everything that has gone before. Leopold Bloom is in many respects Stephen Dedalus's opposite; whereas the younger man is introduced at the top of a tower, high above the world, hooked up with Hamlet, Ancient Greece, and Christianity, the reader meets Bloom right in the middle of his everyday life, in a kitchen, associated closely from the start with the mortal world and bodily pleasures; first the faint smell of urine from fried kidneys, then the pleasing waft of his excrement after moving his bowels. When later in the day he visits a museum and looks at the statues there, it is Aphrodite that captures his attention, for reasons quite apart from the noble and artistic. Leopold Bloom's mind too is filled with fragments of immaterial reality, though in its lowest form, as it appears in newspapers and advertisements, signs and leaflets, he misconstrues and is often naïve, but in contrast to Stephen he is a whole human being, a complete human being, a true human being, so when finally they meet and go through the city together at night he is indeed Virgil to Stephen Dedalus's Dante. That Molly Bloom should be lying above them with her head full of thoughts as they seat themselves in the kitchen is something of which both are unaware, just as they are oblivious to her superiority over them, in the sense that she sees her husband so much more clearly than he sees her, and sees Stephen as a diligent schoolboy, the son of his father.

Few characters in the history of literature are depicted with as much complexity as these three. Yet the novel could not have carried any of their names as its title; it could not have been called *Leopold Bloom*, as Flaubert's novel was called *Madame Bovary* or Shakespeare's play was called *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, for the novel is greater than them, which is to say that the characters are not the principal focus of its theme. Everyone knows Madame Bovary's conflict, Hamlet's conflict, Don Quixote's conflict, it is what we think about when we hear the names, but who knows Stephen Dedalus's conflict? He is more intelligent than Hamlet, finds Hamlet's ruminations about death shallow, and his field of reference is broader, he too has lost one of his parents and feels guilty about it, yet the fact remains that as a literary character he is not in Hamlet's league. Is that because Elizabethan England had a different view of greatness from that of Dublin at the beginning of the twentieth century? Joyce strives to portray the lives of quite ordinary people, and the contrast to the greatness from Odysseus and Hamlet is a continual point; if the same thing happens in *Ulysses*, it happens on a smaller scale. Prometheus's impressive and wild transformations are represented in Dublin by a dog and Stephen's imagination, as Olof Lagercrantz observed. The modest life, meaning the ordinary and down to earth, is the foundation of *Ulysses*, and through such life the novel's great characters and themes wander ghostlike. Of course, it is far from unusual for an ordinary person, one deemed by others to be insignificant, to make a great character in a novel; Emma Bovary is no princess or duchess but the jilted wife of a country doctor. The difference is that Madame Bovary, Don Quixote, and Hamlet reside in history, whereas in the case of Leopold Bloom, Molly Bloom, and Stephen Dedalus the opposite holds and history resides in them. The new in Joyce and modernist literature is in the weakening of the boundary between the self and the outside world, so radical that the relationship becomes near osmotic. People get bigger in a way, embracing both history and the stream of events of contemporary existence, but they also get smaller insofar as what is unique and unexampled about them, collected in the name, the person they are, becomes dissolved in it.

Yet while Joyce achieved these insights, and they were achieved simultaneously in many other fields of culture, they have never been for everyone, the way the *Odyssey*, for instance, once was for everyone, as one must assume it was, something children and adults alike, women and men, poor and rich listened to. *Ulysses* has only ever been read by the few, a fate it shares with many other trailblazing works of modernism, not just in literature but also in philosophy and psychology, the work of Husserl and Freud to mention but two, because although many of their ideas have spread and been accorded universal validity, the exactness on which they depend and which only direct reading can provide, has been lost along the way. *Ulysses* has become the myth of the difficult book, eight hundred pages about a single day, Freud is associated with the subconscious, with stretching out on a couch and talking about your childhood, and with jokes about cigars and trains going through tunnels, Husserl is Heidegger's forerunner, Heidegger himself a Nazi. The fact that Joyce writes about this, the way culture's every expression is broken down to live among us only barely understood, as misconstruals, assumptions, half-truths, myths and surmisals, bits of this and fragments of that, as if to show that culture is this, the human and living is that, God but a shout in the street, is perhaps ironic in view of he himself becoming the very epitome of literary elitism and obliviousness to the world, though quite understandable given the fact that in order to get there, in order to penetrate into this, he had to shun that same quotidian culture's ways of communicating.

What they actually comprise becomes clear in the way the American writer William Faulkner exploits the name. In his novel *The Sound and the Fury* names are presented without accompanying information as to those they denote, who are taken for granted, hardly a characteristic or note of origin to go with them; Faulkner's names leave us utterly in the dark.

In her essay on the name in literature Ingeborg Bachmann writes about Faulkner, and her examples are telling: one minute we're reading about someone calling for Caddie, the next about someone called Caddy, no information is given, one is associated with the verb "hit," perhaps we're dealing with a golfer calling his caddie, but something else is triggered by this too; later the name Caddy appears, the time is another, the connection unclear. Then a character named Quentin is introduced, and one minute the name refers to a woman, the next to a man. In a way, Faulkner goes further than Joyce in his approach to reality, attempting to describe the world the way it appears to his characters and making no effort at all to describe the characters to us, their gazes are as such unconveyed, and in that lies the realism. Reading *The Sound and the Fury* is like going into the house of a family you don't know, where everyone's talking about their relations and paying you not even the slightest attention; all you get is a number of names connected to various events and occurrences everyone knows about except you, which is why they are never related in their entirety but merely alluded to. Or rather, no, it's like going inside the mind of one of those sitting there and being party to the way he or she experiences the conversation, the allusions and references being even more oblique; no one explains to themselves what they already know. The names are closed to us, but not in the same way as in Kafka, where they are relieved of their surroundings and history; on the contrary, in *The Sound and the Fury* the names are woven into the surroundings and history, and since both are closed to us, the names too are closed. The lack of openness points directly inward toward the core of the novel, the fulcrum around which it revolves: something happened once, something no one can talk about, not even think about, but which nevertheless is present in the various streams of consciousness. It cannot be conveyed, it cannot be confronted, it must be concealed. The word *incest* appears, apparently it has to do with that. Incest is one of the oldest of all taboos, and the whole novel, the mood it creates, does indeed have something archaic about it. In Faulkner the past is like a void and unclear, differing radically from Joyce's past, which above all is the past of culture, that which is devised and created, Odysseus and Circe, Dante, and Shakespeare, a past to which one relates through the intellect, whereas the past in Faulkner's work is nameless and without language, and may only be sensed or felt. The difference is reflected too in the titles. Both are intertextual, Joyce finding his in Homer, Faulkner in Shakespeare, but while Joyce uses a name, Ulysses, and brings a culture to life, Faulkner uses a phenomenon of the world, sound/noise/commotion, and another from the domain of the human, fury/rage/anger, both timeless. The name does not address the archaic, but the social. The distance between the archaic and the social is brought about by Faulkner through the unfamiliarity that is infused into the name, the rejection of familiarity. Thus, an existential depth is invoked, which neither Joyce nor Kafka are anywhere near. This is not about the presence or absence of the contemporary, and the idea of "existential depth" is perhaps misleading, since the archaic is not behind anything, and not inside anything, the difference being not a matter of rungs, but of the eye, and through the eye the experience, which is unreachable by language and therefore must be evoked. While the secret is not in itself unreachable in *The Sound and the Fury*, it cannot, for social and psychological reasons, be named, much as in Ibsen's plays, the only difference being that there it rises to the surface to be perceived and recognized in a kind of culmination alien to Faulkner's own characters. Faulkner's, Joyce's, Flaubert's, Proust's, and Kafka's books inhabit the social domain, the novel is its literary form, concerned with interpersonal relationships and how the reality we make up and by which we are surrounded is communicated. This is the case even in Dostoevsky; the fulcrum of his novels is never the spiritual or the religious in itself, but the reactions to it of the surrounding world. This is the novel's basic constraint, chained as it is to life in the social domain, the way people are to each other, and the minute the novel departs from that human world and ventures into the nonhuman or the beyond-human of the divine, it dies. As long as Dante is writing about an inferno populated by people, his epic poem lives; as soon as he proceeds upward to heaven to depict the divine, it withers away in his hands. Music can express it, and painting too, since their forms are wordless, their language another and nameless, as removed from the I that employs it and the I that perceives it as figures in a mathematical formula. Reading a novel after having listened to Bach's cello suites is like leaving a sunset to descend into a cellar. The novel is the form of the small life, and when it's not it is because it's being deceitful and is no true novel at all, since no I exists that isn't small too. The only literary form that can exceed it is the poem. The poem is akin to the song and exists somewhere between music and the word, which is to say that it is capable of reaching beyond the word and thus to break out of the social, which is another term for the world as we know it. This means poetry is related also to religion, which has always been rooted in the human domain, staring out at the nonhuman, in whose icy winds we are unknown and strangers to all, not just to each other, but also to ourselves.

A poem of Rilke's begins like this:

They had, for a while, grown used to him. But after
they lit the kitchen lamp and in the dark
it began to burn, restlessly, the stranger
was altogether strange.

The situation is the washing of a corpse, and the poem concludes thus:

And one without a name
lay clean and naked there, and gave commands.

The name is what joins the body to our social life, the name collects all judgments and assumptions as to a particular personality, and what happens when a person dies is that the name is no longer connected to the body, which decomposes and disappears, whereas the name lives on in the social world.

Can we imagine a person without a name?

It would certainly say something quite different about being human. Without a name the human would be a locus for the beating of a heart, the wheeze of lungs, the tumult of thought, its identity residing in the unique moment, which is to say akin to animal.

But we are that, too.

Rilke's corpse had always been strange, in the sense of unknown, but only when dead and nameless could it be seen as such. And the commands it gave were commands to life outside the social world, commands of flesh, earth, water.

That perspective is ever present in Rilke's poems, not without reason was he a pupil of Hölderlin's, the poet of the divine perspective, for whom the social world does not exist; in Hölderlin everything is existential, and the fact that at the end he abandoned the social context completely in his life, vanishing into madness, beyond the grip of the self, is hard not to understand as a consequence of the worldview expressed in his poems. Rilke is closer to the social, his poems wash in and out of the two different worlds, and the fact that he wrote so often about angels must be seen in that light, angels being the very connecting figures between the divine and the human. In one of his Duino Elegies he writes:

For it seems that everything
hides us. Look: trees do exist; the houses
that we live in still stand. We alone
fly past all things, as fugitive as the wind.
And all things conspire to keep silent about us, half
out of shame perhaps, half as unutterable hope.

The poem moves between what is, the silent, nameless world, and we who see it. That the silent world tries to hide us means that it knows us; and it does so because we issue from it, which in turn is to say we have left it, yet at the same time we continue to belong to it, our hearts beating without word, and I believe it is that very movement he is describing, inward toward our being, outward away from it again. Religion strives inward toward being, and art strives toward that same place. Religion and art combine in the angel. "Every angel is terrifying," Rilke also writes. Why is the angel terrifying? Because its presence renders the human figurative in the same way as death. Yes, the angel looks at us with the eyes of death. Rilke's angels have nothing to do with Christianity. In Christ man was made God, and what he opened up to us he opened up in the social world: your neighbor is you, turn the other cheek, everyone is of equal worth. The social world is about establishing and maintaining differences. In one swoop he annulled them. Forgiveness is the uniformity of the divine implanted in the human. It is as if the gaze is turned from the stars to the eyes.

But as hard as it is for us to exist in the uniformity of the divine, it is quite as hard to do so in that of forgiveness. We are too small, we creep and crawl in and out of our houses and through our streets, terrified for a moment by the vacuum of death yet shaking off our fears to keep on crawling, in and out of our houses, up and down our streets, with a vitality we cannot hope to make shine in the way of the all-obliterating light of the good, no matter that this is what we wish, for our vitality hits a wall, is thrown against a ceiling, hurled toward a floor, it steers us this way and that, in the small and intermittent dislocations that characterize not only the human body, but also its soul and mind.

We lose ourselves, and we lose ourselves in each other.

When I read Rilke's poem it was Dad I thought about, the time I saw him lying dead on a table in the chapel in Kristiansand, in the summer of 1998.

They had, for a while, grown used to him. But after
they lit the kitchen lamp and in the dark
it began to burn, restlessly, the stranger
was altogether strange.

That was what I saw. Not that he was a stranger, but that he had always been a stranger. If I had spoken his name then he would not have reacted, it would have glanced off him, for it was no longer his. He was a corpse and as such outside the name. His body had slid out of its name and lay there without, nameless. For the remainder of that week I saw in short glimpses everything else around me in the same way, outside the name. It was a secret world I saw, and if I did not understand it then, I understand it now, the kinship of death and art, and their function in life, which is to prevent reality, our conception of the world, from conflating with the world.

So much of Dad was collected in his name. He spelled it differently when he was young, and changed it sometime in his forties, and as he lay there dead and nameless, the name the mason chiseled into his headstone was spelled incorrectly. The stone is still there, in the cemetery in Kristiansand, with its misspelled name, on top of the interred urn containing the ashes of his body. And when, ten years later, I began to write about him I was prohibited from referring to him by name. Before that I had never given a thought to what a name was and what it meant. But I did so now, accentuated by the events that followed in the wake of the first book, and I began to write this chapter, first about the name itself, then about various names of literature and their function there, starting out with a piece of thinking I found in the writing of Ingeborg Bachmann concerning the decline of the name in literature, contained in a short essay in a book published a few years ago by Pax. The essay on the name began on a right-hand page. On the left-hand page were some lines of a poem my eyes absently scanned when at some point during the spring I sat down with the book in front of me, intending to see if anything of what I had written had been unwittingly drawn from Bachmann's essay.

So
there are temples yet. A
star
probably still has light.
Nothing,
nothing is lost.

These were the words I read. I guessed they were from a poem of Paul Celan, knowing that Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann had been friends and furthermore enjoyed a certain literary kinship. This is the kind of thing one knows without it necessarily having any bearing on anything, a relationship of some sort that is simply there. That Paul Celan knew and corresponded with Nelly Sachs, for instance, and that Nelly Sachs fled to Stockholm during the war and remained there for the rest of her life. Both were Jewish, and both wrote poetry that had to do with the extermination of the Jews. Both lived in exile, Celan in Paris, Sachs in Stockholm. I had never read any of their poems, apart from Paul Celan's "Death Fugue," which I found astonishingly beautiful when I was introduced to it as a nineteen-year-old student in the writers' academy in Hordaland. "*Svart morgonmjølk me drikk ho um kvelden*," as Hauge's Norwegian translation went, "Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown," and "*døden er ein meister frå Tyskland*," "death is a master from Germany." It was a poem I would later feel shame at having found such beauty in, since its theme was not the exquisite and the sublime, but the exquisite and the sublime's antithesis, the extermination of the Jews.

I skimmed back a few pages in Bachmann's book. Indeed it was Paul Celan. The six lines cited at the end of the essay were from a poem called "Engführung," or "The Straitening" as it is called in one celebrated English translation. I had not heard of it before, but I did have a collection of Paul Celan's poetry in Øyvind Berg's Norwegian translations, it had remained unread on my bookshelf since sometime in the midnineties and I found it immediately. Something in those six lines had appealed to me. Perhaps it was the sequence "Nothing/nothing is lost" that seemed so positive at first sight, only then to turn itself almost inside out and become the opposite; "nothing is lost" can mean that everything goes on as before, if one reads the words in their most immediate sense, meaning that nothing has been lost, but if they are read in the sense of "nothing" being what is lost, the poem then opens out toward something else entirely, since "nothing" is not simply nothing, it is also the end point of all mysticism – the Kabbalists wrote that God resides in the depths of his nothingness. The idea that God is nothing belongs to negative mysticism; by saying what God is not, the divine may be approached without reduction. I had no idea if Paul Celan's poem had anything at all to do with such things, but in the preceding lines temples were mentioned, the houses of religion, and a star, which is only there in darkness. "A/star/probably still has light," it said. Why "probably," why "still"? The existence of the temples too was qualified by a "yet." Did it have something to do with Rilke's poem? He too used the word in a sense that seemed to deviate from the expected, when he wrote "the houses/that we live in still stand." All this made the poem potentially very interesting, but the most important reason for me picking it out and skimming through it was because I was looking for something I could use in my essay about the name. I found it.

The place where they lay, it has
a name – it has
none.

I read.

Something had a name, but what this name might be wasn't mentioned, and then the fact of it having a name was taken back.

With that in mind I noted there wasn't a single name in the entire poem. Not of a person, not of a place, and not of any time.

Why would that be?

Whatever the reason, I found myself drawn in by it, for this was not a world in which the reason for the name not being mentioned could be that it wasn't important, which is to say not the nameless essence of reality, the world beyond language, true and authentic; this seemed rather to be a world in which the name more simply could not be mentioned. It was as if the very foundation of the name was broken.

What was the foundation of the name?

In what way was it broken?

I read the poem, understanding nothing, it was closed to me, almost completely mute. This was no infrequent experience of mine. I couldn't read poetry, and had never been able to. At the same time I had always, from when I was nineteen and had been introduced to the leading modernist poets at the writers' academy, considered poetry to be the pinnacle. What poetry was in touch with was something I was not in touch with, and my respect for poetry was boundless. This is no exaggeration. I have written about it earlier too, in this novel, the way the poem, which I took to be the highest form of expression, refused to open itself to me. When I grew older I became familiar with all the names of the poets and knew enough about them to be able to mention them in what I was writing or talking about, as with the example of Paul Celan above; he was from Romania, his parents died in a German concentration camp, he lived in Paris, wrote in German, and committed suicide sometime in the sixties by drowning himself in the Seine. His poems were mysterious, belonging in a way to the same tradition as Hölderlin and Rilke, but at the end of it, because with Celan the language came apart.

I knew who they were, but not what they had written.

Could it really be the case that poets and readers of poetry comprised some esoteric sect? Surely not only the initiated could read poems?

For some reason that was exactly how I had perceived it. The sense of others possessing insights I have no idea about, of everyone else being able and knowledgeable, has pursued me all through my adult life, in almost every respect. And, I think to myself now as I sit here at the age of nearly forty-three, most likely with justification. I suspect there are vast areas of human erotic life about which I know nothing and which I associate with darkness and fervency, an almost limitless sophistication into which other people, though by no means all, are initiated. When I meet people I often think this to myself, that to them I must come across as naïve and innocuous, a bit like a child. The same applies to poetry. Poetry expresses the innermost secrets of life and the world, some people relate to it with the greatest of ease, others are excluded. That I got nothing out of the poetry I read merely confirmed this to be true. It was as if poems were written in code. I felt excluded by many other languages too, that of mathematics, for instance, yet the language of mathematics did not possess the aura for me of leading to the grail, was not shrouded in such dim mists, with half-turned faces, derisive sneers, scornful eyes. This feeling, of being outside what was important, was degrading, since it made me simple and my life shallow. The way I tackled it was to ignore it and pretend it didn't bother me. The deep secrets of erotic life and the esoteric insights of poetry were meant for others, whereas I, constrained by the stupid thinness of my life, struggled to accept that life was just that, stupid and thin. At the same time, something happened when I entered my thirties, in that some semblance of confidence came to me in the way I engaged with literature, though it was difficult to pin down, most of all a feeling of being able to see that little bit further, think that little bit further, and that what previously had been closed to me suddenly seemed possible to prize open. Though not unconditionally; I could read *The Death of Virgil* by Broch with some return, but not *The Sleepwalkers* by the same author, a novel of which I still hadn't the faintest understanding. It was at that time I got a job working as a consultant on the Norwegian revision of the Old Testament, and since I had no grounding in the linguistic, cultural, or religious aspects that were involved, I had no option but to work hard and meticulously, nothing was going to come to me on a plate, and what revealed itself then, when I went through the first sentence of the creation word for word, for instance, was the way in which entire worldviews might be encapsulated in a comma, in an "and," in a "which," and, with those insights, how different the world becomes if its description is coordinate with rather than subordinate to the metaphor, for example, or the way a word not only has lexical meaning, but is also colored by the contexts in which it appears, something the writers of the Bible exploited to the full, for instance by allowing a word at the beginning to apply to the sun's relation to the earth, and then to let that same word many pages on apply to man's relation to woman. The word is merely there, in the two different places, and the connection is as good as invisible, yet decisive. People have been reading the Bible as holy Scripture for a couple of thousand years, and every word it contains has been considered meaningful, a dizzyingly tight mesh of different meanings and shades of meaning have thereby arisen, which no single human can ever possibly command. What happened when I started working on those texts was that I learned to read. I began to understand what it meant to read. Reading is seeing the words as lights shining in the dark, one after another, and to engage in the activity of reading is to follow the lights into the text. But what we see is never detached from the person we are; the mind has its limitations, they are personal, but cultural too in that there is always something we cannot see and places we cannot go. If we are patient and investigate the words and their contexts carefully enough, we may nonetheless identify those limitations, and what is revealed to us then is that which lies outside ourselves. The goal of reading is to reach these places. This is what learning is, seeing that which lies outside the confines of the self. To grow older is not to understand more but to realize that there is more to understand. Yet the secrets of the Old Testament were to begin with so remote as to be unthreatening. The secrets of erotic life and poetry were menacing, in contrast, having to do with my identity, and what kept me outside was not the alien nature of their culture but the chasm within my own, which was to do with the very remoteness of such things. I realize this probably comes across as somewhat hysterical, and I don't know how to put it in order to make it clear just how inhibiting it is to feel excluded from that which is significant. To me this was exactly the aura in which Paul Celan's poetry was shrouded. His poems canceled out what was given about the words, and thereby what was given about the world. As such, it was not so much existence that was on the line as identity. The name had to become visible in the nameless, much as the all became visible in the nothing, so I imagined on the basis of the four words, "nothing/nothing is lost," which I had read and puzzled over. And that surely was how it was with regard to the poem as a whole. It was not composed of mysteries, but of words. So all that was required was to read them. To note down all possible meanings of the first word, then the next, and then consider the connections between them.

The first word was "Driven."

Driven into
the terrain
with the unmistakable track:

grass, written asunder.

Aside from its everyday, transportational sense, "drive" means to propel, to force to go into or penetrate. It suggests the existence of an outside, a place from where what is propelled comes. The German original has "*verbracht*," and that contains the same element of force. Another English translation has "deported," suggesting forcible removal from one place to another.

Something is driven in from outside, not tenderly and with caution, but firmly, without consideration, harshly and mechanically even; this seemed like a plausible interpretation. But driven into where? Into "the terrain with the unmistakable track." This could be the poem's own terrain, the place established by its very designation, and yet that place seems to exist already, whatever is driven in is already driven, now an element of that terrain.

The terrain is characterized by way of "the unmistakable track." Like "driven," "unmistakable" has something unaccommodating about it, something firm and incontestable. The unmistakable is hard fact, something a person can do nothing about. If "driven" and "unmistakable" are words suggestive of disregard or lack of consideration, carrying with them a more or less direct sense of power or enforcement, then "asunder" is more manifestly suggestive of this in that something is patently said to have been damaged. Yet we understand that this is not a physical force, but a force inflicted by language, the grass being "written" asunder. So it is the way the grass is considered that is damaged, rather than the grass itself.

This damaged way of considering is driven into a preexisting terrain characterized by an unmistakable track, and, one might suppose, damages the way of considering that terrain; this is what is driven.

The first three lines are not just nameless, they are also lacking in pronouns. Only actions are described, as if they occur on their own, at the same time as the element of force attaching to the words "driven" and "asunder" associates them with a will, a certain origin, something not arbitrary. Actions without agents often relate to weather. "It's raining," we say, "it's blowing" or "it's snowing," but what exactly is doing the "raining," the "blowing," the "snowing"? The rain is, the wind is, the snow is; the actions are their own agents, conflated with the subject, and to denote that we use the pronoun "it." "It" points toward a force that exists outside of us and over which we have no control. When actions in the human domain are described without pronouns, as in this case, those actions share that same meaning, it is as if they stem from some force we cannot control, the impersonal and nameless itself: "driven," "written."

> *grass, written asunder. The stones, white,*
> *with the shadows of grassblades:*
> *Do not read any more – look!*
> *Do not look any more – go!*

The next entity, the white stones with the shadows of grassblades, belong either to what has been driven or to the terrain as it was before; presumably the former, since a connection exists between the two, grass and grassblades are much the same thing, and the writing and the shadows are also connected, because what would constitute a shadow of grassblades if not the word "grassblades"?

The first six lines establish an ambivalent space in that they contain elements that simultaneously establish the space and undermine that of which it consists, which is language.

Into what kind of terrain may "grass, written asunder" be driven? No truly tangible one, the way terrain is in the real world with its concrete objects and physical materiality, in such terrain the asunder-written grass would likewise be an object, characters on a page. But it can be driven into the consideration of that terrain, into that which goes before the gaze of the eye that sees it and colors its perception of it. The terrain as it is considered, into this the asunder-written grass may be driven, and into its recollection. In the poem the terrain exists as a terrain prior to the writing asunder of the grass, and as a terrain after the writing asunder of the grass. At the same time the poem is itself writing, thereby itself carrying that which inflicts the damage. Yet only the grass is written asunder. And only in this terrain, which the poem opens before us, does the written-asunder grass, the damaged way of considering, obtain. It is not driven into all terrrains, but into this one, characterized by the unmistakable track. So what kind of a terrain is it? Where is the poem?

The opening sets out a terrain and a situation, and leads into a plea. Do not read any more, it says. Why? Because what we read, writing, writes the world asunder? Look instead, we are told. But then the plea is expanded: we are not to look either. Why? Perhaps because looking and reading are so closely connected. In characters on the page and in the gaze of our eye the world may emerge to us. To the eye the world exists merely in the fleeting now of the moment. What the eye sees is unique and can never return. Language ties the moment down and turns it into something else. Language is not, and can never be, the same as what it represents, but will always comprise its own shadow world pointing toward the real one, so what we see when we read is language, not the world itself. The question is whether language colors our vision and thereby our perception of the world. The grass being written asunder does not necessarily mean that the grass is damaged only in the writing, but also when we lift our gaze from the writing to look at the world. Therefore the plea goes on. Do not read, do not look, but go. To read and to look are in a certain sense passive actions by which we perceive the world; to go, however, is to actively perform, to penetrate into the world. We must not contemplate the world, but act within it. We must not read, and we must not look; instead we must go. Go toward something, perhaps; something whose nature is as yet unknown to us.

Go, your hour
has no sisters, you are –
are at home. A wheel, slow,
rolls out of itself, the spokes
climb,
climb on a blackish field, the night
needs no stars, nowhere
does anyone ask after you.

"Your hour has no sisters." What does that mean? Perhaps that every moment is unique and stands alone, or that only this hour does? This hour, which thereby is the last? It says "your" hour, rather than any hour in general, not time as such, but your time, it belongs to you and has no sisters. It stands alone and is unique. Perhaps it is the hour of death, though this could also be marked out in some other way.

"You are –," it goes on, the dash a slight hesitation or uncertainty, as if something as yet were being kept open. "Are" as in existing? Yes, but something has to follow. If the hour that has no sisters is your last, then what lies in the "are" is death, this is the conclusion: your hour has no sisters, you are dead; this is the eventuality the dash suspends in the air. And yet you are not dead, you are at home. It is as if that assertion is postponed, by means of the dash and by the repetition of "are." You are – you are at home. Is saying you are at home the same as saying you are dead? That death is a coming home to the darkness from which we once arose? Why not just say it outright, you are dead, you are home? Is the poem unable to say "dead"? If so, why? Because no one knows what death "is"? Because it "is" not, whereas the act of naming it, death, turns it into "something"? Or are you simply at home? Where, in that case, is that? In memory, its own memory, or in language, this language?

The lines that follow add depth to the terrain. In the terrain is a wheel, it "rolls out of itself," which is to say turns slowly of its own accord, its spokes climb up a blackish hill. The night needs no stars, it says; does that mean the stars are there but superfluous, since the night in question is deeper and of another nature than any through which light might penetrate, or does it mean that there are no stars at all in this night, but simply darkness?

After the wheel and the night, it says: nowhere does anyone ask after you. You are either forgotten or someone who cannot be asked after. Because you are dead? Because they who do not ask want to forget you? Or because they are dead?

Nowhere does anyone ask after you.

Who are you then, when you are absent in the minds of others? In your own eyes you are alone, in the eyes of others you are no one. But why "nowhere," why not just "nobody"? "Nowhere does anyone ask after you" – in this no person is mentioned, no name, simply the absence of any place in which someone asks after you. And what is required when someone asks after someone else? A name; there is no other way of asking after someone other than by a name. That name is not asked after. The object of the asking after is unnamed.

Until now the poem has been without human presence, apart from the "you" who "goes" – we have been given a track, grass written asunder, white stones with shadows of grassblades, a turning wheel, a blackish field, a night that needs no stars, places in which no one asks after you – yet people are there nonetheless, the agents behind the act of driving, the writing asunder, the not asking after you. Such is the home of the "you."

In such an unwordy poem, in which almost nothing of the world is named, each word and each named element is lent extraordinary weight. A wheel mentioned in *Ulysses* means practically nothing. A wheel mentioned in this poem insists on meaning. But how is it to be understood? The wheel is one of the oldest symbols known to us. It is the sun, it is repetition, it is the serpent that bites its tail, it is time, cyclical and repeating of ages, it is eternity. Here the wheel is mentioned immediately following the hour, yet the two are unconnected, they are next to each other, the wheel turning on its own, of itself, climbing on the blackish field. What makes this image of the wheel remarkable is that the wheel is in motion, in a particular terrain, seen in the now and in a particular space, seen here. As a symbol or an allegory, the wheel represents something else, and it is this other to which the wheel refers that then becomes primary, that which the wheel "is." The more tangible and specific the wheel, the weaker its symbolic force, since being made concrete individualizes it, until eventually the realism becomes consummate and the wheel becomes merely this wheel, the way it is here and now, without any other meaning than its own. The wheel in this poem exists between the all of symbolism and the one of realism. It is not a purely symbolic wheel because it turns on its own in the field at night, nor is it a realistic wheel because no real wheel can ever turn on its own in the field at night.

How are we to understand it?

The wheel is apparently something other than a real wheel, it carries more meaning than its own self, and perhaps the concretization of it, which gathers the meaning closer around this particular wheel in this particular poem, in a way individualizes its symbolic meaning, making it an idiosyncratic symbol, something valid only here, in this poem, whose meaning in that case arises in relation to, and is regulated by, the context in which it appears, the other words and images in the poem.

But the space opened by the ambivalence between realistic and symbolic has been opened before, often in works of literature from ages of crisis caught between two different worldviews or two different aesthetic paradigms, frequently two sides of the same coin. An immediate example here would be the Book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament, its depiction of the revelation of the divine.

Ezekiel first sees a burning cloud in the sky above; in it he sees four creatures, each with human form, each with wings, each with feet hooved like a calf's, and each with four faces: a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. Fire blazes among them, and lightning flashes from the flames. I beheld the living creatures, he writes, and behold, by each was a wheel upon the ground.

Until this point the creatures have been in the sky above him, but now they are next to wheels on the ground. The wheels are tall and terrifying and rimmed with eyes. They looked like they were made of golden beryl, he writes, and whenever they moved, no matter in which direction, they moved without turning. Above these mysterious wheels is a canopy, above the canopy something reminiscent of a throne that seems to be made of sapphire, and on it a figure resembling a human being, immersed in fire and with a radiant light surrounding him. The figure is God. But what are the wheels? Clearly, they are allegorical, rimmed with eyes, yet also tangible, moving this way and that on the ground as though of their own accord.

In the oldest Scriptures of the Old Testament, God's appearance to man is always in the guise of some external phenomenon. God appears as a burning bush, a whirlwind, a pillar of fire, and as a man who comes wandering across the plain outside Abraham's tent. Ezekiel's revelation too is described in terms of an external phenomenon, something in the sky above him, but what he sees is not merely a medium by which the divine reveals itself, as in the instance of the burning bush, but the divine itself; moreover, other revelations follow, clearly visions: lying on the ground with eyes closed he is transported to the temple of Jerusalem, where he sees the same four figures and the same four wheels. This is what makes Ezekiel's revelations so odd and so ambivalent: what he sees is not simply inside or outside his own being, it is at the same time the divine itself. Ezekiel found himself caught between two different modes of perception of the religious, where in the former a chasm existed between the human and the divine, while in what was to come there was a connection between them, by way of man's inner experience, which is to say the mystical. Midway between them are the wheels with all their eyes, moving this way and that on the ground beneath the throne of God.

Is there anything in Paul Celan's poem to justify employing Ezekiel's ancient vision in its reading? What, in a poem, decides whether the reader's association is relevant or tenuous?

The key word in the verse is "no." No sisters, no stars, no place. "No" denotes an absence. In that absence, that which is not, exists that which is. You, a wheel, spokes, field, the night, are characterized by this absence, and it is against the background of this absence that they are presented to us. The night is characterized by the absence of stars. The wheel turns on its own, this is emphasized, and seems not to belong together with anything else. The sky beneath which it slowly turns is empty. Read positively, as it stands, there is no connection between the wheel in the poem and the wheels in Ezekiel's vision. But read negatively, in terms of what it lacks, the wheel is a symbol without context, where the lack of context together with the emptiness of the sky expresses something extremely important, linking up with the "no" of the hour, the "no" of the night, and the "no" of the nowhere: something is no longer. And in that: something is no longer possible.

The wheel that rolls slowly, out of itself, and which is tied up with the darkness of the night and the emptiness of the sky, has to come from somewhere too, and that place, one might imagine, would be a place of cohesion, where things hung together and meaning was apparent. In the here of the poem, wherever it might be, the you is alone, the wheel on its own, the sky empty, and if all cohesion is absent, the reason is not because it has been written asunder like the grass – that terrain was centered upon what was written and the eye that saw, for the grass that is written asunder has been left behind; the you did not read in order to come here, did not look in order to come here, but went. This is not the terrain with the unmistakable track, this is home.

What is home? Home is the place you belong, the place you know, often the place you come from. This home is something to which the you comes. The you thereby returns; time has passed. There is a before, and there is a now. This home is empty, and there is no one there who knows the you. Nowhere does anyone ask after you. Where are they who might have asked after you, and who were they? The way they are mentioned, impersonally, without even a "they," connects them with whoever drove, whoever wrote the grass asunder, in the sense that they are quite as remote.

"Nowhere does anyone ask after you." In the original German this is "*nirgends fragt es nach dir*," in the Norwegian translation "*ingen steder spørres det etter deg*." What is the "*es*" in the German? The "*det*" in the Norwegian? The vague, impersonal agent: it's raining, it's snowing. The human is as remote as can be without having vanished completely. Even the act of asking after you is unperformed, visible only in its negation. No one asks after you, and as such they who do not ask are presented to us. Yet they were here once, this is implied; once they asked after you. Now all there is here is a wheel, a field, a night sky devoid of stars. The terrain being empty, the emphasis of absence, means that the one entity to be named is accorded special weight indeed. The wheel that rolls "out of itself," of its own volition.

A wheel appears in Dante's *Divina Commedia* too; Dante is in the Earthly Paradise and witnesses a procession, and this is also allegory. He sees twenty-four elders, representing the books of the Old Testament; he sees four animals, representing the Evangelists; he sees a griffin, representing Christ; he sees a chariot, representing the universal church; he sees two wheels, representing the two Testaments, or the active and the contemplative life, or justice and devoutness. But the allegory is no abstract vision, it is a tangible occurrence, the procession comes toward him as a physical reality, so physical even that the wheels leave ruts in the ground. The image is a poetic monstrosity in that when the allegory materializes and is accorded particular time in particular space, the griffin is not primarily Christ, but a griffin, the wheels not primarily the two Testaments, but wheels. What happens in Dante is that the timeless construct of the medieval world, the untouchable and schematic system to which all things and powers are subordinate, present for instance in the *Divina Commedia* in the form of all manner of devilish cycles and heavenly spheres centered upon the number three, is implanted into time and space, where the symbolic level is pervaded by the concrete in an impossible equivalation.

The terrain at the beginning of Celan's poem is, like the terrain of Dante's epic poem, bound up with death or nonexistence, though only implicitly so, by way of suggestion, in the wording "your hour has no sisters," and in the caesura between "you are –" and "you are at home." But if we take this in the sense that this starless, blackened terrain is the terrain of death, through which the "you" of the poem proceeds, the wheel is something that reveals itself. In the poetry of the death realm this is a trope: he who wanders through the kingdom of death sees something, and what he sees is shown to him so that he may tell of it when he returns to the land of the living. What the wanderer sees is meaningful. In the first fifteen lines of Celan's poem perhaps the most obvious trait is the archaic, the fact that everything that is named is in some way timeless – terrain, track, grass, stones, grassblade shadows, wheel, field, stars. No name can assign time to the space or assign to it any particular culture. We are in what is always the same. And perhaps this is why the wheel turning on its own through the empty night comes across so forbiddingly, or so forebodingly. A wheel turning by itself is not something that should be unfamiliar to us, given that we are surrounded by wheels turning by themselves, from the cogs of clockwork and machines to the wheels of cars and trains. The forbidding aspect here comes from it being a wheel on its own and that its movement is the only movement, indeed the only thing at all to exist in this terrain, and that in every respect it appears so archaic. The wheel turns of itself. This gives rise to associations of God's wheel, seen by Ezekiel, which like this wheel also existed tangibly in a tangible terrain. It gives rise to associations of the culture infusing the wheel with meaning; the wheel of life, rolling on unalterably, and the wheel that gives order to chaos and gives form to the formless. But in these cases the wheel is everything; here in the poem it is an entity surrounded by everything. And it gives rise too to associations of the mechanically driven wheel, which in such case is not only an image of time, but of our time. The wheel is archaic and religious but not to us, since to us the archaic aspect of the wheel has dissolved into the modern age in which the wheel now exists, and the two levels are made to converge here, the single wheel in the timeless terrain is the archaic wheel, while its forward motion, which is not connected to the divine, the sky above it being empty, renders the archaic strange to us, and the ambivalence renders it forbidding. And forbidding it is, certainly. No one is there to steer it, no one in control; it rolls slowly "out of itself." It is beyond the human. The grass, written asunder, and the agent of not asking after the you, are beyond the name, faceless, invisible higher powers, almost though not quite, for they still belong to the human sphere. The wheel does not.

Does it leave a rut in the terrain, like Dante's wheels?

The poem says nothing about this. But the word "track" appears only a few lines above. "The unmistakable track," it says. A track is at once something in its own right and a sign of something else. A track is language. Usually, tracks are temporary, while that of which they are a sign is more permanent. Animal tracks in the snow or sand are blown away and disappear. This track is different, it is unmistakable, the way for instance a railway track is unmistakable. The poem doesn't say railway track, and it says nothing of the wheel turning the way the wheels of a train turn. There is no mention of machinery, nothing to do with mechanics. All we have are the words "unmistakable" and "out of itself." And the fact of the grass being written asunder, which is to say that something is damaged. The line of progression goes from the damaged to what is at home, where a single wheel slowly turns, the night prevails and no one asks after whoever has come. This is the terrain of the poem, this is the home of the you, accorded more depth in the verse that follows:

*

Nowhere
does anyone ask after you –

The place where they lay, it has
a name – it has
none. They did not lie there. Something
lay between them. They
did not see through it.

Did not see, no,
spoke of
words. None
awoke,
sleep
came over them.

This is the first time someone other than "you" appears directly in the poem. They are without name, referred to simply by the pronoun; they are "they."

Who are "they"?

And what is meant by the fact that they "lay"? Were they dead, were they buried, or were they asleep? In which case, where? The place has a name, but the name is unstated, and then the very fact of it having a name is withdrawn – it has none. "They" too are unnamed. Their namelessness, their being referred to merely as "they" or "them" is disquieting, for while the "it," the agent of driving and writing asunder and not asking, is so remote as to defy association, the pronoun here draws "them," whoever they may be, closer, and their namelessness, which is the facelessness of language, becomes menacing in a different way altogether, much like the eyes of a blind person, one might imagine, the absence of the human in the human gaze. Disquieting also because they are surrounded by negation – none, not, no, none – it is almost as if they do not exist at all, as if they are on the very brink of erasure, at the same time as the neutral aspect, the remoteness of the nonpersonal, lends to their presence an aura of representation, something solemn and ritual; as if they were kings or gods. But "they" are not gods, they do not see and barely exist; we are told that "none awoke," so they were asleep even before "sleep came over them." The sleep of sleeps is death. But the poem does not say death, nor does it say sleep of sleeps, but: none awoke, sleep came over them. Why?

They are tightly bound to each other, they slept in life, they did not see and did not awake from it, for the next sleep came over them. Their not seeing stands in direct opposition to their speaking of words: they did not see the true world but the world that points toward the true world, that of words. This can be understood in existential terms, as if they were living a life that was inauthentic, unseeing of that which is genuine, but in the space between "none awoke" and "sleep came over them" lies the possibility of an unuttered "before it was too late." This, along with the failure to see, "they did not see through it," the repetition of "not see," the reinforcement of "spoke of words"; all this implies neglect, and the consequence of that neglect was that the other sleep came over them. They died, though the poem cannot state as much, since death would then become "something" and the dead "someone." Death is nothing and the dead are no one, and it is the absolute nature of this loss, the complete irreversibility of it, that the language has to deal with; this is what it has taken upon itself, at the same time as it must remain true to the unique and individual, which is to say separate it from the undifferentiated void without at the same time maintaining that identity and making it something that "is." The poem stands at the very borderline between language and the unspeakable, but this is not what it points toward, this is no language game; the poem is out there in the night of nights in order to evoke the unevokable, that which is so brittle and fleeting, so ghostly and indefinite that the slightest glimpse of an eye or a fleeting thought would cause it to recede and vanish; indeed, in a way it is that very movement it seeks to express.

The question posed is this: how to name that which is nothing without making it something? This is the very negation of religion's great puzzle: how to name what is infinite without making it finite? Even the "all" is finite. How do we name what is beyond humanity without drawing it into the human domain, given that language in itself is human? How do we refer to God?

In orthodox Judaism, God's name is unuttered, or uttered only by the high priest in the temple of Jerusalem, which no longer exists. And if the name is written down it cannot then be erased or defaced. The name appears in the Torah, the collection of holy Scriptures that for non-Jews is the Old Testament, in the form of four letters, YHWH, known as the Tetragrammaton, "the four letters." Instead of reading this name of God in prayer, the faithful read it as "Adonai," meaning "my Lord," while mention of God's name in conversation generally requires the form "HaShem," literally "the Name." Adonai and HaShem are thus names of the name. "The name has a name!" as the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas exclaims in a reflection on God's name. The name is revealed and is hidden. It is as though the name itself were God. A normal name is the name of something or someone, here the name is itself something besides. "God" in Hebrew is Elohim; YHWH is the name of the one God, God's own name. Its correct pronunciation is no longer known with any certainty; the oldest Hebrew alphabet contained no vowels, these having been added to the Scriptures at some later date, though not in the case of YHWH. Insofar as the name must not be pronouced, this would not seem to matter. But what does this name that cannot be pronounced actually say?

In the Bible, when Moses asks God his name, God replies "I am that I am" or "I am who I am," more simply "I am." The Canadian critic Northrop Frye writes that some scholars believe a more correct translation to be something along the lines of "I will be what I will be." What is important though is the fact that the name is derived from a Hebrew word meaning "to be," a verb. The name of that which cannot be named is given by God himself to Moses in the form of flames rising from a burning thornbush on Mount Horeb. The Bible says, "There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed." Moses approaches and suddenly he sees not the angel of the Lord, but the Lord himself, calling out to him, "Moses, Moses! Come no closer," the Lord says. "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses hides his face, afraid to look at God. And thus, barefoot and with eyes lowered, Moses is given his task, to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses replies, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" And God says, "I will be with you," and he tells Moses he will receive a sign that God is with him; and when he has brought the people from Egypt they are to worship God on that same mountain. But not belonging to the people he must lead, Moses needs a sign now, rather than later, for how else might he persuade them to go with him? For this reason he says to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" To which God replies, "I am who I am. Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

The name God gives Moses is not a name, because it defines nothing, locates nothing, yet it is a name nonetheless, but of that which defies definition, location, determination. The inexhaustibility of this name, which is not a name, contrasts strongly with the context in which it is revealed. As in so many other instances in the Old Testament there is something comical about the occurrence, the reason for this being that the highest, the divine, the extra-human comes so close to the human as to become almost snared up in it. God or the divine revealing itself in the form of some heavenly phenomenon might be sublime, but not in a burning bush, there being something almost trivial about such a thing, at which one might stand and stare in perplexity but never tremble in fear. God asking Moses to take off his sandals diminishes the revelation yet further: sandals or no sandals is a particularly human deliberation, one would think. And when Moses speaks to God, a misunderstanding arises, Moses asking for a sign to bolster his credibility in the eyes of the Israelites, God however promising him a sign once it is all over, meaning

Moses has to be more exact and explain: but if I come to the Israelites and say to them that the God of their ancestors has sent me, and they ask me what his name is, what am I supposed to say? Moses's approach is reminiscent of a trick, asking for God's name by asking for the answer to a hyopothetical question the Israelites might ask him. The answer, the name, points away from the trivial toward the nature of the divine. The two levels intermingle throughout the Old Testament, as when God sews clothes of animal hide for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, or when God gets himself into an argument with Sara, wife of Abraham. The same occurs in other ancient texts, for instance in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, where gods and the divine move in and out of the human domain, not in any metaphorical sense but tangibly so, with physical bodies in the physical world.

Gershom Scholem writes of the three phases of religion, the first occurring when the world itself is divine, populated by gods humankind may encounter anywhere, who can be won over to one's cause without trepidation: the human and the divine are not separated in any fundamental way. Everything is connected: man, nature, the gods. So too in Homer, where the names of the gods are likewise anything but unmentionable, flourishing in daily conversation. The second phase occurs with the emergence of the great religions, which open a vast and absolute abyss between the divine and the human, Scholem writes, bridgeable only by the voice: God's voice, instructional and legislative, and man's voice in prayer.

Some of the texts of the Old Testament carry with them fragments of earlier periods, such as the fairly-tale nature of the incident when Jacob encounters a stranger in the twilight and wrestles him all through the night, until the stranger beseeches Jacob to release him because dawn is approaching. Jacob refuses, only if the stranger blesses him will he let him go. The stranger does so and tells Jacob that from that moment on his name shall be Israel, for he has striven with God and prevailed. Then, although the stranger has made himself known as God, Jacob asks his name. God replies, "Why is it that you ask my name?" blesses him, and is gone. That God may physically be encountered and even wrestled with – the physical nature of the meeting being made plain in the detail of Jacob's hip being put out of joint during the struggle – brings to mind the world of which Scholem writes, shared by humans and gods alike, and God's wish to end the struggle before the dawn draws the encounter into the world of the folktale and the ancient reality of myth, in which the troll turns to stone in daylight. Northrop Frye writes that the world is characterized by what he calls a metaphorical language in which words are substantial in their own right, invoking their objects, the entities or phenomena they denote, much like hieroglyphics, posessing powers used in spells and evocations, as for instance is shown by the account of the creation when God's word becomes real: Let there be light, and there was light. Names may create, and names may rule. In such a world to know the name of God would be to possess the power of the divine, one might imagine, it hardly being accidental that Jacob measures himself against God, eventually even prevailing, before asking for his name. "Tell me your name!" he demands with some presumption. "Why is it that you ask my name?" asks God, and vanishes into the shadows of the night.

According to Scholem, mysticism arises in the third phase of religion, once religion has assumed its classic expression in communities of faith, and when the new religious impulses that occur, rather than stepping outside the prevailing context to establish something new, instead remain to shape themselves within the old religion, where the abyss between the divine and the human is considered a mystery that inner experience of the divine may resolve.

Mysticism is free of the practical sides of religion, the morality, the obligations, the tasks, directed entirely inward toward the experience of the divine and its nature. The original revelations, the burning bush seen by Moses, for instance, or the winged creatures with the heads of animals that appeared to Ezekiel, are to the mystic somewhat obscure and poorly developed, Scholem suggests.

His definition of mysticism is approached firstly by way of a quote from Rufus Jones as "the type of religion which puts the emphasis on immediate awareness of relation to God, on direct and intimate consciousness of the Divine Presence," subsequently by reference to Thomas Aquinas, who defined it as "*cognitio Dei experimentalis*," the experiential knowledge of God. The great canonical revelations are placed side by side with the individual's own experience. As Scholem states:

> *With no thought of denying Revelation as a fact of history, the mystic still conceives the source of religious knowledge and experience which bursts forth from his own heart as being of equal importance for the conception of religious truth*

The heart is the very symbol of the innermost human self, our deepest emotional being, in direct contrast to the rational intellect and the outer world. And it is here, in the perception of and meditation upon the nature of the divine, present in our souls, in the ecstasy of the heart, that language becomes a problem in religion. Religious ecstasy contains all manner of vast and formidable emotions; they are wordless and cannot be represented, cannot be described, cannot be repeated, at one with themselves, and only in the very particular experience is the presence of God real. And what reveals itself, what is perceived, the divine, is outside the human sphere, drawn into it only by the very nature of language. A strong tradition in mysticism is therefore the negative; only by stating what the divine is not may it be approached without reduction. Can it be said that God is living? Scholem ponders, citing Maimonides. Would that not imply a limitation of the infinite nature of his being? The sentence "God is living" can only mean "He is not dead," which is to say that he is the opposite of the negative, the negation of negations. But what is he then? Can we say that God is anything at all? It is to this progression that the Kabbalist notion of God resting in the depths of his nothingness belongs. God is nothing. This is not to say that Celan's poem explores any sort of mystical experience, merely that the language employed in it has certain things in common with the language of mysticism, the issue being the same: how to approach that which is not, without turning it into something that is. But if the abyss of religion is that separating the divine from the human, bridgeable only by that which is without language – the heart, ecstasy, delight – and the challenge in the texts of mysticism for that reason lies in giving words to the wordless presence, then the challenge of Celan's poem lies rather in approaching wordless absence. The poem's unutterable word is not God, but death, since death is nothing, whereas the name of nothing is something. This awareness of the impossibility of representation is fundamental to the poem; it is as if the relationship between the world and its linguistic representation has broken down, and the poem exists, ruin-like, within that destruction at the same time as being about it. Its basic distrust of language reveals itself firstly in the image of the grass written asunder in the opening lines, then in the opposition between seeing and speaking about: they saw not, and spoke of words. The words exist between them and reality, and they do not see through them, but see them, and speak of them. This again has to do with being asleep.

The place where they lay, it has
a name – it has
none. They did not lie there. Something
lay between them. They
did not see through it.

Did not see, no,
spoke of
words. None
awoke,
sleep
came over them.

Yet the poem itself consists of words, the poem "speaks." This can hardly be understood in any other way than that the image of the grass written asunder and of the sleeping who speak of words are not an expression of misology, it is not the language itself which is distrusted, but the conceptions that attach to it, the fact of language not only evoking what it names, but also the idea of what belongs to "the word," which is to say the community of language, and not the "thing" or the "phenomenon." This becomes especially clear when language names that which is not, the past, which language makes present, and death, which language makes into "something." The poem turns this latter point to its own advantage, since by naming nothing, the nothing emerges as something, to exist in the text, then to be withdrawn, not existing after all, here and not here at one and the same time. The first instance of this strategy being used is in connection with the name, that which turns the open, indefinite, diverse, and heterogeneous into one, the emblem of place, the place name, which seems almost to accommodate both the terrain itself and the history of the terrain, in that way becoming an existence in the language, which is to say the culture, and not in the world. "The place where they lay, it has/ a name – it has/ none." The place does and does not have a name. The fact of it having or not having a name is no more significant than the name itself, but the name cannot be mentioned. Mention the name, and the place and those who lay there become something they are not. Then the poem too would speak of words, and sleep.

Up until now the poem has been about a "you" in a world in which other people at first are discernible only as powers unrepresented by pronouns, then, in the movement of the "you" toward "home," expressed as "they" and "them." These "they" are unpositioned within the space; to begin with they lay "there," only then to be called back, "they did not lie there." They are, however, positioned in time, for while the poem's "you" is described as being in the present, in the terrain of the now, "they" are assigned to the past. They lay, they did not wake, they slept. This makes it possible to read their presence as a memory, something on which the "you" thinks back. "They" exist in a time remote from the "you," but the place where they lay/did not lie exists in the same time, since it "has" a name.

The place where they lay, it has
a name – it has
none. They did not lie there.

Then comes the poem's first turning point. Until now the poem has proceeded steadily, from the terrain with its track, via the call not to read, not to look, but to go, into a deathlike landscape in which the thought of the "they" who once were arises. In the next verse an "I" speaks for the first time, and like the "you" it speaks in the present, about the "they" of the past.

> *It is I, I,*
> *I lay between you, I was*
> *open, was*
> *audible, ticked at you, your breathing*
> *obeyed, it is*
> *I still, but then*
> *you are asleep.*

*

It is I still –

The original German has "*Ich bins*," a contraction of *Ich bin es*, a colloquial expression often used when answering the phone, *Ich bins*, "It is I." After the mysterious introductory stanzas from which little meaning may be extracted, the everydayness of the introduction of this "I" seeems striking, there is almost something childlike about it, the way it insists, the "I" being named three times in the course of four words. *Ich bins*, *ich*, *ich*, at the same time as the time shifts, *ich bins*, *ich lag*, *ich war* – I am, I lay, I was – then shifts back again, *ich bin*, I am – *noch immer*: still. The movement is thereby from I am to I was and back to I am again. Present, past, present.

Péter Szondi, who has provided the classic and probably most detailed analysis of this poem, now a standard reading, believes that it is time speaking here, time personified. This may be so, but there is another possibility, that the writer is the "I" and that the situation described, when I lay between "them" and was open, is a memory. Both the sudden childlike presence in the text and the wording "I lay between you" make me think of a child lying between its parents. The significance of time in this verse is plain, but so too is "I," whose presence is conspicuously emphasized in the forceful repetition I, I, I. Regardless of how this "I" is understood, the "they" the "I" lay between may be the same "they" mentioned in the previous stanza, of whom it is predicated "something lay between them." They were sleeping, and the movement of the "I" from am to was and back to am again is something from which they are excluded; they too "are" still, but sleeping, which is to say dead. That which "is" becomes "was" through the "I," who turns it into "is" by the evocation of memory – identical with the poet's evocation of reality, the two things, the past and the written, memory and literature, coincide here – but that possibility does not exist for those he was with at that time, they slept then and they sleep now, their "still" being of a different character altogether, unchangeable, uniform, of death and the timelessness of the nothing. Death is not a state or a quality, it is an absence of states and qualities, and as such it has no time, only non-time. Non-time too has no "is" of existence other than in language, which abstracts the world, and in abstraction nothing too may be accorded form. The gaze of the eye may exist only as an "is," in the now, whereas the language may strive toward "was," through memory, where the differences between tangible and intangible are wiped out: in memory the space was the same, the world and its people faded into impalpability, as Joyce defined the ghost.

If we ignore the "I" and the "they" and the question of who they are and what relation exists between them, or rather, who they are to the "I," given that the "I" is not something to them, then the most significant thing occurring in this stanza is the time that flows through the verbs and thereby through the I. You cannot step twice into the same rivers, as Heraclitus says in one of his fragments, the ninety-first, perhaps his best known quote, now a cliché. But there is another fragment of his concerning the same thing, the forty-ninth, in which he puts it rather differently and thereby makes a quite different statement:

> *We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not.*

Time and identity are drawn together in "are," we are and yet we are not, and what is "are" then? In Celan's poem time opens up the same distance in the I, which does not say I am, I was, I am, but shades and complicates it by subtle means, impossible to reproduce in translation to Norwegian, to do with the interplay between *ich* and *bin* and *es*. In English *Ich bins* has to be rendered as "It's me" or "It is I," but another meaning becomes apparent if, leaving aside the idiomatic, one shadows the syntax of the German more closely. That gives us "I am it," then "I am it still," and finally "am it still." This latter nuance is important insofar as it deprives the everyday "It's me/It is I" of its notional subject, leaving us with "it's/it is" and thereby drawing attention to that very constituent. What is the "it" that is? "It," apparently, is "I," but then what is the "it" that the "I" is? The question projects back to the opening, no longer quite as quotidian, the "I" containing an "it." The German looks like this.

Ich bins, ich,
ich lag zwischen euch, ich war
offen, war
hörbar, ich tickte euch zu, euer Atem
gehorchte, ich
bin es noch immer, ihr
schläft ja.

*

Bin es noch immer –

Translating the first assertion as "It is I" preserves, more so than the literal "I am it," some measure of the colloquialness of the original, the unencumbered everydayness about the wording that keeps the I firmly within the bounds of the social: It's me. But then the final line would strictly speaking have to be "It is still," theming "it," the assertion thereby extending beyond the social. I am it, it is I. This points toward something outside the

"I" that encompasses itself. "I am another," said Rimbaud, but while this is dissolving of the identity it remains within the realm of the social. "I am I" goes beyond the social, beyond the name, into the nameless, "it" being the mark of the impersonal. "It sleeps," "it laughs," "it grieves" – no person would be referred to in such a way: "it" pertains not to the human, but to the nonhuman. And yet, it is an "I" that is "it." Taken positively, the "it" might be that through which existence presents itself, that which is common to us all, bound up with the authentic, in contrast to that aspect of human existence that is joined up with the social world, which is to say all our hierarchies and laws, norms and rules, what Heidegger called *das Man*, the derivative and inauthentic, the very opposite of the authenticity and independence of pure existence. This pure self of Heidegger's, open toward existence, is in turn related to the self of the mystics, that which comes together with the divine in the forgetting of the self, the I-less I. It seems beyond doubt that the I of the poem has to do with this, though not in any positive sense; the I is what is left of the person when the name is gone, the I is what dies when the person dies and the name lives on. The I is not erased in ecstasy, filled with the meaning of life, but in its opposite, being erased in the shadow of death, filled with its nonmeaning.

It is I.
It is.
It.

But "it" is not what the poem invokes. What the poem invokes is "I." Three times in succession it rings out, I, I, I, almost as if it were trying to wrench free of its "it." The fact that it is, whereas they were, is another way of saying I am alive and they are dead. The constituents are the simplest possible: you, they, I, it, is, was. Being and not being. Being is a matter of existence, we are dealing with being in itself. This is Hamlet's question, to be or not to be, and it concerns the notion of being without identity. In such being, one is not someone but something. This is where the line goes between being someone and being nothing. But being is also a matter of identity. One is, in such an instance, someone, and the line goes between being someone and being no one. Something/someone, nothing/no one. The first, something/nothing, is that which stands outside the name and the social realm, the second, someone/no one, exists within the name and the social. One can be something in relation to nothing. But one cannot be someone in relation to no one: one can be someone only in relation to others. A you, a they, which together make a we. But here there is no we, only an I/you and a they. The they is absent and no one asks after the you/the I. This is what is at stake here; who is the you, since no one asks after them, since no one knows them or knows about them? In such an instance the you is not someone, but no one/something.

Who is the I? Is the I a part of "them," does it belong among them, is that what is meant by "home"? Is that the connection that has been lost? The important thing in the verse is what separates I from them, which is time: once, I and you existed together in a present, now only I remain there, while you are in a past. That time, that division, that abyss, is expounded upon in the next verse:

Years.
Years, years, a finger
feels down and up, feels
around:
seams, palpable, here
it is split wide open, here
it grew together again – who
covered it up?

*

Covered it
up – who?

The insistence, the repetition of the word three times, joins "I" and "years" together. The space between is and was, present and past, has been opened, within or by the I. Into it the I now enters. Years, years, years; time here is a space, something within the same, the movement is down, up, around. The finger that feels around is connected to that which ticks in the previous stanza, Aris Fioretos suggests in his reading of the poem; German "*ticken*" can mean both "tick" and "touch with the fingertip." The ticking finger that joins the notion of the I as the person writing with that of the I as the voice of time. A finger feels and finds. What does it find? Seams. What are seams? Seams are made of stitches. Stitches join together wounds. The wound is grown together again and is thereby absent and yet present, unmentioned, yet apparent in the mention of that which covers. The wound does not emerge in its authentic form, hardly anything does in this poem, and yet this is somehow different, because here "someone" has covered, the covering is active and has a particular cause, and the question concerns who covered up the wounds, rather than what covered them.

To cover something up involves something coming between one thing and another, an intervention, and so far in the poem this has been expressed in terms of the grass written asunder and the speaking of words, and time separating the I from them. The attention has been on the what, the act of covering, but here it is directed not toward the what, but toward a who.

Who covered it up? And why is "who" so important that their identity has to be asked for in a question?

Thus, cautiously and without naming anything that might propel it back into the darkness from which it is lifted ghostlike, the poem approaches its center or zero point.

Came, came.
Came a word, came,
came through the night,
wanted to shine, wanted to shine.

The repetition of the word is of the same intensity as that of "I" and "years": three times a "came." And it is intensified further still, mentioned twice more. Came, came, came, came, came. The effect is much like that of an incantation, a ritual recitation. The word that came represents the opposite of the covering up, it came "through" the night, that which covers up or makes things the same, thereby canceling it out. The word is the opposite of the nothing, the word came forth as something against the darkness of the nothing, and for this reason it is recited. It is, therefore, a different kind of word those of which "they" spoke, for those words prevented them from seeing, and were the very hindrance. In that instance there was a contrast between seeing and the words, a negative relation: they who spoke, spoke of words, and they did not see. Here it is the similarity between seeing and the word, a positive relation: the word wanted to shine in the night. And light makes visible. But the word did not shine, it wanted to shine, and in this lies the idea of the light being an insubstantiated possibility. The word could shine, but it could not shine here, the poem appears to say.

Why not? What is it that prevented the word that could shine from shining?

It is the night.

What kind of night is it? At the beginning of the poem it is described as a night that needed no stars. This is a different night to that which ends at dawn: it is tempting to think of it as an image of death: the night needs no stars, needs no light, for there is nothing there to illuminate, there is nothing. This night is of a different quality, there is something in it the words lack strength to illuminate. Night is darkness, darkness is undifferentiated, the opposite of words, which by their nature are differentiating, establishing of distinctions. Whereas the first night did not need stars or light, this one does. Why? The poem has predicated a moving forward, and in that moving forward it has approached something, and in that approach this something, at first distant and remote, has gradually become clearer in shape, and in this, the gradual uncovering of something whose nature is still unknown to us, the intensity of the poem has increased and is now so acute that the words are repeated with the forceful effect of the incantation. Came, came, came, came, came. This incantation comes immediately after the ascertainment that the wound, unmentioned and unshown, present merely by virtue of the "it" that "grew together," is covered up, and immediately after the question as to who covered it up. The words repeated are repeated in a time other than that of their occurrence: came a word, it says, in the poem's present, in the time of the you and the I, whereas the will to shine, and the lack of ability to do so, is in its past: wanted to shine.

Is it so because the night is the very force that makes present past, that it is this, the darkness of what has been lost, that is meant, in that case also comprising the light of the words, and turning their want into a wanted, by virtue of their being words, immobilizing what is and transforming it, inevitably, into something that was? Or is the night connected with the covering up of the wound and the writing asunder of the grass, the language then being a part of the night, a part of what covers up – something that lies in the description of those who "spoke of words" and did not "see"? Would that be why the words cannot shine, nor, thereby, make it possible to see, because they offer only darkness themselves? The desire that lies in "wanted to shine, wanted to shine" suggests that it is not the language in itself that darkens, but a particular kind of language, spoken by "them," and that some other language exists, but even that language cannot penetrate this night. This night is associated with events, they who did not wake before sleep came over them, and they who caused a wound, and they concern the I who once lay between them, who opens up the space between the absence of the wound in the present and the presence of the wound in the past.

"Came a word, came / through the night," and yet in vain, the word wanted to shine but could not. The will is without subject, the poem says only "wanted to shine, wanted to shine," according weight to the will, which is strong, yet futile.

Wanted to shine, wanted to shine.

Why can the words not shine here? What is it that makes the night so undifferentiated that no word can make a difference in its darkness?

Ash.
Ash, ash.
Night.
Night-and-night. – Go
to the eye, the moist one.

Ash, it says three times, night three times, though without a verb, nothing "came," there is no motion of any kind, no "through."

Ash, ash, ash.

Ash is the form of that which has been incinerated without it bearing any similarity to its former state, ash is nothing, yet it is what is left of an object when that object has gone, at the same time as it is something in itself, a blackish-gray dust, the same in any instance of incineration. In a poem in which nothing came from nothingness, the ash can be read as an actualization of that which is not, the physical form of absence. And it can be read as the material instantiation of the undifferentiated. Ash is nothing, yet it is something, and it is the same for everything.

After the ash, night and night follow night. In this night even the undifferentiatedness of ash becomes undifferentiated.

Ash.
Ash, ash.
Night.
Night-and-night.

Why the "and" in night? Separated by a comma it might be the same thing, night, night, night, an insistence, an incantation, but the "and" inserts a relation, which is to say a distinction, and in so doing introduces a course of events. Night-and-night. Night follows night, but so closely joined, the hyphens connecting the two nights in a single word, "night-and-night," that nothing exists between them, no light, no dawn, no day.

Then the "go" is resurrected, the plea from the beginning of the poem, at that point open, general, a simple "go" instead of "reading" and "looking."

Now "go" is directionally specified: "to the eye." And further: "to the moist one." This is at the end of the poem's fifth section, and since the poem consists of nine sections in all, it comes exactly midway, at the very center.

Came, came, came a word, came, came, wanted to shine, wanted to shine, ash, ash, ash, night, night-and-night, go to the eye, to the moist one. From the word, that which is general, and its light that is not possible, to the ash and the night and to the eye, but not to the eye that sees, it carries on, to the moist one.

Do not read, look, do not look, go, go to the eye that weeps.

"Ash" and "night" enter into the series of words that are given weight by being repeated three times and which establish particular places in the poem where meaning becomes concentrated. I (identity), years (time), came (incantation), ash (absence, destruction), night (undifferentiatedness). These words make up an axis of meaning within the poem. Another axis consists of the pronouns, you-I-they-who. A third is comprised of the imperatives, read, look, go, which to begin with lead into the deathlike and the terrain, empty of both people and stars, down into the past and up again to the here, where for the first time a direction is specified. The weeping eye is the midpoint of the poem around which the entire text revolves, for after the eye, and the long way toward it, the poem radically changes character.

Until now the human presence has been a "you," an "I," and a "they." The significant aspect of the relationship between "I" and "they" has been their separation from each other. By time, sleep, death, darkness. The gaze of the eye and the word have been likewise separated from the world. This latter separation, from the unnameable wound, which is a wound no longer, but covered up by someone, was followed by the coming of a word and its failure to shine. From the ash and the night, nothing may be extracted but ash and night. There is nothing to read, nothing to see. But there is something to feel. This eye does not separate, does not divide, it is not primarily connected with the external and with seeing, but with the internal and with feeling; indeed, it is hard to understand "to the eye, to the moist one" in any other way.

In mysticism the source of innermost truth is the heart, locus of the ecstatic coming together of all things. Celan's eye can be understood conversely as a place whose wordless concentration is not of joy and expanded awareness, but of grief and the implosion of awareness. Both places exist outside the social world, and outside the name.

The heart is full of the all, the eye of the nothing. The heart, filled with what is, is blind and sees nothing; the eye, filled with what is not, sees, and sees nothing.

Here, at the place of grief and the weeping eye, the poem turns away from its now to face a then, not what grew together and was a wound, but that which went before. The time of the "we."

Gales.
Gales, from the beginning of time,
whirl of particles, the other,
you
know it, though, we
read it in the book, was
opinion.

Was, was
opinion. How
did we touch
each other – each other with
these
hands?

Gales are specified in two different ways here. Firstly as being from the beginning of time, which is to say archaic, immutable, the same then as now. Secondly as a whirl of particles, something known by a "you," because "we" read it in "the book": it was opinion. The next stanza emphasizes the past nature of that opinion. Was, was opinion.

What is a gale? A strong wind, a force of nature, arbitrary, violent, destructive, chaotic, something of the "it" we name when we say "it's blowing outside." But also "the other," the whirl of particles, the explanation in that, the resonance of science in "particle," something broken down into its smallest elements, and thereby also the concept, though not unconditionally; the "whirl" is that which has been whirled together into something beyond concepts, something more and other than the mere whirling together. The word "particle" points toward something invisible to us, but which nonetheless we know to be there. This line of thinking stems from Democritus and the atomic theory of the ancient Greeks, as pursued by Lucretius in his poem *De rerum natura*, in which poetry meets science; it seeks to explain a phenomenon, to command and delimit, whereas the word "gale" points to a phenomenon. The significance of this distinction becomes clear in what comes next: the whirl of particles was in "the book," it was "opinion." Knowing something is associated with reading, which in turn is associated with opinion. But that opinion no longer exists, as suggested by the emphasis of past time in the repetition. Was, was. Opinion, opinion. The plea not to read any more might be directed toward this time, the time when what was written was opinion. In other words, that opinion is now lost. But the emphasis is not so much on the reading itself as on what "you" and "we" read. There is a community there, and the fact of opinion now being of the past, and perhaps no longer valid, is followed by a question that has to do with the connection between those who comprised the "we," and it is hard indeed not to construe this in such a way that it is the socially cohesive aspect of the opinion that is at stake, the common foundation shared by people belonging to the same culture: "we" read, "we" touched each other.

Who are "we"?

Seemingly, the "we" would refer to something in the past, a community no longer in existence and which now in some sense defies understanding. How did we touch each other, is the question, though it does not stop there, but continues with a specification: – each other with these hands? These hands exist now; what they touched, which comprised the "we," exists in the past, the verb form being "touched" rather than "touch," and this is the abyss the question spans. "You," "you," "they," "we," and "our" are all past, only the "I" is present, so what happens is that something of what has been lost is separated out. The difference between being an I looking toward other I's that existed once, and being an I looking toward the "we" the living and the dead once comprised, is huge. Not only has the community of those particular people been lost to time, but what made that community possible then, the very conditions of its existence, has been lost too. It is within the field of this loss that the poem is written. It is as if what this entails, what "we" represents, cannot be stated until after the plea to go to the eye, to the moist one; only then can the lost "we" be named; and this is the most painful thing of all.

Another of Heraclitus's fragments, the twenty-sixth, concerns the relationship between the living, the sleeping, and the dead:

> *Man kindles a light for himself in the nighttime, when he has died but is alive. The sleeper, whose vision has been put out, lights up from the dead; he that is awake lights up from the sleeping.*

The states described exclude each other – when sleeping, one cannot be dead, when awake one cannot be asleep – and yet are connected by the very ambivalence of those states, the borderlands between them. Man is in the nighttime, which is to say the darkness, where nothing is visible and nothing may be differentiated. He kindles a light, but the light cannot make visible, his eyes are put out and cannot see, he is himself darkness. Man is dead, but is alive, which is to say that he is sleeping. The sleeper lights up from the dead. He that is awake lights up from the sleeping, he is outside sleep, even further from death, yet the border is by no means absolute; like the text, we pass through the various states, consciousness waxing and waning within us, and when it wanes something else comes into view, unknown to those awake; the shores of the dead.

But this proceeds in one direction only, from the living to the sleeping to the dead; the dead do not look back.

There is another of Heraclitus's fragments likewise concerning death and sleep, the twenty-first:

> *All the things we see when awake are death, even as all we see in slumber are sleep.*

In both fragments seeing is pivotal, and both relate to sleep and waking, life and death. Both fragments are opaque, and to begin with seem to point in different directions. In the first, he who is awake lights up from the sleeping, but not the dead. In the second, death is all that he who is awake can see, while the sleeper sees only sleep, i.e., that which is his, not that of the other. But they may also be understood as expressing the same thing. When we are awake we see death, in the sense of absence and nothingness; when we sleep we do not, in sleep death is sleep, too. There may also be a point relating to a qualitative distinction in the act of seeing; to be awake is to see clearly, faithfully, we see that death is all around us, a fundamental condition of our lives, while to sleep is to not see clearly, in that we see only that which is ours, sleep, which hushes us up. The authentic life, which recognizes death, and the inauthentic life, lived as if death does not exist.

All these various levels are present in Paul Celan's poem, those that distinguish between gradations of awake, asleep, and dead, and those that distinguish between gradations of authentic and inauthentic. From the poem's beginning:

> *The place where they lay, it has*
> *a name – it has*
> *none. They did not lie there. Something*
> *lay between them. They*
> *did not see through it.*

Did not see, no,
spoke of
words. None
awoke,
sleep
came over them.

They do not light up, but slip away. At first it is the place where they lay that slips away, it has a name and then does not, and they lay there no longer. This is what they are to those who write, who in their woken state seek to "touch" them. Then we are told what they were in themselves, unseeing. They saw not, because they spoke of words, in a sleep. The agent of the writing is awake, and if it is to "touch" them it cannot speak of words. The name of the place is such a word, something that lies between. It existed, and it exists, but not to them, nor therefore to the poem, which by naming it would have included them within it. The world of the name is the world of opinion, it belongs to the we that was, but which is no longer. Here the world of the name has become still, deactivated, because its foundation, the we, is no longer viable or must be established anew. This stillness of the name exists on two different levels. Nowhere does anyone ask after you, it says, and as such you are something concealed, outside language. The wound is covered up by someone unknown to the I, it is kept under cover. In both instances we are dealing with agentive forces outside the terrain opened up by the poem. The first, the no one asking after you, may also be down to "you" being dead, or because all others in the terrain in which you are present are dead and cannot ask after you, no longer know that you exist. But the covering up is not ambivalent in this way, merely vague. The second level exists in the relationship between those who write and what is written, between "you" and "they," "I" and "we." "They" did not see, they spoke of words. "You" know this, we read it in the book, it was opinion. Was, was, opinion, opinion. And then:

Spoke, spoke.
Was, was.

To speak is to be within language, and the pervading mistrust of what the poem says on all levels is attached to being. Is what it deals with the language of being? Or are the two things separate?

Yes.
Gales, whirl of part-
icles, there was
time left, time
to try it out with the stone – it
was hospitable, it
did not cut in. How
lucky we were:

Grainy,
grainy and stringy. Stalky,
dense;
grapy and radiant; kidneyish,
flattish and
lumpy; loose, tang-
led –: he, it
did not cut in, it
spoke,
willingly spoke to dry eyes, before closing them.

Spoke, spoke.
Was, was.

Gales, whirl of particles, these have already been established as being within the opinion-community of the book and the society; this is the time in which "we" was meaningful and was good. This is before it becomes lost, and before the grieving over it, but it is written after, and remodeled not into the now of the I, but the now of the poem. It stands on the very brink of meaning, not because it has no meaning in itself, a stone has no meaning, merely a state of being, but because it has no meaning to anyone but the I.

But try what out with the stone? How is the stone hospitable? What does it mean, that it did not cut in? Stones are among the commonest and least meaningful of entities; a stone is a stone, neutral and moreover most usually unspecific, a stone looks much like any other stone. In itself it is unchanging, or changes only unimaginably slowly, without conveying any trace of its age to anyone but a geologist, thereby in a way existing beyond culture, history, and time, or in a time other than our historical time, but the fact that whenever we see a stone we are confronted by something infinitely older than humanity, which existed here before even the beginnings of life, is something we rarely if ever think about, a stone is simply a trivial phenomenon of nature, no, not even a phenomenon, an object of simple existence, something we skim across the water's surface without thought, for the pleasure of our children, for instance, or in the case of larger ones, something on which we sit down to drink coffee on picnics in the woods.

In ancient religions stones were used as a symbol of the continuous and everlasting; raised in circles at certain places they enclosed what was deemed to be sacred and were often associated with the heavenly bodies. The laws given to Moses were inscribed on tablets of stone, rendering eternal and unalterable the otherwise transient script of God's commandments to humankind. In religious life the stone was in contrast to the tree: whereas the tree symbolized life and rejuvenation, the stone was the symbol of eternal being. Not much remains of that world in our day and age, the tree and the stone are no longer opposites by which we make sense of our lives, but here and there we find remnants of its very tangible mode of thought, not least in the funeral ritual, in which we continue to erect stones over the dead, while the coffin is of wood. Into the stone we inscribe the name of the deceased. While the body decomposes in the earth below, the name stands in stone for all time, belonging no longer to the social world alone, but also to matter.

There are no traces at all of ritual or religion in Celan's poem, on the contrary, the stone is shrouded in the quotidian, it is something we must "try it out with," it is "hospitable." "Try it out with" preserves the stone quality of the stone, an object we move or share, whereas "try it out at," as the German might also be interpreted, makes important the place of the stone and would seem to make it a question of proximity to it. "Hospitable" is a radical anthropomorphization, hospitable being a human quality, not even animals can be hospitable, yet the stone is hospitable in the poem. To be hospitable is to be accommodating toward others. In this case "we." What made it hospitable was the fact of it not cutting in, of it being accommodating of the "we." But what it did not cut into was the discourse that was conducted outside it, meaning perhaps, in the logic of the poem, that it was not seen through words. Was it then with its property of absolute duration that it exists outside the fleeting community of the human? That it did not cut into language with its radical otherness? An otherness to which "we" then also belong, since our bodies contain not only our beating hearts, but also our skeletons, that part of us which remains when we die, along with the names on our stones. The stone belongs to "it," the nonhumanity of the world, is that what did not cut in? Because it was woven into the veil of language? The puzzle deepens in repetition:

    he, it
did not cut in, it
spoke,
willingly spoke to dry eyes, before closing them.

To speak here is in other words the opposite of cutting in. And not only does "it," the stone, speak, it is also drawn into "it," which must be all things indirectly referred to after it: grain, grapes, kidneys. It is this that "speaks."

Earlier in the poem speaking was placed on an equal footing with not seeing, and with sleeping, which is another way of not seeing, though stronger since the person asleep is wholly turned away from the world in which he or she lies. But sleeping and not seeing apply to humans; not cutting in, which is to say speaking, applies in this instance to things. What the things speak to are eyes. To speak to eyes is to be seen. But not in the way those awake see, for they do not cut in. They are seen sleeping. The eyes that see are dry, in contrast to the eye at the poem's midpoint, which is moist. That was before the grief, of the poem's we. But to go to the eye, to the moist one, may of course be read less sentimentally, moist can point simply to a property of the moist, that it flows, runs, is not firm in its form, is never the same. The contrast between the dry and the moist is found in other places in the poem too, for instance between the "unmistakable track" at the beginning and the "water-level traces" at the end. A track is something that points to something else, an imprint, and that imprint must have duration in order to be meaningful. Water does not have duration, it forms itself according to the now, so a water-level trace contains at one and the same time the trace and the dissolution of the trace. The entire poem rests here, between the traces in time and the tracelessness of time. The traces are not themselves that which once was, but signs of what once was, at the same time as they are something in their own right. When the trace is water, the traces are more transitory, their mistakability drastically increased. But the trace is not merely water, it is groundwater, something that lies below the surface, pervaded by that which comes from above, all that seeps through the soil. The moist, the liquid, belongs to the eye, which sees the now, whereas that which pegs down and gives form belongs to writing. The fact of the eye never seeing the same thing, the seen always in flux, is something the poem addresses on a number of levels, not only in tracks and traces, but also for instance in the way the nouns are transformed into adjectives, from entities into properties of entities – not grain but grainy; not stalk but stalky; not grape but grapy; not kidney but kidneyish. Thereby the poem describes, rather than specifying membership of any class or category. Together these properties make up an "it," which along with that of the stone does not cut in, but speaks to dry eyes before closing them.

Why are the eyes dry? Is it because they are untouched by grief, or because they see only the immutable and invariable? Is it because the grapes and the grain and the stone do not cut in? It does not cut in, the speaking, the talk of words is compared earlier on with sleep, and their closing their dry eyes might also be sleep, or death, or a mere doze, but in any case it has to do with not seeing. "It" is active, it "closes" the dry eyes; the unseen closes the eyes of the unseeing, who then becomes "it," dead? But while the dry eyes are outside the "it," the poem is not; the poem calls it forth, in a time and in a form that is the poem's own. The poem sees. The poem sees the eyes of the sleeping, they are dry but good, in the stone, the grain, the grape; yet it sees the stone, the grain, the grape as well.

Good, but is it true?

The question the poem does not pose directly, though it may be read as a response to it, is how reality is to be represented when language by its very nature renders general all objects and phenomena, depriving them of time and thereby veiling their uniqueness, and moreover is bound up with a society and a history attaching to that society, which has charged and depleted them in slow ebbs and flows of meaning, in the sense of ways of seeing, and which, more than merely concerning the existential and the social, is what actually makes the existential social. For "blood" is not simply blood, "soil" not simply soil. One way of getting away from that would be to create a new language altogether, freed of history, wholly constrained in respect to its generality, but that would not be a language at all; the wholly particular cannot be communicated, but requires community, a you, to create a we; this is the foundation of language. The poet would understand the poem, but no one else would, and so the question would then be what the poet understands, in a solipsistic world.

Another way of getting away from it would be to change languages. But for one thing all languages generalize and are laden with culture and history, and for another this poem goes so far into the particular that it becomes hard to read as an instance of the specific language, German, or the specific culture, the German; its crisis goes deeper, to the very foundation of our understanding of what a human being is, what a language is, what reality is, what memory is, what death is, what time is. Such questions can be neither posed nor answered in the language in which the general understanding of the concepts is seated without losing their own particularity and radicality.

But at the same time it cannot step outside the language and become one with its own particularity and radicality, since then it would reveal itself to no one. It is through language that reality reveals itself to us, not as it is but, as it is revealed by language, and if that language is to be genuine it must reveal to us the singular reality of the own, in its own singular language, but without severing either the connection with reality or the connection with others who share that language. "Engführung" inhabits that borderland. And existing at the very limits of meaning means the question of what meaning actually is becomes inevitable, at the same time as each single word is accorded quite extraordinary weight. That weight comes not from meaning, but from the basis of meaning. "Stone" is such a word. It is there, almost like a stone in the poem, unconnected with its surroundings, and if we try to draw in aspects of the stone's connection to the human sphere, to give it meaning in that way, it does not "answer." It is within language, and yet outside the contexts of language.

In the unique lies the own, in the own the private; the path that evades generality passes through here. And perhaps the stone in Celan's poem is laden with something unknown to the reader, at which he or she cannot even guess. In the afterword to his Norwegian rendering, Øyvind Berg writes that Celan's parents, Friederike and Leo, German-speaking Jews resident in Romania, died in a German work camp known as the Stone Pit. "This brings to mind a poem such as 'Engführung,'" Berg writes, "though at the same time it is important to keep some measure of air between biographical background and the poems that transcend it: historicizing interpretations deprive the poetry of contemporary interest." What Berg points to here is the fundamental hermeneutic issue: where exactly is the line between what is in the poem, what is in the poet, and what is in the reader? Celan writes the word "stone." Was he thinking about his parents? Are they contained in the word "stone"? We will never know. Now I know that Celan's parents died in the Germans' quarry, or stone pit, and I can read that connection into the word "stone," but is it right to read the poem in that way, or am I forcing something upon it that it does not contain? How much is outside and how much inside the poem?

The key words of the poem, besides "no one" and "nothing," are "night," "words," and "ash." When Celan wrote "came a word through the night, wanted to shine," was he addressing the beginning of the Gospel of John? There we find the classic connection of word and light, the word there is God, God is life and life is man's light shining in the darkness. If this was indeed what Celan was thinking about, does it then "exist" in the poem, as opposed to if he was not? If he was not and it does not "exist" in the poem, but only in me, a reader, am I then understanding it "wrongly"?

> *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*

> *Came, came.*
> *Came a word, came,*
> *Came through the night,*
> *wanted to shine, wanted to shine.*

If one hears the tone of the Gospel of John in those four lines of Celan, one will also hear the tone of God in the word they evoke, which wants to but cannot shine. But God is not only the word, he is life, and life was the light of mankind; that tone too then fills the words; just as light is a word that cannot penetrate the undifferentiatedness of night, there may be people who cannot penetrate the undifferentiatedness of death. Yet the opening verse of the Gospel of John not only associates the word with God, and God with the light of mankind, it also tells us we are "in the beginning," in the manner of the creation narrative. Thereby it becomes an echo of the Old Testament's account of the creation, which also starts with the words "In the beginning." Whereas in the Old Testament the creation is of the material world, the sky and the earth, which to begin with are empty and desolate places in the midst of an expanse of darkness, gradually gaining light, land, life, and which in keeping with all accounts of creation are brought from chaos to order, the beginning in the Gospel of John is not the dawning of a day and land rising out of eternal darkness in the material world, but the word. What begins here is the human world, and it emerges in the word, which establishes differentiation in the undifferentiated, meaning in the meaningless, order in the chaos. If a person falls out of language, he or she falls out of the world. A world without language is a world without distinction, and a world without distinction is a world without meaning. Instead it is chaos, the expansion and collapse of all things. But language is not above the world and the people in it, a ring-binder system of distinctions and differences, but something existing in every one of us, by whose means we understand ourselves, our fellow humans and the world in which we live. Language is the human. In language I exist, but only if there is also a you to which the I of the speech act can relate, because if not, how then should the I separate itself and find form? The you-less I is no one and everyone.

What does a language look like without the other? Not like Joyce's inner monologues, for although the language in them purports to come from the most particular own, it listens to it at the same time, and it is this presence in the entire, quiet flood of memories, thoughts, fragments of life, and an I that pass through a mind, as for instance in Molly Bloom's concluding monologue in *Ulysses*, that is the other to whom the inner human being relates, no longer enclosed within itself. Joyce's merit was precisely in knowing how tightly the innermost I was bound up with the other and to the culture through language, and in his next novel he proceeded further along the same path, where language was no longer decoded within the one, he wrote of an "all," or within an all, which is to say the language in itself, without sender or receiver, an I or a you, but a gigantic we extending in all directions, for every single word has part in another, all words are open toward one another, and all that they contain in the way of history and culture and centuries of meaning flows through them, and thereby they come to exist at the second limit of meaning: the first is where the I disappears into the own, which cannot be communicated without losing its character of ownness and becoming the other, therefore ultimately being without language. The second limit, at which *Finnegans Wake* is written, is that where the I disappears into the self of the language. In the instance of our crossing the first limit, the you ceases to exist, and the I becomes it; in our crossing the second limit, the you ceases to exist, and the I vanishes into an "all"; in both instances meaning departs the language, which accordingly becomes mysterious.

But what is the mysterious? It is that which cannot be understood. But then what is meant by understanding? Do we "understand" a stone? Do we "understand" a star? Do we "understand" water? The most important concept in the first verse of the Gospel of John is "*logos*," the word. "*Logos*" is Greek, and in the Greek culture, from Plato onward, language is abstract to a greater extent than in the Jewish culture, where, according to Northrop Frye, if I have understood him correctly, the word, "*dabar*," is taken more tangibly, as if closer in some way to what it denotes, almost as if words were entities or actions in themselves. If the Gospel of John is not a presence in Celan's poem, the Greek certainly is, and not only in the suggestion of reference to Democritus, where the physical world is divided up into its smallest component parts, but also in the abstract, relational, all-connecting language world that was the prerequisite of the we that no longer is possible: without connection, the stone lies in language. What does the stone mean? This is a question for language, for the "stone." We know what it looks like, we know how it is built up, and we know what kind of properties it has. But as for what it is, in itself, we have no conception. "It," we can say. "It is a stone." "It is a star." "It is water." "It is I." Or, perhaps, "I am it." What is "it"?

It is what has no name.

Understanding and meaning are not the same thing. The Israeli-American sociologist Aaron Antonovsky defines meaning as a feeling or experience of coherence. Religion sets up such states of coherence, drawing the stone and the tree into the human sphere, where they are what they are, tangible objects in their own right, and moreover represent aspects of the sacred or divine, which is to say that which lies outside the human. Science, which took the place of religion, also sets up such states of coherence, placing the stone and the tree within an enormous system of differences and similarities that man has established and is himself a part of. And the social world establishes connections and coherences, an intricate system of rules as to what may and may not be done, what is desirable and what is not, what can be said and what not, organized in a hierarchy in which the individual may ascend or descend according to how finely the society's various strata are divided. Meaning is not something in itself, but a feeling that may arise, and the coherence on which it is dependent is relative and may be based on misunderstanding as well as understanding, superstition as well as true belief, illusion as well as reality, immorality as well as morality. Meaning is a sense of coherence, and the greater the coherence, the greater the meaning. Affinity with the all of the universe and with the divine, as experienced in ecstasy, is the strongest feeling of coherence a person may experience. Love is a coherence-bringing emotion. And the sense of community that arises when we are together with other people in a shared experience is also coherence-bringing and fosters meaning. The great insight of whoever wrote the Gospel of John was not only that the human world arose in the word, but also that mankind itself arose in the word, and that all meaning that may exist in that world derives from the word. The word is a light that illuminates our world, beyond that world is but darkness, and this is so because the word creates differences while the dark is without difference. In Paul Celan's poem the darkness and the undifferentiated are not something belonging outside the human sphere, our perimeter, at which we stand when we encounter death or the divine, but something that has pervaded the very core of humanity itself, which in this understanding is the same as language.

If language falls, darkness invades our world, flooding in like an ocean.

But what does it mean for language to fall? How can language fall? Or, put differently: why did the word not shine when it wanted to shine? In the Gospel of John the word is God, and this can be understood as saying that God is what gives the word meaning, that in which meaning resides and from which meaning emanates, which is to say a securer of coherence. In the poem there is no such meaningful coherence. Words relating to the world destroy the world, the grass is written asunder and the wheel turns of itself, unconnected with its surroundings, a symbol detached from context, where perhaps that very detachment is the most important aspect, certainly it is emphasized, for the night sky under which it turns is without stars. Stars are lights in darkness, lights are words, the word is God. The evocation of the word as light immediately afterward must be understood as a longing for another kind of word, the wish to establish another coherence after the one that has broken down, and when that does not occur, and that light does not shine, the poem collapses into ash, ash, ash, night, night-and-night, and the call to go to the eye, not the one that sees and distinguishes, but the one that weeps.

However, coherence or meaning are not exclusively found where the word comes from, but also where the word is going, which is toward a you. To this you, absence of meaning is meaning too. Without this you the poem would have been mute. It would not have collapsed into ash and night, which are proximate to the language-less, but into the language-less itself. The you is the poem's hope, the poem's future, the poem's utopia. But the poem's you is not the same as me, reading it now, but a semantic role into which I can insert myself or not. If I do, I must do so with caution, since this is what it means to read, to give up the self and yield to the alien voice, obeying it, in this instance a voice created by a Paul Celan, a human being long since dead but who in these words and their fine shades of meaning emerges into view, an I directed toward a you, which I, more than fifty years after it was written, endeavor to identify with. If I bring too much of myself into that endeavor, I turn the you of the text into my own I, and the poem then becomes a mirror, its potentials in terms of yielding insight constrained by my own limitations, since I know what I know. That prejudice operates not only in respect to my own personal self, but also in relation to the culture as a whole, which is also a part of my reading self, and quite necessary; without it I would be blank at every word. The "you" that exists in Paul Celan's poem, to whom the poem is addressed, is denied all words that are creative of such common prejudices, precisely because the perceptual space in which it is written is concerned with the inadequacy of those prejudices in relation to the world it strives to reach, and this is why the poem is so difficult to grasp; it moves away from points of commonality, and when nevertheless it approaches them it is somehow free of the usual associations and resonances: a stone is a stone. This idiosyncracy is the method employed by the poet in order to write about something other than words that awaken words, and this forces the reader to read idiosyncratically, complicating all associations between the image of the poem and that which the image "represents," that which it "in essence" is an expression "of." The poem expresses itself. But it does so using the words of the community. That makes it difficult to interpret, but not to understand, for while the associations the words give rise to are denied space and rejected by the other words in their vicinity, no such rejection occurs of the moods and emotions awakened by the same words. Nor is it the case that the poem's true and absolute meaning lies, beyond its language, in the heart and the weeping eye. It is where the "you," which may well be a personification of the reader, is urged to go. Not read, not look, but go to the eye, the moist one. On the other hand, the eye that does not see but that weeps, is a kind of equivalent of the light that wanted to shine, an image in this darkness of futility, the fall of language. Language has fallen, since the "we" from which it both arises and issues has fallen, but it is not only to show this that the poem has been written, it is itself an attempt to find a way out and as such reestablish meaning, if only here, in this poem, and if only negatively, by way of making the loss of meaning visible. The figure for this loss is not the night that conceals, nor the word's lack of force, but the ash, into which everything has vanished. Ash is the form of absence. Religion, which in its laws and rules relates everything in the human world to God, thereby rendering it significant, has incorporated the ash too in its delineation of the borders between our social reality, our physical reality and the divine reality of God; ash is mentioned particularly in the Law of Moses, given by the Lord to the Israelites through Moses, where it is the object of certain rules. Not ash in itself, but the ashes of burned offerings. The priest must be clad in linen when he removes the ashes, and he must place the ashes beside the sacrifice. Then he must put on different garments before carrying the ashes from the camp to a clean place. The ritual of sacrifice consists of a series of transitions, an animal is slaughtered and brought into the sphere of the holy, becoming holy in itself, becoming God's own. The ashes are still within the holy and therefore holy in themselves. The priest changing clothes marks a transition, completed by the ashes being removed from the temple and taken out of the camp, returned to the world once more. But even in the differentiation of the holy, ash is a remnant that in contrast to life cannot be brought to conclusion – it being already dead – and which is carried away, thereby becoming unholy.

The question is what this dimension of ash has to do with Paul Celan's poem. Ash, ash, ash, it says, as if insisting on it being merely that, ash, and nothing else. At the same time, the burned offering of which the ashes are a remnant is called *holocaust* in Greek. And in a poem written by a German Jew in 1959 it is hard to read "ash" and "holocaust" in any neutral way. But is such a reading historicizing? To turn the issue on its head: what else would "ash" and the wound suggested by "seams" and "grew together" point to, relate to, if not the Holocaust? Is it reductive? In a way, for it is exactly the reduction of the name the whole poem, with its fierce negative force, tries to avoid, for the simple reason that it would close what the poem strives to keep open. But it is precisely this and nothing else that is going on in the poem. It addresses something quite specific that it cannot name, and in that it strives beyond the specific, that which applies in historical time, to reach into the fundamental existential categories where what is important is the relationship between language and reality. Without the human catastrophe of the Holocaust, the poem would very likely have been able to speculate as to the difference between words and stones, and to circle about the nothingness of death, but I can hardly imagine it would have been able to lament the absence of light from on high, the divine light, to bewail that it did not shine.

"Engführung" is clearly no exercise in language, clearly not an academic excursion into presence and absence, it is an elegy and a requiem to those who perished, but also to what was lost with their death, which is to say "we." It was in Celan's native tongue, German, that the Jews were first separated from the "we" of the language to become "they," and subsequently, in the extermination camps, "it." The Jews were deprived of their name; in the name lay not only their identity, but also their humanity; they became "it," bodies with limbs that could be counted, but not named.

They became no one. Then they became nothing. All that was left when they were gone was ash.

A short while ago I watched a documentary film about the extermination of the Jews, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, which deals exclusively with what was left, exclusively with what exists now; no old photos, no old footage, just people in the present time, relating, one by one, what they saw and experienced during that time. Trains, forests, faces. Some spoke frivolously of what they had seen, without understanding, they didn't know what they were saying, others were mute, others broke down under the weight of a single recollection, abruptly unbearable. As a viewer I could understand what it was about, that this and that event had occurred, I could assess the accounts of the various people in the film and place them into perspective with everything else I knew, and in relation to their own psychologies and character types, but only twice during the course of the nine hours the film lasted did the reality of what had happened, in all its horror, come home to me, two glimpses of insight, by which I mean that I grasped what it was telling me emotionally rather than intellectually. In both instances this lasted two, perhaps three, seconds, and was then gone. One of these glimpses of insight I related to Paul Celan's poem.

A railway official who had been working at a station next to a German camp in Poland in 1942 spoke of something he had experienced there one afternoon. The camp had been under construction for a short time, there was talk of what it might be for, perhaps he asked some of the Germans, I can't remember, but the assumption, for whatever reason, was that it was a labor camp for Jews. That afternoon he was just about to knock off work when a train came into the station. It was made up of many wagons, all crammed with Jews, and as he cycled home the soldiers began to empty the wagons and herd the Jews into the camp. The station being so close by, everyone at work there heard the murmur and commotion of this great number of people passing through the area as evening fell: the shouts, the cries of the children, the hum of voices. But when he came back the next morning all was still. He could hardly comprehend how still it was. Where had they all gone? They had not been transported on, he knew that, so they had to be there, in the camp. But how could so many people be so quiet?

That stillness, in which every human distinction is erased, is what Paul Celan was writing about. That stillness is nothing, but in that nothing resides a something, all those who have disappeared within it. That stillness, and the darkness of that stillness, is what makes the poem's I lament the word that came and did not shine, and what compels that I to write: wanted to shine, wanted to shine, and then ash, ash, ash, night, night-and-night. All distinctions are erased, everything has become nothing, and what it once was cannot be called back, is lost forever, and not even in language can it be called back, for in the empty dominion of this undifferentiated void a word cannot make a difference. The only thing left behind is stillness, which is to say the wordless, which is to say night, and ash. The one's entire differentiated world: ash. The past, the future: ash.

Perhaps a cynical person might say that a life is a life, and that a child dying in a gas chamber is no more terrible than a child dying in a car accident; the grief of the bereaved is the same; grief is grief, it is not increased by multiplication, people are not numbers, grief is not arithmetic. This indeed is true. To lose a child is always the same. But the accumulated number represents more than just one added to another; the dead were a community in themselves, a collective entity. When a person dies in a society his or her memory lives on among the others and their physical belongings are divided up among the next of kin. A we has lost a you, which in death has become it.

The Holocaust saw whole societies wiped out in one swoop, in such a way that not only what they were became nothing, but also what they had been. All memories and stories were wiped out with them. What they were when they died, their own "is," ceased to exist, but also their "was," and that nothing, which is absolute, in which no one and nothing is left, creates a distinction between is and was which death in itself does not establish, for the we never dies, it lives on, all our institutions, all that we build and all that we do is directed toward the continuation of the we, more resilient than any of its individual parts, which all will die, remaining for a short time in the memory of the closest we, which in turn dies too, until the we, fundamentally the same, eventually comprises completely new individuals.

This is what culture is.

The culture not only bears the deaths of the you and the I, but exists to overarch and build on them. And the most important element in that endeavor is language. Language belongs to the we, it is ours, but what we express through it is our individuality. That individuality, expressed again and again in language, through the centuries, is the cacophony of the we. In language and culture we overcome death, and this is perhaps their most fundamental function. When Mallarmé wrote about his son and his son's death, his writing edged toward the brink of the nothing, staring into its darkness, but the fact that the language broke up had to do with his venturing out to language's very perimeter, and at that exact point it came apart, faced with the fact that it was powerless, but it is not intrinsically so, for if the language shifted itself from there toward the center, toward life and the social world, it would again become meaningful and whole. Mallarmé remembered his son. In the Holocaust, the child and those who remembered the child perished.

But this is not what sets Celan's death poem apart from Mallarmé's death poem, though the absence of memory makes the undifferentiatedness of the nothing that much greater. No, what sets them apart is that the dissolution of meaning in Celan's death poem does not apply to the outermost zone of the language, that which language cannot grasp, the negation of the problem of God's name, but applies to language as such, the language in itself. Not the individual words of the language, like stone or grass, but the foundation of coherent meaning established by the language's we, since it was this we that had separated you after you from the community of the we and recategorized them as a "they" and then an "it," expelling them from the language and from the domain of the human.

Can an I who has seen this then say "we"? And if it cannot, how then to write and speak at all?

Language is a social activity, all language presupposes an I and a you, together a we.

The reality of language is thereby a social reality, it is the reality of the I, the you, and the we. But language is no neutral phenomenon giving expression to the existent; the I, the you, and the we both color and are colored by the language they create and are created within. Identity is culture, culture is language, language is morality. What made the atrocities of the Third Reich possible was an extreme reinforcement of the we, and the attendant weakening of the I, which lessened the force of resistance against the gradual dehumanization and expulsion of the non-we, which is to say the Jews, bolstering the we still further. This dehumanization took place in the language, in the name of the we, where morality too is found, and within only a very few years the voice of conscience in Germany went from Thou shalt not kill to its reverse, Thou shalt kill, as Hannah Arendt points out.

In this language, where morality, ethics, and also aesthetics were perverted, Paul Celan uttered an "I." To utter the word "death" in the same language would be to say something other than the absence of life, something other than nothing, for Nazism, which had pervaded all parts of the culture, was a death cult; to say "dead" was not to say "nothing," but to say sacrifice, fatherland, greatness, fervor, pride, courage. To say "soil" was to say history, belonging, heritage. To say "blood" was to say rage, purity, victim, death. Death in the gas chambers was another death, its nothing was something else, referred to as one refers to the extermination of insects or vermin, an elimination of the undesirable, something other than human, and how was it possible to refer to that death, which was without identity, without awakening the fluttering banners or the teeming rats that lay in the very word "death"?

Seven years earlier, in 1952, Paul Celan published another poem concerning the Holocaust, perhaps his most famous, "Death Fugue." The theme is the same, but the world described is very different, not least because the poem contains names. Germany is mentioned five times, Margarete with the golden hair four times, Shulamith with the ashen hair three times. Death is personified, a master from Germany, violence is exemplified, "he grabs at the iron in his belt he waves it," "he strikes you with leaden bullets his aim is true," "he sets his pack on to us," the violence is directed toward Jews and is associated with music, "he whistles his pack out/he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave/he commands us strike up for the dance," and above him, the master from Germany, flash the stars. "Death Fugue" is a suggestive and hypnotic poem, its beauty is wild and compares with that of Hölderlin's poetry. And it is not untrue, Nazism was wild, barbaric, and carnivalistically grotesque in the extreme, it sought the sublime in its banners and uniforms, its parades and posters, invoking history and history's depths, holding German culture, including Hölderlin, proudly before it, its I dissolving in the we of the masses, and the dissolution was good, for it was to dissolve itself in something greater than the self, to leave behind the strangulating narrowness of class and enter the proud all of us, blood, nation, Germany, and then night fell, brutal and perverted, its darkness lit by fires of violence and destruction.

This strident evil, as base as it was solemn, permeates "Death Fugue." Identity is not destroyed, but gathered in three names, Germany, and Margarete, her golden hair against Shulamith's ashen, the Aryan against the Jewish. Death is not nothing, the past not absent, not impossible to represent, the language is not broken, but gives meaning still. All this is gone in "Engführung," fallen to the ground. In "Engführung" all is silent. Not a name remains. The poem penetrates the space between the name of the world and the world itself, but what it seeks is not pureness of being, in the sense of freedom from civilization and culture, which is to say the so-called authentic, for the absence of the name is a loss in the poem, as the absence of the name's differentiating power is a loss, beseeched in vain, impossible. Even nature as it is, authentic and true, behind language, as it were, is colored by the ideology of the we, the project of striving to establish common meaning, including the Nazis' own, in which it was one of the dominant ideas, evident not least in Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, where the idea of nature in itself is perhaps the most important element of all, but also in the philosophy of Heidegger, in whose work Celan immersed himself, going so far as to meet him in person, an encounter not entirely without controversy, Heidegger having aligned himself to Nazism, so not even the idea of the world as it "is," outside language, was unaffected by the ideology and the worldview, it was woven into all things, and this lack of innocence, or this discovery of the loss of innocence, is, the way I read it, the very point of departure of Celan's poem.

The biggest difference between "Death Fugue" and "Engführung" derives not unnaturally from the years that separate them, though is not merely a result of Celan's writing having developed, matured, and deepened, for something else happened too during those years, concerning the way in which Nazism and the Holocaust were perceived by the culture, which is to say the we, for while in 1952 that must all still have been gaping open in its unfathomable atrocity, in a society laid waste, in 1959 it was quite differently shut, an episode that could be referred to, a period of history in which each single event, each single life, each single moment was locked tight in the emblem of the name – Auschwitz, for instance.

"Who covered it up?" the poem asks. Designation is another kind of disappearance. Therefore the poem cannot describe the deportation of the Jews, the transportation in cattle trucks through the Polish countryside, the herding into the camps, the stripping naked, the processions prodded into the gas chambers, the extermination inside the gas chambers, where in panic they scrabbled toward the doors, their corpses tumbling out when those same doors were again opened, the incineration in the ovens or on the grids over the pits, the ash. This description, which we may say is made up of facts, and which we associate with the word "Auschwitz," has nothing to do with reality, in part because its perspective indicates a consummate course of events, which is a fiction for the simple reason that no single person witnessed this sequence, but only parts of it, and that those who were there and who did witness that course of events in its entirety are either dead, without ever having related their experience, or, in the case of those who survived, experienced it from the inside, whereas the description is always as seen from the outside.

The perspective has never existed, it belongs to writing and is possible only there. Auschwitz, the way we think of it, does not exist, it belongs to the past, which is gone, and it did not even exist there either, because what we imagined happened there, in the way it was told to us, did not happen in that way, the story lies, forgetting the one, whose perspective is the only perspective possible, and this very forgetting of the one was what made the extermination possible.

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When I was growing up, playing at the age of ten in the German bunkers in the woods on Tromøya, or sitting on their artillery emplacements with my legs dangling as I stared out over the sea, only some thirty years had passed since they had been in use. But the world in which I played was peaceful and orderly, and when for the first time I visited Flensburg in northern Germany, nine years old, tagging along at the heels of my father, who walked quickly and had such an odd expression on his face as we passed through a narrow street with scantily clad women sitting in small booths on each side, presumably the reason I remember the place at all, I saw that same peacefulness and orderliness there too. Whenever we drove over the fells to my grandparents in Vestland, the majority of tourists we encountered were Germans. Many of them must have been there before, during the war. The war was something we learned about at school, mostly that small part of it that had taken place in Norway, but also, gradually, what had gone on in the rest of the world as well. In the newspapers it was present in reports of war criminals being discovered in various parts of the globe and brought to trial. The weekly magazines, perhaps *Vi Menn* in particular, were full of colorful stories about war treasure, so-called Nazi gold, and German war criminals hiding away in Argentina or Brazil. But the biggest sources of knowledge about Nazism were the comic books I read, such as *På vingene* and the *Vi vant* series. There, the Germans, or Fritz as they were called, were evil and unscrupulous, the "yellows" or the "Japs" even worse. All this, the books, the comics, the newspaper articles and the magazine stories, as well as our history lessons at school, seemed to be situated in a radically different age, in a radically different place, more like the forest in which Hansel and Gretel got lost than the one that became smaller and narrower as it approached the pebble beach, eventually to come to an end altogether out at Hove, where the German artillery positions were still plain to see.

In the spring when we were in the seventh grade, I was thirteen years old, I saw pictures from the extermination camps for the first time. I was standing in the library, which was housed in the school's basement, and it was a complete shock, I froze inside, but it was not the numbers of the dead or their suffering I was reacting to, because I had learned about the Holocaust and knew what it was, it was the image itself, a woman so emaciated she barely resembled a human, she was naked, but there was nothing sexual about her, and then there was a picture of a pile of corpses, heaped and stacked like timber, the picture had been taken from a distance and the limbs and bodies were tangled up, but I could still see very clearly that they were humans. The coldness it filled me with, the horror that went through me and left me in a state of alienation for some hours afterward, had nothing to do with their suffering or the terrible nature of what had taken place, it had to do with the bodies, the way they were arranged and what that expressed, something I had never seen before and had no idea even existed.

At university I encountered the war and the Holocaust in a quite different form, for instance the way Horkheimer and Adorno write about it in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where in order to grasp the collapse of civilization in that ultimate barbarity they provide an analysis of the *Odyssey*, as far as I understood it in order to demonstrate how light and darkness hung together and that light had always tried to free itself from the dark, in several instances almost succeeding, only in each case to be sucked back again. The way enlightenment became blind to itself, what began as a de-enchantment from reality, designed to make man free and his own master, ending up in re-enchantment, at the same time as progress, with all its advances and technologies, marched on, making man unfree and slavelike, and eventually it collapsed completely.

Adorno's solution was more enlightenment, as I understood it. "What is at issue here is . . . the necessity for enlightenment to reflect on itself if humanity is not to be betrayed," he wrote. And: "What is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfillment of past hopes." Where the connections were between light, darkness, enlightenment, myth, Nazism, and Bergen – the city I lived in – I had no idea, because the issue did not exist. Everything had its place then. Adorno was in one place, the *Odyssey* in another, my life in a third, the war in a fourth. When those categories became mixed up, as in Sørbøvåg one night when I was watching TV with Grandad and the politician Jo Benkow appeared on the screen, prompting Grandad to point at the TV and say, "What's that Jew doing there?" I did not know they had got mixed up, did not think about enlightenment, did not think about myth, did not think about Adorno, did not think about Arendt, but about Grandad, who I knew had never been a Nazi, assuming by extension that his prejudice stemmed from the age from which he came and did not in any way express anything significant about the person he was inside.

The fact that in the years that followed I read many books about Nazism had less to do with an attempt to understand than with the enormous fascination the events of that time exerted on me. The unbounded, was a much-discussed concept at the time, vague and theoretical, applied to texts, usually modernist texts, whereas the unbounded in reality, in the same way as the transgressional, another academic-intellectual buzzword, was not something anyone wanted to know about. For where did the unbounded and the transgressional exist in our culture? Drug addicts were unbounded, shunning no means of getting their hands on drugs, and pornography was transgressional, like the political direction no one approved of, the suburban pseudolibertarianism of the Progress Party, Fremskrittspartiet, like racism and the glorification of violence.

What consituted the unbounded in literature? What was transgressional there? Mostly it was genre, the traditionally lowappearing in the traditionally highbrow, or philosophy turning up in creative texts, or the poem approaching prose. For my own part, the transgressional was associated with an enormous sense of freedom on the one hand, and enormous shame on the other, played out in a rather unsophisticated fashion in a few too many beers followed by a couple of hours of undesirable yet delightfully unfettered behavior as a result. It was low and vile and wretched, even if it didn't necessarily feel like it, whereas the crimes that took place in the Third Reich were transgressional in a radically different and fundamentally incomprehensible yet no less compelling sense altogether. It was as if they exceeded the very limits of what was human. How was that possible? The allure of death, the allure of destruction, the allure of total annihilation, of what did it consist? The world burned, and they were joyful.

I read about it, I wondered about it, and never without feeling some small measure of that same allure myself as I sat there far from war and death, destruction and genocide, on a chair in Bergen, surrounded by all my books, usually with a cigarette in my hand and a cup of coffee next to me on the desk, the dwindling hum of the evening's traffic outside the window, sometimes with a warm cat asleep on my lap. I read about the final days of Hitler, the utterly demented atmosphere far beneath the ground where he lived with his attendants and those closest to him, the city above them, bombed to rubble by the Russians, a blazing inferno. At one point he ascended to inspire some boys of the Hitler Youth, I had seen the footage that was shot, he is ill, tries to stop his hand from shaking as he goes from one boy to the next, it must have been Parkinson's disease. But in his eyes there is a gleam, something unexpectedly warm.

Surely it couldn't be possible?

When Dad died, Yngve and I found a Nazi pin among his belongings, a pin with a German eagle to put in the lapel of a jacket. Where did he get it from? He was not the type to have bought something of that nature and therefore he must have been given it or come across it in some way. When Grandma died, a year and a half after Dad, and we went through the house to divide things up, we found a Norwegian edition of *Mein Kampf* in the chest in the living room. What was it doing there? It must have been there since the war. It was a fairly common book at the time, with thousands of copies sold, someone might have given it to them as a present, without it having any significance for them, but nevertheless it was still strange that they hadn't got rid of it after the war, for they would hardly have been unaware that it was incriminating. After the initial sensation the discovery of something so illicit gave rise to, I thought little more of it. I knew the people they were, Grandad and Grandma, and I knew they were from another age, in which other rules applied. Then came a period, perhaps a year later, when I began to read up more systematically about Nazism, it was just a subject I began to explore, the way I had previously explored other times and places in history. I read Shirer's work on Nazism, Kershaw's first book about Hitler, Gitta Sereny's book on Speer, Speer's Spandau diaries and his memoir, *Inside the Third Reich*. This was what I was reading when Tonje and I broke up and I moved to Stockholm. There, alone in a very feminine one-room flat I'd borrowed in the city's Söder District, I read the Swedish translation of Gitta Sereny's book about Treblinka, *Into That Darkness*, it made me unwell for a couple of weeks, and after that I read no more about it, it was a path on which I could proceed no more, where everything closed in on itself, everything emptied itself.

Seven years later, in the spring of last year, I bought a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in Norwegian. Or rather, because I had since made a name for myself as a writer, and because the interest surrounding that name was as great as it was, I took no chances ordering the book from the antiquarian bookshop myself, I was paranoid and scared it might get out, so I asked Geir to order it for me. He paid the two thousand kroner the two volumes cost and sent them on to me. Unwrapping them and standing with them in my hands filled me with distaste, to say nothing of the near-nausea that came over me when I started reading the first volume and Hitler's words and Hitler's thoughts were thereby admitted to my own mind and for a brief time became a part of it. I was due to go to Iceland for two days and had thought of reading the book on the plane, seeing as how I was intending to get started writing the first book of this novel when I got home again, and because it shares its name, *My Struggle*, with Hitler's book, and because Hitler's book and the Nazi pin were unexplained mysteries in that story, or perhaps not mysteries, but more exactly fields of the past that manifested themselves in the present and which I felt unable to trace back to anything I knew in that past, I had decided to write a few pages about Hitler's book.

I usually always sniff the books I buy, the new ones as well as the old, putting my nose to the pages and breathing in their smell because I associate that smell, and the smell of old books in particular, with something good, that element of childhood that was unconditionally pleasurable. The adventure, the abandoning oneself to other worlds. But I could not do that with *Mein Kampf*. The book was evil, in some indefinable way. I was unable too to have it on my shelf or on my desk, and instead I put it out of sight in the bottom drawer. Reading it on the flight, as I had imagined I would, was unthinkable, I realized that the moment I sat down in my seat after boarding. One of the female flight attendants congratulated me on my books, the other winked and said she knew who I was, and two passengers in the row in front of me were reading the same article about me in *Aftenposten*. Being that visible made reading Hitler's book out of the question, but it would have been just as impossible even if I had been anonymous, since the book in itself is stigmatizing, and if anyone had seen me reading it there in public a mood of distaste would have spread through the cabin and people would have thought there was something wrong with me. I left it in my bag for the duration of the flight and even when, having reached my destination, I stretched out to relax on the bed of my hotel room before the event I was scheduled to take part in, I left it there and turned on the TV instead, the embarrassment was simply too great. But why? I had read the Marquis de Sade, another stigmatized writer, but that was literature, hailed as pioneering and revolutionary by all the great French philosophers of the postwar period and used as a point of departure for their analyses of power, sex, language, and death. But with Hitler's book it was different. Hitler's book is no longer literature. What later happened, what he later did, the axioms of which are meticulously laid out in that book, is such that it transforms the literature into something evil. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is literature's only unmentionable work. To say that this fact makes it interesting is impossible, regardless of the fact that it is interesting, since in that case one is deemed to lack respect for all those sent to their deaths by the system to which the book directly gave rise. Six million Jews, only sixty-five years ago. Almost all literature is simply text, but not *Mein Kampf*. *Mein Kampf* is more than text. It is a symbol of human evil. In it the door between text and reality is wide open, in a way quite unlike any other book. In Germany it is banned to this day. In Norway it has not been printed since the war.

Shortly after the war ended, in 1947, a book came out by a German-Jewish philologist, Victor Klemperer, entitled *LTI – Lingua Tertii Imperii: Notizbuch eines Philologen*, later published in English as *The Language of the Third Reich*. Klemperer was a professor of Romance languages at the Technical University of Dresden, an assimilated Jew, married to an Aryan woman. When the Nazis seized power in 1933 he therefore considered himself safe enough to remain in Germany. Soon, however, he lost his job, his house, his right to borrow books from the library; he was stopped from listening to the radio, refused the right to read books by non-Jewish writers, and eventually prohibited from speaking to anyone other than Jews – and, indeed, from writing. He lived under the constant threat of deportation, a fate he avoided only by virtue of his wife's lineage and because he had fought for Germany as a volunteer in World War I.

LTI is an eyewitness account of the Third Reich as seen from within – not of how life inside it harshened and became ever more brutalized throughout the 1930s and on into the 1940s, but rather of how the language changed. Klemperer kept a diary, its first entries are dated the spring of 1933, at the time he still holds his professorship and thereby a prominent position in society, and while his entries exhibit concern, such concern is mild in nature: a mere disquiet. Gradually, all that is Jewish is separated from the German, and the German bolstered everywhere. In Leipzig a commission is established for the nationalization of the university. A bulletin board in Klemperer's department carries the words: "If a Jew writes in German, he is lying." The word *Volk* – most simply "people" in English – is all over the place, in every context: *Volksfest* (public festival), *Volksgenosse* (ethnic comrade), *Volksgemeinschaft* (ethnic community), *volksnah* (in touch with the people), *volksfremd* (alien to the people), *volksentstammt* (descended from the people). Hitler himself is *der Volkskanzler* – the people's chancellor – and the elevation of the nation becomes the National Socialist revolution. A ceremony is held at the grave of "Rathenau-eliminators." By summer Klemperer senses that the people are weary of Hitler, as if they are exhausted by all the propaganda. On August 22 he writes:

> *Frau Krappmann, the deputy concierge, married to a postal inspector: "Professor Klemperer, by 1 October, the 'Hospitality' club of the postal workers of section A 19 will be brought into line [*gleichgeschaltet*] by the Nazis. But they will not receive any of its capital; a sausage dinner will be organized for the gentlemen, followed by coffee and cake for the ladies." Annemarie, clinically blunt as ever, relates the remark of a colleague wearing an armband with a swastika: "What is one supposed to do? It's like a lady's sanitary towel." And Kuske, the grocer, recites the new evening prayer: "Dear Lord, make me dumb, so that to Hohnstein I never come." Am I deceiving myself if I derive some hope from all this?*

Three days later Klemperer writes that his vice-chancellor has politely asked if he might hold back on publishing an article he has written; instead he approaches another publishing house, receiving a speedy rejection on the grounds that the piece is lacking the necessary national angles (*völkische Gesichtspunkte*). On August 28 he writes that he does not believe the people are going to go along with things much longer. He tells of going on a bus trip, a "mystery tour," some eighty people in two busloads, "the most petty-bourgeois company imaginable." During a coffee stop entertainment is laid on, a *compère* recites a pathos-ridden poem in praise of the Führer, the savior of Germany, and the new national community; the audience is silent and apathetic, the applause that follows entirely without enthusiasm. To top things off the man tells a funny story about something that happened at the hairdresser's, a Jewish woman wants a permanent, only to be refused, for as the hairdresser says, "The Führer solemnly promised on the occasion of the boycott of the Jews that no one is to harm a hair on a Jew's head." The story meets with laughter and enthusiastic applause. Three weeks later he relates some scenes from the party rally at Nuremberg that he has seen at the cinema. Hitler blesses new members of the *Sturmabteilung* by allowing them to touch the *Blutfahne*, the Blood Banner, from the failed coup attempt of 1923. Other Nazi banners are touched by the *Blutfahne*, thereby becoming consecrated, and cannon are fired in celebration. Klemperer reflects upon the name: "Blood Banner." He ponders the way that whatever has to do with the National Socialist party is elevated from the political to the religious sphere. He descibes those in attendance, how devout they appear toward the scenes that are played out before their eyes. The rallies are cult ceremonies, a ritualistic action, he writes, National Socialism is a religion. He learns of Jewish colleagues dismissed from their jobs. A colleague of Klemperer asks if Klemperer and his wife can receive a guest, "an enemy of the state" unexpectedly released from prison, the man had written about Marx and was deemed "politically unreliable" (*politisch unzuverlässig*). Klemperer notes that the philological journals are pervaded by Third Reich jargon: "science on a National Socialist footing," "the Jewish spirit," "the Novembrists." Deductions are made from his salary, a "voluntary winter charity" donation; he reflects on the the words "tax" and "charity," the way the latter appeals to the emotions. October 29, a sudden directive: every Tuesday afternoon the students are to gather for military sporting exercises – *Wehrsport* – instead of attending lectures. He notes the same word used for a brand of cigarettes: Military Sport brand (Marke Wehrsport). He hears about some communists who have been interned in a concentration camp. He reflects on the word *Konzentrationslager* ("concentration camp"). When he was a boy, he writes, the word had an exotic, colonial, and quite un-German ring to it, he heard mention of it in talk of the Boer War conducted by the English, after that the word disappeared from common usage, but now suddenly it had reappeared to describe a German institution, a permanent peacetime establishment directed against Germans, and he considers that the word will henceforth through all time be associated with Hitler's Germany.

He asks himself if it is heartless of him, a manifestation of some pedantic schoolmasterly streak, that he keeps returning to this philology of misery? He searches his conscience, he writes, and comes to the conclusion that it is not heartless, but a matter of self-preservation.

Disconcertingly few students find their way to his lectures. The Jewish students carry yellow cards, the stateless blue, the German brown. He lectures in French, in itself unpatriotic, and he is a Jew; attending his lectures requires courage, he writes. Besides, the students are more interested in "military sports exercises" or else are helping out with propaganda or taking part in demonstrations and rallies ahead of the upcoming referendum. He rages about Hitler's "unified list of candidates" (*Einheitsliste*) and maintains that it means the end of the Reichstag as a parliament. All wear little buttons with the word *Ja* on their lapels, he writes, and one cannot turn the button sellers away without being viewed with suspicion. He calls it such a "rape of the general public" that it must surely work against itself. But he has held this belief for some time; Goebbels addresses an intoxicated common herd, Klemperer is an intellectual and has been wrong all along. He mentions having a Jewish couple he refers to as "K" over for coffee. He finds Frau K snobbish and uncritical, a person who repeats the dominant opinion in any circumstance, but has more respect for her husband. When Herr K says that he is intending, in line with the central committee of Jewish citizens, to vote yes in the referendum, Klemperer loses his temper and thumps his fist on the table. His voice raised in anger, he demands to know if the man considers the policies of the government to be criminal or not. The man replies with composure that he has no right to ask such a question. The woman says that one must acknowledge that the Führer is a most brilliant and captivating man whose extraordinary charisma cannot be denied. Later, while intending to apologize for his behavior, he hears similar judgments from other Jews in his circles, from all walks of life, including intellectuals.

"Some kind of fog has descended which is enveloping everybody," he writes. At that time the Nazis had been in power for only a few months.

The new came not from without, but from within, and not in the guise of the unfamiliar, but as an amplification of the already known. And it came not as a negative force, and was not associated with destruction and death; reading accounts from early 1930s Germany, there is a striking optimism radiating from everywhere. Something new has begun, enterprise is strong, and the new party assuming power brings with it new career opportunities for a new people. Much is unproven, established and shaped as they go along; reading Albert Speer's memoir, *Inside the Third Reich*, the sense of empowerment and freedom it gives out is clear; as a young architect straight out of school he joins the NSDAP, is commissioned to renovate a party building in the provinces, does the job to everyone's satisfaction, receives further commissions, is noticed, entrusted with greater responsibilities, handpicked by the party's central offices, and one day finds himself standing before Adolf Hitler himself. The optimism of shaping one's own future blows like a wind through Speer's account of the era. The Nazis were of course continually on the lookout for young talent, there were positions to be filled, and many. The new optimism and momentum emanated too from all the parades, the marches, the rallies, and the meetings, which made the public space a stage, and what was shown on that stage came not from the outside, was not some alien element belonging to some other, it was the people themselves as they were in community, together, that found their form in these scenes.

But it was not the case that the people were deceived, that they were unaware of the propaganda, of the fact that behind what they were seeing and hearing there was a will and a particular intention, and that this was directed toward them in order to make them act or think in a certain way. That aspect was so obvious it was impossible not to be aware of it. It is similar to advertising in our day; we know full well it is trying to manipulate us and make us buy some product, but this does not prevent us from watching the ads, which can be good or funny, subtle or just plain silly, but even if we dislike them we do not necessarily dislike advertising in itself, and although we know there is no difference between this or that product and that all the glamor associated with one and not the other belongs to the image and not the product, which can be a different thing altogether, we nevertheless still buy what we associate with the glamor. We know that someone always will, and we know that the association between a product and its advertising is arbitrary, so buying the product or not buying the product is entirely up to us. No one has deceived us.

What is peculiar about advertising is that it works and does not work at the same time. The same is true of the propaganda of Hitler's Germany. They knew it was propaganda and seldom took it seriously, as is evident from Klemperer's notes, people regarded it more as a phenomenon, easy to see through, and yet they could be taken in by it, and when it came to the matter of the Jews it was an exaggeration, a hang-up Hitler had, any reasonable person knew this even if not necessarily distancing themselves from what it involved. Klemperer despised the propaganda, but was also affected by it; his emotions reacted even though his mind shunned the idea that there might genuinely be something inferior about him. Klemperer is interesting too because he was both Jewish and German, which is to say he was born into Judaism, but converted later to Protestantism, so he considers what is going on around him as both an intellectual German citizen and a Jew.

This is how he describes one palpable instance of propaganda in 1933:

> *10 November, evening. I heard the apogee of propaganda this afternoon on Dember's radio (our Jewish physicist, already dismissed, but also already negiotiating for a professorship in Turkey). On this occasion the organization by Goebbels, who also served as the compère of his own show, amounted to a masterpiece. The emphasis is on work and peace in the service of peaceful work. First the sound of sirens wailing across the whole of Germany and then a minute of silence across the whole of Germany – they have picked this up from America of course, and from the peace celebrations at the end of the Great War. This is followed by the framework around Hitler's speech, perhaps not a great deal more original either (cf. Italy), but executed to absolute perfection. A factory floor in Siemensstadt. For a few minutes the noise of all the machines at work, the hammering, rattling, rumbling, whistling, grinding. Then the sirens and singing and the gradual falling silent of the wheels as they are brought to a standstill. Then quietly, out of the silence, Goebbels's deep voice with the messenger's report. And only after all of this: Hitler himself, he speaks for three quarters of an hour. It was the first time that I had heard one of his speeches from beginning to end, and my impression was essentially the same as before. For the most part an excessively agitated, hectoring, often rasping voice. The only difference*

> *was that on this occasion many passages were declaimed in the whining tone of an evangelizing sectarian. He advocates peace, he proclaims peace, he wants the unanimous support of Germany not out of personal ambition, but only in order to be able to defend peace against the attacks of a rootless international clique of profiteers, who for the sake of their own profit unscrupulously set populations of countless millions against each other . . .*
>
> *All of this, together with the well-rehearsed heckling ("The Jews!"), I had of course been conversant with for a long time. But in all its hackneyed overfamiliarity, its deafening mendacity – audible surely to the deafest of ears – it acquired a special and novel authority from a peculiarity of the foregoing propaganda, an aspect which I consider to be the most outstanding and ultimately decisive among its succesful individual ingredients. The advance notice and radio announcement stated: "Ceremony between 13:00 and 14:00. In the thirteenth hour Adolf Hitler will visit the workers." This is, as everyone knows, the language of the Gospel. The Lord, the Savior visits the poor and the prodigal. Ingenious, right down to the timing. Thirteen hundred hours – no, "the thirteenth hour" – sounds too late, but he will work miracles, for him there is no such thing as too late. The Blood Banner at the rally was of the same order. But this time the dividing line separating it from ecclesiastical ceremony has been broken down, the antiquated costume has been shed and the legend of Christ has been transported into the here and now: Adolf Hitler, the Redeemer, visits the workers in Siemensstadt.*

The present is charged with the weight and suggestive force of the myth, the proximate, normally trivial, becomes meaningful and ultimately sacred. The quotidian becomes a magical world. It is elevated. Like Klemperer, one can see through it, but not without being touched by it at the same time. The sound of sirens is magnificent; once a month they are heard in this country too, and when they sound out it is hard not to stop what you are doing and look out the window if you are inside, or up at the sky if you are out; their sound pierces everything, ominously they pervade the air, as if it were doomsday itself. The sirens call out, call out to us, to all who hear them. Collective silence works in much the same way, within it we are never alone.

After the two invocations of this great "we" come Goebbels's and Hitler's speeches about peace. The footage I have seen of Hitler's speeches, two generations on, shows a screeching, gesticulating man, his face contorting as he spits out his words to an audience that receives everything he says with huge enthusiasm. But those images are part of a course of events, containing a before and after, which show something else. I once saw one of Hitler's speeches in its entirety, it too began with Goebbels bellowing slogans, arms gesturing, eyes flashing, a warm-up man, and when finally he introduced Hitler the crowd erupted in exultation. Suddenly Hitler is there, utterly impassive on the stage. He mumbles some politeness into the microphone, ladies and gentlemen, perhaps, or dear countrymen, something like that. He seems ill at ease, as if he wishes he could be anywhere else but there. He fidgets uneasily with some papers on a table at his side, sips water from a glass, hitches up his trousers. He says nothing, but stares down before this enormous crowd whose attention is directed entirely toward him. His silence is almost unbearable, what can be wrong, has he lost his nerve? Is he really that nervous? Why is he not saying anything? He takes another sip of water. And then he leans forward toward the microphone. He speaks quietly, slowly, hesitantly. But everyone is listening, the silence is total, everyone wants him to succeed. I too wanted him to succeed. Even before he has spoken, he has established a very strong feeling of identification with himself on the part of his audience, the crowd is on his side, he is one of them. After that there is only one way, his speech rises and rises again in intensity, gripping each and every individual present, soon he has them all in the palm of his hand, they obey his every motion, he can say anything and they will never deny him but give him whatever he might ask them for. The important thing about Hitler's speeches was not what he said, the nature of the arguments he presented, but his winning over the crowd. The people were with him.

Albert Speer was twenty-eight years old when he saw Hitler for the first time, at Hasenheide, a beer hall in Berlin, where Hitler was to speak to the students of the university. In his autobiography Speer writes that he was expecting a caricature, a shrieking, gesticulating demagogue in uniform with a swastika armband. What he saw was something quite different. Hitler was dressed in a neat navy-blue suit, giving an impression of respectability, and when he started to talk he spoke softly and self-effacingly, Speer writes, and what he then witnessed was more like a talk on history than a political speech. Sober, self-conscious, respectable, these are the words Speer uses to describe Hitler. After a while the shyness and hesitancy vanished, his voice became more forceful, he stressed his words and spoke with great persuasion and more and more hypnotically, and this enthusiasm washed away all reservations, all skepticism, Hitler was no longer speaking to persuade and convince, yet nor did he seem to be saying what his audience expected of him. Speer writes that he had forgotten what Hitler had said only hours later, whereas the mood stayed with him, the passion and the optimism: he had seen the new, he had seen the future. All this was written in hindsight, and certainly with the aim of exonerating Speer himself, portraying him as someone who had been pulled along by something of considerable substance rather than by something lesser, thereby in a way being duped – at the same time there are many other sources that say exactly the same thing: there was something more to Hitler than the historical caricature.

Hitler himself knew he could never win over the people through argument alone. The written word was of no use to him, it led to nothing. What he wanted was palpable action, he strove for transformation, and transformation took place in the moment, among the people. An opinion in the newspaper, hitting out against this or that, prompting a response in kind, an endless debate washing this way and that, was meaningless, nothing but words. Even in his book, *Mein Kampf*, he returns time and again to his distrust of the written word. *Mein Kampf* is about how a society can be changed starting at the very bottom, and in that it is pragmatic rather than fanatical. At one point he writes:

> *How hard it is to upset emotional prejudices, moods, sentiments, etc., and to replace them by others, on how many scarcely calculable influences and conditions success depends, the sensitive speaker can judge by the fact that even the*

> *time of day in which the lecture takes place can have a decisive influence on the effect.*

This is the goal: to work other thoughts in behind the protective wall formed by prejudice, which is to say general, unreflected opinions. That protective wall cannot be penetrated by argument, for it is not made of arguments. It is made of a sense of what is right and wrong, what is decent, what is appropriate. To reach behind it into where such opinions reside and may be changed, one must proceed via the emotions. This requires great attention to the audience, whose self-image must not be violated, what is said must not appear alien – in such cases it will be rejected – but familiar, as something already belonging to them, something that is them. Hitler writes:

> *How hard it is to upset emotional prejudices, moods, sentiments, etc., and to replace them by others, on how many scarcely calculable influences and conditions success depends, the sensitive speaker can judge by the fact that even the time of day in which the lecture takes place can have a decisive influence on the effect. The same lecture, the same speaker, the same theme, have an entirely different effect at ten o'clock in the morning, at three o'clock in the afternoon, or at night. I myself as a beginner organized meetings for the morning, and especially remember a rally which we held in the Munich Kindl Keller as a protest "against the oppression of German territories." At that time it was Munich's largest hall and it seemed a very great venture. In order to make attendance particularly easy for the adherents of the movement and all the others who came, I set the meeting for a Sunday morning at ten o'clock. The result was depressing, yet at the same time extremely instructive: the hall was full, the impression really overpowering, but the mood ice cold; no one became warm, and I myself as a speaker felt profoundly unhappy at being unable to create any bond, not even the slightest contact, between myself and my audience. I thought I had not spoken worse than usual; but the effect seemed to be practically nil. Utterly dissatisfied, though richer by one experience, I left the meeting. Tests of the same sort that I later undertook led to the same result.*

> *This should surprise no one. Go to a theater performance and witness a play at three o'clock in the afternoon and the same play with the same actors at eight at night, and you will be amazed at the difference in effect and impression. A man with fine feelings and the power to achieve clarity with regard to this mood will be able to establish at once that the impression made by the performance at three in the afternoon is not as great as that made in the evening. The same applies even to a movie. This is important because in the theater it might be said that perhaps the actor does not take as much pain in the afternoon as at night. But a film is no different in the afternoon than at nine in the evening. No, the time itself exerts a definite effect, just as the hall does on me. There are halls which leave people cold for reasons that are hard to discern, but which somehow oppose the most violent resistance to any creation of mood. Traditional memories and ideas that are present in a man can also decisively determine an impression. Thus, a performance of Parsifal in Bayreuth will always have a different effect than anywhere else in the world. The mysterious magic of the house on the Festspielhügel in the old city of the margraves cannot be replaced or even compensated for by externals.*

Mein Kampf was published in 1925, after *Growth of the Soil*, *The People of Juvik*, *Kristin Lavransdatter*, *Ulysses*, and the first volumes of *In Search of Lost Time*, but before *The Castle*, *Being and Time*, and *The Sound and the Fury*. It is the most infamous book of our time, not because of what it says in itself, but because what it says was carried out in real life, and it is impossible to read *Mein Kampf* today without immense distaste, for something terrible and repulsive is attached to it, as if it were written by the devil himself. But at the time of its writing, its author, Adolf Hitler, was an ordinary man, he had not murdered anyone, had ordered no killings to be carried out, had stolen nothing and burned nothing to the ground. Had he not risen to power in Germany nine years later, nothing of what he wrote would have had any particular significance or overtone, the book would presumably be long since forgotten, existing only in a limited number of dusty volumes on the shelves of university libraries, borrowed on rare occasion by a doctoral student writing about the historical period and finding the work illustrative of some of its typical characteristics, not least the paranoid hatred of Jews. But Hitler did rise to power in 1933, and *Mein Kampf* now occupies a place apart in literature, wide open to the world: not only were the words on its pages transformed into real life, but what happened there, in real life, stains its each and every word; not a sentence can be read or quoted without thinking about the Nazis' industrial extermination of the Jews and the millions who perished in World War II. It is almost impossible to read the book for what it once was, the work of a political fanatic outlining his personal background, analyzing society,and detailing what needs to be done in order to change it in the direction he wants. There is nothing gripping about it, nothing hypnotic or suggestive, and what little it says about its author and his life mutates into lengthy political ventings after barely a few lines. It has a smug, opinionated quality about it, for regardless of what aspect of society its author touches upon there is always something wrong with it, and moreover he knows exactly what it is and what needs to be done in order to put it right. Even the lambasting to which he often resorts gradually becomes rather mechanical. *Mein Kampf* is written in a tone of righteous indignation so powerful it must surely scare away anyone whose indignation by comparison falls short.

That the book takes the form of a bildungsroman, in which we follow the author from birth, through the first character-shaping years of childhood, and further into youth and the discoveries and fundamental insights of the young adult, has to do with the same thing: Hitler makes himself one with his politics, makes himself one with his role; what he believes and what he is are inseparable. Hitler builds up a persona in *Mein Kampf*, and that persona is his political platform. He is of the people, this is his message, and he knows the people's problems, having experienced them himself; gradually he devises a comprehensive political solution, a vision thereby bound up with both the people and his own person, concentrated in the name, the signum of the work, Adolf Hitler.

Invariably, the personal experiences he describes are hooked up to the political, and if the book has any biographical axis at all, it is considered from such a remote distance that everything personal and private, relating only to him, to his own person and character, the idiosyncratic, vanishes from sight. These are the book's first sentences:

> *Today it seems to me providential that Fate should have chosen Braunau on the Inn as my birthplace. For this little town lies on the boundary between two German states which we of the younger generation at least have made it our life work to reunite by every means at our disposal.*
>
> *German Austria must return to the great German mother country, and not because of any economic considerations. No, and again no: even if such a union were unimportant from an economic point of view; yes, even if it were harmful, it must nevertheless take place. One blood demands one Reich. Never will the German nation possess the moral right to engage in colonial politics until, at least, it embraces its own sons within a single state. Only when the Reich borders include the very last German, but can no longer guarantee his daily bread, will the moral right to acquire foreign soil arise from the distress of our own people. Their sword will become our plow, and from the tears of war the daily bread of future generations will grow. And so this little city on the border seems to me the symbol of a great mission.*

Like any other memoir or autobiography, *Mein Kampf* begins with the main character's birth. But no sooner are we informed of it than this "I" recedes into a "we," so essential that the first thing it does there is to define its borders.

"We" is the people, and the people's we stands above the we of the state by which it has been divided. The necessity of the we becoming united again stands above practical everyday politics and has its foundations in morality, finding its force in the body, that which is outside of language, nonargumentative, tangible, and physical: the blood. So essential is this that reunification takes precedence over the damage it will entail. Once this, the book's utopia, has been accomplished, the practical consequences of it, the damage done, the country being unable to feed its people, will be rectified by way of the moral mandate that comes with being a united people, which is to say the conquering of new land. In less than half a page then, Hitler has both outlined his political program and associated it with his own person, born in Braunau on the Inn, a border town and thereby symbolic of this great task, the reunification of the two countries' peoples into one, which he, child of the borderland, will carry out. This goal stands above everything else, and such is the symbolic and moral power of the reunifying act that it can transform a sword into a plow, tears into bread, war into peace.

After a page in this vein, the author returns to his point of departure and carries on the story of his origins:

> *In this little town on the Inn, gilded by the rays of German martyrdom, Bavarian by blood, technically Austrian, lived my parents in the late eighties of the past century; my father, a dutiful civil servant, my mother giving all her being to the household, and devoted above all to us children in eternal, loving care.*

Hitler was born in 1889 in a town far from the world, provincial and unimportant in every sense, into an ordinary family of the lower middle class. He did not feel himself particularly attached to the place, the family moving elsewhere when he was three years old. Its description as being gilded by the memory of German martyrdom, with Bavarian blood running through its veins, places us partly in the obscure and magical world of myth, partly in the late-nineteenth-century Austrian provinces. The outline of his mother, her looking after the household and devoting herself lovingly to the care of her children, is the only thing said of her in the entire book. There is no mention of the fact that she was related to her husband by blood and pregnant when she married him some six months after his first wife had been put in her grave. Nor are we told that the three children to whom she gave birth before Adolf all died, one, a girl, at the age of two, or that the boy she had after Adolf, Edmund, died when he was six. How many siblings Hitler had, what their names were and what kind of feelings he had toward them, are all passed by. They are mentioned merely as "us children." The father is the only person in Hitler's life, during his first thirty-five years, to be described in more than a few words and accorded some biography. Like everyone belonging to Hitler's closest family in *Mein Kampf*, he appears without a name.

Of "my father," Hitler writes that he was from poor circumstances, son of an impoverished cottager, who ran away from home at the age of thirteen, determined to make something of himself and become a civil servant, the most respected position he had heard of, succeeding at the age of forty, retiring at fifty-six to purchase a small farm at Lambach in Upper Austria. The book tells us nothing of his relationship with his family or Hitler himself. Where the mother is loving and devoted in relation to her children, the father is "a dutiful civil servant." His social trajectory is described in sentimental terms. He is the "poor boy" from the village with "all the tenacity of a young man whom suffering and care had made old while still half a child." Moreover he was born outside wedlock, a bastard child, to all intents and purposes a nobody. Hitler does not deny his father's poor circumstances and low social status, instead making a point of it in a narrative about the power of will and independence. Certainly, Hitler makes no explicit mention of illegitimacy. The description of his father returning after a long and hard-working career to the life his own father had led is part of the same embellishment of the gilded German town of Hitler's birth. This is an idea of lineage, which basically means being born of somebody else, there is in essence nothing qualitative about the concept, nor in the expression to be of "one blood," since blood is in all of us and all of us are born into some lineage. "Lineage" and "blood" create similarity and in this instance elevate, into these concepts vanish the miserable circumstances of life, the low social status of the illegitimate child, and this too is the sense such words are ascribed in Hitler's politics, erasing social divides and making everyone a part of the same thing. Lineage and blood are nature; class and status are culture, and in Hitler's image of the world the former governs. As he later writes when discussing the issue of rapidly increasing population:

> *While Nature, by making procreation free, yet submitting survival to a hard trial, chooses from an excess number of individuals the best as worthy of living, thus preserving them alone and in them conserving their species, man limits procreation, but is hysterically concerned that once a being is born it should be preserved at any price. This correction of the divine will seems to him as wise as it is humane, and he takes delight in having once again got the best of Nature and even having proved her inadequacy. The number, to be sure, has really been limited, but at the same time the value of the individual has diminished; this, however, is something the dear little ape of the Almighty does not want to see or hear about.*
>
> *For as soon as procreation as such is limited and the number of births diminished, the natural struggle for existence which leaves only the strongest and healthiest alive is obviously replaced by the obvious desire to "save" even the weakest and most sickly at any price, and this plants the seed of a future generation which must inevitably grow more and more deplorable the longer this mockery of Nature and her will continues.*

Here, mankind is reduced to numbers, the aggregate being decisive, determinative of power, expressing the will of nature, which is the same as the divine will, and the nameless individual who succumbs to hunger or sickness has no right to life. Keeping such individuals alive is "humane," and thereby counter to nature. Such a perspective was by no means unique to Hitler, it was everywhere in the age and would not have been possible without Darwin and his unprecedentedly influential book, *On the Origin of Species*, in which all living creatures were considered through the same lens of evolution, this mighty power which through its very few laws has conveyed life from its monocellular origins in the great oceans to the huge complexities of the human. The fittest live on, and thus our life-bearing properties are steadily improved and refined, and since life is one long struggle the fittest are often the strongest, and that thought, translated to the social and the civilizational, comprises a pillar of *Mein Kampf*, one of the immovable premises from which the rest of its ideology issues. Nature is above culture. In nature the sick die, the weak die, the tardy die, the injured die. The brutality and cruelty of according this same principle so very central a status in culture lies in the worth of the human, the humane, being so radically diminished. A single human life is of little value in *Mein Kampf.*

But what is of value? The ideal a person can express, or be an expression of, this is of greater value than life. This is what lies behind dying for a cause, the idea that there is something greater, something one lives for and which is understood to be of such manifest importance that a person would be willing to give up his life for it.

Life is not primary.

Hitler wrote his book in 1924, six years after four million young men had slaughtered each other in the trenches of Europe, a shadow that lay over all that was to be thought and written in the years that followed. In the autumn of 1914 a human life was infinitely more worthless than in the autumn of 1913. World War I was an abyss, a near-unfathomable crisis of civilization, and one of the most important issues that needed to be addressed in its wake was precisely the worth of the human being. To understand *Mein Kampf*, one must understand this.

This is the overarching societal perspective to which the book belongs and by which it is steered, but there is a personal perspective too, the I of its writer, the close and proximate world in which he grew up and by which he was formed, with his conscientious father, the civil servant, and a mother who gave "all her being to the household, and devoted above all to us children in eternal, loving care." In this proximate world death too was close, and if the three children who died before Hitler was born were mentioned only rarely during his childhood and upbringing, they must surely have been present in the minds of his parents, in particular his mother, who sources unanimously describe as serious and mournful. Child mortality was high in those days, to lose three children was by no means unusual. August Kubizek, Hitler's childhood friend, likewise had three siblings die before he was born, and the fact of death being so common must have made life seem at once more and less valuable. Less valuable in the sense that death was something to be reckoned with; the death of one's first three children must have made the death of the fourth a perilously proximate possibility. More valuable in the sense that the one who survived would be the only one, correspondingly precious.

Adolf Hitler was Klara Hitler's fourth child, he was sickly, and yet it was he who survived, and his mother, according to his friend Kubizek, was forever fretting and worrying about him. When the fifth child, Edmund, died, Hitler was eleven years old, old enough to grieve over him and to remember him for the rest of his life.

According to the ideology expressed in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's younger brother died because he was too weak and therefore unworthy of life. What Hitler himself thought and felt as an eleven-year-old boy is a matter of conjecture, but it would not seem unreasonable to suggest that he was affected by his brother's death and that he pondered on why it had happened. Why him rather than another? As a teenager Hitler distanced himself from the Church; his mother attended devoutly every Sunday, his friend and his friend's family likewise, but not Hitler, who would stand outside and wait for them, suggesting that he was certainly not looking for any religious explanation of the brutality of existence.

In *Mein Kampf* everything belonging to Hitler's own biography is related to his ideology. It is not his father's life as such that is significant to him, the person he was in real life, the man whose smell could be described in such and such a way, who walked and stood and sat like this or like that, who expressed himself in this way rather than that and who filled a room with his very own presence, but rather what he in his life represented. His father is presented as a man who worked his way up from the humblest beginnings, in other words he belongs to the strong, and in this way Hitler turns his problematic social background to his advantage, at the same time as he keeps private that which would ruin the trajectory, the striving to surmount, that which takes place in the material world among real people, who not only belong to a lineage, but also belch and shit and yell and lash out, and with a certain regularity drink themselves senseless; who slurp and spit and reek of piss and sweat, who drag their sons here and there by the hair, behavior that presumably cannot have been unusual in the home of a customs official at the end of the nineteenth century – all this vanishes too in the ancestral circle closed by his father's passage from cottager's son to farmer.

But while Hitler translated his father's history into an example of vitality and strength, there is something else in that history that Hitler is not sensitive enough as a writer to be able to control. Almost everything that follows on the subject of his father concerns the disparity between him and his son. The conflict is very much toned down and yet occupies some considerable surface area, and in this asymmetry there is tension.

> *It was at this time that the first ideals took shape in my breast. All my playing about in the open, the long walk to school, and particularly my association with extremely "husky" boys, which sometimes caused my mother bitter anguish, made me the very opposite of a stay-at-home. And though at that time I scarcely had any serious ideas as to the profession I should one day pursue, my sympathies were in any case not in the direction of my father's career.*

In his own self-image, Hitler is a child of the outdoors, playing with "extremely 'husky' boys," "rather hard to handle," and "a boy who in reality was really anything but 'good' in the usual sense of the word." In other words, he is indignant, obstinate, unruly, perhaps also aggressive, all of which is directed toward his father, no one else being named in this context, his father who could "achieve no understanding" of the "youthful ideas" in his son's head and was thereby made to feel "concern." As a result, his father begins "the relentless enforcement of his authority," this by later accounts involving beatings and harsh corporal punishment. But Hitler lends another side to this depiction:

> *I had become a little ringleader; at school I learned easily and at that time very well, but was otherwise rather hard to handle. Since in my free time I received singing lessons in the cloister at Lambach, I had excellent opportunity to intoxicate myself with the solemn splendor of the brilliant church festivals. As was*

only natural, the abbot seemed to me, as the village priest had once seemed to my father, the highest and most desirable ideal. For a time, at least, this was the case. But since my father, for understandable reasons, proved unable to appreciate the oratorical talents of his pugnacious boy, or to draw from them any favorable conclusions regarding the future of his offspring, he could, it goes without saying, achieve no understanding for such youthful ideas. With concern he observed this conflict of nature.

As it happened, my temporary aspiration for this profession was in any case soon to vanish, making place for hopes more suited to my temperament. Rummaging through my father's library, I had come across various books of a military nature, among them a popular edition of the Franco-German War of 1870–71. It consisted of two issues of an illustrated periodical from those years, which now became my favorite reading matter. It was not long before the great heroic struggle had become my greatest inner experience. From then on I became more and more enthusiastic about everything that was in any way connected with war or, for that matter, with soldiering.

But in another respect as well, this was to assume importance for me. For the first time, though as yet in a confused form, the question was forced upon my consciousness: Was there a difference – and if so what difference – between the Germans who fought these battles and other Germans? Why hadn't Austria taken part in this war; why hadn't my father and all the others fought?

Are we not the same as all other Germans? Do we not all belong together? This problem began to gnaw at my little brain for the first time. I asked cautious questions and with secret envy received the answer that not every German was fortunate enough to belong to Bismarck's Reich.

This was more than I could understand.

Both fascinations are embellishments of reality. The splendor of Church ceremonial, in which he delights, is theatrical and external, whereas the narrative of the heroism of war is an internal transformation, the character of the soldiers, their courage and self-sacrifice giving luster to an otherwise trivial and quotidian reality, not in itself, but in the sympathetic insight into their heroism the books about them make possible, the viewpoint thereby established, the notion that this ordinary landscape could be transformed and become uniquely significant. Both fascinations are associated with his father; the first making Hitler's idealization of the abbot natural, a reflection of his father's veneration of the village priest in his boyhood days. A male ideal to any boy of such age is the ideal of his father, and to Hitler's father nothing was more natural since he had no father of his own. Hitler, however, does, and his idealization of the abbot must be seen in that light. It is this "conflict of nature" in his son's character that makes his father feel anxious. He seeks what is furthest from his father. In the description of his infatuations with war, the two realities, the one in which he grew up and the one he dreamed about, are brought even closer together, the nearest the book gets to an accusation without tearing away the veil of euphemism by which it shrouds all things proximate. Why did Austria not fight? Why did my father and all the others not fight in that struggle?

It is a childish accusation, for there were any number of good reasons for his father not having fought, but the childish nature of it suggests that it preys on him during the time about which he is writing; nothing else in the first three or four pages seems to be so, everything is controlled, held in the same grip and tone as is used throughout the work.

The suggested conflict escalates when a decision is to be made as to what kind of school the eleven-year-old Adolf is to attend. Hitler himself prefers the classical *Lyceum*, whereas his father wants him to attend the non-classical *Realschule*.

> *Then barely eleven years old, I was forced into opposition for the first time in my life. Hard and determined as my father might be in putting through plans and purposes once conceived, his son was just as persistent and recalcitrant in rejecting an idea which appealed to him not at all, or in any case very little. I did not want to become a civil servant. Neither persuasion nor "serious" arguments made any impression on my resistance.*
>
> *I did not want to be a civil servant, no, and again no.*

> *All attempts on my father's part to inspire me with love or pleasure in this profession by stories from his own life accomplished the exact opposite. I yawned and grew sick to my stomach at the thought of sitting in an office, deprived of my liberty; ceasing to be master of my own time and being compelled to force the content of a whole life into blanks that had to be filled out.*

The odd thing is that the book says nothing of how it turned out, what happened, how the conflict ended. Instead, this is merely suggested, a dozen lines on: "In this respect my attendance at the *Realschule*, which now commenced, made little difference."

He describes an absolutely intractable conflict, he is eleven years old, for the first time confronting the wishes of his father, who is harsh and strict and high-handed, nothing can break down his opposition – and then, although nothing apparently happens, Hitler has given in and is in the midst of everything he so fiercely rejected.

The narrative is clearly hiding something, but what? Is it his defeat itself and the way it must have altered his relationship with his father? His father broke his will, and insofar as he had been open in his opposition and squared up to him in a battle of strength, that defeat must have been humiliating indeed. Yet there is something odd about this entire depiction. That a father should have plans as to his son's education is only natural, but the son being so farsighted in respect to his future as to invest, at the age of eleven, all his strength in opposing his father's will in the matter of something as far off in time as a civil servent's position sounds strange.

Why was it so urgent for Hitler to say that he was sent to the *Realschule* in Linz against his will? It was a highly respectable school, Ludwig Wittgenstein, born in the same year as Adolf Hitler, went there, and he was from one of the wealthiest and culturally most well-endowed families in Austria, if not the whole of Europe. Wittgenstein and Hitler both did poorly at the school, Hitler especially so, failing in several subjects and having to retake his first year, then failing again in his third year with the result that he was not allowed to continue before improving his grades at another, less prestigious school. Could it be that this whole story of his father forcing him to attend was something he made up, allowing him to state that he could have passed had he wanted to, but that what he wanted was something else, for which reason he saw no reason to make an effort? It sounds like a rather circuitous route.

The conflict surrounding the civil servant's position is escalated further. Hitler attends the *Realschule* against his will, forced to give in to his father's wishes, but in his own words he is "persistent and recalcitrant" and instead of standing firm on *Lyceum* over *Realschule*, he redoubles the conflict a year later:

> *How it happened, I myself do not know, but one day it became clear to me that I would become a painter, an artist. There was no doubt as to my talent for drawing; it had been one of my father's reasons for sending me to the* Realschule, *but never in all the world would it have occurred to him to give me professional training in this direction. On the contrary. When for the first time, after once again rejecting my father's favorite notion, I was asked what I myself wanted to be, and I rather abruptly blurted out the decision I had meanwhile made, my father for the moment was struck speechless.*
>
> *"Painter? Artist?"*
>
> *He doubted my sanity, or perhaps he thought he had heard wrong or misunderstood me. But when he was clear on the subject, and particularly after he felt the seriousness of my intention, he opposed it with all the determination of his nature. His decision was extremely simple, for any consideration of what abilities I might really have was simply out of the question.*
>
> *"Artist, no, never as long as I live!" But since his son, among various other qualities, had apparently inherited his father's stubbornness, the same answer came back at him. Except, of course, that it was in the opposite sense.*
>
> *And thus the situation remained on both sides. My father did not depart from his "Never!" And I intensified my "Oh, yes!"*
>
> *The consequences, indeed, were none too pleasant. The old man grew embittered, and, much as I loved him, so did I. My father forbade me to nourish the slightest hope of ever being allowed to study art. I went one step further and declared that if that was the case I would stop studying altogether. As a result of*

> *such "pronouncements," of course, I drew the short end; the old man began the relentless enforcement of his authority. In the future, therefore, I was silent, but transformed my threat into reality.*

His brother Edmund dies of the measles in February 1900. Hitler begins at the *Realschule* in Linz in September that same year. How his brother's death affects him is impossible to glean from his own writings about the period. Some biographies describe a transformative impact on his personality, suggesting that Hitler went from pleasant and outgoing to argumentative, sullen, and introverted, but even if this was the case we have no way of knowing what might have occasioned it, all we can do is note that at some point during this time he left one milieu for another, going from a small village school to a big city school where he knew no one and made no friends, and that his brother died some months before. But then again, it was his younger brother who had died, it must have left a crater, and was bound to have darkened his mind and his life in general. Everything his little brother was in life, and then his ceasing to exist, no longer being alive among them, would perhaps be more difficult for an eleven-year-old to accept than to understand. And when the child of a family dies, the grief of its parents is unfathomable; in that grief those who do not die must live on. The parents must have been quite differently attached to him than to those who had died at birth, the future must have been meshed into their gaze whenever they looked at him. The death of a child is a crisis greater than any other, and how can an eleven-year-old relate to that, other than to dwell on the injustice of it? This tragedy resonates through Hitler's years at the *Realschule*, his disinclination to apply himself, his impudence and self-confidence; he is his own person, with no reason to give a damn apart from his father's attempts to thrash sense into him. The beatings cannot have been decisive in shifting his character, he had been beaten before, it was a circumstance of his life, as doubtless it was for many other children of the time, certainly in that environment. He writes nothing about his mother, nothing about his siblings, nothing about friends, only about his father. If we are to believe his account, the way he sabotages his schooling to demonstrate to his father that he was wrong, then certainly there is something self-destructive about his behavior here. Only a darkened mind would pursue the thought, refuse to work, make him see what he has done, when no other opportunity exists but this to take revenge, no other way to hurt the one you hate. While this entire elaborate operation may conceivably be a concoction designed to excuse Hitler's poor grades and lack of schooling, it is nevertheless descriptive of the remoteness that existed between father and son, a deadlock, though there seems to be no obvious reason to consider it fictitious, since it clearly seems to have been working at various levels and is confirmed by other sources. "The old man . . . as I loved him" would seem to be a rather kind way of referring to an obstinate, cantankerous, and bitter customs official who beats his children senseless, but the representation here is not of Hitler's father, but the more abstract "father," a presence in almost any life, to be looked up to and respected, hence the form Hitler uses slightly further on, "the old gentleman."

Few had much good to say about Alois Hitler, born Schicklgruber. In her book *Hitler's Vienna* Brigitte Hamann cites one of his acquaintances, Josef Mayrhofer, as saying this of him: "In the bar he always had to be right and had a quick temper . . . At home he was strict, not a gentle man; his wife didn't have an easy life." Yet the picture is by no means unambiguous; the obituary in the Linz *Tagespost* describes a cheerful and sociable man, "always . . . happy" and "of a downright youthful joyfulness even," Hamann quotes, and also "a friend of song." "Even though a rough word may have escaped his lips once in a while, a good heart was hiding behind a rough exterior," the obituary went on. Basically, then, he would seem to have been a jovial sort socially, a pig at home. To his secretary Hitler later confided that he had not loved his father, and moreover had been frightened of him. "He had tantrums and immediately became physically violent. My poor mother would always be very scared for me." Hitler's older brother, Alois Junior, draws much the same picture, adding that Adolf was spoiled and protected by his mother, Alois Junior's stepmother, who pampered him from morning till night. But Alois Junior too states that Adolf was beaten, on one occasion so brutally he thought him to be dead.

Undeniably the most important source about Hitler's early days in Linz, and to a certain extent in Vienna too, is August Kubizek's book *The Young Hitler I Knew: The Memoirs of Hitler's Childhood Friend*, which came out in 1953. Kubizek was nine months older than Hitler and they first met at the theater in Linz when they were both sixteen. This means that Kubizek never met Hitler's father, but he became a friend of the family and writes that Alois was still very much a presence in their lives. A large portrait of him adorned the most prominent place on the sitting-room wall; the long pipes he used to smoke were still arrayed on a shelf in the kitchen, and Kubizek writes that they were in some strange way a symbol of the father; often when Frau Hitler spoke of her late husband she would gesture toward his pipes "as though they should bear witness how faithfully she carried on the husband's tradition."

According to Kubizek, the father's colleagues at the customs office described him as precise, dutiful, and strict, proud of his rank, though an unpopular superior. The most notable trait highlighted by Kubizek is a near-manic restlessness. He changes address twelve times during the years he lives in Braunau, twice when living in Passau, and seven times after his retirement. Adolf himself recalls seven different homes and five different schools. The moves had nothing to do with the quality of the dwellings, often he would move to a poorer habitation. Kubizek's explanation is that his temperament required constant change, and since his job demanded stability his restlessness had to find another outlet. Kubizek interprets his starting three different families in his life in the same way; while married to his first wife, a considerably older woman, he was unfaithful with the woman who would become his second wife, and the same thing happened again when he embarked on his affair with Hitler's mother. "This strange and unusual habit of the father's, always to change his circumstances, is all the more remarkable as those were peaceful, comfortable times without any justification for such change."

Kubizek finds exactly the same restlessness and unease in the sixteen-year-old Hitler's character and he sees the civil-servant conflict between father and son as described in *Mein Kampf* in this very light. The father's volatile nature is kept in check by the demands of his position, the discipline which gave direction and meaning to his unstable character, the uniform of the state official served to conceal his stormy private life; the authority to which he thereby submitted allowed him to steer clear of the dangerous reefs and sandbanks on which his life might otherwise have foundered, Kubizek suggests. The father must have seen the same traits in his son and for this reason would have been more than unusually keen to direct his son's future career. It is by no means certain that Hitler's father was aware of the inner reason for his attitude, Kubizek writes, but his insistence on imposing his point of view would seem to indicate that he indeed realized how much was at stake for his son. "So well did he know him," Kubizek writes.

This idea provides a more sympathetic picture of Hitler's father than is normally presented, and it is neither untrustworthy nor improbable; on the contrary, the traits parents tend to be most implacable toward in their children are often those most similar to their own, and in acts of brutality toward children there is always an element of self-loathing even if one is unaware of its existence, perhaps especially so when the emotions that well to the surface are so powerful and all-consuming as to eliminate any semblance of reason. A will as strong as this, in which the father invests all his power and authority, contains solicitude too, however impossible for a child to understand or recognize, in that it firstly seeks to subjugate the child without listening to his objections or even trying to put oneself in the child's place, and secondly is quite bereft of the language by which love more generally is communicated. Whether such love existed or did not, we have no way of knowing. Hitler's own feelings for his father lay somewhere between hatred, terror, and respect for his authority. The changes of address, the infidelity, the age gaps in the marriages would point toward a troubled and restless soul, and it seems likely that Alois recognized this in his son's rebellious manner. The idea that he knew his son better than his son knew himself shifts the whole conflict away from responsibility and subjugation, or from the mechanical aspect of such responsibility, such subjugation, into something essential, unknown to those involved, who were helpless against themselves.

Where did the notion of becoming a painter come from? There were no artists in the family or its milieu; the closest Hitler came to art must have been what he saw in the churches and what he read about in books. Yet this is what he wants to be when he grows up. Not a soldier, not a priest, not a teacher, not a civil servant, but the absolute opposite of a civil servant, an artist. That Ludwig Wittgenstein should become a philosopher is not in the slightest bit odd or surprising, his world was awash with art and culture, the very finest the contemporary age could offer. But Hitler could draw, and may have been encouraged, he wanted something quite different from the life that surrounded him, so perhaps art seemed to him to be a way out.

His father died suddenly from a violent hemorrhage when Hitler was thirteen.

> *The question of my profession was to be decided more quickly than I had previously expected.*
>
> *In my thirteenth year I suddenly lost my father. A stroke of apoplexy felled the old gentleman who was otherwise so hale, thus painlessly ending his earthly pilgrimage, plunging us all into the depths of grief. His most ardent desire had been to help his son forge his career, thus preserving him from his own bitter experience. In this, to all appearances, he had not succeeded. But, though unwittingly, he had sown the seed for a future which at that time neither he nor I would have comprehended.*

The word "hale" echoes Hitler's use of "husky" to decribe the boys with whom he played, and by association himself, making the notion of robustness a governing one, contrasting with his mother, who is "anguished," and with a sedentary indoor life as a "stay-at-home." "Hale" evokes his father's vitality, a man not in any way sick or in decline.

In the text Hitler's father is the very antithesis of art, the pattern being: indoors/reading/mother/stay-at-home versus outdoors/in the open/friends/combative, and ecclesiastical ceremony/art/freedom versus father/coercion/strength/vitality. "Hale" is an honorific here, held up as a positive, but beneath it flows the nonrobust. The only place where there is a bridge between them is in the description of his reading about the war, where the active, vigorous, and robust aspects of soldiers' heroic lives meet the passive, dreamy, mother-bound stay-at-homeness of reading and art.

His father dies, but Hitler does not leave school to begin with, his mother wishing him to continue. "Then suddenly an illness came to my help and in a few weeks decided my future and the eternal domestic quarrel. As a result of my serious lung ailment, a physician advised my mother in most urgent terms never to send me into an office." The fact of the doctor advising "in most urgent terms" suggests her having to be persuaded, and her having to be persuaded suggests that it was no easy task. The illness seems to have been minor, an excuse to which his mother surrendered. The fact that she gave in to the will of her son is hardly surprising in that she had been witness to her husband's beatings of the boy without being strong enough to step in, he was twice her age and a man of authority, and she had lost four children. Hitler is the survivor, nothing is too good for him.

> *The goal for which I had so long silently yearned, for which I had always fought, had through this event suddenly become reality almost of its own accord.*
>
> *Concerned over my illness, my mother finally consented to take me out of the* Realschule *and let me attend the Academy.*

When Germany entered Austria in 1938, Hitler ordered the Gestapo to remove all documents relating to himself and his family from the public archives. Seemingly he wished to wipe away all traces of his past. Nevertheless, a wealth of material concerning his life during those years still remains, and hardly a single person who entered his sphere has not been interviewed. The past resists control, it lives on in memory, in recollections and stories, rumor, letters, diaries – and whereas normally such things might never be brought together but remain solely with each individual, spread out in the way fate and destiny spread out the people of any generation, the progress of a single individual may cause them to converge and condense, as in the case of Adolf Hitler. *Mein Kampf* is by no means an unambiguously credible source, but in giving us a picture of Hitler as he saw himself in 1924 it nevertheless tells us a lot. He describes his childhood the way he wanted it to be, though with elements of his childhood the way it was, intact, in the sense that some key characters and events are included, albeit not all and not necessarily the most significant. The five years that pass between the deaths of first his father, then his mother, are treated in nineteen lines, the two years he lived in Linz with his mother and sister without attending school are dealt with in a single sentence: "These were the happiest days of my life and seemed to me almost a dream; and a mere dream it was to remain. Two years later, the death of my mother put a sudden end to all my high-flown plans."

These two happy, though in *Mein Kampf* silent, years are dealt with in Kubizek's book. It is the single most important source as to Hitler's life between the ages of sixteen and twenty, and provides at the same time the best documentary insight into Hitler's personality, Kubizek being the only real friend he had in his life.

As in the case of other accounts provided by contemporaries of Hitler, Kubizek's motives and the reliability of the picture he draws must be scrupulously assessed. This indeed has been the case with Kubizek's book. Having pointed out some minor errors, Brigitte Hamann concludes: "Yet altogether, Kubizek is reliable. His book is a rich and unique source for Hitler's early years, not even counting the letters and postcards by young Hitler that it includes."

Ian Kershaw, author of Hitler's two-volume biography, *Hubris* and *Nemesis*, is more critical, stating:

> *Kubizek's postwar memoirs need to be treated with care, both in factual detail and in interpretation. They are a lengthened and embellished version of recollections he had originally been commissioned by the Nazi Party to compile. Even retrospectively, the admiration in which Kubizek continued to hold his former friend colored his judgment. But more than that, Kubizek plainly invented a great deal, built some passages around Hitler's own account in* Mein Kampf, *and deployed some near plagiarism to amplify his own limited memory. However, for all their weaknesses, his recollections have been shown to be a more*

> *credible source on Hitler's youth than was once thought, in particular where they touch on experiences related to Kubizek's own interests in music and theater. There can be no doubt that, whatever their deficiencies, they do contain important reflections of the young Hitler's personality, showing features in embryo which were to be all too prominent in later years.*

The reasoning here is typical of Kershaw's work, which is marred by his describing everything, and I mean everything, about Hitler extremely negatively, even such aspects as relate to his childhood and youth, as if his whole life were tainted by what he would become and do some twenty years later, as if in some way he were evil incarnate, or as if evil were some core inside him, immutable and irremediable, and thereby an explanation of why things turned out the way they did. Such an understanding of Hitler is immature, and makes Kershaw's books, renowned as the definitive Hitler biography, almost unreadable. Is it possible for everything a person does, even when that person is sixteen years old, to be appalling and bad? Kershaw's descriptions of Hitler's youth are invariably thickly strewn with negatives. He writes of the father's aversion to his son's "indolent and purposeless existence," he writes that "Alois had worked his way up through industry, diligence and effort from humble origins to a position of dignity and respect in the state service," whereas his son "from a more privileged background saw fit to do no more than dawdle away his time drawing and dreaming." Given the evidence to suggest the father would beat the daylights out of his son and was in every sense a domestic tyrant, casting the father as the hero and the son as the villain in this way appears severe indeed.

The transformation in Hitler's character that would seem to have occurred in his adolescence is described by Kershaw in the following manner: "The happy, playful youngster of the primary school days had grown into an idle, resentful, rebellious, sullen, stubborn, and purposeless teenager." Of the time between Hitler leaving school at sixteen and his mother's death when he was eighteen he writes, "In these two years, Adolf lived a life of parasitic idleness – funded, provided for, looked after, and cosseted by a doting mother."

> *He spent his time during the days drawing, painting, reading, or writing "poetry"; the evenings were for going to the theater or opera; and the whole time he daydreamed or fantasized about his future as a great artist. He stayed up late into the night and slept long into the mornings. He had no clear aim in view. The indolent lifestyle, the grandiosity of fantasy, the lack of discipline for systematic work – all features of the later Hitler – can be seen in these two years in Linz.*

How great the disdain in the inverted commas dashed around "poetry"! And how conservative the negative inflection concerning his staying up late and sleeping into the mornings! How often he states that the boy was "indolent" or "lazy," that his existence was "purposeless" or "parasitic," and how negatively charged the words "daydream," "fantasize," "dream"! Together with the idea of drawing being a "dawdling away" of one's time, all this is the very expression of the mind-set and attitudes that Hitler's life at that time would seem to be protesting against. If we substitute "Hitler" with "Rilke," for instance, and imagine someone writing of the young Rilke that he was indolent, lazy, and parasitic, with no aptitude for systematic work, that he stayed up late and lay in bed in the mornings when he was sixteen; if one read such a damning rant in a biography of Rilke, one would be left perplexed at the author's outlook on life and art. Kershaw views everything even verging on art negatively, art being construed as the opposite of actual work. Of course, it might be objected that Hitler was no true artist, and that such damnation thereby is justified, but when a boy is sixteen years old no one can possibly know what he will become or not become, and it is by no means a given that artistic talent was what primarily distinguished Hitler and Rilke when they were sixteen.

Kubizek's picture of Hitler is drawn from within this reality, of which Kershaw is so disdainful, and it is a picture of a young man fired with enthusiasm for life. Hitler lives for the opera, for the theater, for music, for poetry, for painting, for architecture. He writes poetry, he draws, he paints watercolors, he draws and designs buildings as he sees and imagines them. Instead of wondering about where such vigorous interests could come from and what they might express, as striking and conspicuous as they are in the young Hitler's life, such a powerful presence in his first twenty-five years, Kershaw sees them as an expression of Hitler's personal, and thereby base, character. But he is sixteen years old, his poetry is bound to be poor, the buildings he draws in detail cannot possibly match the work of a trained architect, obviously he is a dilettante, but what sixteen-year-old is not?

Kubizek's description of his friendship with Hitler, and of the time and milieu in which that friendship occurred, where music, art, and literature provide the very fulcrum of youth, is reminiscent of the picture Stefan Zweig gives of his formative years in Vienna in his memoir *The World of Yesterday.* Zweig was ten years older than Hitler, and what he writes about Austria in the years prior to the outbreak of World War I, that it was a period characterized by stability and liberal idealism, a "Golden Age of Security," as he calls it, must also have been true of life in Linz in 1905–6.

Zweig's description of his youth in Vienna emphasizes how obsessed he and his friends were with everything to do with culture. They line up outside the theaters for every opening night, the poems of Rilke are stuck between the covers of their Latin grammars at school, they sneak-read Nietzsche and Strindberg under their desks, they keep up with literary criticism and follow all the discussions, and if one of them should spot Gustav Mahler on the street one evening, the event would be proudly reported at school the very next morning.

> *A première of Gerhart Hauptmann's in the Burgtheater had our entire class on edge for weeks before the rehearsals began. We slipped in to the actors and understudies to be the first – before the others! – to know the plot and learn about the cast. We had (I do not hesitate to report upon absurdities) our hair cut by the barber of the Burgtheater, so that we could gather secret information about Wolter or Sonnenthal, and a pupil in one of the lower classes was particularly spoiled by us older boys and bribed with all sorts of attentions, merely because he was the nephew of one of the lighting inspectors at the Opera, and through him we were sometimes smuggled on to the stage during rehearsals – the shock of treading on that stage exceeded that of Virgil when he mounted into the holy*

> *circles of Paradise. The radiant power of fame was so strong for us that even if it were seven times removed from us, it still forced us to respect it; a certain poor little old woman seemed like an immortal being to us because she was a grand-niece of Franz Schubert, and on the street we gazed respectfully at Josef Kainz's valet because he had the good fortune to be close to the most beloved and most genial of all actors.*

Stefan Zweig was a Jew born into Vienna's upper bourgeoisie. He wrote his memoirs under the shadow of the brutal and destructive regime of Nazism before committing suicide "in despair at the fall of European culture," as it says on the cover of the Norwegian edition of *The World of Yesterday.* Few have provided a better or more fascinating picture of the lost reality of prewar Europe than Zweig in that book. This is the golden age of the middle class, a time of wealth, continuity, caution, harmony, and security, so staidly sedate that the ideal to which its youth aspires is middle age; he writes that anyone wishing to get along in life was compelled to conceal his youth in every conceivable way. Young men of twenty-four and twenty-five grew impressive beards and acquired paunches, strolled leisurely in long frock coats, and wore glasses even if their vision was perfect.

Thomas Mann's first novel, *Buddenbrooks*, published in 1901, provides the same double exposure as Zweig's memoir: on the one hand the staidness of commercial prosperity and an unfluctuating bourgeois existence, on the other the children of this bourgeoisie and their fascination with art and the culture of the great emotions, who in Mann's universe invariably have something fragile and almost destructive about them. Citizen and artist, these are the two figures both Mann and Zweig hold up for scrutiny. Mann's Munich and Zweig's Vienna were among the great centers of European culture at the twentieth century's beginning, but although Hitler was to live in both cities, at the same time as Zweig in Vienna and Mann in Munich, he was separated from the culture of which the two were a part by what amounted to an abyss. Hitler's Vienna was a slum, Hitler's Munich not much better. Yet despite the great social divide between them, Hitler still frequented the same world; during his time in Vienna he attended Gustav Mahler's stagings of Wagner's operas, which he admired greatly, and on his arrival in the city he carried with him a letter of recommendation to the famous Alfred Roller, not only a professor at the academy of arts, but also Mahler's collaborator and scenographer, a person Zweig and his friends would have turned their heads to look at on the street. This recommendation had come about through the owner of the Hitler family's apartment in Linz, a woman who had taken a liking to the young Adolf; she knew Roller's brother and wrote the following about him to a female friend in Vienna, quoted in *Hitler's Vienna*:

> *The son of one of my tenants is becoming a painter, has gone to school in Vienna since the fall, he wanted to attend the Austro-Hungarian Academy of Visual Arts, but was not accepted and went to a private institution instead (Panholzer I believe). He is a serious, ambitious young man, nineteen years old, more mature and settled than his age indicates, nice and sensible, from a perfectly decent family. His mother died before Christmas, suffered from breast cancer, was only forty-six years old, the widow of a higher-up official at the local main customs office; I liked the woman very much, she lived next to me on the first floor; her sister and her daughter, who is in high school, are keeping the apartment for the time being. The family's name is Hitler; the son, in whose behalf I'm asking your help, is called Adolf Hitler. We happened to talk about art and artists the other day, and among others, he mentioned that Professor Roller is a famous man among artists, not only in Vienna, but one could even say he has world renown, and that he reveres him in his works. Hitler had no idea that I am familiar with the name Roller, and when I told him that I used to know a brother of the famous Roller and asked him if it might be helpful to him in his endeavors if he received a recommendation to the director of the Court Opera's Scenery Department, the young man's eyes started glowing; he flushed crimson and said he would consider it the best luck he ever had if he could meet that man and got a recommendation to him! I would love to help the young man; he simply has no one who could put in a good word for him or help him by word and deed; he arrived in Vienna a complete stranger and alone, and had to go everywhere alone, without anyone giving him direction, to*

> *find entrance. He has the firm intention of learning something solid! So far as I have got to know him, he won't "operate in a low gear," since he is focusing on a serious goal; I hope you won't waste your good offices on someone unworthy!*

Roller replied by return of post in a three-page letter, writing among other things, "Do tell young Hitler to call on me and to bring some of his works so I can see how he is doing. I surely will advise him as best I can. He can meet me every day in my office at the Opera, entrance Kärntherstrasse, Principal Offices staircase, at 12:30 and at 6:30 p.m."

But Hitler never appeared. Later he would say that his courage had failed him. He had gone to the Opera some days after arriving in Vienna, but had not found it in him to go in and had turned around instead. After much deliberation with himself he conquered his fear and went back, only with the same result, he was too scared. On a third occasion he had been standing outside Roller's office when someone asked him his business and he had muttered an apology and fled. After that he destroyed the letter of recommendation and never returned. At this point he had been turned down by the Academy, so there was much at stake for him; an introduction to Roller would clearly have been invaluable to a provincial teenager wanting to become a painter. If nothing else Roller could have cast an eye over Hitler's sketches and pictures and told him what aspects of his work he should try to develop, what was good about them and what was lacking, thereby equipping him better in case he should try again for admission to the Academy. Hitler's problem was that he was self-taught and had little if any contact with other artists or artistic communities. This meant he was most likely unaware of what was required, unaware of what was important, and to anyone wanting to get into one of the major institutions, such ignorance would be fatal; these places were the very seat of the cultural establishment

But still he lacked the courage. Why? One reason is shyness, and Roller was a man he admired greatly, he had seen two of Mahler's Wagner operas to which Roller had contributed, *Tristan* and *The Flying Dutchman*, to speak to him must have been to speak to a god; another likely reason is that he feared rejection. The artist identity was so important to him, he had gone through so much in order to keep it alive, defying his father's will, then his mother's, and, after they were dead, the forceful wishes of his remaining family and his guardian. Everyone expected him to get a normal job, to grow up, earn his own money, start a family. Shortly before leaving home for Vienna he was offered a job at the local post office by a relative. He turned it down, presumably not without contempt, for according to Kubizek there was always contempt in his voice when he spoke of "bread-and-butter" jobs. Art was Hitler's opposition to civil life, and so strong was the dream of art inside him that he found himself unable to run the risk of Roller deeming him without talent and advising him to go back to Linz and get himself a job like anyone else. He could not risk having to face such a fate, even if it were to become reality. Better then to live on with the dream.

A typical trait of Hitler's, revealing itself on many occasions described by Kubizek, seems to be that he lives a vital inner life, intensely nourished by fantasies he goes to great lengths to preserve from any confrontation with reality. Perhaps the most typical example of this is his four-year infatuation with Stefanie, a young Linz girl who catches his eye on a number of occasions on the Landstrasse in the center of the city, where Linzers would stroll in the afternoons and evenings, to see and be seen, to stop and chat with friends and acquaintances, to look in the shop windows, enjoying provincial life as it was lived at the time. One evening in 1905 when Kubizek and Hitler are out taking their usual stroll, Kubizek writes, Hitler suddenly grips his arm excitedly and asks him what he thinks of the slim blond girl walking arm-in-arm with her mother along the boulevard.

I am in love with her, Hitler says.

It transpires that he has never spoken to her. The evening strolls along the Landstrasse were occasions for flirting, for glances and smiles, yet the formalities were strict; if he wanted to speak to her he would first have to be introduced, a matter that lay beyond his reach, as Kubizek explains. Hitler asks him what he should do, Kubizek tells him he should approach the mother, introduce himself and ask her permission to address the daughter and escort them.

> *Adolf looked at me doubtfully and pondered my suggestion for quite a while. In the end, however, he rejected it. "What am I to say if the mother wants to know my profession? After all, I have to mention my profession straight away; it would be best to add it to my name – 'Adolf Hitler, academic painter' or something similar. But I am not yet an academic painter, and I can't introduce myself until I am. For the mama, the profession is even more important than the name."*

Hitler never takes that step, never approaches the mother to introduce himself, consequently he does not exchange a single world with the girl during the four years that ensue, a time in which according to Kubizek she is Hitler's great love. He makes do with looking at her from afar. Now and then their eyes meet, now and then he receives a smile, making him certain that her feelings for him are just as great as his own for her. He plans out a future down to the smallest detail; he even draws up plans for the house in which they will live; for a time he is utterly absorbed in the project. He writes poems about her, "Hymn to the Beloved" is the title of one, according to Kubizek's account. Stefanie is a near-dreamlike, perfect, and utterly idealized woman, perhaps best related to Wagner's mythological heroines, and when the real world, so compelling that it cannot be denied forever, intervenes, Hitler's reaction is one of anger. He has asked Kubizek to investigate her background, and Kubizek has spoken with an acquaintance who is a friend of her brother's. Her family is of the upper middle class, he finds out, and she lives with her mother, a widow, and likes to dance; the previous winter she had attended all the important dances in the town along with her mother. As far as Kubizek's acquaintance knew, she was not engaged. Hitler is highly satisfied with the report, apart from one thing, the fact that she dances. The thought does not accord at all with his image of her, nor with the life he leads himself.

Kubizek describes Hitler as an exceptionally serious person, dedicated to his interests, which at the time are mostly art and architecture. He doesn't drink, doesn't smoke, has no interest in sports, no interest in provincial social life. Dance is completely alien to him. The fact of her dancing, and thereby belonging to that life, troubles him intensely.

> *After having been his butt for so long, at last I had a chance of pulling his leg. I proclaimed with a straight face, "You must take dancing lessons, Adolf." Dancing immediately became one of his problems. I well remember that our lonely perambulations were no longer punctuated by discussions on "the theater" or "reconstruction of the bridge over the Danube" but were dominated by one subject – dancing.*
>
> *As with everything that he couldn't tackle at once, he indulged in generalizations. "Visualize a crowded ballroom," he once said to me, "and imagine that you are deaf. You can't hear the music to which these people are moving, and then take a look at their senseless progress, which leads nowhere. Aren't these people raving mad?"*
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> *"All this is no good, Adolf," I replied. "Stefanie is fond of dancing. If you want to conquer her, you will have to dance around just as aimlessly and idiotically as the others." That was all that was needed to set him off raving. "No, no, never!" he screamed at me. "I shall never dance! Do you understand! Stefanie only dances because she is forced to by society on which she unfortunately depends. Once she is my wife, she won't have the slightest desire to dance!"*
>
> *Contrary to the rule, this time his own words did not convince him; for he brought up the question of dancing again and again. I rather suspected that, secretly at home, he practiced a few cautious steps with his little sister.*

To extract himself from this torment, Hitler came up with the idea of kidnapping Stefanie. This was something he seriously contemplated, Kubizek writes. When for a time she seemed unfriendly and would avert her gaze, passing Hitler on the street as if he did not exist, he began to despair, proclaiming that he would commit suicide, an act as meticulously detailed in his imagination as all his other plans. Sometime later, however, she takes part in a festival parade and tosses him a flower. Kubizek writes that he would never again see Adolf as happy as he was at that moment. "I can still hear his voice, trembling with excitement, 'She loves me! You have seen! She loves me!'" When Hitler moves to Vienna after his mother's death two and a half years later, in February 1908, with the letter of recommendation addressed to Roller, he sends Stefanie a postcard saying that he is to begin at the Academy and that she must wait for him, he intends to ask for her hand as soon as his studies are completed and he returns to Linz. He leaves the card unsigned, and she has no idea who on earth might have sent it to her.

The ambivalence of not putting his name to his words is the same failing as emerges in his inability to act on his introduction to Roller – he lacks the courage to take the final step. The world he dreams about, his future as an artist, his future with Stefanie, exists partly within him and partly without – he seeks her out, he sees her, she exists, the future is possible, in the same way as he sketches and paints and puts his work forward to the Academy with a view to acceptance – yet he is too afraid to actually join these two planes of reality together. What reality does, and brutally so, is to correct. And a prominent trait of the young Hitler's character is precisely an unwillingness to accept correction. It is anathema to him. Even the slightest contradiction incenses him and leaves him indignant.

It is hard not to see his inner strength and its expression as a means of defense. But against what? Seemingly against the social world. Hitler takes no part whatsoever in any social life, he is completely uninterested by it and looks with disdain on his contemporaries as they have fun, drinking and dancing, playing sports and flirting. He has no friends either; Kubizek appears to be the exception, but their friendship is basically monological: Hitler talks, Kubizek listens. Hitler is primary, Kubizek secondary. Kubizek knows this and accepts it since he admires Hitler and feels advantaged by his friendship; moreover, so he writes, he understands that Hitler needs him.

> *Soon I came to understand that our friendship endured largely for the reason that I was a patient listener. But I was not dissatisfied with this passive role, for it made me realize how much my friend needed me. He, too, was completely alone.*

At one point Kubizek has to attend a funeral, his former violin teacher having died, and to his surprise Hitler decides to go with him. Hitler had no association with Kubizek's teacher, so why would he want to go to his funeral? Hitler replies, "I can't bear it that you should mix with other young people and talk to them."

He wants Kubizek for himself, which in a way is touching, revealing vulnerability, yet disturbing too in that he almost wants to own him.

What is it then about Hitler that Kubizek so admires?

Above all, perhaps, it was his standing apart from his contemporaries, to Kubizek's mind radically so. Most had their lives mapped out by the time they were sixteen; Hitler had not, he was "just the opposite" as Kubizek states. "With him everything was uncertain." His shunning of middle-class life appealed to Kubizek, who worked in his father's upholstery workshop and was expected by everyone to eventually take over the family business, whereas what he himself wanted, a wish he hardly dared utter to anyone, was to train as a musician and conductor. When Hitler moved to Vienna, he insisted on Kubizek following, approaching Kubizek's parents himself and managing to convince them to allow his friend to leave.

Hitler, then, represented something Kubizek himself wanted to become. However, they were by no means alike. Kubizek hardly spoke when they were together and had none of his friend's restless energy, though he possessed the patience Hitler lacked. Kubizek practiced and was admitted to the conservatory in Vienna at the age of eighteen, whereas Hitler practiced nothing, had no patience, threw himself into the loftiest projects without ever completing them, and would never gain admittance to Vienna's Academy.

Hitler's most striking trait, acccording to Kubizek, was his holding forth on everything he saw and thought about, usually involving some form of change: a building in one style, he might suggest, ought to be pulled down to make way for another in a different style, Linz needed an underground railway, a pension scheme required an overhaul, a traveling opera had to be set up to bring Wagner to the outlying districts. Seemingly there were no limits to what he might take an interest in and hold an opinion about. Describing this aspect of his friend's personality, Kubizek emphasizes the restlessness of which it was an expression, his need for things to happen, and this gives an impression of Hitler as being in some way menaced, as if there were something he needed to get away from, and since the things that caught his attention in this way were so external, there always being some element of his surroundings with which to take issue, it is easy to think that there was something inside him that he wanted to escape or get rid of. A conspicuous aspect of what is revealed of Hitler's inner life in *Mein Kampf* as well as in Kubizek's memoir is his almost dreamlike remoteness from reality, as if he were turned toward another age, another place, whether rooted in the intense experiences the two friends shared at the opera, which they frequented, in what he would read of German history and mythology, or in what he would relate of his own life, which never was concerned with what it was but what it would become. To this picture belongs the wholly asocial nature of his character, his disinterest in social life, and his strikingly serious demeanor.

> *I have often been asked, and even by Rudolf Hess, who once invited me to visit him in Linz, whether Adolf, when I knew him, had any sense of humor. One feels the lack of it, people of his entourage said. After all, he was an Austrian and should have had his share of the famous Austrian sense of humor. Certainly one's impression of Hitler, especially after a short and superficial acquaintance, was that of a deeply serious man. This enormous seriousness seemed to overshadow everything else. It was the same when he was young. He approached any problem with which he was concerned with a deadly earnestness which ill suited his sixteen or seventeen years. He was capable of loving and admiring, hating and despising, all with the greatest seriousness. But one thing he could not do was pass over something with a smile.*

Kubizek finds the same earnestness in Hitler's mother. When he meets her she is forty-five years old. He writes that she still looked like the only known photograph of her, but that "the suffering was more clearly etched in her face and her hair had started to go gray." He felt sympathy for her, stating that she made him feel like he wanted to do something for her. "Every smile which crossed that serious face gave me joy," he writes. She was disinclined to talk about herself and her worries, yet found relief in confiding to Kubizek her concerns about Adolf and the uncertainty of his future.

> *Her preoccupation with the well-being of her only surviving son depressed her increasingly. Often I sat together with Frau Hitler and Adolf in the tiny kitchen. "Your poor father cannot rest in his grave," she used to say to Adolf, "because you do absolutely nothing that he wanted for you. Obedience is what distinguishes a good son, but you do not know the meaning of the word. That's why you did so badly at school and why you're not getting anywhere now."*

The family lived in a small flat comprising two rooms and a kitchen. Hitler had one room for himself, while his mother, his half sister, and his younger sister shared the other. He never helped out at home, his mother did everything for him, and there is no doubt he was spoiled. At one point he announced that he wanted to learn the piano, his mother bought him one and paid for lessons, all presumably beyond her means. After four months Hitler gave up, enraged by his teacher's insistence on "stupid" finger exercises. Music was about inspiration, not finger exercises, he declared, and laid his ambitions to rest. Placing the blame for his inadequacy on his music teacher was typical of him. He read all he could lay his hands on about Wagner and identified almost entirely with him; the adversity he encountered in his young life was the same as the young Wagner had to battle against. "So you see," he would say after quoting from some letter or essay, "even Wagner went through it just like I have. All the time he had to tackle the ignorance of his surroundings." Kubizek found these comparisons somewhat exaggerated, Wagner having led a long and productive life with plenty of ups and downs, whereas Hitler was only sixteen years old with hardly any experience at all. Nevertheless he spoke "as though he had been the victim of persecution, fought his enemies and been exiled."

There is something of the poseur about this side of Hitler in the sense that it is the role itself that seems to appeal to him, an impression accentuated by his inability to invest the role with the necessary practice and talent, and by the way he dresses, the young dandy in black coat and white shirt, the ivory-handled cane, on occasion even a black top hat, and yet the matter is not as simple, he does not do this to impress or to be seen, since basically he is on his own, and the intensity with which he absorbs himself in the operas they attend, for instance, seems anything but affected or shallow and would seem to saturate his entire being. The same is true of the frenzy he exhibits when devoting himself to his architectural drawings, which often lie scattered about his room. He is impassioned, burns with enthusiasm, is willing to put everything else aside for their sake. Why? Both Hitler and Kubizek believe in the supreme position of art in human life, and in that belief they express a rather typical attitude of the age in which they live, in the provinces shared only by a small handful of young people, certainly, yet highly prevalent in Vienna and the other major cities. From the picture Kubizek paints of Hitler this would seem to be not simply a fad but so much a part of his character as to be imperative. "His intense way of absorbing, scrutinizing, rejecting, his terrific seriousness, his ever-active mind needed a counterpoise," Kubizek writes. "And only art could provide this."

Noticeable in Kubizek's descriptions of Hitler are the elements of mania he exhibits; Hitler talks incessantly, he is quick-tempered and irritable, he harbors grand designs and seems never to doubt that he will see them through to completion, and he can work frenetically on a project for nights on end. On the other hand, and such loftiness always has its counterweight, there are periods where Hitler does not appear to speak at all but withdraws and goes for long walks on his own in the environs of Linz, dejected and dispirited. Art is somewhere outside this, and he seeks it presumably so that something else may fill his soul and that he may express himself in it.

Another obvious reason for art being so important to him as a teenager was that it was the only way he could see of moving beyond the social class from which he came. This becomes apparent in his remote infatuation with Stefanie. Why does he not approach her? He is bashful and clearly lacks the courage. Perhaps he has no will or feels unable to try his fortune, knowing at some level that to make his desires known to her would be for reality to intrude on the dream and that the perfection and ideal of the dream is preferable to inadequate reality. Moreover, there is the fact that he is a nobody. Pressed by Kubizek, this is what he says, that to introduce himself to the mother he needs to be someone, to have a profession, and not just any profession, a postman, for instance, would not impress her, the widow of a high-standing official, but an academic painter would fit the bill admirably.

In a certain sense art is classless insofar as it is available to all; in Linz in the first decade of the twentieth century there were no such things as television, radio, gramophones, or cinemas; music had to be heard live, though it cost little, and these two sixteen-year-olds of the lower middle class frequented the theater and the opera and attended all manner of concerts, absorbing everything, and on their way home they would be fired with enthusiasm, discussing what they had seen and heard; admission to art galleries was cheap too, and then there were books. In another sense art too is a class issue. The fact that it exists and is available does not mean that it is actually accessible to all; anyone growing up in a home without books, without pictures, without music, among people who never speak of art and do not care for it, perhaps even think it to be a waste of time and money, has no easy path in art's direction. And even if they discover that path and venture along it, they will more than likely find themselves lacking the basic means possessed by those belonging to more elevated classes, the self-assurance with which they embrace culture and its expressions. Hitler, who came from a home quite without books and with no interest at all in art, overcame this first hindrance, though would never wholly surmount those that remained. His taste in art, and his understanding of it, was throughout his life always provincial and conservative, even though at the time he lived in the provinces and opposed the petty bourgeois with all his might, his attitudes and ideas must have seemed radical to those in his surroundings.

This radical streak is what Kubizek finds so striking about Hitler when they first meet. They notice each other at the opera and strike up a conversation in the intermission of a late performance, and from then on it was as if Hitler monopolizes him completely. Whenever Kubizek is late for an appointment, Hitler will go at once to fetch him from his father's upholstery workshop;

he has no understanding of the fact that his friend must work, insisting that they stroll through the town together, more often than not with Hitler holding forth.

Kubizek is surprised that Hitler has so much time on his hands, does he not work? Of course not, Hitler snaps back, the very idea of a "bread-and-butter" job is beneath him. Kubizek is rather impressed by this, yet finds it somewhat puzzling. Perhaps this Adolf is a student at a school somewhere? "School?" Hitler snorts back at him in a first outburst of temper. The mere mention of the word incenses him, school is a red rag. He hates it, hates the teachers, hates his classmates.

Kubizek tells him how little success he had at school himself.

Hitler demands to know the reason for this, apparently dissatisfied with his new friend having done poorly. This self-contradiction confuses Kubizek but is something he will soon get used to; self-contradictions are a characteristic of Hitler. In this first instance in the upholstery workshop, however, it seems innocuous enough. Self-contradiction arises when two incompatible utterances collide, and in this case they are easy to identify: Hitler's experiences apply to him alone, they are his, perhaps precious and inalienable in that they define his character, he hates school and the very notion of it, and this makes him what he is, an independent man with no need of what school could possibly give him, no intention of assimilating himself into the society it represents, the petty bourgeois world of Linz, for he is destined for greater things in the wider world. Kubizek sharing that same experience would mean Hitler was no longer unique, and this he cannot tolerate.

However, this simply does not exist for him as an insight, he is completely blind to it; for Kubizek different rules apply, Hitler does not regard him in the same light as he regards himself, but wholly from without, and in that external light not doing well at school looks like failure. Is his new friend a failure? A failure in the eyes of his teachers and the other students? No, he does not care for the thought; Kubizek doing badly at school is not good at all.

What this little scene reveals is the gap between Hitler's inner and outer selves, how distinctly they are separated, and this separation is significant in that the inner self is thereby beyond reach and unamenable to correction. Self-insight is the ability to apply the outer perspective to the inner, it is the presence in the ego of the voice or gaze of the indefinite other, and if that is prevented, then the two will be unconnected, there will be no accommodation within the ego, which then will be left to its own devices, and this abandonment means that interaction with and understanding of others essentially becomes an external phenomenon, occurring outside the I, without empathy, without involvement of the inner self, which is empathy's first and to all intents and purposes only condition.

Hitler was by no means wholly unable to empathize with others, but his empathy was weak; everything Kubizek writes suggests it. He was ruled by emotions, almost in their thrall, they could overpower him, overcome him completely; this too is in the pattern of the abandoned ego. His asocial nature too. And not only was he asocial, he avoided moreover all points of potential confrontation between his inner and outer selves, as the examples of Stefanie and Roller show. Nor would he tolerate any kind of dissent from Kubizek or his mother. On the other hand, he was only sixteen years old, at a stage of his development when a person is perhaps the most challenging of life, hurtling on, and in turmoil.

Later Hitler would refer to the two years in Linz as the happiest of his life. Just as Kubizek was a frequent visitor in his home, Hitler spent much time in Kubizek's. Kubizek's mother was fond of him, he was polite and well brought up, Kubizek's father being rather more skeptical, he had hoped his son might find a more stable and dependable friend, sensing perhaps the direction in which he was going, the lure of the upholstery business pale compared to the world of music that now seemed to open itself to him even more.

On weekends, Hitler and Kubizek enjoyed going for long walks together into the countryside, often meeting up with Kubizek's parents, who would take the train to some appointed place and treat them to a meal at a local inn. Hitler was fond of them and attentive to their well-being; as late as 1944 he would send Kubizek's mother a present on her eightieth birthday.

The provincial prewar life Kubizek describes seems quite as sleepy and secure as Zweig's descriptions of his young days in Vienna ten years earlier. Evening strolls along the boulevard, Schiller at the theater, and Wagner at the opera, bandstand concerts, long walks and outings in the surrounding countryside. There are no cars, no planes, hardly any engines of any kind, no telephones, no radio or television, barely an electric light. They are, however, anything but wealthy; Kubizek's father toils to keep his tiny business running, Hitler's mother scrimps and saves to make her widow's pension last. Poverty is no abstract concept, something that only applies to others: Hitler's mother came from the humblest of circumstances in one of Austria's poorest regions, one of twelve children. The young Hitler's contempt for the petty bourgeoisie must have grown out of a strong though probably unarticulated class consciousness; he came from quite a different background to the vast majority of his classmates in the *Realschule*, it took him an hour to get there in the mornings and there was something rural and unsophisticated about him, and when later he moves to Linz with his mother, he refuses even to talk to them – Kubizek mentions an episode when Hitler is approached by a former schoolmate who asks him sincerely how he is doing, Hitler instantly flies into a rage and tells him it's none of his business – but his sense of being better than them, these representatives of the provincial bourgeoisie, who complete their schooling and take on normal work, must find articulation in some way, and this is a problem: how to rise above something basically unfamiliar to him, how to abandon and leave behind a level for which he has never really qualified himself? He dresses like a student or a young artist and insists he will never take on ordinary work as long as he lives, he is certain of it. He despises middle-classness and yet is its captive.

> *Adolf set great store by good manners and correct behavior. He observed with painstaking punctiliousness the rules of social conduct, however little he thought of society itself . . . It is most revealing that the young Hitler, who so thoroughly despised bourgeois society, nevertheless, as far as his love affair was concerned, observed its codes and etiquette more strictly than many a member of the*

> *bourgeoisie itself . . . It was apparent in his neat dress, and in his correct behavior, as much as in his natural courtesy, which my mother liked so much about him. I have never heard him use an ambiguous expression or tell a doubtful story.*

The young Hitler is acutely aware of the importance of dress and behavior in assessing a person, and while he couldn't care less about the bouorgeoisie, in actual fact he has no choice, being wholly without qualifications: if he dressed like an ill-bred peasant or an ignorant son of the lower middle class, there would be nothing separating them, he would be exactly that in the eye of the beholder, and with justification, so if he is to elevate himself to the status he believes he deserves, he has no other means than correctness, which, with a little dash of effort, can be embellished with the panache and flair of the dandy, the young artist.

The Young Hitler I Knew was published more than forty years after the events it portrays. As Ian Kershaw points out, no one can remember exactly what was said in a given situation decades later, the way Kubizek pretends when quoting both Hitler and Hitler's mother. But memoirs are no exact science, readers understand this and know from their own lives how later events twist and turn what happened at some earlier time, adding new shades, illuminating from new angles according to where we are in life. We need to be alert whenever events shape themselves into narratives, for narratives belong to literature and not to life, and occurrences of the past seep into and absorb expectations of the future, for the true present stands open and knows as yet no consequence. So when Kubizek allows the story of Hitler's infatuation with Stefanie to coincide with the death of his mother, in a scene where the funeral cortège passes Stefanie's house and she at that very moment opens the window and leans out to see what is going on, we should have every reason to doubt that this was how it actually happened. And when Kubizek describes how deeply affected Hitler was by a performance of Wagner's opera *Rienzi*, about a Roman demagogue –

> *Adolf stood in front of me and now he gripped both my hands and held them tight. He had never made such a gesture before. I felt from the grasp of his hands how deeply moved he was. His eyes were feverish with excitement. The words did not come smoothly from his mouth as they usually did, but rather erupted, hoarse and raucous. From his voice I could tell even more how much this experience had shaken him.*
>
> *Gradually his speech loosened and the words flowed more freely. Never before and never again have I heard Adolf Hitler speak as he did in that hour, as we stood there alone under the stars, as though we were the only creatures in the world.*

– there is no doubt that they saw the opera and that it made an impression on them both, but the definitive and fateful aspect the description lends to the moment, the sense that Hitler gazed into the future and found his destiny is obviously constructed after the event, as Kershaw points out. Much of what Kubizek writes about Hitler is in this way colored by what was to happen, which does not mean to say that what he writes did not take place, only that those events were not accorded any such weight at the time, were not in any way inclined toward fortunes at which neither could as much as hazard a guess. But the advantage of Kubizek's memoir is that the period with which it deals is sufficiently short, and the events sufficiently small and quotidian, as to hinder the construction and development of any larger narrative, at the same time as the temporal constraint, the fact of Kubizek never having met Hitler until he was sixteen years old, and not meeting him again until almost thirty years later, frames the events portrayed and renders them clear. Hitler's presence was a unique and brief occurrence in Kubizek's life, and Hitler himself was such a curious character as to make it likely indeed that Kubizek should remember him well. In his recollection Hitler is an unusually ambivalent figure, his memoir is certainly no hagiography, and the traits he describes of his friend's character are fully in accordance with what emerges from other sources, only clearer, because no one before or since came as close to him as Kubizek did. The fact that Kubizek values Hitler greatly and sees him as if through a veil of admiration, does little to detract from what is a many-sided and nuanced portrait. The following description is typical:

> *But although he was often brusque, moody, unreliable, and far from conciliatory, I could never be angry with him because these unpleasant sides of his character were overshadowed by the pure fire of an exalted soul.*

Hitler vanished from Kubizek's life in the summer of 1908, and he neither saw him nor heard anything of him until 1933 when Hitler became Reich chancellor and Kubizek sent him a letter, a reply to which arrived some months later.

> *My Dear Kubizek,*
>
> *Only today was your letter of 2 February placed before me. From the hundreds of thousands of letters I have received since January it is not surprising. All the greater was my joy, for the first time in so many years, to hear news of your life and to receive your address. I would very much like – when the time of my hardest struggles is over – to revive personally the memory of those most wonderful years of my life. Perhaps it would be possible for you to visit me. Wishing yourself and your mother all the best, I remain in the memory of our old friendship,*
>
> *Yours,*
> *Adolf Hitler*

In 1938, during the so-called Anschluss, Hitler crosses the border of Austria at the town of his birth, Braunau on the Inn, thereby fulfilling the ambition he had set out at the beginning of *Mein Kampf*. This attention to the power of the symbolic was typical of him. That same evening he spoke from the balcony of the city hall in Linz. Kubizek was unable to attend, but when Hitler returned in April that same year Kubizek visited him at the Hotel Weinzinger. There was a huge crowd on the square outside, the guards took him for a madman when he asked to see the Reich chancellor, but after showing them the letter he was led into the foyer, where, he writes, the activity was like a beehive. Generals, ministers of state, Nazi Party bosses, and other uniformed officials came and went, all buzzing around one man, Adolf Hitler, now separated from Kubizek by a wall of power. He is told by a senior adjutant by the name of Albert Bormann that the Reich chancellor is feeling unwell and will not be receiving guests that evening, but that he should come back the following afternoon. The adjutant then invites him to take a seat for a moment so that he might ask him a few questions.

Had the Reich chancellor always slept in so late, he wishes to know. Hitler it seems never goes to bed before midnight and sleeps until well into the morning, while his entourage, who presumably have been required to stay up just as late, are obliged to be up bright and early the next day. The adjutant, brother of the more familiar Martin Bormann, goes on to complain about Hitler's outbursts of temper, which nobody could calm, and about his peculiar diet, vegetarian based on flour and plenty of fruit juices. Has he always been like that? Kubizek replies that indeed he has, except that he used to eat meat.

When he returns the next day the excitement and activity is unabated, the whole city has taken to the streets, he writes. He fights his way through the crowd and is led into the hotel foyer by some officials. He holds no illusions, expects nothing more than a brief handshake and a few warm words, and is nervous as to the form of address to use, fearing that any breach of protocol will send Hitler into a rage. But he is given an hour. Hitler appears in the corridor, recognizes him immediately, and cries out with joy, "It's you, Gustl!" and when he grasps Kubizek's hand with both of his and looks into his eyes, he is quite clearly as moved by the occasion as Kubizek himself. Hitler leads him to the elevator, which takes them up to his suite on the second floor.

> *The personal adjutant opened the door; we entered and the adjutant left. Again, Hitler took my hand, gave me a long look and said, "You haven't changed, Kubizek. I would have recognized you anywhere. The only thing different is that you've got older." Then he led me to a table and offered me a chair. He assured*

> *me how much pleasure it gave him to see me again after so many years. My good wishes had pleased him especially, for I knew better than anybody else how difficult his path had been. The present time was unfavorable for a long talk, but he hoped that there would be an opportunity in the future. He would contact me. To write to him directly was not advisable, for all his mail was dealt with by his aides.*
>
> *"I no longer have a private life and cannot do what I like as others can." With these words he rose and went to the window, which overlooked the Danube. The old bridge with its steel bars, which had so annoyed him in his youth, remained in use. As I expected, he mentioned it at once. "That ugly footbridge!" he cried. "It's still there. But not for much longer, I assure you, Kubizek." With that he turned and smiled. "All the same, I would love to take a stroll with you over the old bridge. But I can't, for wherever I go, everybody follows me. But believe me, Kubizek, for Linz I have many plans." Nobody knew that better than I. As expected, he drew forth from his memory all the plans which had occupied him in his youth just as though not thirty, but no more than three, years had passed since then.*

After describing his plans for Linz in detail, Hitler questions Kubizek about his life, what he has become. The reply, *Stadtamtsleiter*, displeases him: "So, you are a civil servant, a clerk. That doesn't suit you. What did you make of your musical talents?" Kubizek tells him the war had thrown him off course and that in order not to starve he had to change horses. Hitler nods gravely. "Yes, the lost war." He looks at him, and adds, "You won't be ending your career as a municipal clerk, Kubizek." He asks him about the orchestra he runs, and enthuses, instructing him to make out a report detailing anything they might be short of and he will make sure they get what they need. He asks if he has any children. Kubizek tells him yes, three sons.

> *"Three sons!" he cried emotionally. He repeated the words several times and with an earnest expression. "You have three sons, Kubizek. I have no family. I am alone. But I would like to help with your sons." He made me tell him everything*

> *about them. He was delighted that all three were talented musically and two of them were skilled sketch artists.*
>
> *"I will sponsor the education of your three sons, Kubizek," he told me. "I don't like it when young, gifted people are forced to go along the same track that we did. You know how it was for us in Vienna. After that, for me, came the worst times of all, after our paths had separated. That young talent goes under because of need must not be allowed to happen. If I can help personally, I will, even if it's for your children, Kubizek!"*
>
> *I have to mention here that the Reich chancellor actually did have his office foot the bill for the musical education of my three sons at the Linz Bruckner-Conservatoire and on his orders the sketches of my son Rudolf were assessed by a professor at the Munich Academy.*

Later they meet again, Hitler inviting him to the Wagner festival in Bayreuth in 1939 and 1940. The question is how reliable are the descriptions of these meetings and the picture of Hitler they provide? No one else was there, we have no other account to go by than Kubizek's own. One thing though is certain, the portrayal of Hitler is by no means opportunistic. Had Kubizek's book come out while the Nazis were still in power, in 1938 or 1942, for instance, the picture would have been different, there would have been grounds for suspicion, since any suggestion of anything negative or ambivalent in the portrait it paints of Hitler would have been impossible or at least highly precarious. But the book was published in 1953, and at that time the opposite held: the opportune thing to do then would have been to demonize Hitler, emphasize his negative aspects, whereas writing about his kindness, for instance, might be seen as an expression of Nazi sympathies, something not many people would wish to admit to after the war.

Kubizek was contacted by the Nazi Party in 1938 and asked to put his recollections of Hitler's youth on paper for the NSDAP archive. He joined the party in 1942, was to all intents and purposes ordered to write his memoirs by Martin Bormann, and in 1943 was given a better-paid position in order to complete the task. When the war ended, however, he had managed to write only some one hundred and fifty pages. He was arrested by the Americans because of his connections with Hitler and was interned for sixteen months under repeated interrogation. His manuscript and memorabilia remained hidden in his house, forming the basis of the book he eventually published in 1953, but the differences between the manuscript and the published work are nevertheless notable, Hamann writes. All passages expressing admiration for the Führer had been deleted, those describing their lives together in Linz and Vienna were retained. Some of the stories, such as Hitler's infatuation with Stefanie, have been expanded and reworked, many dates are incorrect, and in some places his memory fails him – for instance at one point he writes that their landlady in Vienna was Polish, whereas in actual fact she was Czech, and that they lodged at number 29 rather than number 31 – but otherwise everything that can be checked is correct. An exception is a number of episodes purporting to reveal Hitler's anti-Semitism, yet there would seem to be no evidence to support the suggestion that Hitler was an anti-Semite in his youth; on the contrary, his acquaintances in Vienna included several Jews and he expressed interest in Jewish culture. Mahler, whom he admired, was Jewish. The anti-Semitic episodes in Kubizek's book do not exist in the original manuscript, but were added in its later version. Hamann writes:

> *Here Kubizek is clearly trying to promote himself. The Americans had questioned him exhaustively about his anti-Semitism, and now he is forced to maintain his line of defense. Thus he claims that Hitler had joined the Anti-Semitic League, filling out an appliction for him, Kubizek, as well, without his permission: "This was the high point of the kind of political violation which I had gradually got used to with him. I was all the more surprised since otherwise Adolf eagerly avoided joining any associations or organizations."*
>
> *However, before 1918 there was no Anti-Semitic League in Austro-Hungary. The Austrian anti-Semites were so at odds with one another, politically as well as ethnically, that an organization similar to the German Anti-Semitic League of 1884 never came about. Kubizek could have only joined the Austrian Anti-Semitic League, which was founded in 1919 – and voluntarily at*

> *that, without Hitler's help. This issue is important because of all those early eyewitnesses who can be taken seriously, Kubizek is the only one to portray young Hitler as an anti-Semite, and precisely in this respect he is not trustworthy.*

Another noticeable aspect that separates the two versions is that the first, completed during the Nazi period, is comparatively poorly written, while the second, published eight years after the war was over, is comparatively well written. Kershaw explains this by suggesting the second was ghostwritten, whereas Hamann points to "a skilled editor." Both however agree that the memoirs are the most important source of insight into Hitler's early years. And if it seems contrived that the circle should so neatly be closed with Hitler's return to Linz and his declaration that he will redesign the city according to the plans of his youth, it is nonetheless an incontrovertible fact that Hitler, in his final time in the bunker, with the world aflame above him and the Russians already well inside Berlin, only days before he shot himself, could sit for hours and ponder over a model of Linz built on his instructions by his architect Hermann Giesler and shown to all his visitors no matter the time of day or night. A bell tower one hundred and fifty meters tall with a mausoleum containing his parents' graves at its foot, a gigantic hotel for up to two thousand guests at a time, a music school called the Adolf Hitler School of Music, an opera house that was to be the biggest in the world, seating thirty-five thousand, were the most prominent buildings, according to Bengt Liljegren. Moreover, a technical university was planned, and a huge hundred-thousand capacity arena, housing areas for workers and artists, homes for SS and SA invalids, a railway station connecting to an underground transit system, access to the autobahn, and heavy industry, steelworks and chemical factories besides. The focal point of this new cityscape, in addition to the mausoleum with its bell tower, was to be a giant art museum. So determined was Hitler that his extensive art collection be donated to Linz that he explicitly mentions it in the will he draws up prior to his suicide, Liljegren writes. And throughout Hitler's entire period in power Linz was favored over Vienna. Hamann cites Goebbels's diary entry of May 17, 1941: "Linz costs us a lot of money. But it means so much to the

Führer." This in contrast to Vienna, which during Hitler's years of government is given no priority whatsoever. Goebbels's diaries again, March 21, 1943: "The Führer doesn't have any particularly great plans for Vienna. On the contrary, Vienna has too much, and it might rather lose something than gain anything."

Hitler made it clear to Kubizek almost from the very outset of their friendship that he would live in Vienna. Linz was too small and provincial. To begin with he made a short trip there in May 1907 and enthused at what he saw. Back in Linz after this four-week sojourn in the capital, however, he is impossible to reach, withdrawn and silent, he wanders alone in the daytime and night in the city's environs, presumably in crisis at the prospect of uprooting, though it seems certain that it is his decision to make the move to Vienna that brings him back to normal again a couple of weeks later.

> *The idea that he, a young man of eighteen, should continue to be kept by his mother had become unbearable to him. It was a painful dilemma which, as I could see for myself, made him almost physically ill. On the one hand, he loved his mother above everything: she was the only person on earth to whom he felt really close, and she reciprocated his feeling to some extent, although she was deeply disturbed by her son's unusual nature, however proud she was at times of him. "He is different from us," she used to say.*
>
> *On the other hand, she felt it to be her duty to carry out the wishes of her late husband, and to prevail on Adolf to embark on a safe career. But what was "safe," in view of the peculiar character of her son? He had failed at school and ignored all his mother's wishes and suggestions. A painter – that was what he had said he wanted to become. This could not seem very satisfactory to his mother for, simple soul that she was, anything connected with art and artists appeared to her frivolous and insecure.*

Hitler's brother-in-law, Raubal, wants him to start working like any other young person, and tries to win Hitler's mother over. He finds Hitler spoiled, a manipulator who twists his mother around his little finger and needs to shape up and get a job, learn something decent. "This Pharisee is ruining my home for me," Hitler says of him. Raubal appeals to Frau Klara's reason, stepping into the role of her deceased husband. It is by no means difficult to imagine his arguments: Hitler sleeps late, earns no money, wanders around with his head in the clouds all day, she can't go on paying his way, he'll never learn to look after himself and his family otherwise, it's for his own good, surely you can see? Hitler's guardian, Mayrhofer, wants him to become a baker and has arranged an apprenticeship on his behalf. The other tenants in the building have their opinions too, Kubizek writes; none is in Hitler's favor. His mother despairs. For Hitler's own part, staying is out of the question, he has made up his mind, there is no alternative to Vienna and an artist's career there.

> *He had come to hate the petit-bourgeois world in which he had to live. He could hardly bear to return to that narrow world after lonely hours spent in the open. He was always in a ferment of rage, hard and intractable.*

The feeling of everyone being against him is not new in Hitler's life. But he and his mother are close – despite the pressures of others she can refuse him nothing. She is also ill. In January of that year the family physician, Dr. Bloch, discovers a lump in her breast. She undergoes surgery, and since the family has no health insurance, the bill, somehow settled by Hitler himself, then aged seventeen, must have been a considerable strain on their finances. She was in the hospital for a month; Hitler visited daily. After her release her frail condition meant she was no longer able to cope with the stairs and the family was forced to move. Their new apartment was on the ground floor of a building in the suburbs, owned by the woman who a few months later would write Hitler's letter of recommendation to Roller. Undeterred by the resistance of those closest to him, Hitler uproots to Vienna that same summer in order to become an artist.

Kubizek writes that Hitler came to see him the evening before his departure, asking him to see him off at the station, not wanting his mother to come.

> *I knew how painful it would have been for Adolf to take leave of his mother in front of other people. He disliked nothing more than showing his feelings in public. I promised him to come and help him with his luggage.*
>
> *Next day I took time off and went to the Blütgengasse to collect my friend. Adolf had prepared everything. I took his suitcase, which was rather heavy with books he did not want to leave behind, and hurried away to avoid being present at the farewells. Yet I could not avoid them entirely. His mother was crying and little Paula, whom Adolf had never bothered with much, was sobbing in a heartrending manner. When Adolf caught up with me on the stairs and helped me with the suitcase, I saw that his eyes too were wet.*

Hitler leaves for Vienna to seek admission to the Academy of Fine Arts; confident of his own talents he considers it a formality that he will be given a place. But he is turned down. In view of all the pressures at home, all those who held that his artist dreams were folly and who wished only that he would pull himself together and get himself a proper job, the rejection must have been crushing, and in fact he told no one. Neither Kubizek nor his own mother heard from him in those first weeks, not a word was sent, and a worried Kubizek went to see Frau Klara to find out if her son had been in touch. She offers him a chair and unburdens herself.

> *"If only he had studied properly at the* Realschule *he would almost be ready to matriculate. But he won't listen to anybody." And she added, "He's as pigheaded as his father. Why this crazy journey to Vienna? Instead of holding on to his little legacy, it's just being frittered away. And after that? Nothing will come of his painting. And story writing doesn't earn anything either. And I can't help him – I've got Paula to look after. You know yourself what a sickly child she is but, just the same, she must get a decent education. Adolf doesn't give it a thought, he goes his way, just as if he were alone in the world. I shall not live to see him making an independent position for himself . . ."*
>
> *Frau Klara seemed more careworn than ever. Her face was deeply lined. Her eyes were lifeless, her voice sounded tired and resigned. I had the impression that, now that Adolf was no longer there, she had let herself go, and she looked older*

> *and more ailing than ever. She certainly had concealed her condition from her son to make the parting easier for him.*

Frau Hitler's condition deteriorates while her son is in Vienna: according to Hamann she visited the doctor once again on July 3, and again on September 2. Kubizek is busy; if not working in his father's workshop, he spends all his time practicing, so with Hitler's absence he does not return to visit Frau Klara until later that autumn. When he does he is shocked by what he sees. She is lying in bed, thin and pale, her face worn. Immediately she begins to talk of her son's letters, he seems to be doing well in Vienna. Kubizek asks if she has told Adolf how unwell she is. She has not, she does not wish to burden him, but if her condition fails to improve she will have to send for him. The doctor has advised her to go to the hospital and be admitted. Before leaving, Kubizek makes her promise to write to her son. When he gets home again he tells his parents. His mother immediately offers to help Frau Hitler, but his father thinks it bad manners to impose without being asked.

On October 22 in his office, Hamann writes, the doctor, Eduard Bloch, informs the family – Klara, Adolf, and his younger sister, Paula – that Frau Klara's illness is incurable. The next day Hitler appears at the upholstery workshop. Kubizek describes him as looking terrible. His face is so pale as to be almost transparent. His eyes are dull, his voice hoarse. Without a greeting, without word of what he has been up to in Vienna, and with no question about Stefanie, all he utters is, "Incurable, the doctor says."

> *His eyes blazed, his temper flared up. "Incurable – what do they mean by that?" he screamed. "Not that the malady is incurable, but that the doctors aren't capable of curing it. My mother isn't even old. Forty-seven isn't an age where you give up hope. But as soon as the doctors can't do anything, they call it incurable."*

He says he will stay in Linz and look after his mother and the housekeeping. Kubizek asks him if he can manage, knowing his friend's distaste for the necessary chores others have always carried out on his behalf, how disdainful he is of such monotonous work. Hitler replies that a person can do anything if they have to. For the next month he does exactly that. Not a word does he say about the issues on which he normally holds forth; politics, architecture, art, none of these things seems to occupy him any longer, only his ailing mother, close to death, and the grief of that. He moves her bed into the kitchen, the warmest room in the apartment, and sleeps on the couch next to her. He reads to her, cooks her food, helps his younger sister with her homework. One day Kubizek finds him scrubbing the floor, Frau Hitler smiles on seeing his surprise and says with pride, "There, you see, Adolf can do anything."

> *I had never before seen in him such loving tenderness. I did not trust my own eyes and ears. Not a cross word, not an impatient remark, no violent insistence on having his own way. He forgot himself entirely in those weeks and lived only for his mother. Although Adolf, according to Frau Klara, had inherited many of his father's traits, I realized then how much his nature resembled his mother's. Certainly this was partly due to the fact that he had spent the previous four years of his life alone with her. But over and above that there was a peculiar spiritual harmony between mother and son which I have never since come across. All that separated them was pushed into the background. Adolf never mentioned the disappointment which he had suffered in Vienna. For the time being, cares for the future no longer seemed to exist. An atmosphere of relaxed, almost serene contentment surrounded the dying woman.*

December is cold and bleak, a damp mist hangs over the river; the few hours in which the sun shines allow no warmth. Kubizek visits them daily; on one occasion he is not admitted, Hitler comes out instead and tells him his mother is suffering terrible pain. Snow falls, dusting the rooftops white, Christmas approaches. On the morning of the twenty-first of December, Hitler appears at the Kubizek home. From his distraught expression they realize what has happened. She has died, he tells them. Her final wish was to be buried next to her husband in Leonding. Hitler is beside himself and barely able to speak.

Kubizek writes nothing of the doctor's presence during the final weeks of Klara Hitler's life, yet according to Hamann he was there in daily attendance from November 6. He administered morphine and treated her with iodoform, a treatment "typical of the time and extremely painful" – cloths containing the substance were laid on the open wound to "burn it out," resulting in excruciating thirst and the simultaneous inability of the patient to swallow.

In 1941, Bloch published an article in *Collier's* magazine detailing the course of the illness and the circumstances surrounding it, in which he stated that Hitler was tormented by his mother's treatment and expressed gratitude to him for administering the morphine. Bloch's version confirms Kubizek's account.

> *In the practice of my profession it is natural that I should have witnessed many scenes such as this one, yet none of them left me with quite the same impression. In all my career I have never seen anyone so prostrate with grief as Adolf Hitler.*

Bloch also briefly described his general impression of Hitler:

> *Many biographers have put him down as harsh-voiced, defiant, untidy; as a young ruffian who personified all that is unattractive. This simply is not true. As a youth he was quiet, well-mannered, and neatly dressed. He was tall, sallow, old for his age. He was neither robust nor sickly. Perhaps "frail-looking" would best describe him. His eyes – inherited from his mother – were large, melancholy, and thoughtful. To a very large extent this boy lived within himself. What dreams he dreamed I do not know.*

On December 23, Kubizek and his mother visit Hitler's home. The weather has changed, the snow in the streets turned to slush, the air a mist. Frau Hitler is laid out in her bed, her face waxen, Kubizek writes that death must have come to her as a release from terrible pain. Paula, who is eleven years old, is crying, but not Hitler. Kubizek and his mother go down into the street. The body is placed in a coffin and brought down into the hall. The priest blesses the deceased and the small cortège begins its progress. Hitler follows the coffin, wearing a long black overcoat and black gloves, carrying a black top hat in his hand. He is stern and composed. To his left is his brother-in-law, Raubal, and between them Paula. His half sister, Angela, heavily pregnant, follows in a closed carriage. The rest of the cortège comprises only a few neighbors and acquaintances. Kubizek describes it as miserable.

The next day is Christmas Eve, Kubizek invites Hitler to spend it with his family, Hitler declines. Nor does he wish to join Raubal and his sister, who from now on are to look after Paula. Instead he wanders about the streets of Linz through the night, if what he later tells Kubizek is true.

Little mention is made of any of this in *Mein Kampf*. Of his mother's death and the circumstances surrounding it, Hitler writes as follows:

> *It was the conclusion of a long and painful illness which from the beginning left little hope of recovery. Yet it was a dreadful blow, particularly for me. I had honored my father, but my mother I had loved.*
>
> *Poverty and hard reality now compelled me to take a quick decision. What little my father had left had been largely exhausted by my mother's grave illness; the orphan's pension to which I was entitled was not enough for me even to live on, and so I was faced with the problem of somehow making my own living.*
>
> *In my hand a suitcase full of clothes and underwear; in my heart an indomitable will, I journeyed to Vienna. I, too, hoped to wrest from Fate what my father had accomplished fifty years before; I, too, wanted to become "something" – but on no account a civil servant.*

The little "but" in the sentence concerning his mother and father, "but my mother I had loved," more than suggests that he did not love his father, and by dwelling so little on his mother's death and immediately directing the text toward the future, and so optimistically, in such a way as to close the circle of what, if *Mein Kampf* is to be believed, has been the predominant and governing conflict in his life so far, his refusal to become a civil servant, he gives the impression that the grief of losing his mother was transient, an impression reinforced by the fact that she is hardly mentioned at all in the text and that the two years they spent together are passed over in a single sentence. This gives a sense of vigor and drive, a new beginning, pockets empty, his own devices being his only resource. In the chapter that follows he goes back in time, writing:

> *When my mother died, Fate, at least in one respect, had made its decisions.*
>
> *In the last months of her sickness, I had gone to Vienna to take the entrance examination for the Academy. I had set out with a pile of drawings, convinced that it would be child's play to pass the examination. At the Realschule I had been by far the best in my class at drawing, and since then my ability had developed amazingly; my own satisfaction caused me to take a joyful pride in hoping for the best.*

He gets through the first part of the exam, but fails the remainder. "I was so convinced that I would be successful that when I received my rejection, it struck me as a bolt from the blue. Yet that is what happened."

This happens before the death of his mother, and since he has already described that event, and the previous chapter concludes with his moving to Vienna, his rejection by the Academy is tacked on to the description of his arrival in Vienna following his mother's death, meaning that the rejection and his mother's death are reported in reverse order and separated. This gives the impression that while his mother's death was a blow it was also a release in that it brought with it a sense of future, though in real life it must have seemed quite different: his mother is gravely ill, he leaves for Vienna to take his entrance exam, fails, his dream thereby in ruins, and with that failure he returns home to his mother, who then dies. In this there is no future, but quite the opposite, his life closes in on him. She was the very center of his existence, and he of hers. His mother's condition deteriorates, he returns from Vienna, they both know she is dying, she is concerned as to his future, and he never tells her he failed the entrance exam to the Academy.

*

The first eighteen years of Hitler's life are described in only fourteen pages of *Mein Kampf*, and the narrative is furthermore dotted with reflections on nationalism, history, and his own theories on a number of subjects. The period in which he lived in Vienna, the five years from 1908 to 1913, takes up all of ninety-eight pages. But there is hardly a sentence that touches on his personal life, and what little he writes in this respect is general in nature.

> *To me Vienna, the city which, to so many, is the epitome of innocent pleasure, a festive playground for merrymakers, represents, I am sorry to say, merely the living memory of the saddest period of my life.*
>
> *Even today this city can arouse in me nothing but the most dismal thoughts. For me the name of this Phaeacian city represents five years of hardship and misery. Five years in which I was forced to earn a living, first as a day laborer, then as a smaller painter; a truly meager living which never sufficed to appease even my daily hunger. Hunger was then my faithful bodyguard; he never left me for a moment and partook of all I had, share and share alike. Every book I acquired aroused his interest; a visit to the Opera prompted his attentions for days at a time; my life was a continuous struggle with this pitiless friend. And yet during this time I studied as never before. Aside from my architecture and my rare visits to the Opera, paid for in hunger, I had but one pleasure: my books.*
>
> *At that time I read enormously and thoroughly. All the free time my work left me was employed in my studies. In this way I forged in a few years' time the foundation of a knowledge from which I still draw nourishment today.*

Nothing of this is untrue. He was poor, often hungry, and eked out a living painting for tourists or frame makers, a "meager" time indeed. In *Mein Kampf* he makes this out to be a necessary apprenticeship, a time in which, from his lowly position in society, he learned what it meant to be poor, what it meant to live in social misery, experiencing firsthand the dissolution of shared values and the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. He presents himself as a manual laborer, describing how he involves himself in workers' politics, the violence and the suppression of opinion that occurs at society's lower levels, and he puts forward his visions of how all this may and ought to be dealt with. He tells of his visits to the parliament, giving rise to his disdain for parliamentarism and democracy. And he describes his first encounters with Jews, not personal but in the form of strange figures he sees on the streets. He gives a picture of a world disintegrating on all levels and in every imaginable way. Everything he experienced, even the misery in which he lived, is in this way given meaning: he observes, perceives, reads, thinks, and though his circumstances are poor, his life at this time is a school he would not have wished to have done without. He has entered the school of life, nothing of what he can do comes from any university, nothing of what he takes in and writes about is down to any theory, but is alone the result of practical reality.

The pride in this account hides how badly he wants to enter the Academy and is clearly a rationalization after the fact. Everything points forward to the person he is now. But if we are to understand the kind of life he led in those five years, all Hitler's future must be discarded. Nothing of what he did then pointed toward anything else. The misery into which he gradually sank was indeed misery. He was seen standing in line at a soup kitchen for the homeless; everything indicates he slept in the parks for a time. He had no friends, hardly any acquaintances, and what little social contact he had consisted of the fellow destitutes he encountered at a flophouse. Moreover, the five years he spent living in this way are perhaps the most crucial of all in a person's life, those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three. Hitler was destitute, nothing of what he had believed in had turned out to be right, his dreams had fallen short, he was a person no one wanted and no one needed. He had lost his grip on reality, had practically no footing at all in the real world. If he had frozen to death in the night, no one would have cared. He was, in every sense, a nonentity, vanished into total anonymity, in the very gutter of society.

Yet it began in a different place altogether. It began well. Arriving in Vienna he had with him his mother's money, enough to keep him going for a year providing he was thrifty. He could reapply to the Academy. And he was not alone in the big city, Kubizek came with him.

In his Hitler biography Ian Kershaw provides this depiction:

> *When he did return to Vienna, in February 1908, it was not to pursue with all vigor the necessary course of action to become an architect, but to slide back into the life of indolence, idleness, and self-indulgence which he had followed before his mother's death. He even now worked on Kubizek's parents until they reluctantly agreed to let August leave his work in the family upholstery business to join him in Vienna in order to study music.*

Kubizek himself was for the rest of his life grateful that Hitler had talked his parents into allowing him to pursue his desire to study music. Self-indulgence was undoubtedly one of Hitler's most prominent traits, yet it was this very eruptive, near-manic side of him too that meant he would throw himself with great abandon and urgency into whatever subject or issue might capture his imagination at a given time, this often being followed by periods of despondency, though such moods too could be quite as restless and insistent. What Kershaw is perhaps alluding to is that this urgency was never directed, would never follow any plotted course or plan. While Hitler's relatives most likely would have endorsed the description of him giving himself up to "indolence, idleness, and self-indulgence," Hitler himself must certainly have seen things differently, there was something he wanted to become, something never quite within reach, that never quite turned out, which of course is by no means unusual for a young man of eighteen years old with ambitions of becoming an artist. Hitler was in every respect an autodidact, and like so many of his kind he became gradually more opinionated, a development exacerbated by his essentially solitary nature, inclined never to seek the company of others; he had a favorite bench in one of Vienna's parks, slightly out of the way, where he would sit and read whenever he was not seated at one of the city's many cafés poring through the newspapers, or else immersed in one of his many projects in his lodgings, whether drawing up plans for apartment buildings, opera houses, and concert halls, or writing plays and short stories – these all being matters to which he devoted himself during this time, all abandoned before completion, all witnessed by Kubizek, who lived by his side.

Kubizek arrives at the railway station in Vienna late one evening in winter. Hitler is waiting for him, elegantly clad, the ivory-handled walking stick in his hand, seemingly acclimatized and at ease with the hustle and bustle, already the city dweller. Hitler kisses him lightly on the cheek in greeting, they take a handle each of Kubizek's heavy bag and head out into the city, "such a terrible noise that one could not hear oneself speak," Adolf eventually leading them down a side street, Stumpergasse, to his rented room in a rear courtyard building.

> *In the small room that he occupied, a miserable paraffin lamp was burning. I looked around me. The first thing that struck me were the sketches that lay around on the table, on the bed, everywhere. Adolf cleared the table, spread a piece of newspaper on it, and fetched a bottle of milk from the window. Then he brought sausage and bread. But I can still see his white, earnest face as I pushed all these things aside and opened the bag. Cold roast pork, stuffed buns, and other lovely things to eat. All he said was, "Yes, that's what it is to have a mother!" We ate like kings. Everything tasted of home.*

Kubizek is tired after his journey, his senses already bombarded, the hour is late, but still Hitler insists on showing him the city. How could someone just arriving in Vienna go to bed without first having seen the opera house? They go out. Kubizek writes that it feels as though he has been transported to another planet, so overwhelming is the impression. They proceed to the Stefansdom. The evening mist is so dense they cannot see the spire: "I could just make out the heavy, dark mass of the nave stretching up into the gray monotony of the mist, almost unearthly, as though not built by human hands."

Kershaw describes the same events as follows:

> *Adolf met a tired Kubizek at the station that evening, took him back to Stumpergasse to stay the first night, but, typically, insisted on immediately showing him all the sights of Vienna. How could someone come to Vienna and go to bed without first seeing the Court Opera House? So Gustl was dragged off*

> *to view the opera building, Saint Stephen's Cathedral (which could scarcely be seen through the mist), and the lovely church of Saint Maria am Gestade. It was after midnight when they returned to Stumpergasse, and later still when an exhausted Kubizek fell asleep with Hitler still haranguing him about the grandeur of Vienna.*

Kershaw's only source as to this evening is Kubizek's book, which says nothing of Hitler "haranguing" him, and the sense, on seeing the opera, of having been transported to another planet, and of the cathedral appearing unearthly in the mist, as Kubizek writes, charging the experience with positive energy, is ignored by Kershaw; in his version the mist is negative, making the spire scarcely visible, and this is so in order to make Hitler out to be an unreasonable, self-indulgent, and egotistical young man oblivious to the needs of his friend. But if this had been the case, if the experience had been unambiguously negative, why does Kubizek not say so? Kubizek is a friend, his arrival has been greatly anticipated, Hitler is eager to show him all the things he has seen himself, all that is marvelous about the city, and can anyone blame him for that? How can we say that Hitler's enthusiasm was in fact disregard for his friend, when at the same time his friend has described what happened as a positive experience? Was Kubizek duped? Was he too stupid to realize that Hitler was using him? Did he not understand that viewing a cathedral in the mist is a washout, not an unearthly experience?

Or, conversely, on what basis does Kershaw overrule the account of his only source with a version of what *in fact* happened?

The issue with biography as a genre, and this is as true of autobiography as it is of the memoir, is that the author purports to be omniscient, a sole authority, he or she knows how it all turned out, and as such it is almost impossible not to accord emphasis to any sign, be it character trait or event, that points in that one direction, even if, as in this instance, it is merely one trait, one event among many others that in no way called attention to themselves. Of course, the truth of any past situation is elusive, it belongs to the moment and cannot be separated from it, but we may ensnare that moment, illuminate it from different angles, weigh the plausibility of one interpretation against that of another, and in that experiment endeavor to ignore what later happened, which is to say refrain from considering one character trait, one event, as a sign of something other than what it is in itself.

This "in itself" is both riddle and solution at the same time. If we view Hitler as a "bad" person, with categorically negative characteristics even as a child and a young man, all pointing toward a subsequently escalating "evil," then Hitler is of "the other," and thereby not of us, and in that case we have a problem, since then we are unburdened of the atrocities he and Germany later committed, these being something "they" did, so no longer a threat to us. But what is this "bad" that we do not embody? What is this "evil" that we do not express? The very formulation is indicative of how we humans think in terms of categories, and of course there is nothing wrong with that as long as we are aware of the dangers. In the night of pathology and the predetermined there is no free will, and without free will there is no guilt.

No matter how broken a person might be, no matter how disturbed the soul, that person remains a person always, with the freedom to choose. It is choice that makes us human. Only choice gives meaning to the concept of guilt.

Kershaw and almost two generations with him have condemned Hitler and his entire being as if pointing to his innocence when he was nineteen or twenty-three, or pointing to some of the good qualities he retained throughout his life, were a defense of him and of evil. In actual fact the opposite is true: only his innocence can bring his guilt into relief.

The day after Kubizek's arrival in Vienna the two friends begin their hunt for a room he can rent. The task is a difficult one, most rooms being too small for the piano he needs, and when they do find one big enough the landlady refuses to hear of having a lodger practice such an instrument. Kubizek's impression of Vienna is not good, the city seems to him full of indifferent, unsympathetic people, gloomy courtyards, narrow, ill-lit tenements and stairs. Despairing and miserable, he happens on another "room-to-rent" notice in the Zollergasse; they ring the bell and a maid opens the door and shows them into an elegantly furnished room containing magnificent twin beds.

> *"Madame is coming immediately," said the maid, curtsied, and vanished. We both knew at once that it was too stylish for us. Then "madame" appeared in a doorway, very much a lady, not so young, but very elegant.*
>
> *She wore a silk dressing gown and slippers trimmed with fur. She greeted us smilingly, inspected Adolf, then me, and asked us to sit down. My friend asked which room was to let. "This one," she answered, and pointed to the two beds. Adolf shook his head and said curtly, "Then one of the beds must come out, because my friend must have room for a piano." The lady was obviously disappointed that it was I and not Adolf who wanted a room, and asked whether Adolf already had lodgings. When he answered in the affirmative she suggested that I, together with the piano I needed, should move into his room and he should take this one. While she was suggesting this to Adolf with some animation, through a sudden movement the belt which kept the dressing gown together came undone. "Oh, excuse me, gentlemen," the lady exclaimed, and immediately refastened the dressing gown. But that second had sufficed to show us that under her silk covering she wore nothing but a brief pair of knickers.*
>
> *Adolf turned as red as a peony, gripped my arm, and said, "Come, Gustl!" I do not remember how we got out of the house. All I remember is Adolf's furious exclamation as we arrived back in the street. "What a Frau Potiphar!" Apparently such experiences were also part of Vienna.*

These are a pair of inexperienced young men from the sticks; the man of the world he thought Hitler was vanishes in the blushing cheeks that also give us a picture of Hitler's chastity and fear of women. He is eighteen years old and utterly unversed, Kubizek tells us there were no women in Hitler's life in the four years they spent together and he did not masturbate. This latter point is of course impossible to verify, yet it fits well with what we know of Hitler's sexuality from *Mein Kampf* and various other sources. Womanhood was associated with purity and exalted, a part of the ideal world he so cultivated, and his later romantic relationships were all with very young and innocent women. His obsession with purity and the way that obsession also pertained to sexual matters reveals itself in several episodes in Kubizek's book. On one occasion, after they had been to a performance of a play the press had made infamous for its supposedly immoral nature, Hitler takes Kubizek by the arm and leads him to the red-light district so that he might see with his own eyes how depraved and morally corrupted humanity has become. The prostitutes sit in illuminated rooms in low, one-story houses along the street, men amble back and forth, stopping to conduct whispered interchanges with the girl of their choice, after which the light inside would be put out. Hitler and Kubizek pass down the length of the street, but as they reach the end Hitler turns to go back. "Sink of iniquity" is a recurring phrase, and when Kubizek suggests that seeing it once is enough, Hitler drags him back past the windows with him. The prostitutes try to win their attention, one rolls down her stockings and shows her bare legs as they pass, another casually takes off her chemise as if to change, and as soon as they are out of the area Hitler rages against their "tricks of seduction." Back home in his room in the Stumpergasse he proceeds to hold forth and deliver a lecture on these new impressions and what they mean. Now, he declares, he has learned the customs of the market for commercial love and the purpose of his visit has thereby been fulfilled.

The episode makes plain three of the young Hitler's various modes of relating to the world around him: at first he is within it, filled with unmanageable feelings of attraction and disgust, lust and shame; then he rages against it, eventually, at due distance, to analyze it. Analysis is the preferred mode, and the remoteness it requires is one of the most striking elements of Hitler's character and cannot be underestimated.

Hitler and Kubizek live in the middle of one of the world's biggest cities, they are eighteen years old, and Hitler at least is completely free in the sense that both his parents are dead, he has no family to tie him down, and in principle he can do whatever he wants. The possibilities are many, the world stands open. Yet he associates with no one, does not so much as look at a woman, takes no part in the life that is going on around him. The seriousness with which he approaches life is immense, he has only disdain for anyone having fun, enjoying oneself is superficial and in some way beneath him. He sees much hardship and misery in his surroundings and possesses a strong sense of social indignation, he speaks often of the little man and of poverty; at one point he makes an excursion into the poorest district so that he might know what he is talking about, but the poor themselves, the people who live in such poverty, are anathema to him, he ignores them, will not speak to them or even be close to them, his dislike of contact is immense and conspicuous. The same applies to women, he can speak of them, idealize them, or consider them depraved, but he cannot have them close to him, expressing relief that women have no access to the area where he and Kubizek usually stand at the opera.

The strict morals he champions and according to which he conducts his life, these harsh rules he follows in all their rejection of the physical body, would clearly seem to be a way of controlling his inner self, which by all accounts is chaotic in the extreme. And since the outside world too is chaotic, which is to say complex and expanding in every way, as the city and culture were in the first decade of the twentieth century, marked by rampant poverty, political chaos, prostitution and sexual liberation – it has to be remembered that Freud was living and writing in the same city, and that Gustav Klimt was painting there too – it is hardly surprising that he should apply to society the same rules he has applied to himself, rules of abstinence and control, the two things, individual and society, meeting and leveling out in the emotions, which in his case are powerful. The contempt of his "Frau Potiphar!" or "tricks of seduction" stem clearly from emotions thereby occasioned inside him, lust and disgust, perhaps, and applied to society as a whole, the "sink of iniquity." He is manically obsessed with cleanliness and a well-groomed appearance, dressing always as neatly as possible, another way of controlling his inner chaos. And this must be why he is so interested in art, it affords him peace in which to devote himself to something else, something grand and beautiful and majestic.

> *When he listened to Wagner's music he was a changed man: his violence left him, he became quiet, yielding, and tractable. His gaze lost its restlessness; his own destiny, however heavily it may have weighed upon him, became unimportant. He no longer felt lonely and outlawed, misjudged by society.*

These emotions that so uplift him are his too, they belong not to the music, not to Wagner, but to him, and the feeling of being elevated by the music and language of the stage, of being permeated by the exquisite, is so important to him that he even forgoes eating so as to have money to buy opera tickets.

His immense energy, construed by Kershaw as indolence insofar as it exists outside any academic framework or meaningful enterprise whatsoever, is hard not to read into the same pattern, for when he is most deeply immersed in a project, he vanishes completely, and the only thing that exists is his urgent industry: his thoughts, plans, and sketches. His behavior is eruptive, obsessive, on the threshold of normal. Indeed, if Hitler's personal morals and those he applies to society at this time are strongly constraining, his artistic industry is quite without boundary. There are simply no limits to what he will apply himself to, nothing can stand in his way, everything is wide open. "It is not the professor's wisdom that counts," he says to Kubizek, "but genius," and begins promptly to compose an opera. He can play no instrument, has no knowledge of harmony or orchestration, and yet he pushes such limitations aside as technicalities, striving to delve into his fiercest emotions and express them in the language he admires most of all. He experiments with an ill-fated system attempting to combine sound and color, works out a prelude and asks for Kubizek's opinion of it. Kubizek tells him the basic themes are good, but that he has to realize that on such a basis alone it will be impossible to write an opera, at the same time declaring his readiness to teach him the necessary theory. "Do you think I'm mad?" Hitler shouts at him. "What have I got you for? First of all you will put down exactly what I play on the piano."

They proceed accordingly. Kubizek tries to make it clear to him that he must keep to one key. "Who is the composer, you or I?" Hitler rants back. Eventually he decides that the opera, based on a legend of Germanic mythology, should be performed in the musical mode of expression pertaining to the period in question. He asks Kubizek if anything remains preserved of Germanic music. Kubizek tells him there is nothing save for a few instruments, drums, bone flutes, and horns. Hitler reminds him that the skalds had sung to the accompaniment of harp-like instruments and proposes they do likewise. To make the thing tolerable for the human ear, as he puts it, Kubizek talks him out of the idea. Reverting to more conventional instrumentation they forge ahead, however slowly. Hitler designs the scenery and costumes in detail and pens the libretto. He eats nothing, goes without sleep, hardly drinks. Throughout, he demands that Kubizek not only be party to the process, but quite as devoted as he is, and berates him repeatedly. Hitler is the roommate from hell.

> *It would have been easy for me to take as an excuse one of our frequent quarrels to move out. The people at the Conservatoire would have been only too pleased to help me find another room. Why did I not do it? After all, I had often admitted to myself that this strange friendship was no good for my studies. How much time and energy did I lose in these nocturnal activities with my friend? Why, then, did I not go? Because I was homesick, certainly, and because Adolf represented for me a bit of home. But, after all, homesickness is something a young man of twenty can overcome. What was it then? What held me?*
>
> *Frankly it was just hours like those through which I was now living which bound me even more closely to my friend. I knew the normal interests of young people of my age: flirtations, shallow pleasures, idle play, and a lot of unimportant, meaningless thoughts. Adolf was the exact opposite. There was an incredible earnestness in him, a thoroughness, a true passionate interest in everything that happened and, most important, an unfailing devotion to the beauty, majesty, and grandeur of art. It was this that attracted me especially to him and restored my equilibrium after hours of exhaustion.*

Like so many of Hitler's projects, his opera comes to nothing. He is far too restless and has far too little patience to see such a demanding enterprise through to completion, and furthermore we can assume that his frustrations at his own musical shortcomings must eventually have wearied him.

Other projects on which he embarked in this period included a grand attempt at solving the housing crisis in Vienna, a task that involved him redesigning the entire city as well as meticulously drawing plans for the new workers' units he envisaged. Another idea was that the music he so cherished should be taken to those living outside the city, a "mobile Reichs-Orchestra" whose organization and repertoire he planned down to the smallest detail, even the color of the orchestra members' shirts, Kubizek recalls. All these projects were pipe dreams, remote from reality and basically meaningless, yet they tell us a lot about Hitler's character, the way he could dedicate himself, the boundless belief in his own abilities and the way he thereby found out how he might connect his internal and external existences without having to pass through the social domain he seemingly either feared or loathed, and which, regardless of all else, always broke down his inner dreams by confronting them with external reality, presenting to him, in other words, their real-world consequences. Our internal existence is abstract, external reality tangible, and in these grand yet unrealistic designs the two aspects collide in a way he is unable to manage.

Kubizek and Hitler lived together in Vienna for five months over the spring and summer of 1908. Hitler never let on that he had been turned down by the Academy, and he led his life in such a way as to make his friend believe he had been accepted and attended its lessons. They shared a room; after the incident with Frau Potiphar they had decided it was convenient. Hitler made inquiries with his landlady, Frau Zakreys, who agreed to move into Hitler's old room, while the two friends moved into hers. Kubizek took the conservatory's entrance exam the following day. He passed and was admitted, but Hitler seemed anything but pleased on his behalf. "I had no idea I had such a clever friend," he remarks baldly. He was often irritable during this period, and Kubizek considers this the reason he does not wish to hear about his studies. Kubizek is puzzled by a number of aspects of his friend's behavior, among them the fact that he spends so little time painting, devoting his attention to any number of other things instead; he writes a play, he reads books that have nothing to do with painting. Kubizek clearly senses that all is not well, but he is used to Hitler's obstinacy and eccentric manner and puts it down to that, besides him having only recently lost his mother.

> *His mood worried me more and more as the days went by. I had never known him to torment himself in this way before, far from it. In my opinion, he possessed rather too much than too little self-confidence. But now things seemed to have changed round. He wallowed deeper and deeper in self-criticism. Yet it only needed the lightest touch – as when one flicks on the light and everything becomes brilliantly clear – for his self-accusation to become an accusation against the times, against the whole world. Choking with his catalog of hates, he would pour his fury over everything, against mankind in general who did not understand him, who did not appreciate him and by whom he was persecuted. I see him before me, striding up and down the small space in boundless anger, shaken to his very depths. I sat at the piano with my fingers motionless on the keyboard and listened to him, upset by his hymn of hate, and yet worried about him.*

They argue a lot in these first weeks about how to arrange themselves in the apartment; Kubizek wants to practice, Hitler wants to read; when poor weather forces them both to stay in, the mood can be tense. At one point Kubizek fixes his schedule to the cupboard door with a thumbtack and asks Hitler to do likewise so they can see when the other one is going to be out. But Hitler has no schedule, he doesn't need one, he says, he keeps it all in his head. Kubizek shrugs his shoulders, unconvinced. Hitler's work is anything but systematic, mostly he works at night and sleeps until late in the mornings. To see his friend doing so well cannot have been easy for Hitler. And now, with the schedule on the cupboard door a clear and visible symbol of his friend's progress, he explodes with rage.

> *"This Academy," he screamed, "is a lot of old-fashioned fossilized civil servants, bureaucrats devoid of understanding, stupid lumps of officials. The whole*

> *Academy ought to be blown up!" His face was livid, the mouth quite small, the lips almost white. But the eyes glittered. There was something sinister about them, as if all the hate of which he was capable lay in those glowing eyes! I was just going to point out that those men of the Academy on whom he so lightly passed judgment in his measureless hatred were, after all, his teachers and professors, from whom he could certainly learn something, but he forestalled me: "They rejected me, they threw me out, they turned me down."*
>
> *I was shocked. So that was it. Adolf did not go to the Academy at all. Now I could understand a great deal that had puzzled me about him. I felt his hard luck deeply, and asked him whether he had told his mother that the Academy had not accepted him. "What are you thinking of?" he replied. "How could I burden my dying mother with this worry?"*
>
> *I could not help but agree. For a while we were both silent. Perhaps Adolf was thinking of his mother. Then I tried to give the conversation a practical turn. "And what now?" I asked him.*
>
> *"What now, what now," he repeated irritably. "Are you starting too – what now?" He must have asked himself this question a hundred times and more, because he had certainly not discussed it with anyone else. "What now?" he mocked my anxious inquiry again, and instead of answering, sat himself down at the table and surrounded himself with his books. "What now?"*
>
> *He adjusted the lamp, took up a book, opened it, and began to read. I made to take the schedule down from the cupboard door. He raised his head, saw it, and said calmly, "Never mind."*

That Hitler can construct and live such a lie instead of admitting to his friend that he has failed must surely have been a great strain on his life and tells us something about his ability to deny the real world in favor of illusion, but most of all it is revealing of his pride. Their friendship is based on Hitler talking and Kubizek listening, Hitler acting and Kubizek tagging along, in short Hitler dominating and Kubizek submitting. During that spring a fundamental shift occurs in this power structure, for not only does Kubizek gain admittance to the music conservatory, with Hitler having failed the entrance exam to the Academy, he also makes great strides in his studies. Soon he is entrusted with teaching, and as part of the conservatory's end-of-term festivities he conducts the first-night concert, with three songs of his own composition being performed on the second night as well as two movements from his sextet for strings. Hitler is in attendance and witnesses the congratulations Kubizek receives from his professors and even from the director of the conservatory. Hitler is enthusiastic and proud, though, as Kubizek writes, one can well imagine "what he was thinking in his heart of hearts." His friend's success throws his own failure emphatically into relief. And while he may still dominate him when they are on their own together and appear totally superior, when things are boiled down, the fact of the matter is that he is outshone and overlooked.

Summer arrives, and they have been living together for five months; Kubizek returns to his parents in Linz for the holidays, after which he is to undergo eight weeks of training in the Austro-Hungarian army reserve before coming back to Vienna to continue his studies. Hitler remains in the apartment, having no money to travel anywhere and no one to visit. He sends Kubizek postcards and letters while his friend is away, all is fine, and in the main he is occupied by the building projects going on in Linz and wants Kubizek to keep him informed as to their progress. Kubizek does as he asks while putting in hours in his father's workshop, sending his share of the rent to their landlady in Vienna; he departs for his military training and writes to Hitler announcing his arrival back in Vienna so that his friend might meet him and lend a hand with his luggage. By then it is November.

> *I had, as I had written to him, taken the early train to save time, and arrived at the Westbahnhof at three o'clock in the afternoon. He would be waiting, I thought, at the usual spot, the ticket barrier. Then he could help me carry the heavy case which also contained something for him from my mother. Had I missed him? I went back again, but he was certainly not at the barrier. I went into the waiting room. In vain I looked around me: Adolf was not there. Perhaps he was ill. He had indeed written me in his last letter that he was still*

> *being plagued by his old trouble, bronchial catarrh. I put my case in the left-luggage office and, very worried, hastened to the Stumpergasse. Frau Zakreys was delighted to see me, but told me immediately that the room was taken. "But Adolf, my friend?" I asked her astonished.*
>
> *From her lined, withered face Frau Zakreys stared at me with wide-open eyes. "But don't you know that Herr Hitler has moved out?"*
>
> *No, I did not know.*
>
> *"Where has he moved to?" I asked.*
>
> *"Herr Hitler didn't tell me that."*
>
> *"But he must have left a message for me – a letter, perhaps, or a note. How else shall I get hold of him?"*
>
> *The landlady shook her head. "No, Herr Hitler didn't leave anything."*
>
> *"Not even a greeting?"*
>
> *"He didn't say anything."*

Thirty years would pass before Kubizek again laid eyes on Hitler. He had vanished and did not wish to be found. Had he wanted to keep in touch, Kubizek reasons, Hitler would have asked for his address from their former landlady, his parents in Linz, or the music conservatory. He never did, so there was no doubt he wanted to be left alone. Kubizek looked up his half sister the next time he was in Linz, but she knew nothing of his whereabouts or what he might be up to.

There are many conceivable reasons why Hitler would take such a drastic step as to sever all contact with the only person in his life. The most obvious of these is pride: while Kubizek was undergoing his military training in September Hitler had again taken the Academy's entrance exam and had once again failed; this time he was rejected after the first round. From what Kubizek tells us of his character and nature it would not be unreasonable to assume that his failure this time was too great for him to be able to tell Kubizek. Another reason has also to do with pride; after a year in Vienna punctuated by the death of his mother, his funds were beginning to run out, he could no longer afford to keep up the room in the Stumpergasse, nor did there seem any likelihood of him earning money without degrading himself by taking on what he so disdainfully referred to as "bread-and-butter" work; another loss of prestige in relation to Kubizek. Another reason still was that Kubizek represented his only contact with Linz and Hitler's family there; through Kubizek's parents they could easily find out where Kubizek – and therefore Hitler himself – was living. By vanishing the way he did, all ties to his family, which is to say the family of his half sister, were broken.

With Kubizek out of the picture we know little about Hitler's life in the year that followed. This is telling indeed, given that his life as a whole is one of the century's most thoroughly charted and dissected. From the public records we know he moved out of the Stumpergasse into cheaper lodgings not far away in the Felberstrasse. The form required by the local police authority states his profession as "student" – on his arrival in Vienna he had registered as an "artist." He remained in the Felberstrasse for a year until the following summer. What he did during that time is not known. The only existing information tells us he canceled his membership in the museum association in Linz on March 4, presumably in order to save the cost of the subscription. In August 1909, after a year, he moves to even cheaper accommodation, a room on the outskirts in the Sechshauserstrasse, where he registers himself as a "*Schriftsteller*," or "writer." He lives there no more than three weeks before moving out again, at which point all trace of him is lost. On the registration form a hand has written "moved, no known address." Everything points to him now being homeless, sleeping out through the autumn and winter. It was not possible to rent a room without registering with the police, and even though everything relating to Hitler was removed by the Nazis from the Austrian archives following the *Anschluss*, the documents were not destroyed but kept in the archives of the NSDAP, and tell us nothing. Another indication that he now lived on the streets consists of a sighting of him, the only one reported during this time, by a relative of his first landlady, Frau Zakreys, who recognized him standing in line at a soup kitchen for the destitute: "His clothes looked very shabby and I felt sorry for him, because he used to be so well dressed."

The next time he appears in police archives is in December 1909, when he found his way to a flophouse in Meidling. There he made the acquaintance of a tramp, Reinhold Hanisch, a man with a police record for a variety of misdemeanors including fraud and theft. Later, Hanisch would publish a memoir, in which he writes that Hitler, then twenty years old, looked in a sorry state, depressed, tired and hungry, and with sore feet. His blue-checked suit had turned purple due to rain and the disinfectant with which anyone staying at the hostel was obliged to delouse their clothing. He had no possessions, presumably having sold everything he had brought with him from Linz. According to Hamann, Hitler told Hanisch he had been thrown out by his landlady, that he had sat around in all-night cafés the first few nights until his money ran out, and that since then he had been sleeping on park benches. He had not eaten for some days and told of approaching a drunken gentleman one night and begging him for money, only for the man to hurl insults at him. Hanisch shared some bread with him and put him in the know as to where to get free soup and medical attention.

This is not the Vienna in which Stefan Zweig and Ludwig Wittgenstein grew up; and if Hitler belonged to the lower social strata when renting his room in the Stumpergasse with Kubizek, he had now definitively fallen through the floor into the gutter. This was rock bottom. He has no work, nowhere to live, no money, no food, no friends, barely an acquaintance. He owns nothing, his clothes are shabby, he is cold and he is hungry. That he should be indolent, a layabout, as Kershaw suggests, accords poorly with the fact that he remains in Vienna. To be indolent is to choose convenience, to be indolent is to proceed by the easiest route. The life he is now living, at a minimum level of existence, depending on the charity of others, is no convenient life, but the most strenuous life imaginable. Knowing as we do that Hitler had offers of work at the time of his leaving Linz, from one of his former neighbors and from his guardian, that he had relatives in the countryside whom he visited in the summer with his mother, and that his brother-in-law was a state official in a secure tenure, with whom he almost certainly would have been able to stay for a period of time if only he would bow his head in humility, the fact that we now find him here, in such extreme destitution, indicates the opposite of convenience and indolence, it is a life far from that of the layabout. His rejection of bourgeois existence is no convenient rejection, but an absolute rejection, a "no" for which he is prepared to pay quite a high price.

One must ask oneself why. What was it he wanted? He has sought admittance to the Academy of Fine Arts, not once but twice, John Toland suggests three times, that he reapplied in September of that year, but the fact remains that he has his whole life set on it. "Artist," he calls himself when registering as tenant of his first lodgings, "student" the second time, "writer" the third. His talk was of becoming a painter, then an architect, and in the meantime he has written plays, stories, and an opera. None of these ventures has been successful, but he is undeterred, for next time may be different. Another headstrong young man from the lowest levels of society with an unbounded, and in the eyes of others unfounded, reservoir of self-confidence, lived similarly from hand to mouth for many years with no other ambition than becoming a writer, something he achieved at the age of thirty with the publication of his first novel: *Hunger*. Van Gogh was another artist of that time who lived in extreme poverty, wanting nothing else than to paint, even though in his lifetime he sold not a single canvas. We have no way of knowing if this was what Hitler was doing, but if it was not, his "no" must then have been all the more emphatic, all the more obstinate, since in that case he was rejecting society itself and all that came with it of work, career, marriage, children. Rather than being a part of that, he chose to live in the gutter. This is not an expression of indolence, but of something else entirely. Could he simply have allowed himself to drift? Nothing would indicate to us that he struggled against it in the way of a man possessed by a particular goal, rather he seems to have positioned a framework of circumstances about his life that slowly but surely sent him to the subterrain, to the flophouse in Meidling at whose doors the subterraneans flock: down-and-outs, tramps, beggars, winos, criminals, the jobless, the poor, hustlers, and fraudsters.

*

The social problems that existed in Vienna around the turn of the century were huge. Poverty was rampant, the housing shortage severe, several hundred thousand people existed in the most abject circumstances, and still more continued to join them, migrants flooding from all corners of the great empire to converge on its capital. The cost of housing rocketed, and landlords exploited the situation to its limit; the workers' district of Favoriten, Hamann writes, housed an average of ten persons per rental unit, which consisted of one room and a kitchen with no running water. Child mortality was astoundingly four times greater here than in the city's more affluent areas. Almost all basements were utilized for habitation, and beds unused during the daytime were rented out to so-called *Bettgeher*, literally "bed-goers," homeless people permitted to use a bed for some eight hours or so but not to stay in the apartment the rest of the time. In 1910 the city contained more than eighty thousand of these bed-goers. No system of social security existed, the only poor care being charity-based in the form of soup kitchens, shelters, hostels, and children's homes, all private sector, many of them established by Jewish philanthropists. Some of the needy were lucky enough to be allowed to take leftovers from the taverns and hospitals, and whenever a baker gave away unsold bread, Hamann writes, hordes would descend and fights could break out. The housing shortage became increasingly acute and the so-called shelters, overcrowded with bed-goers during the daytime, began to stay open at nights. The worst conditions, however, were in the illegal sublets. Hamann cites the report of a journalist at the time: the flats are crammed with people unknown to each other, many are children, often they sleep in the same bed, crawling with lice and vermin, inhabiting a single room for cooking, washing, living, sleeping, studying, and carrying out work to earn money; he mentions a stable deemed unfit for animals, inhabited by ten people with three children among them. A two- or three-room apartment in a crumbling, condemned tenement could house eighty or more people, men and women, able and infirm, alcoholics, and prostitutes, and children. "Everything around me was a confused mass of people, rags, and dirt. The room looked like a humongous dirt ball." These places were infested with rats, and disease spread quickly – cholera, tuberculosis, syphilis. Begging generated little income and for many prostitution was the only option, and it was prevalent too among children.

Outside the flophouse in Meidling, which could take in about a thousand people, and where Hitler duly appeared in December of 1909, the destitute lined up in long lines each evening, watched by the guards deployed to prevent rioting among those for whom there would be no room. The newspapers would mention the place only in the case of some tragic incident such as a child freezing to death outside the hostel gates or someone being denied medical assistance and dying there. In 1908 the opposition on the city council moved to establish shelters and to open up tram sheds to the homeless, but the authorities pointed merely to existing measures, though these were practically nonexistent, claiming, according to Hamann, that no one could possibly be homeless in Vienna without bearing the blame themselves. There was no help to be had from the city, and in this unregulated social mire the immigrant population, in this case Slavs and east-European Jews, ranked lowest; many citizens were of the opinion that the hospitals ought only to accept Austrian natives and turn everyone else away.

Hitler himself describes housing conditions for casual laborers as follows:

> *Even more dismal in those days were the housing conditions. The misery in which the Viennese day laborer lived was frightful to behold. Even today it fills me with horror when I think of these wretched caverns, the lodging houses and tenements, sordid scenes of garbage, repulsive filth, and worse.*

This was the situation in all of Europe's major cities of the time, and had been ever since the great tides of industrialization and urbanization in the first part of the nineteenth century. This was a new kind of poverty, concentrated in the urban conglomerations where the lowest classes lived so densely, and were so many in number, and so faceless as to be conspicuously referred to throughout the available sources as hordes or masses or armies of poor.

In 1903 the American writer Jack London published a firsthand account of life in the slums of east London, *The People of the Abyss*, referring to that inner-city area as a ghetto, a place "of remarkable meanness and vastness . . . where two million workers swarm, procreate, and die." Some 1.8 million people in London are estimated to be very poor, he writes, one million exist with one week's wages between them and pauperism. The misery he describes is difficult to take in and comprehend, but the consequences of the extremely high mortality rate and the extremely poor housing conditions are nonetheless clear: here, inside the ghetto of the poor, life is worth less than life outside. It is worth less because death is a constant presence and because the inhuman circumstances in which the poor live are practically insurmountable. In the city's West End, he writes, 18 percent of all children die before the age of five; in the East End 55 percent of all children die before the age of five. In other words, every other child. "And there are streets in London where out of every one hundred children born in a year, fifty die during the next year; and of the fifty that remain, twenty-five die before they are five years old. Slaughter!"

And should the child survive, work awaits in trades that are not merely unhealthy but lethal. In the linen trade wet feet and wet clothes, a result of the preparation of the flax, lead to bronchitis, pneumonia and severe rheumatism, and the women, who start work at the age of seventeen or eighteen, break down and are physically destroyed by the time they reach thirty. Laborers in the chemical industry, "picked from the strongest and most splendidly built men to be found," live on average less than forty-eight years. In the potter's trade dust gradually settles into the lungs until eventually a case of plaster is formed, making breathing more and more difficult, until finally it ceases.

Jack London wrote his book in 1903 in London, thirty-five years after Karl Marx published the first volume of his *Das Kapital* but only eighteen and nine years respectively after the posthumous publication of volumes two and three. Jack London was a socialist, *The People of the Abyss* an attempt to raise awareness by entering into a world usually viewed from some great distance, and to describe that world from the inside. It contains no analysis, but a wealth of emotions; indignation and resignation being the most dominant. *Das Kapital*, on the other hand, is an analysis of the fundamental preconditions of the misery Jack London describes: commodities, labor, and capital. Theoretical as it is, the work includes lengthy statistically based descriptions of conditions among the lowest class, the same people London would later visit, which at the time, in the 1850s and 1860s, were not much different to those in the first decade of the twentieth century. In his Chapter 25, "General Law of Capitalist Accumulation," Marx tries to outline the circumstances that led to the "intoxicating augmentation of wealth and power" that industrialization had brought about for the privileged classes, not in this instance conditions in the workplace, in themselves appalling, with working days of sixteen, seventeen hours or more in cramped spaces with little light or ventilation, but conditions outside the workplace, the standards of diet and housing of the most poorly situated workers. In 1855, the official list of paupers in England numbered 851,369 persons, these being people without employment and relying on public alms for their survival, while in 1864, due to the crisis in the cotton industry, that figure rose to 1,014,978 persons. These are people living below the very minimum level of existence.

These enormous numbers of poor were an unmanageable problem for society insofar as the colossal changes in production circumstances of which they were a result, the massive industrialization that had taken place, found no counteraction in any form of societal planning or governance; poverty's bottomless pit, concentrated as it was in huge ghetto-like areas of the inner city, arose over a period of only a few decades, and many considered it to be the result of some kind of natural law or force of nature, not least in the wake of Darwin's breakthrough theory of the survival of the fittest, whose axiom was applied equally to the social domain, and the apparent moral and spiritual decline that accompanied it was seen to derive from a kind of human inferiority, self-inflicted, irremedially mushrooming among the lowest classes.

It was as if a whole new society or societal order had arisen within the framework of the old, and the huge pressure it applied to its structures cannot be underestimated. Prior to industrialization, in rural society there were no classes at all but status and strata, and poverty found quite different forms, dealt with in different ways altogether. Marx's analyses, as an instrument by which to understand the enormous upheavals that had taken place in society, were of course invaluable. He had experienced the consequences of poverty at first hand, three of his own children having died when they were still small, and he had seen misery with his own eyes in the great English industrial areas from whence it had spread, seemingly systematically, as if according to its own laws, to large parts of the world.

Industrialism knew no boundaries; nor indeed did the misery that followed in its wake, and the fierce political strife that divided Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century was in the main a matter of a horizontal, transgressional solution versus a vertical, national solution. In other words, identification with class or with place. Hitler, who came from a small petty-bourgeois environment in a relatively homogenous town, source of all his ideals, accorded much emphasis to the poverty issue in *Mein Kampf*, written at a time when the decay of which he had been a part no longer threatened to consume him. His understanding of it was primarily structural:

> *If I did not wish to despair of the men who constituted my environment at that time, I had to learn to distinguish between their external characters and lives and the foundations of their development. Only then could all this be borne without losing heart. Then, from all the misery and despair, from all the filth and outward degeneration, it was no longer human beings that emerged, but the deplorable results of deplorable laws; and the hardship of my own life, no easier than the others, preserved me from capitulating in tearful sentimentality to the degenerate products of this process of development.*
>
> *No, this is not the way to understand all these things!*

Hitler recognized poverty as a major political problem and he was just as distraught about its inhumanity as Karl Marx and Jack London, but in Vienna it had not only emerged within a relatively homogenous working class as in London, but was exacerbated by great numbers of immigrants from all corners of the empire converging on the city in the hope of finding work, and the ethnic conflicts that were so rife there in that period are crucial to Hitler's way of understanding his surroundings and the time in which he lived. He was born a German in Austria, his father was a German nationalist, albeit moderately so, loyal to the Kaiser, while many of his teachers at school and the majority of students cultivated a more radical German nationalism, and the idea of the supremacy of the nation, not merely in constitutional terms but almost as if it were some kind of metaphysical entity, pervades every conception in *Mein Kampf*, and also, if we are to go by Kubizek's memoir, everything else he thought as a young man when it came to politics. When Hitler observed such gross social injustice he did not look firstly toward class relations in search of a solution, but to relations between peoples. In the Greater Germanic Reich of which he dreamed there would be no division between burgher and aristocrat, but between German and non-German. It was on this basis that he was already at the age of eighteen a confirmed anti-Marxist. The international orientation of Marxism went against everything he stood for. He was anticapitalist for the same reason. And the fact that he knew what it meant to be poor, and had seen firsthand the huge and inhuman poverty that existed in Vienna, was surely significant in the formation of his viewpoints on social misery as expressed in *Mein Kampf*, where rather than being seen as a problem of class structure, it is understood as a combined consequence of the disintegrating Dual Monarchy and international capitalism. That his meticulousness and overarching need for control moreover may be seen as a kind of embodiment of the wish to delimit and localize even the biggest structures into more manageable units, in the same way as his fear of everything that spreads, everything that crosses boundaries, like disease and flotsam, may be seen as a kind of embodiment of all the great currents and forces that were at work in his time and which knew no boundaries of nation, is not quite as tenuous and forced as it might appear, for if there is something going on in *Mein Kampf* it is precisely an interpretation of the external world on the basis of the feelings and temperament of the internal being.

After the turn of the century, Vienna was, socially speaking, one of the most backward cities in Europe.

Dazzling riches and loathsome poverty alternated sharply. In the center and in the inner districts you could really feel the pulse of this realm of fifty-two millions, with all the dubious magic of the national melting pot. The Court with its dazzling glamor attracted wealth and intelligence from the rest of the country like a magnet. Added to this was the strong centralization of the Habsburg monarchy in itself.

It offered the sole possibility of holding this medley of nations together in any set form. But the consequence was an extraordinary concentration of high authorities – in the imperial capital.

Yet not only in the political and intellectual sense was Vienna the center of the old Danube monarchy, but economically as well. The host of high officers, government officials, artists, and scholars was confronted by an even greater army of workers, and side by side with aristocratic and commercial wealth dwelt dire poverty. Outside the palaces on the Ring loitered thousands of unemployed, and beneath this Via Triumphalis of old Austria dwelt the homeless in the gloom and mud of the canals.

In hardly any German city could the social question have been studied better than in Vienna. But make no mistake. This "studying" cannot be done from lofty heights. No one who has not been seized in the jaws of this murderous viper can know its poison fangs. Otherwise nothing results but superficial chatter and false sentimentality. Both are harmful. The former because it can never penetrate to the core of the problem, the latter because it passes it by. I do not know which is more terrible: inattention to social misery such as we see every day among the majority of those who have been favored by fortune or who have risen by their own efforts, or else the snobbish, or at times tactless and obtrusive, condescension of certain women of fashion in skirts or in trousers, who "feel for the people." In any event, these gentry sin far more than their minds, devoid of all instinct, are capable of realizing. Consequently, and much to their own amazement, the result of their social "efforts" is always nil, frequently, in fact, an indignant rebuff; though this, of course, is passed off as a proof of the people's ingratitude.

> *Such minds are most reluctant to realize that social endeavor has nothing in common with this sort of thing; that above all it can raise no claim to gratitude, since its function is not to distribute favors but to restore rights.*
>
> *I was preserved from studying the social question in such a way. By drawing me within its sphere of suffering, it did not seem to invite me to "study," but to experience it in my own skin. It was none of its doing that the guinea pig came through the operation safe and sound.*

This passage, so typical of *Mein Kampf*, begins by sketching the divide between Vienna's rich and poor, viewed as if from afar, from the viewpoint of an impersonal "you," which is to say in general terms, though not objectively; the multinational state has a "dubious magic" and the many nationalities held together by the centralizing power are a "melting pot." The preliminary conclusion is that no other city would seem to be as well suited for the study of social issues. However, such a study is possible only at first hand, and, moreover, only by someone "in the jaws of this murderous viper," in other words someone who has actually lived in poverty. What this says is: I was there, I know what I'm talking about, unlike almost everyone else. In this way Hitler lends ethos to his text, the same ethos as is evoked at intervals at the beginning of the book, and gradually, by way of meticulous insistence and the fundamental lack of other perspectives, that ethos becomes increasingly self-propelled, jettisoning "This is true because I say so, having seen it with my own eyes" in favor more simply of "This is true because I say so."

To what purpose does the text employ this legitimacy? It pursues no analysis, presenting only a sudden outburst against those who condescendingly "feel for the people" and who fail to realize that their false charity is degrading to its recipients. Hitler shares this same perspective with Marx, but in Hitler's case, judging by the sudden intensification of mood and the closeness of association of subject matter to writer, signaled by the use of the first-person pronoun, it would seem to have its source in his own experience, entangling moreover with more general misogyny. His conclusion, that genuine social activity consists not in handouts but in the reestablishment of a more just system, was likewise shared by Marx.

In Jack London's depiction of London's East End ghetto, life there is described as raw, brutal, and base, words like barbaric and primitive are employed, and to those who live such a life, at the very bottom of the world, in the most wretched need, men abandoned to drink, for instance, who batter their wives and neglect their children, or women who lose their babies to disease and sickness and who themselves cough and hack and shiver from cold and hunger, no crack of space exists between themselves and their misery to allow them a more generous perspective on their fellow human beings or to insist on maintaining some kind of human-centered mind-set, as Jack London is able to do as he wanders about and observes them as if they were a part of some abominable freak show. Humanity requires at least some minimum of material comforts. As Mackie Messer says in Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral" – first food, then morals. The same is true of human worth. For this is what happens in these vast slums, the value of human life, to those who live there as well as to those outside, diminishes. Thus, Jack London:

> *No more dreary spectacle can be found on this earth than the whole of the "awful East," with its Whitechapel, Hoxton, Spitalfields, Bethnal Green, and Wapping to the East India Docks. The color of life is gray and drab. Everything is helpless, hopeless, unrelieved, and dirty. Bathtubs are a thing totally unknown, as mythical as the ambrosia of the gods. The people themselves are dirty, while any attempt at cleanliness becomes howling farce, when it is not pitiful and tragic. Strange, vagrant odors come drifting along the greasy wind, and the rain, when it falls, is more like grease than water from heaven. The very cobblestones are scummed with grease.*
>
> *Here lives a population as dull and unimaginative as its long gray miles of dingy brick. Religion has virtually passed it by, and a gross and stupid materialism reigns, fatal alike to the things of the spirit and the finer instincts of life.*
>
> *It used to be the proud boast that every Englishman's home was his castle. But today it is an anachronism. The Ghetto folk have no homes. They do not know the significance and the sacredness of home life. Even the municipal dwellings, where live the better-class workers, are overcrowded barracks. They*

> *have no home life. The very language proves it. The father returning from work asks his child in the street where her mother is; and back the answer comes, "In the buildings."*
>
> *A new race has sprung up, a street people. They pass their lives at work and in the streets. They have dens and lairs into which to crawl for sleeping purposes, and that is all. One cannot travesty the word by calling such dens and lairs "homes." The traditional silent and reserved Englishman has passed away. The sidewalk folk are noisy, voluble, high-strung, excitable – when they are yet young. As they grow older they become steeped and stupefied in beer. When they have nothing else to do, they ruminate as a cow ruminates. They are to be met with everywhere, standing on curbs and corners, and staring into vacancy. Watch one of them. He will stand there, motionless, for hours, and when you go away you will leave him still staring into vacancy. It is most absorbing. He has no money for beer, and his lair is only for sleeping purposes, so what else remains for him to do? He has already solved the mysteries of girl's love, and wife's love, and child's love, and found them delusions and shams, vain and fleeting as dew-drops, quick-vanishing before the ferocious facts of life.*

Marx quotes from a report on living standards drawn up in 1863 by one Dr. Simon:

> *It must be remembered that privation of food is very reluctantly borne, and that as a rule great poorness of diet will only come when other privations have preceded it. Long before insufficiency of diet is a matter of hygienic concern, long before the physiologist would think of counting the grains of nitrogen and carbon which intervene between life and starvation, the household will have been utterly destitute of material comfort; clothing and fuel will have been even scantier than food – against inclemencies of weather there will have been no adequate protection – dwelling space will have been stinted to the degree in which overcrowding produces or increases disease; of household utensils and furniture there will have been scarcely any – even cleanliness will have been found costly or difficult, and if there still be self-respectful endeavors to maintain it, every such endeavor will represent additional pangs of hunger. The home, too, will be where*

shelter can be cheapest bought; in quarters where commonly there is least fruit of sanitary supervision, least drainage, least scavenging, least suppression of public nuisances, least or worst water supply, and, if in town, least light and air. Such are the sanitary dangers to which poverty is almost certainly exposed, when it is poverty enough to imply scantiness of food. And while the sum of them is of terrible magnitude against life, the mere scantiness of food is in itself of very serious moment . . . These are painful reflections, especially when it is remembered that the poverty to which they advert is not the deserved poverty of idleness. In all cases it is the poverty of working populations. Indeed, as regards the indoor operatives, the work which obtains the scanty pittance of food is for the most part excessively prolonged. Yet evidently it is only in a qualified sense that the work can be deemed self-supporting . . . And on a very large scale the nominal self-support can be only a circuit, longer or shorter, to pauperism.

The intimate connection between the pangs of hunger of the most industrious layers of the working class, and the extravagant consumption, coarse or refined, of the rich, for which capitalist accumulation is the basis, reveals itself only when the economic laws are known. It is otherwise with the "housing of the poor." Every unprejudiced observer sees that the greater the centralization of the means of production, the greater is the corresponding heaping together of the laborers, within a given space; that therefore the swifter the capitalistic accumulation, the more miserable are the dwellings of the working-people. "Improvements" of towns, accompanying the increase of wealth, by the demolition of badly built quarters, the erection of palaces for banks, warehouses, etc., the widening of streets for business traffic, for the carriages of luxury, and for the introduction of tramways, etc., drive away the poor into even worse and more crowded hiding places. On the other hand, every one knows that the dearness of dwellings is in inverse ratio to their excellence, and that the mines of misery are exploited by house speculators with more profit or less cost than ever were the mines of Potosí. The antagonistic character of capitalist accumulation, and therefore of the capitalistic relations of property generally, is here so evident, that even the official English reports on this subject teem with heterodox onslaughts on "property and its rights." With the development of industry, with the

> *accumulation of capital, with the growth and "improvement" of towns, the evil makes such progress that the mere fear of contagious diseases which do not spare even "respectability," brought into existence from 1847 to 1864 no less than 10 Acts of Parliament on sanitation, and that the frightened bourgeois in some towns, as Liverpool, Glasgow, etc., took strenuous measures through their municipalities. Nevertheless Dr. Simon, in his report of 1865, says:*
>
> *"Speaking generally, it may be said that the evils are uncontrolled in England."*

And Hitler:

> *In a basement apartment, consisting of two stuffy rooms, dwells a worker's family of seven. Among the five children there is a boy of, let us assume, three years. This is the age in which the first impressions are made on the consciousness of the child. Talented persons retain traces of memory from this period down to advanced old age. The very narrowness and overcrowding of the room does not lead to favorable conditions. Quarreling and wrangling will very frequently arise as a result. In these circumstances, people do not live with one another, they press against one another. Every argument, even the most trifling, which in a spacious apartment can be reconciled by a mild segregation, thus solving itself, here leads to loathsome wrangling without end. Among the children, of course, this is still bearable; they always fight under such circumstances, and among themselves they quickly and thoroughly forget about it. But if this battle is carried on between the parents themselves, and almost every day in forms which for vulgarity often leave nothing to be desired, then, if only very gradually, the results of such visual instruction must ultimately become apparent in the children. The character they will inevitably assume if this mutual quarrel takes the form of brutal attacks of the father against the mother, of drunken beatings, is hard for anyone who does not know this milieu to imagine. At the age of six the pitiable little boy suspects the existence of things which can inspire even an adult with nothing but horror. Morally poisoned, physically*

undernourished, his poor little head full of lice, the young "citizen" goes off to public school. After a great struggle he may learn to read and write, but that is about all. His doing any homework is out of the question. On the contrary, the very mother and father, even in the presence of the children, talk about his teacher and school in terms which are not fit to be repeated, and are more inclined to curse the latter to their face than to take their little offspring across their knees and teach them some sense. All the other things that the little fellow hears at home do not tend to increase his respect for his dear fellow men. Nothing good remains of humanity, no institution remains unassailed; beginning with his teacher and up to the head of the government, whether it is a question of religion or of morality as such, of the state or society, it is all the same, everything is reviled in the most obscene terms and dragged into the filth of the basest possible outlook. When at the age of fourteen the young man is discharged from school, it is hard to decide what is stronger in him: his incredible stupidity as far as any real knowledge and ability are concerned, or the corrosive insolence of his behavior, combined with an immorality, even at this age, which would make your hair stand on end.

What position can this man to whom even now hardly anything is holy, who, just as he has encountered no greatness, conversely suspects and knows all the sordidness of life, occupy in the life into which he is now preparing to emerge?

The three-year-old child has become a fifteen-year-old despiser of all authority. Thus far, aside from dirt and filth, this young man has seen nothing which might inspire him to any higher enthusiasm.

But only now does he enter the real university of this existence.

Now he begins the same life which all along his childhood years he has seen his father living. He hangs around the street corners and bars, coming home God knows when; and for a change now and then he beats the broken-down being which was once his mother, curses God and the world, and at length is convicted of some particular offense and sent to a house of correction.

There he receives his last polish.

And his dear bourgeois fellow men are utterly amazed at the lack of "national enthusiasm" in this young "citizen."

Day by day, in the theater and in the movies, in backstairs literature and the

> *yellow press, they see the poison poured into the people by bucketfuls, and then they are amazed at the low "moral content," the "national indifference," of the masses of the people.*

It seems unlikely Hitler came close to any such family in Vienna; at the time he was living outside history, in the sense that we have no eyewitness accounts of his life then, firstly in a room on his own for a year, then in the weeks and months of homelessnesss before his appearance at the flophouse, when it seems reasonable to assume he was sleeping rough in the parks rather than in some overcrowded basement lodging with a family he did not know. His description is an example, a concretization of something otherwise abstract, the decline of working-class youth in the face of social circumstances. Hitler provides many examples throughout *Mein Kampf*, though practically no narrative such as this, and certainly he never seems to empathize with his examples the way he does here, where moreover he appeals to the reader's sympathies in a way that seeems quite out of keeping with the tone of the book as a whole. There is also an element of identification.

Ian Kershaw suggests there might be a touch of autobiography here, writing:

> *A passage in* Mein Kampf, *in which Hitler ostensibly describes the conditions in a worker's family where the children have to witness drunken beatings of their mother by their father, may well have drawn in part on his own childhood experiences. What the legacy of all this was for the way Adolf's character developed must remain a matter for speculation. That its impact was profound is hard to doubt.*

If indeed he is giving vent to experiences from his own childhood here, as if under cover of the example's neutrality he somehow were able to write about himself, then it is the only instance that occurs.

Respect for human life need not necessarily be diminished by the baseness of what Hitler saw in Vienna, though this may certainly happen, and apparently did so in Hitler's case, even though he clearly states in *Mein Kampf* that it did not, emphasizing that the individual is without blame in his or her misery, which rather is brought about by a miserable system. But how does he express this?

> *Then, from all the misery and despair, from all the filth and outward degeneration, it was no longer human beings that emerged, but the deplorable results of deplorable laws; and the hardship of my own life, no easier than the others, preserved me from capitulating in tearful sentimentality to the degenerate products of this process of development.*

This is a treacherous statement, typical not only of Hitler but of the times. By saying it is not the fault of the individual that he or she has become brutalized, but of the system within which the individual exists, one thereby expresses a humanistic attitude by which it is emphasized that it is the conditions under which the people live that are unfit and wretched, rather than people themselves. However, one consequence of this is that the individual is thereby seen to be a manifestation of class, and if class is the important category here, then the life of the individual diminishes in value, being seen in relation to the common goal. Not the face or the name, but the mass and the number. The reduction or absorption of the individual by the mass was indeed a new phenomenon, a direct and highly perceptible result of industrialization and urbanization: hordes of poor, in which the individual was an expression not of itself but its poverty; droves of workers filing in and out of factory gates in the mornings and evenings; armies of protesters taking to the streets, converging into surging crowds marching on the squares and parks. Baudelaire was fascinated by the city's rivers of people in which the dandy so to speak bathed, Chaplin juxtaposes herded sheep with workers milling toward a factory in *Modern Times*, and Hamsun, primarily and in everything the individualist and therefore never one to hold the worker in contempt, only the mass in which the worker himself was everyone and no one, the rabble, had his protagonist in the 1920s, August, come to a grisly end, swept under by a tide of sheep. A recurring motif in the literature of the Weimar Republic was the human mass, and a frequently employed perspective was that of remoteness, in which the human world seemed to consist of busy swarms of insects or great flocks of teeming animals. The reduction of the human that such a perspective entailed was not unambiguous, since at this time, perhaps more than any other, the power of the masses and the potential they held for change began to be understood.

Another consequence of the mass perspective is that it propels the human in the direction of biology, the biological human. Jack London's urban exploration of 1903 construed man as a cow, and in describing how the ghetto is constantly drained of its best stock he uses for his metaphor the image of blood being drawn from the body. This was a common way of thinking, such metaphors were in frequent usage, no one found them to be suspect, no one was anxious about their use, as yet they were unladen with cruelty, still neutral in a way. The fact that blood became the great symbol of the national socialist movement has to do with man as a mass as well as with man as biology, for blood is the same for all of us, the same blood in the rich as in the poor, in the educated as in the uneducated, and in its being bound up with the people, *das Volk*, whose institutional expression was the nation-state, blood moreover separated out those who did not belong, according to the racial theory of the day, which again was in no way frowned upon, issuing as it did from those most elevated seats of learning, the universities.

Hitler never formulated any ideological manifesto apart from what may be gleaned from the various reasonings, assertions, and analyses that go to make up *Mein Kampf*, and which in actual fact cannot be extracted from it without turning them into something else, for the most unusual aspect of the book is that it is so characterized by impulsive notions, so inextricably bound up with the temperament of its author and with its time by virtue of the psychology that is transported backward and forward throughout its pages, and also so intent on building up a persona by way of this peculiar plainsong, as we might call it, of indignation, self-assertion, and obdurate resentment, that any superstructure would ring false, so no, there is no superstructure here, nor any kind of consolidated whole, the sheer centrifugal force of pettiness and rhetorical crudeness being so strong as to prevent this.

Language, more so than the image, is intimately connected with the social environment, and while the Nazis' meticulous orchestrations were able to mobilize the seductive power that lies in the mythological and in the past, and while they managed to make tangible the idea of the nation as rendering each and every individual significant, Hitler's own language is stuck in prosaic experience, which is to say the hum and sputter of the linguistic reality that surrounded him in Vienna, where for instance anti-Jewish sentiment was rife in the press, and where the air was thick with political agitation and propaganda as if the great political issues of the day had been taken out into the streets and deprived of any Olympian perspective, construed there as manifestations of the own, the local, the private: What are the Czechs doing here? What are the Jews doing here? The housing situation is critical, poverty rampant, inflation spiraling. There are mass protests and riots, windows and streetlights are smashed, trams and motor cars vandalized, troops are deployed, violence spreads through the workers' districts. What will happen if a revolution comes? The violence escalates, tangibly at street level, in clashes between police and protesters, police and homeless, police and the poor, and within families, but also at the structural level, in the shape of a societal order that looks after the well-to-do and completely ignores everyone else. Parliament has ceased to function and is in a state of near-dissolution; with its myriad of political parties from the disparate countries and cultures of the Dual Monarchy it can barely muster a quorum, representatives fighting for attention with whistles, children's trumpets, and rattles, Hamann writes, as indeed Hitler himself witnessed during his first year in Vienna, when he would often drag Kubizek along with him to spend entire days in the parliament, barely able to contain his excitement, according to his friend. Hitler immerses himself in political reading, mostly newspapers, pamphlets, and journals, and it is in the secondary, popularized form he becomes familiar with the works of some of the great and most controversial thinkers of the age, such as Darwin, Nietzsche, Chamberlain, and Schopenhauer, so Hamann tells us. Inherent in the zeitgeist was dwindling esteem for academia and scientific knowledge, while idiosyncratic and autodidactic thinkers seething with distrust of the establishment flourished, and what we know of Hitler's preferences at the time, of which he later offers glimpses, points, according to Hamann, almost exclusively in the direction of such unorthodox, unscientific renegade figures. So in the year he lived alone in his room, socializing with not a soul, we can assume theirs were the works he read, and without academic or even human context of any sort everything was then down to his own judgment and instinct, and this lack of opportunity for correction was perhaps the most characteristic aspect of his private world of thought. What few books he might have owned must have been sold when his money ran out, because when Hanisch encounters him in Meidling in December 1909 he owns nothing but the clothes on his back.

That evening, when after a year and a half hidden from the light of history he once more steps into it by joining the line outside a flophouse two and a half hours on foot from the city center, thereby to have his name registered in the police archive, tired, cold, and hungry, in a shabby purple suit, pale and thin, twenty years old, with eyes that in Kubizek's words dominated his features with the piercing look Kubizek's mother found almost frightening, he is not the all of everyone, nor is he the nothing of no one, for though he is unimportant in the eyes of others, to all intents and purposes socially nonexistent, there is no reason to believe that the grandiosity of his self-image, this boundless belief in his own abilities, has been entirely lost. Weakened it must surely have been, however, for this is the nadir of his life, quite intolerable for a young man of Hitler's self-confidence and pride, yet in the picture Hanisch paints of him he appears meek and without resistance.

The hostel plays an important social role, a source of information about places to keep warm in the day and sleep at night, favorable begging pitches and possible openings as to a chance of work. To Hitler, Hanisch became a kind of helper; they began to hang out together. In the daytime they would look for work, in the evenings they bedded down in one of the establishments that existed, a night shelter in Edberg, for instance, and another in Favoriten, perhaps then to return to Meidling again. According to Hanisch Hitler was unsuited to physical labor; once, some men were needed for ditch digging, but Hanisch advised him against it, realizing it would be too much for him. Instead, Hitler hung around the railway station offering to carry luggage for people, or, when winter came, he stood in line to shovel snow, though without a winter coat, freezing and coughing miserably – he did this only a few times, Hanisch reports. So helpless and frail was he that he was even considered poor compared to the other destitutes who at least could labor for a day's wages. Hitler "thought of all sorts of jobs, but he was much too weak for hard physical work."

This is in stark contrast to Hitler's own account of this period in *Mein Kampf*.

> *The actual business of finding work was, as a rule, not hard for me, since I was not a skilled craftsman, but was obliged to seek my daily bread as a so-called helper and sometimes as a casual laborer.*
>
> *I adopted the attitude of all those who shake the dust of Europe from their feet with the irrevocable intention of founding a new existence in the New World and conquering a new home. Released from all the old, paralyzing ideas of profession and position, environment and tradition, they snatch at every livelihood that offers itself, grasp at every sort of work, progressing step-by-step to the realization that honest labor, no matter of what sort, disgraces no one. I, too, was determined to leap into this new world, with both feet, and fight my way through.*
>
> *I soon learned that there was always some kind of work to be had, but equally soon I found out how easy it was to lose it.*
>
> *The uncertainty of earning my daily bread soon seemed to me one of the darkest sides of my new life.*

This may not be untrue, but knowing that he earned money carrying luggage at the railway station and shoveling snow, a young man who in his adult life so far has set his sights exclusively on becoming an artist, but has failed and withdrawn from all human company, tormented and grossly humiliated, a loser in the eyes of all others, the comparison with the pioneers in America, who worked the soil and made fields and built houses, seems eccentric to say the least. But this is what *Mein Kampf* is like: Hitler construes his poverty in words that fall sorely short of its actual consequences, yet rather than denying it he instead turns it into something immensely powerful and productive, weaving it into a political viewpoint that finds much of its force in, and indeed practically bases itself on, this distortion of his life.

A person such as this, in whom a pervasive sense of inner nobility buffers all outer abjection, was of course the main character in Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger*, published seventeen years before Hitler's own wretchedness in Vienna. Like Hitler, Hamsun's character exists from hand to mouth in a city where he knows no one, has no friends, no job or income of any sort other than the money he occasionally earns writing a piece for a newspaper. He harbors the ambition of becoming a writer, the idea of which is the only thing that keeps him going. Applying for work at a fire station he is met with rejection, and subsequently makes no further effort to find a job, instead spending his days drifting about the streets, trying to write, trying to think, moving to increasingly shabbier lodgings, disgusted by the poverty that surrounds him. He never mentions the place he grew up, his childhood or youth, his parents, brothers, or sisters, it is as if they do not exist. He is himself only, and though in the profoundest material need, he never once doubts himself.

Hitler possessed the same self-belief and some measure of the same feverish imagination; at the hostel in Meidling he is reported by Hanisch to have claimed that science would soon eliminate the force of gravity from objects, allowing even the heaviest iron blocks to be moved from place to place without difficulty, and that people would in future nourish themselves with pills alone.

His mode of survival too is highly reminiscent of Hamsun's hero; not short pieces in the newspapers, but small paintings he sells in inns and drinking establishments.

Selling paintings was Hanisch's idea. Hitler lied and told him he had attended the Academy. Hanisch suggested he paint to earn a living. Hitler buys the necessaries and starts work; since the shelters are overcrowded he sits painting at cafés while Hanisch hawks the canvases around. They do brisk business and before long can move into a new, permanent men's hostel a cut above the ones for the very poorest; here they pay a modest sum each week for a small private cubicle with a bed and a daily meal. The hostel is big, housing some five hundred residents, for some it's a permanent home, though for most a temporary measure. About 70 percent of the residents are under the age of thirty-five. Seventy percent are workers and tradesmen, the remainder coachmen, shop assistants, waiters, gardeners, unskilled men, and unemployed, with a smattering of fallen aristocrats, unsuccessful artists, divorcés and bankrupts, Hamann writes. The ethnic backgrounds represented were quite as diverse. Hitler lived for three years in this environment. He had his own cubicle, where he could relax between the hours of eight in the evening and nine in the morning. There was a dining room and two reading rooms, one for smokers, one for nonsmokers. There were newspapers and a small library for the use of the residents, where Hitler according to Hanisch spent most of his time. He would read the papers in the mornings, paint during the day, and read in the evenings, provided he was not attending one of the many public debates and discussions that still went on all around the city, where the political challenges were so great and so conspicuous. Selling his canvases meant Hitler and Hanisch made just enough money to pay for rent and food, though not enough for clothes, and by Hanisch's account Hitler kept his coat on indoors for a period, having a hole in the seat of his trousers and no shirt to cover it. To make ends meet Hitler needed to paint a picture a day. Hanisch kept him to the grindstone, Hitler eventually becoming so annoyed with him that after a year and a half, in June 1910, he turned to another occupant, Josef Neumann, and asked him to take over the sale of his pictures. Hitler had previously disappeared from the hostel for a whole week in the company of Neumann without informing Hanisch and was obviously quite friendly with him. Liljegren writes that they toured the art galleries together.

Eleven years Hitler's senior, Neumann was, moreover, a Jew, so if Hitler did hold any anti-Semitic views at this stage they most certainly cannot have featured as prominently in his mind as they would later. Nothing suggests that he did. His political views were, however, nationalistic, he was against the Social Democrats, and anti-Marxist, and according to Hanisch held the workers in low esteem, saying repeatedly that they were "an indolent mass that cared about nothing but eating, drinking, and women," in other words possessing no sense of life's finer cultural values, interested only in its material level. Yet one must assume Hitler's own self-image at this time to have been somewhat muddled; certainly he painted, in the region of seven or eight hundred pictures during the period, but there is little reason to believe he saw any prestige at all in what was entirely a matter of earning money for his survival; in 1939 he would prohibit their continued sale, presumably embarrassed and unpleasantly affected by their circulation.

But if he was not an artist, not an architect, not a worker, and not a layabout, what was he then? Did he consider this to be a gap, an interlude while waiting for better times? And what did he expect such times to bring?

What separates Hamsun's young alter ego in *Hunger* from Hitler is that Hamsun would later write the book he imagined he would and break through as a writer, whereas in Hitler's case nothing happens. Why not? For want of talent? For want of drive? Was he not strong enough to cope with the lack of artistic environment his marginalization entailed? Did he give up and allow himself to drift aimlessly wherever his fortunes might take him?

His youthful reveries about art were perhaps more to do with the life of the artist than with art as such; in contrast to the civil servant, the artist's life is an expression of the self, a person is an artist by virtue of being that self, with that particular talent, and such a thought must surely have appealed to him. He saw no need to work for the sake of achievement, it was sufficient simply to be the person he was. Only one figure could transcend the rigid framework of bourgeois culture and elevate himself above it, one figure of whom this moreover was expected, and that figure was the genius. The one against the mass's many. This was an idea born of the understanding that the one should manage the culture of the many, and this by its idealization, by evoking the sense of there being something the many could reach out and long for, by distilling the insights of the many into one: such is our life in this world. This is the mandate of Goethe and Wagner. What happened in art at the end of the nineteenth century was that this figure, the artist genius, altered character. The one no longer represented the all, but went against them. An example is Munch. He went beyond the social world – not positively, but negatively. He was met with scorn and disdain. To do this, to not be a part of the all but to express his particular self, which so deviated from the accepted mainstream, he had to either go against it, which required enormous strength, or be unattached to it. In Munch's case, as in the case of many artists, he chose to be unattached, living for long periods of his life within himself, having little or no contact with family and practically no friends. Only then could he go beyond, for Munch was not Hans Jæger, and lacked his strength and will. Jæger lived in the social world, cavorted with the social world, went to the wall in the social world. Munch turned away, turned in, painted. Such solitude and lack of social attachment was not dissimilar to the way Hitler was living during this period of his life, but in Hitler's case this transgression of the bourgeois was only social in nature, not artistic. On the contrary, his aesthetic was identical with that of bourgeois culture, sharing with it the imperative that art should be splendid, beautiful, ideal.

The foremost shaper of such a conception of art, to many still so obvious as to resemble a law, was perhaps G. E. Lessing, who put the idea into words in his *Laocoon*, originally published in 1766, in which he writes of the difference between ugliness and beauty in art. The ugly form "wounds our sight, offends our sense of order and harmony, and excites aversion without regard to the actual existence of the object in which we perceive it." Lessing divides art into two: imitative art, which seeks to reproduce reality the way it is, and art that strives for beauty. "Painting as imitative skill can express ugliness; painting as a fine art will not express it. In the former capacity its sphere extends over all visible objects; in the latter it confines itself to those which produce agreeable impressions." To Lessing's mind, ugliness in art was a threat also to order and harmony in society as a whole, and he wished to forbid representation of ugliness altogether in favor exclusively of art that presented beauty. "The object of art . . . is pleasure, and pleasure is not indispensable. What kind and what degree of pleasure shall be permitted may justly depend on the law-giver."

With the advent of realism in the middle of the nineteenth century, which represented ugliness as well as beauty, the hideous as well as the sublime, Lessing's view of art fell into decline, though no more so than that the bourgeoisie reacted with repugnance and rage at the direction in which painting was going at the turn of the century, which they believed had nothing to do with art, since it did not elevate or make agreeable, but was the expression merely of the sick mind of the artist.

Hitler, who wished to transcend the bourgeois by following the path of genius, almost brims over with the same ideas:

> *Thus, the saddest thing about the state of our whole culture of the pre-War period was not only the total impotence of artistic and cultural creative power in general, but the hatred with which the memory of the greater past was besmirched and effaced. In nearly all fields of art, especially in the theater and literature, we began around the turn of the century to produce less that was new and significant, but to disparage the best of the old work and represent it as inferior and surpassed; as though this epoch of the most humiliating inferiority could surpass anything at all. And from this effort to remove the past from the eyes of the present, the evil intent of the apostles of the future could clearly and distinctly be seen. By this it should have been recognized that these were no new, even if false, cultural conceptions, but a process of destroying all culture, paving the way for a stultification of healthy artistic feeling: the spiritual preparation of political Bolshevism. For if the age of Pericles seems embodied in the Parthenon, the Bolshevistic present is embodied in a cubist monstrosity.*

In 1907 and 1908, when Hitler applied for admission to the Academy, painting was exploring its forms of expression in hitherto unprecedented ways, as for instance in the Expressionism of Munch, Kirchner, and Nolde, the Fauvism of Matisse, Derain, and Vlaminck, the Cubism of Braque and Picasso, the radical simplification and nascent abstractions of Burliuk and Kandinsky, the Primitivism of Jawlensky, to mention but a few examples of the hugely radical currents that ran through European culture of the day, Vienna being one if its most important cities.

The question that arises is of the kind of relationship that exists between the contemporary age and its art, whether art is simply a weather vane occupation, a fashionable way of life whose purpose is to do what everyone else is doing, though not "everyone else" in the sense of anyone at all, but a defining elite, the happy few, the standard-bearers of the arts, those on everyone's lips in all the cafés, culture then being a locus of ingratiation?

Hitler looked on these currents as a sign of decay; the latest thing, the new, the next has nothing to do with art in Hitler's eyes, to him art is the expression of something everlasting and timeless. He shows no understanding of how inextricably the everlasting and the timeless in art is bound up with the contemporary and the social, or how crucial that dynamic, between what is living and what is dead, is to its power of expression and to its significance, and the reasons for this failure to comprehend are presumably the same ones as make it impossible for him to conceal the low and small-minded aspects of his person in his writing, which is to say a poorly developed sense of form, according to which content and the feelings it gives rise to are the only things of real importance.

But his failure as an artist is not down to being out of touch with the zeitgeist. That none of these currents is present in Hitler's pictures is hardly surprising and tells us little else about him other than that he was the product of the lower middle class and excluded from what was happening at the vortex of the culture, or else he excluded himself, in that he chose to adhere so firmly to the preferences of his class, these not yet having been deemed void nor necessarily entirely forsaken; the Academy to which he sought entrance, held in such great esteem, guarded the same neoclassicist and realistic aesthetic that formed the basis of his own painting. That he was not accepted to study there would seem more due to the lack of expressive force in his painting, the almost exclusively decorative nature of his canvases, which possess no element of self. On the other hand he was only seventeen years old when he applied there, and only a couple of years older when he was painting his other pictures. A relevant comparison could be Hamsun's early attempts at the novel, for instance, *Bjørger*, which in the same kind of way lacks originality and is without soul, an image of what its author saw to be literature, where the idea of the literary stands between himself and the world, much as the way Hitler's idea of what art was and should be stood between him and what he painted. The presence of such an idea is destructive enough in itself, but in Hitler's and Hamsun's cases its destructive thrust was compounded by its provincial and homely nature. Their social points of departure were not dissimilar, though Hamsun was from more humble circumstances by far, his parents near destitute, with no education, and he himself, in contrast to Hitler, had not even finished school. Hamsun taught himself everything, Hitler did too, but whereas Hitler gave up painting, Hamsun stuck at his writing, eventually finding success as a novelist. What Hitler lacked as a painter and Hamsun gained for himself as a writer was intimacy with the form of his art. Hitler's weakness as a painter was that he found no way of expressing his own inner being, or else lacked the will to address it, and perhaps this was the reason he gave up and settled for painting as a simple means of making ends meet.

But what actually was his own inner being?

The writer Ernst Jünger, Hitler's senior by ten years, who came from a considerably more elevated social background, and who in the interwar years came out on the extreme antiliberal and antidemocratic right, published a number of essays in the Nazi Party journal, writing as follows in 1929:

> *And I also know that my basic experience, what finds expression through life's events, is the typical experience of my generation, a variation on the motif of the times, an exotic species perhaps, but one that still displays the characteristics of the genus.*

Reading biographies of the period, patterns emerge, certain recurrent connections and types, perhaps this is what Jünger means by "a variation on the motif of the times," for the very structure of society and the views by which it is characterized set up spaces that are astonishingly alike, and those who inhabit them go through the same experiences, which become typical for them. Hitler was not the only person in the Habsburg Empire with an authoritarian father and a loving mother, with siblings who perished and dreams of becoming a metropolitan artist. No, the age was full of them. An example is Alfred Kubin, born in 1877, twelve years before Hitler, universe, the impenetrability of bureaucractic process, its incessant deferments and adjournments, so vague and slippery and unassailable, and the authority of the father figure, are of course all important themes in Kafka.

Kafka was six years younger than Kubin and six years older than Hitler, but Prague belonged within the same empire, and as a native speaker of German Kafka related to the same culture as both Kubin and Hitler. He refers to Kubin several times in his diaries. On September 26, 1911, for instance, he writes of Kubin's meeting with Hamsun.

> *The artist Kubin recommends Regulin as a laxative, a powdered seaweed that swells up in the bowels, shakes them up, is thus effective mechanically in contrast to the unhealthy chemical effect of other laxatives which just tear through the excrement and leave it hanging on the walls of the bowels. He met Hamsun at Langen. He (Hamsun) grins mockingly for no reason. During the conversation, without interrupting it, he put one foot on his knee, took a large pair of scissors from the table, and trimmed the frayed edges of his trousers. Shabbily dressed, with one or so rather expensive details, his tie, for example. Stories about an artist's pension in Munich where painters and veterinaries lived (the latters's school was in the neighborhood) and where they acted in such a debauched way that the windows of the house across the way, from which a good view could be had, were rented out. In order to satisfy these spectators, one of the residents in the pension would sometimes jump up on the windowsill in the posture of a monkey and spoon his soup out of the pot. A manufacturer of fraudulent antiques who got the worn effect by means of buckshot and who said of a table: "Now we must drink coffee on it three more times, then it can be shipped off to the Innsbruck Museum." Kubin himself: very strong, but somewhat monotonous facial expression, he describes the most varied things with the same movement of muscles. Looks different in age, size, and strength according to whether he is sitting, standing, wearing just a suit, or an overcoat.*

Kafka read both Kubin and Hamsun, who met each other in Munich in the company of Hamsun's publisher Langen, probably in 1896. Kubin met with the heads of birds, a vast congregation of helmeted soldiers gathered beneath the towering sculpture of an ox, chopped-up animal carcasses, severed heads on stakes, the state depicted as a trundling machine in a field, suicides, dogs frothing at the mouth, a man with his head between a woman's legs, she in a coffin and thin as a skeleton, another is an actual skeleton, though with a pregnant belly rising like the top of an egg. These are fin de siècle pictures, yet they are filled with a horror of the body, with an extravagance and a mood of man as mass that distinguishes them radically from fin de siècle elsewhere, in other countries; Kubin would have been unthinkable in England, for instance, and also in America, and while some of his pictures come close to the French pastelist Odilon Redon, their mood is nonetheless radically different, finding their like only in other areas of German expressionism of the day, with the exception of some of Goya's darkest and most apocalyptic drawings, in which Kubin most likely found inspiration.

Kubin also left his mark on literature, publishing a single novel, *The Other Side*, in 1908. The novel tells of an imaginary realm, a city called Pearl, inhabited by some sixty-five thousand souls, located deep in eastern Uzbekistan, separated from the rest of the world by a vast wall and governed by a godlike figure by the name of Patera. The city's inhabitants have come from all corners of the world, many from sanitoriums and health resorts, particularly sensitive individuals full of mad ideas, hyperreligious, obsessed with reading or gambling, neurasthenics and hysterics; to all intents and purposes homeless, these people have entered into the world of the imagination, of which the city is a physical, tangible manifestation. But the presence of Patera, who rules with an iron fist, makes this dream kingdom more of a sinister underworld, a kingdom of the dead devoid of all hope rather than a haven for the escapist.

Kubin wrote his novel following the death of his father, and the father's presence in the name – Patera so closely resembling *pater* – and the omnipotence of that figure, while remaining so elusive, is of course an image of paternal authority. It is not surprising that Kafka held Kubin in high esteem and was influenced by his work; the dreamlike otherworldliness of his universe, the impenetrability of bureaucractic process, its incessant deferments and adjournments, so vague and slippery and unassailable, and the authority of the father figure, are of course all important themes in Kafka.

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Jünger and corresponded with him for a decade, while Hamsun met Hitler in 1943, penning his infamous obituary of him in May 1945. Of these figures, Hamsun hailed from the lowest social rank and from the very periphery of Europe, and belonged moreover to the previous generation, whereas of the others, all of whom were of the same generation and belonged to the same language area, Hitler was from the lowest social rank, with Kubin next above him, then Kafka, then Jünger, who as the son of a factory owner hailed from society's upper echelons. When it came to that generation's overriding experience, the First World War, Hitler and Jünger had served at the front in the German army, Hitler as a corporal and orderly, Jünger as a lieutenant in the infantry, whereas Kafka and Kubin were both exempt from service. When the Nazis were elected into the Reichstag, Hitler offered Jünger a seat in the parliament, which he declined. Hitler, Jünger, Kubin, and Hamsun were right-wing radicals, a fact that influenced their writings to various degrees, whereas Kafka kept himself well out of politics, well out of the sphere of the ideological, this being obvious in his diaries, which reveal him to be as near-dissolved in the trivialities of the quotidian as to quote Kubin's reference to "laxatives which just tear through the excrement and leave it hanging on the walls of the bowels," something neither Hitler, Jünger, Kubin, nor Hamsun could ever have put to paper. That ease within unease, the proximity to his own life in its truest nature, from where everything, even the most imaginative of events, issues, makes his writings much more valid beyond his time than both Jünger's and Kubin's, though perhaps not Hamsun's, whom he admired. In character and temperament Hitler and Hamsun were not unlike each other, and are similar particularly in their being self-made and in the grandiosity of their self-images, though Hamsun, who rose from quite impossible beginnings, was a much more sympathetic social being and an incomparably greater artistic talent. When he met Hitler, a couple of years before the latter's downfall, he saw him as his equal and treated him as any other person he respected, without trepidation or fear, which to Hitler was an affront, only Göring was permitted to challenge him and never without being subjected to his wrath, albeit always forgiven, and Hitler was enraged by the time Hamsun left. Hamsun was from the generation of Hitler's father and was quite as stubborn and authoritarian, so it is hardly odd that Hitler should become so enraged. Kafka, Hitler, and Kubin all struggled with the authority of their fathers, they were loners, tormented to a greater or lesser extent by the fear of contact and, each in his own way, by inhibitions relating to women. Moreover, for all their individuality, all three belonged to the same cultural type. Psychology is also epochal, the mind too has its directions of style, which change through the years.

Hitler was a resident of the Vienna hostel for three years. That he stayed there so long does not mean he found it pleasant; the moment he reached the age of twenty-four and received the final installment of his father's inheritance he went into town, bought himself new clothes, collected his scant possessions, and boarded a train for Munich. The resoluteness of his actions would seem to indicate that he had considered the matter for some time and decided that as soon as he got the money he would leave the city which he would gradually come to despise as if it were the very source of his ill fortune. Traveling with him on the train, which he presumably hoped was going to take him to a new and more prosperous life in the country he loved, at the same time as allowing him to avoid an imminent call-up to the Austrian army, was an acquaintance from the hostel, Rudolf Häusler, a nineteen-year-old who shared Hitler's interest in art, a kind of Kubizek Junior he could lecture and impress, and whose parents, which is to say his mother, took a liking to him. They rented a room together in Munich, in the house of the Popp family, where Hitler registered as an "architectural painter."

There he carried on the life he had lived in Vienna: as soon as his inheritance was spent he began to paint again, wandering the beer halls in the evenings to sell his canvases. Häusler moved out after a few months, leaving Hitler to a life on his own; on the occasions he was invited to supper with the Popp family he declined. In Toland's account, Frau Popp found him an "Austrian charmer," though something of an enigma too: "You couldn't tell what he was thinking," she would later state. Nor could she recall Hitler ever receiving visitors in his room. He would paint in the daytime and read at nights. Frau Popp asked him once what his books had to do with painting, to which he replied, "Dear Frau Popp, does anyone know what is and what isn't likely to be of use to him in life?"

He lived like this for a year in Munich and then the war broke out. Hitler joined up the same day and was sent to the trenches on the French front, where he would remain for four years.

It changed everything.

One of the most famous images of Hitler is from those same days in the summer of 1914. He is in the midst of a great crowd on Munich's Odeonsplatz, beaming a huge smile, one of thousands who have gathered there following the declaration of war on August 2, his face recognized and enlarged in the 1930s after he became Reich chancellor of Germany, but at the time utterly anonymous. A young man wearing a white shirt and dark suit, lifting his hat in the air, hair parted at the side, cheekbones pronounced, sporting a thick black moustache, eyes plainly gleaming with elation. It is a very suggestive photograph, for he is merely one of the crowd, a face among thousands, a fate among thousands, full of the collective zeal that swept through the cities, towns, and villages of Europe in that summer of 1914. To himself, naturally, he was everything, immersed in his life and destiny, a twenty-five-year-old semi-artist with no family and no friends, living in Munich with no direction but with an inner fire now ignited, fed by the fuel of high politics which had so interested him since early youth and by the declaration of war that so unexpectedly provides him and every other member of his generation with the opportunity to act in accordance with the ideals and dreams they have felt so fiercely from as far back as childhood and which bourgeois society, centered as it was around preservation and security, business and commerce, had until then denied them.

The European summer of 1914 was exceptionally balmy, an area of high pressure lingering over the continent for months. Under blue skies and a blazing sun the forests lay "dark and profuse in their tender green," writes

Stefan Zweig, who found himself in the small town of Baden outside Vienna when news of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria filtered through. The impression he gives is of carefree abandon. What the war that now lies ahead will bring, no one yet knows, and even if they did, even if they had sensed that it would proceed with such destructive force as to wipe out almost an entire generation of European men, the darkness in which the future lay shrouded would not have endured more than fleetingly in the lethargic, time-steeped tranquillity that emanated from all things: the leafy trees that lined the rivers, the undulating green fields, the cool brick of the village churches, whose lazy bells laid their acoustic cloaks over the old houses, the way Marcel Proust describes life in the French countryside in a book that came out the year before. Ruminating cattle and sheep, horse-drawn carts, the smoke of steam locomotives billowing into the sky. The smell of warm earth and warm grass, the tart, dry taste of cold white wine or the bitter-sweet of cool ale sipped under the parasols of a hotel patio or in the shade of a leafy tree at the side of a road. The dust of the road, the dark currents of the river which sweeps under the bridge, the silvery glimpses of darting fish. The way the summer connects itself to all previous summers, the body and weight of repetition exuded by the landscape, its structures and people in the social domain, making any radical upheaval so hard if not impossible to imagine, though it lies but weeks ahead.

Stefan Zweig leaves Baden and travels to Le Coq, a small seaside resort on the Belgian North Sea coast. People are just as carefree there, he writes; they doze on the beach and soak up the sun, they bathe in the sea, the children fly kites, young people dance on the dykes in the evenings. He moves on to visit a friend, the painter Verhaeren, tension mounts, the threat of war ever growing.

> *At once an icy wind of fear blew over the beach and swept it bare. People by the thousands left the hotels and stormed the trains, and even the most optimistic began to pack their bags with speed.*

Austria declares war on Serbia, Zweig is on the last train into Germany. On the German side of the border the train suddenly comes to a halt in the darkness. The edgy passengers peer through the windows and see cargo trains passing one after another; beneath the tarpaulins they glimpse the ominous outlines of cannon. Zweig goes on:

> *The next morning I was in Austria. In every station placards had been put up announcing general mobilization. The trains were filled with fresh recruits, banners were flying, music sounded, and in Vienna I found the entire city in a tumult. The first shock at the news of war – the war that no one, people or government had wanted – the war which had slipped, much against their will, out of the clumsy hands of the diplomats who had been bluffing and toying with it, had suddenly been transformed into enthusiasm. There were parades in the street, flags, ribbons, and music burst forth everywhere, young recruits were marching triumpantly, their faces lighting up at the cheering – they, the John Does and Richard Roes who usually go unnoticed and uncelebrated.*
>
> *And to be truthful, I must acknowledge that there was a majestic, rapturous, and even seductive something in this first outbreak of the people from which one could escape only with difficulty. And in spite of all my hatred and aversion for war, I should not like to have missed the memory of those first days. As never before, thousands and hundreds of thousands felt what they should have felt in peacetime, that they belonged together.*

That Zweig, a pacifist all his life, would not have wanted to miss the sense of togetherness that pervaded those first days of August 1914 is telling indeed of the force with which the war swept through the land. Adolf Hitler was not the only one to lift his hat in joy, eyes gleaming, when the declaration came. The enthusiasm was all over Europe, the war was welcomed and celebrated by almost all. The Swedish historian of ideas Svante Nordin, who in his book *The Philosophers' War* examines the stance of the intellectual community in respect to the war and its outbreak, notes Sigmund Freud's words of July 26 in Vienna: ". . . for the first time for thirty years I feel myself an

Austrian and feel like giving this not very hopeful Empire another chance. Morale everywhere is excellent."

On July 27, the British ambassador in Vienna reported: "This country has gone wild at the prospect of war with Serbia, and its postponement or prevention would undoubtedly be a great disappointment."

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, ten years older than Hitler, also a native of Austria-Hungary, applauded the war's outbreak:

> *For the first time I see you rising,*
> *hearsaid, remote, incredible War God*

The otherwise levelheaded and unsentimental Thomas Mann, fourteen years Hitler's senior, wrote the following of those same days some six months later:

> *War! It was purification, liberation that we experienced, and an enormous hope . . . It set the hearts of poets aflame . . . How should the artist, the soldier in the artist, not have praised God for the collapse of a world of peace that he had his fill, so completely his fill of?*

Kafka too got carried away. Though on the day of the war's outbreak his diary notes matter-of-factly, "Germany has declared war on Russia. Swimming in the afternoon," four days later he writes, "I discover in myself nothing but pettiness, indecision, envy, and hatred against those who are fighting and whom I passionately wish everything ill," then, in a letter to Felice seven months later, "In addition, I mostly suffer from the war because I myself am taking no part."

Of course, not everyone was as enthusiastic about the war. Kafka's friend Max Brod, five years Hitler's senior, reflecting on the war's outbreak, despaired at the apolitical indifference that had allowed it to catch them unawares:

> *War to us was simply a crazy idea, of a piece with, say, the perpetual motion machine or the fountain of youth . . . We were a spoiled generation, spoiled by nearly fifty years of peace that had made us lose sight of mankind's worst scourge. No one with any self-esteem ever got involved in politics. Arguments about Wagner's music, about the foundations of Judaism and Christianity, about Impressionist painting and the like seemed infinitely more important . . . And now, overnight, peace had suddenly collapsed. We were quite simply stupid . . . not even pacifists, because pacifism at least presupposes a notion of there being such a thing as war, and of the need to fight against it.*

This indifference was widespread, not least in academic circles, where an intellectual such as Martin Heidegger, born in the same year as Hitler and Wittgenstein, making him twenty-five years old when the war broke out, carried on regardless, immersed in debates about nominalism in medieval philosophy.

One of his student friends, Ludwig Marcuse, described the mood at the university in Freiburg during those days in July 1914 in the following way, as cited by Safranski in his Heidegger biography:

> *Toward the end of July I encountered one of my most respectable seminar colleagues, Helmuth Falkenfeld, on Goethestrasse. He said despairingly, "Have you heard what's happened?" I said, full of contempt and resignedly, "I know, Sarajaevo." He said, "Not that, tomorrow Rickert's seminar is canceled." I said, alarmed, "Is he sick?" He said, "No, because of the threatening war." I said, "What's the seminar got to do with the war?" He shrugged sadly.*

Falkenfeld, Safranski writes, is sent to the front only weeks later, from where he sends Marcuse a letter:

> *I continue to be all right, even though the battle in which I participated on October 30 nearly deafened my ears with the roar of twenty-four artillery batteries. Nevertheless . . . I still believe that the third Kantian antonomy is more important than this whole world war and that war is to philosophy as sensuality is to*

> *reason. I simply do not believe that the events of this material world can, even in the least degree, touch upon our transcendental components, and I will not believe it even if a French shell fragment were to tear into my empirical body. Long live transcendental philosophy.*

This indifference toward politics, however, is not the same as that recalled and condemned by Max Brod. Brod was deeply involved in the cultural life of the day and simply dismissed politics as unimportant without thereby turning his back on the world. The apathy of these students was altogether more ideological, they saw philosophy as the antithesis of life in society, a space in which the authentic revealed itself beneath the veneer of the social, outside history. According to George L. Mosse in his book *The Crisis of German Ideology*, academic milieux produced intellectuals "whose ideal was to view the world *sub specie aeternitatis*," which is to say from the perspective of eternity, Schopenhauer's motto. "Their concern was hardly with mundane, day-to-day affairs," Mosse writes.

This fundamental ideological standpoint, that the social, political, and societal were superficial phenomena behind whose pragmatic façade something more important existed, at least potentially, was widespread throughout prewar German culture, which more than anything cried out for essence and unity. It manifested itself in the wild paintings of the expressionists, who in their powerful subjectivity, their powerful primitiveness strived for the life that lay beneath the sheen of civilization and culture, where instinct and basic human drives prevailed. But it came out too in another, almost diametrically opposed orientation, in which the answer to the rising social unrest and instability that had come with industrialization and modernity was sought and focused in overarching, ahistorical notions such as that of the people and the rootedness of culture. Alienation entailed a loss of meaning that could not be offset by the material. If a single idea recurs throughout the mind-set of the age it is a distaste for the pragmatic and what Wagner in an essay called "soulless materialism." Modernity was characterized as rationality, therefore they turned toward what was not rational, not purposeful, but which transcended such tendencies and found meaning in notions considered timeless and nonpragmatic. The people was one such notion, bringing together concepts of home, nature, culture, and religion, against whose immutable core the constant shifts of industrialism and modernity could only flake away, against whose profound depths, evoked by history, mythology, and religion, the entertainment industry and increasing commercialization of the day appeared abjectly shallow and banal.

The infatuation with art that Zweig describes as so strongly affecting his youth, and which also ran through Hitler's teenage years, was not faddish but genuinely meaningful. Wagner, Hölderlin, Rilke, Hofmannsthal, George, all those writers and poets cultivated by German youth, celebrated the great, the divine, the essential, and they lauded death, too, which lay beyond it all. *Stirb und Werde*, die and become – something to die for means something to live for. The people, the earth, the war, the hero, death. The local, the own, the great, the eternal. These were the predominant concepts of German culture prior to the outbreak of World War I, and many of those who saw it coming looked on it as a catharsis, long-awaited and good.

What was singular about the enthusiasm many made manifest was that it was not politically but existentially motivated. Thomas Mann expressed pleasure at the collapse of a peaceful world, so full of loathing. Freud regained his belief in Austria as a nation. Rilke wrote of war being a god. Kafka envied the soldiers who were fighting. Georg Simmel saw the war as a great opportunity for Germany and proclaimed his unconditional love of his homeland. But neither Mann, Freud, Rilke, Kafka, nor Simmel took any part in the war, their enthusiasm was that of the onlooker. Ernst Jünger on the other hand, only nineteen years old when war broke out, joined up as a volunteer like Hitler. He kept a diary throughout, publishing in 1920 perhaps the best book about World War I, *Storm of Steel*. This is how he describes the mood of his generation in the summer of 1914:

> *We had come from lecture halls, school desks, and factory workbenches, and over the brief weeks of training, we had bonded together into one large and enthusiastic group. Grown up in an age of security, we shared a yearning for danger,*

> *for the experience of the extraordinary. We were enraptured by war. We had set out in a rain of flowers, in a drunken atmosphere of blood and roses. Surely the war had to supply us with what we wanted; the great, the overwhelming, the hallowed experience. We thought of it as manly, as action, a merry dueling party on flowered, blood-bedewed meadows. "No finer death in all the world than . . ." Anything to participate, not to have to stay at home!*

The hallowed dream of greatness and glory, this was what the war was about. Carefree dueling on blood-bedewed meadows, this was the vision. In his biography of Ernst Jünger, *Into the Abyss*, Thomas Nevin points to some of the origins of this mind-set, noting essay assignments given to students of the gymnasium schools in the Hanover District in the spring of 1914, topics to be discussed including "The Kaiser's words, 'I am a citizen of the German Reich,' words of pride and duty," "War is as terrible as plagues from heaven, but it is good, it is a fate like them," "How authentic is the saying of Frederick the Great, 'Life means being a warrior'?" "The bow when bent first shows its power," "My favorite hero in the *Nibelungenlied*," "A nation is worthless if it doesn't set everything upon its honor."

Jünger's conceptions of war, Nevin writes, came mainly from his readings of Homer, whose influence was acknowledged by the school's director, Dr. Joseph Riehemann, in his speech to graduating students, who were told that "apart from the light of Christianity, nothing will penetrate your future life with a brighter and warmer glow than Homer's sun."

Europe had been at peace since 1871, and in the war between France and Germany that ended that year, the machine gun as yet to be introduced, transport taking place by means of horse and cart or sailing ship, some 150,000 people lost their lives. In 1914 most believed that this new war would be conducted in much the same way and last no more than a few short months.

*

In the waning summer of 1914 Hitler too was afraid the war would be over before he got there. In *Mein Kampf* he writes:

> *For me, as for every German, there now began the greatest and most unforgettable time of my earthly existence. Compared to the events of this gigantic struggle, everything past receded to shallow nothingness. Precisely in these days, with the tenth anniversary of the mighty event approaching, I think back with proud sadness on those first weeks of our people's heroic struggle, in which Fate graciously allowed me to take part.*
>
> *As though it were yesterday, image after image passes before my eyes. I see myself donning the uniform in the circle of my dear comrades, turning out for the first time, drilling, etc., until the day came for us to march off.*
>
> *A single worry tormented me at that time, me, as so many others: would we not reach the front too late? Time and time again this alone banished all my calm. Thus, in every cause for rejoicing at a new, heroic victory, a slight drop of bitterness was hidden, for every new victory seemed to increase the danger of our coming too late.*

Two weeks after Germany's declaration of war against Russia, Hitler joined the 16th Bavarian Reserve Regiment in Munich, where he underwent a seven-week stint of basic training. Before being moved on to Augsburg for more intensive training, he visited his landlady's family asking them to pass on word to his sister Angela should he fall in battle. In the event that she did not wish to inherit his few possessions, the Popp family would be welcome to them. He hugged the two children, and Frau Popp wept as he left, Liljegren reports. The regiment marched west for some eleven hours in pouring rain, Hitler writing in a letter to Frau Popp that he had spent the night in a stable, soaked to the skin and unable to sleep. The following day's march took thirteen hours, after which they bivouacked in the open, so cold that another sleepless night awaited. Reaching their destination the next day, they were "deathly tired, ready to drop," Toland writes. There, in the camp at Lechfeld, they trained for two weeks, until October 20, when in the evening they boarded the trains that would take them to the front in Flanders. "I'm terribly happy," Hitler wrote to Frau Popp that same day. "After arrival at our destination I will write immediately and give you my address. I hope we get to England."

Mein Kampf tells us nothing of this, no names are mentioned, no faces appear to us, no detail is described. All we have is Hitler and the war he has entered.

> *At last the day came when we left Munich to begin the fulfillment of our duty. For the first time I saw the Rhine as we rode westward along its quiet waters to defend it, the German stream of streams, from the greed of the old enemy. When through the tender veil of the early-morning mist the Niederwald Monument gleamed down upon us in the gentle first rays of the sun, the old "Watch on the Rhine" roared out of the endless transport train into the morning sky, and I felt as though my heart would burst.*
>
> *And then came a damp, cold night in Flanders, through which we marched in silence, and when the day began to emerge from the mists, suddenly an iron greeting came whizzing at us over our heads, and with a sharp report sent the little pellets flying between our ranks, ripping up the wet ground; but even before the little cloud had passed, from two hundred throats the first hurrah rose to meet the first messenger of death. Then a crackling and a roaring, a singing and a howling began, and with feverish eyes each one of us was drawn forward, faster and faster, until suddenly past turnip fields and hedges the fight began, the fight of man against man. And from the distance the strains of a song reached our ears, coming closer and closer, leaping from company to company, and just as Death plunged a busy hand into our ranks, the song reached us too and we passed it along: "Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles, über Alles in der Welt!"*
>
> *Four days later we came back. Even our step had changed. Seventeen-year-old boys now looked like men.*
>
> *The volunteers of the List Regiment may not have learned to fight properly, but they knew how to die like old soldiers.*
>
> *This was the beginning.*

The List Regiment, to which Hitler belonged, numbered 3,600 men on arrival at Lille on October 23. After the first four days of action at Ypres only 611 were left. Five out of six had perished. The risk of being killed during the push forward was considerably greater than the chance of surviving. The mental effect of such losses on those who survive, with comrade after comrade falling in their midst and every minute potentially one's last, is something known only by those who have been to war. The Battle of Ypres was one of the most comprehensive in the war's initial phases; the British in their efforts to break through the German lines there in October and November lost 58,000 men. Writing to an acquaintance by the name of Ernst Hepp in Munich, Hitler describes the first engagements:

> *Now the first shrapnel hisses over and us and explodes at the edge of the forest, splintering trees as if they were straws. We watch with curiosity. We have no idea as yet of the danger. None of us is afraid. Everyone is waiting impatiently for the command, "Forward!" . . . We crawl on our stomachs to the edge of the forest. Above us are howls and hisses, splintered branches and trees surround us. Then again shells explode at the edge of the forest and hurl clouds of stones, earth, and sand into the air, tear the heaviest trees out by their roots, and choke everything in a yellow-green, terribly stinking steam. We cannot lie here forever, and if we have to fall in battle, it's better to be killed outside . . . Four times we advance and have to go back; from my whole batch only one remains beside me, finally he also falls. A shot tears off my right coat sleeve, but like a miracle I remain safe and alive. At 2 o'clock we finally go forward for the fifth time, and this time we occupy the edge of the forest and the farms.*

The regimental commander is killed and his deputy seriously wounded. The new commander, Lieutenant Colonel Engelhardt, taking Hitler and another man with him, ventures forward to observe the enemy lines. Detected, they are sprayed with machine-gun fire, Hitler and the other man pulling Engelhardt to safety in a ditch. A thankful Engelhardt tells them he intends recommending the two men for the Iron Cross, but the very next day he is badly wounded when the regimental headquarters tent takes a direct hit from a British grenade, killing three and wounding three of its occupants. Only moments earlier, Hitler, together with three other enlisted men, had been told to vacate the tent to make way for four company commanders, as a result of which perhaps he was saved. "It was the most terrible moment of my life," Hitler would write to Hepp. "We all worshipped Lieutenant Colonel Engelhardt."

The new adjutant, Lieutenant Wiedeman, recommends Hitler for the Iron Cross, First Class. The recommendation is turned down, but Hitler is instead decorated with the second-class award, prompting him again to write to Herr Popp, this time with news of the happiest day of his life. "Unfortunately, my comrades who also earned it are mostly all dead." He asks Popp to save newspaper reports of the battle. He is promoted to the rank of corporal and begins his duties as an orderly, a position he holds throughout the four years of the war. His job is to take dispatches from regimental headquarters to the soldiers in the front line. It is a perilous assignment, not only because it involves crossing open land, either by bicycle or on foot, and, unlike the men in the trenches, unprotected by any cover, but also because he is an important target for the enemy. The dangers faced by dispatch runners pale in comparison with those of assault troops, who rush forward across no-man's-land to break into enemy positions, but are considerable nonetheless; Kershaw reports that three of the eight runners attached to the regimental staff were killed and another wounded in a confrontation with French troops on November 15. Where possible, dispatches are sent via two runners, increasing the chances of their reaching the lines. But death is not just in the trenches or between the lines; shells burst everywhere and at any time, in the camps to which the men withdraw for rest, in villages kilometers behind the front and in the various makeshift headquarters that are the domain of the highest-ranking officers.

Of all the depictions of the war in the trenches, Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* is the most closely detailed and therefore also the most appalling, alongside the Englishman Robert Graves's *Goodbye to All That*, which provides a view from the other side. Jünger describes everything at eye level, from the moment he arrives at the front until he leaves it again four years later, and the sense of chaos is never absent from his account; this is a world devoid of any privileged vantage point, a disordered, tumultuous world in which lives are reaped by the minute.

Joining the front in Flanders in December 1914, Jünger is oblivious to what lies ahead, and the eyes by which he sees become ours. His company base is a staging point, Orainville, a village of some fifty houses grouped around a château in parkland. Wide-eyed, he observes the hectic comings and goings of ragged soldiers with weather-beaten faces, the glowing field kitchen with its smell of pea soup, men jingling their mess tins as they wait to eat. He spends the first night in a barn, eating breakfast the next day in a school building, when suddenly they hear a series of dull concussions. The more experienced soldiers rush out, those just arrived follow them without knowing why. There is a curious fluttering and whooshing sound above their heads, those around him cower or fling themselves to the ground. "The whole thing struck me as faintly ridiculous," he writes, "in the way of seeing people doing things one doesn't properly understand." Immediately afterward he sees dark figures emerge onto the empty village street, carrying black bundles on canvas stretchers. "I stared, with a queasy feeling of unreality, at a blood-spattered form with a strangely contorted leg hanging loosely down, wailing 'Help! Help!' as if sudden death still had him by the throat."

This takes place far from the enemy lines, at a place for recreation and rest, and it is Jünger's first experience of the war.

> *It was all so strange, so impersonal. We had barely begun to think about the enemy, that mysterious, treacherous being somewhere. This event, so far beyond anything we had experienced, made such a powerful impression on us that it was difficult to understand what had happened. It was like a ghostly manifestation in broad daylight.*
>
> *A shell had burst high up over the château entrance, and had hurled a cloud of stone and debris into the gateway, just as the occupants, alerted by the first shots, were rushing out. There were thirteen fatalities, including Gebhard, the music master, whom I remembered well from the promenade concerts in Hanover . . . The road was reddened with pools of gore; riddled helmets and*

> *sword belts lay around. The heavy iron château gate was shredded and pierced by the impact of the explosive, the curbstone was spattered with blood. My eyes were drawn to the place as if by a magnet; and a profound change went through me.*

They are moved to the trenches, where life between the fighting is cold, wet, muddy, sleepless, marked by routine, harsh and dull. In a stream only a stone's throw away lie the irretrievable, rotting corpses of soldiers from a French colonial regiment, their skin turned to parchment by the water that flows over them. Exhausted and mostly unused to physical work, Jünger and his comrades dig their trenches still deeper, and the merry dueling on flowered meadows has never been more distant. After four months they take part in their first major battle, at Les Éparges. Shells come down with dull thumps in a clump of firs, and when they get to the spot bloody scraps of cloth and flesh hang from the bushes around the crater, "a strange and dreadful sight that put me in mind of the butcher-bird that spikes its prey on thornbushes."

In the ensuing battle Jünger is wounded for the first time. The artillery fire intensifies, flashing about them, clouding the air with the dust and debris of detonation, splitting the ear with its dull clamor. Jünger describes it all as being as distant and peculiar as events on another planet, and he is unable to distinguish between the Germans' own gunnery and the shells of the enemy, everything is a tumultuous confusion, the wounded lie slumped around him, shrieking and wailing, and the reader can vividly imagine this inferno, so utterly detached from the familiar world, and then suddenly he describes happy, ardent birdsong, as if the birds were inspired or even encouraged by the bombardment, and one understands that the battle is being fought in an ordinary forest, on the edges of an ordinary village, in the middle of an ordinary day.

This brief glimmer of everyday life, continuing as before, proceeding according to its own laws and habits, makes clear to us that this is a construction, that the forest, presently set ablaze, the twittering birds, the sun in the sky and the grass in the fields are nature, and that the wave of unprecedented destruction that takes place within it is civilization, regardless of the savage and primitive gash it gouges in those who fight, regardless of how blind the rain of metal lashing down.

Men have come together at this place, on each side of a hypothetical line, an invisible chalk mark, in this theatrical distortion of reality in which the familiar is uprooted and life removed to its furthest limit, so relentlessly transgressed, as if they were the gods themselves, since what awaits beyond, on the other side, is death, which is to say nature. The existence of an inside the war, in which lives are emptied out into the void, and an outside the war, in which lives go on as before, together with the mechanization of weaponry, something that further cements the link between war and culture, the large-scale industrialization and modernization of ways of killing, reinforces this impression. Trains crammed with living bodies are sent in, the bodies are destroyed, buried, new trains with new living bodies follow in their wake, their bodies too are destroyed, buried. Some eight million living bodies perish in this celebration of death beneath the persistent sun.

In a way, this is the zenith. For nothing is more precious than life, and here it falls to the ground like hail in a storm. Clearly it is a sacrifice of unprecedented dimensions, but for what purpose? The birds inhabit a world that to them is complete, a repertoire of actions they must carry out every day, throughout their every year, in an interplay of events and instincts with no other significance than keeping them alive, sustaining them in their state of existence. They see the world, and they are familiar with it, though only as effect, not as cause. The sun is warm, the rain is wet, the air consists of various strata through which they fly. They are locked inside their birdness, through which the world appears to them.

That we should similarly be locked inside our humanness has always been a natural thought, our religions issue from it and seek to define what is beyond, that which is concealed from us yet visible in its effects, and they do so in images that simplify for us what we feel to be complex. None of these images is useful here. No god descends from on high to appear before them in the clamor of their war, no only begotten son to whose heaven death is the entrance. The only things here that are not human are the burning trees, the stream running through the forest and fields, the birds sitting on their branches in song, their calls and sorrowless ardor, heard perhaps through a sudden lull in the thunder of cannon.

And then Jünger is hit in the thigh by a sliver of shrapnel, his blood begins to trickle, he drops his haversack and runs to the trench, the wounded from the shelled woods converging on the same place from all sides, the pattern of a star.

The trench is appalling, he flees to a nearby copse, where he is found after some hours and taken to a hospital in Heidelberg. After two weeks of convalescence, he visits home for a short period of leave before being sent to the front again.

He was twenty years old and had gone to war almost straight from school. What he saw and experienced there, the immense battles in particular, like the most violent forces of nature, was so radically removed from ordinary life as to alter forever his outlook on the quotidian. What Jünger saw in World War I was so powerful that it must have been impossible for him to think of it in terms of a haphazard occurrence, an expression of some peripheral idiosyncrasy of the human being, an accident, arbitrary and exceptional. On the contrary, in the years of war he found himself at the very core of the human, with all its exterior fallen away and only the simplest and most basic elements remaining: life and death. That he should have experienced things in this way is not hard to understand in view of the fact that one minute he was a nineteen-year-old living in a world of friends and family, school and literature, an occasional and fleeting romantic infatuation, a chess-playing father who whistled Mozart in the bath and a mother who read Ibsen and had actually met him, and who took her children on pilgrimages to Goethe's Weimar; while the next minute he was in a world of military camps, mud, cold, hunger, exhaustion, and abrupt death, beneath a sky filled with fire and metal. The first of these worlds had contained the second, in the shape of the wars he had read and heard about, but German culture was as classical as it was militaristic, so a nineteen-year-old such as he would be familiar with Homer and Caesar, as well as with Napoleon and the German generals of the war with France in 1870, whereas the second world, that of the trenches, did not contain the first. *Storm of Steel* does not concern itself with the superstructures of war, neither the most primary structures, which is to say the political structures that determined it all, the very reason they were there fighting, nor the militaristic structures that directed them here and there, but only with his own tangible experiences, the things he sees and feels himself. He's the one who must make the decision to get to his feet and stumble out into the hail of fire; no state, no army, no kaiser, no general can do so on his behalf. And he's the one who is hit in the chest, whose mouth fills with blood as he stumbles into a crater certain he will die, filled by an intense feeling of happiness amid the inferno of explosions, artillery fire, battle cries, and shrieks of terror. What he sees is in the same way connected to him, in the sense that it is he who has to understand it, give meaning to it, or deprive it of meaning. Death is the background from which life emerges. Had death not existed, we would never have known what life was. War is the only activity contrived by man that consciously approaches the line between them. If the processes that lead to war are a scheme, war itself is not, for death is absolute.

Death is not modern.

By our thoughts we try to release ourselves from that fundamental, inevitable circumstance, an endeavor short-circuited by our own demise. In all the efforts of our mind to extricate ourselves from the fact of death, our yearning toward heaven and a life beyond our own, which finds expression so variously depending on the age and culture in which we live, death is ever present. As indeed is the heart, for like death the heart is always the same. The heart is not modern either. It is neither reasonable nor unreasonable, neither rational nor irrational. The heart beats, and then it does not. That's it.

This is the insight of war. All existential thought, any quest toward authenticity, stems from here. The occurrence of death opens up a new reality within our preexisting reality. It is our existential circumstance, and yet we seek to conceal the gate that is opened by death. Not so in war. In war the gate is opened and opened again, everywhere. Eventually the living become used to it, death becomes the norm, opening itself anywhere and at any time. Within this zone it is as if the distinction between the living and the dead shrinks, consisting in little but the fact of the living being animate and the dead not, the living by way of their animation being free in respect to the earth, while the dead have so to speak become bound to it and are ground down into it, little by little.

At the time of writing, it is ninety-seven years since World War I began. Considered from such distance it is a war that appears utterly senseless. World War II does not, being essentially a war of defense against Nazism. But what was World War I about? Politically it was meaningless, there being nothing to make real enemies of Britain and Germany, nothing for which they should fight, on the contrary, they had everything to gain by cooperation. Territorially it was meaningless, since nothing was conquered, and even if one of the countries concerned had broken through and conquered the other, it would have been hard put to find any benefit; what would Britain have done with Germany, or Germany with Britain? As such, it was quite as meaningless in human terms too; those who gave their lives did so for nothing.

This meaninglessness exists in the superstructures, whereas in the nearness of the soldier's everyday life zones of meaning arise, so vivid as to demolish any question concerning the war's justification or the legitimacy of its carnage. Jünger sees three things in the war. The first is the archaic, the immutability of man, Homer's sun, whose logical conclusion is death and whose notion is universal and extrahuman. The second consists of the values on which soldiers depend for survival, such as courage, will, and endurance, what could be called the life force, perhaps a universal property of man, but a mere potential of the single person and thereby in itself individual. The third consists of the new machines, the mechanical means that have now increasingly taken over the conduct of war, which are an expression of civilization.

It, I, we/they.

These are the fundamental elements of life, which from their hiding place in the complexity of civilization emerge in the simplicity of war, and which, by virtue of their concerning the most essential, must be acknowledged. If instead they are suppressed, life becomes nonlife, an escape from life's very foundation, as essential as it is grave. Why would anyone wish to escape from the circumstance of existence, one might wonder, why would anyone choose the nonessential? The reason is that the price is such a heavy one to pay. If we accord the highest value to the life of the individual, if we understand life to be a quantitative concept that must be maintained for as long as possible, then death is our foremost enemy and war becomes absolutely meaningless, absolutely undesirable. If we do not accord the highest value to the life of the individual, but to some element of that life, a property, or to something outside it, an idea, then we consider life as something qualitative, something more than the sum of cells and living days, in other words, we hold that there is something more hallowed than life, and then the equation is simple and one might choose to die for it.

But what could be more hallowed than the life of the individual? The life of the all, or one's own all, one might surmise, this being the legitimization of the majority of wars. Nonetheless, it is an abstraction, and must surely mean nothing in the instant of rising to one's feet to charge forward into a hail of bullets.

To commence an assault on enemy trenches as one's comrades are falling before one's eyes would seem inconceivable on the basis of some abstract notion of collective benefit. In the first edition of Jünger's memoir there is little mention of patriotism and none at all of defending any other grand notion. In the second edition the author has added some lines toward the end where he is sitting on a train on his way to Germany after his war has come to an end, and here he has "the sorrowful and proud feeling of being bound to the land more intimately for the blood shed in battle for its greatness," and moreover, according to his biographer Nevin, is filled with the sense that "Life has deeper meaning only through sacrifice for an idea, and that there are ideals compared to which an individual's life or even a people's count for nothing." This second edition ends with the exclamation, "Germany lives and shall never go under!" All this is gone in the third edition, published in 1934; nationalistic rhetoric had become the property of the Nazis, and Jünger wished not to be associated with them. What remains is that the war as an expression of an essentially internal state: "The true springs of war are deep within us, and all that's atrocious, occasionally flooding the world, is only a mirror image of the human soul."

Mein Kampf was written in 1923, in the Great War's shadow, and is impossible to understand without this being taken into account. There was not a single family in Germany left unaffected, no one who had not lost a son, a brother, an uncle, a neighbor, a colleague, or a friend. Their grief was invisible, yet it touched everyone. Visible were the war invalids, hundreds of thousands of them, faces on the streets with cheekbones shot to pieces, bodies without arms or legs, eyes flaring in terror at any sudden noise, any abrupt movement, profoundly confused men in loud conversation with themselves. Those who had survived brought back with them experiences that could only be shared with others who had been there too, for what they had lived through defied words. What they had witnessed left its mark on them for life, not merely in the form of darkness or the shadowy, suppressed images that came over them in dreams or when least expected in their waking hours, but also with respect to the way they related to their surroundings after they got back. A person who has seen others die by the hundreds over a number of years sees life differently. The dead were not anonymous, they were people one had lived with and lived among, whose lives and suffering one had shared in that tight-knit social sphere, the close bonding that comes of war; perhaps you had shown them photos of your loved ones, they were your comrades, and one by one they fell, abruptly and arbitrarily. To anyone who has been through that experience the attachment of human relationships can never be the same again, for even if you know death is no longer likely to strike like a lightning bolt from the sky, the experience of losing a friend in the space of a split second, and of knowing that it can happen again to any other friend at any moment, and moreover to oneself too, is so fundamental that it cannot be erased, not even by an entire lifetime of peace. In such instances people become withdrawn, there being simply too much to lose. This inner disablement, this emotional paralysis, was as invisible as the grief of the sufferers' parents, it was never talked about, and yet it was there, the catastrophe all too great, all too brutal not to leave those who had been through it scarred for life. To the generation born between 1880 and 1900, World War I was the single overriding event of their lives, and the question they asked themselves when it was over was why it had occurred at all. Millions of young men had perished, but for what? For this? For entertainment, cabaret, cinema, self-indulgent art? Had they given up their lives for such systematized emptiness? Was this what they had fought for? This is the way Hitler saw it, and he was not alone.

They had been to the very perimeter of life, inhabited the borderland between all and nothing, and the intensity that had saturated them there, the carnage they had witnessed, could never be meaningless or empty, could never be nothing; this they knew above all. From a political perspective the possible consequences were basically twofold: never again could there be such an appalling and meaningless waste of human life, or else a new war would render meaningful the sacrifice of those two million German soldiers. To Hitler, only the second of these possibilities was real. For if everything that had gone before the war had been reduced to nothing by it, then the same would hold for the war to come:

> *Thousands of years may pass, but never will it be possible to speak of heroism without mentioning the German army and the World War. Then from the veil of the past the iron front of the gray steel helmet will emerge, unwavering and unflinching, an immortal monument. As long as there are Germans alive, they will remember that these men were sons of their nation.*

It is this, the mythology of war, the Wagnerian or Homerian tale of heroism from the depths of time, that Hitler knew and cultivated, this was his condensation of meaning, and it was this to which he aspired, not only in relation to the war, but in relation to everything in his time, which from that perspective, in the great, echoing chambers of the past, became hallowed and was accorded unity and cohesion, which is the same as meaning. Certainly, that meaning was absent from the war to anyone who had fought in it, for the war was anything but the expression of unity and cohesion, yet there is no reason to believe that Hitler was being calculating in describing it the way he did, and every reason to believe he did indeed experience the war as profoundly meaningful. He risked his life for what he believed in, and did so as part of a great community that provided him with arbitrary comradeship with no obligations as to close friendship or intimacy in a situation in which all were fighting for the German nation, to which ever since childhood he had dreamed of belonging, and also – at least if we are to believe those passages in *Mein Kampf* where he writes about the impression left on him by reading his father's book about the Franco-German War of 1870–1 – of fighting for.

This mythologization of war is no dream of war but an essentialization, and the fact of it offering not a glimpse of its everyday reality is typical of the romantic I, the inner being's exaltation of the external, something Hölderlin's poems in particular express rather strikingly, they too being devoid of quotidian triviality, elevating and exalting, saturated with existence, always bordering on the ecstatic, the way life is when charged to the brim with meaning. Romantic infatuation, the state of being in love, can charge up a life in such a way, as the mystical-religious experience can too, and death as well. All three states of being have to do with the transcending of the I. The sense of there being something close to divine in Hölderlin's poetry has to do with the same thing, any distinction between the world and the I all but absent, the poem being almost one with its evocations of deep, green shadows and baking-hot sun, thunder rolling in over the high ground, rivers gushing ice-cold from the mountains, everything being significant and meaningful: the identity of the I and the world is the ultimate meaning. If no such identity exists, the world becomes alien, and before the alien the I stands isolated and detached, as if expelled, alien moreover unto itself and its surroundings. This is what the second creation narrative concerns, the fall that knowledge entails being a fall into the alien. The yearning for nature and the natural is a yearning for identity, unity, the absolute meaning of oneness. The Romantic period's solitary I with its longing to transcend the self is an expression of the same thing, following directly from the dissolution of the religious view of the world, after which only the human remained.

The young Karl Marx's notion of alienation is existential rather than political; only later would it be linked with the specific and mechanical nature of labor under capitalism. Wagner's tales of heroism, his great storms of emotion, are to do with the same thing, exaltation and the transcending of the self. The I of *Mein Kampf* expresses itself in terms of the same model, elevating war and the singular life of the self to something untainted by the quotidian, a hallowedness meaningful in itself, but unlike Hölderlin, Rilke, Trakl, Wagner, Beethoven, and almost any other German artist of the Romantic and late-Romantic periods, Hitler's I is constrained by its feeble mastery of form, an inability to mold the language into any true expression of the I and the emotions by which it is pervaded, all he can do is seek to copy the formal qualities of others, in the simplest of ways, a cliché. "Then from the veil of the past the iron front of the gray steel helmet will emerge, unwavering and unflinching, an immortal monument," he writes. He is constrained too by his very mind-set, which confines itself to the culture in which he has lived, full of prejudice and approximate insight, half-truths, rumor and generally unreliable assumptions, which, as Hamann demonstrates, surprisingly often is in line with the Viennese newspapers of the day as well as more populist publications, in such a way that what to him appeared grand and meaningful was not depicted as such, in the way of Hölderlin, for instance, but rather as something inauthentic, since the idea of greatness, or the desire for greatness, is the only element of the grand that comes out, this then pointing back to the I and its petty-bourgeois nature, which by its very presence disqualifies any quest for the sublime. Reading Hitler's endeavors toward exaltation in *Mein Kampf* is like looking at a poor painting of a steep and splendid mountain.

The fact that his prose renders everything small is not to say that Hitler's feelings in respect to the things he described were small, nor indeed that those things in themselves were small. Hitler's talent lay elsewhere, he even underlines this several times in *Mein Kampf*, the inferiority of writing compared to the spoken word, which he so definitively held in his power and was so adept at exploiting to make his audiences feel what he felt or what he wanted them to feel. In this the mythologization of the essentially quotidian again comes into its own, and the exaltation of a real world in which work, fundamentally dull and monotonous and bleak, becomes heroic and hallowed, and where the past is repeatedly resurrected in parades with horses and medieval banners, in rites and oaths, grand works of architecture reminiscent of Antiquity, a sublime rendering of the present, a reconjuring of society, whose aesthetic elements were largely culled from the world of the military and war: uniforms, ensigns, parades, all unifying. The workers became worker-soldiers, schoolchildren became child-soldiers, sportsmen became athlete-soldiers, and what was unique about it all was that everyday reality was thereby elevated and made significant, not by its interpretation in art, by art's selection of individual constituent parts within it, the world as read in the poem, as heard in music, as seen in the painting, but by the direct and unmediated reshaping and modeling of reality itself. Hitler turned Germany into a theater. What that theater expressed was cohesion, and through cohesion identity, and through identity authenticity. It was not a matter of invention, of constructing an identity by means of costumes, flags, and rallies, but rather of giving expression to something that had always been there, which modern society had held in check and diffused, and this is why so many of its elements came from history: something had been reestablished.

Nor was Hitler a fanatical, militaristic theater director enforcing his will on the people; the strings he played were genuine, the emotions he aroused were in everyone. Anyone who has seen footage of the rallies of Hitler's Germany knows what feelings they evoke, the sheer might of the uniformed, I-less community, the strength of the collective, and oh, how one might long to be a part of such a we. Some of the images of the age express an almost savage beauty, the endless ranks of soldiers viewed at eye level, a sea of steel helmets extending into the beyond, totally symmetrical, the same human being repeated and repeated as if into infinity itself. Or the hush as Hitler walks the several hundred meters toward the burning flame beneath the monument to honor the fallen, surrounded by thousands of soldiers in rank, uniformed, helmeted, invulnerable. Everything he strove to awaken through the prose of *Mein Kampf*, and which in that context failed, is accomplished now in these human tableaux. An iron front of gray steel helmets rises before us, awakening the past from its slumbers, and yet they are in the present, they are immortal. As one soldier cries out during the Nuremberg rallies: They did not die! They live on in Germany!

Who would not wish to be a part of something greater than the self? Who would not wish to feel their life to be meaningful? Who would not wish to have something to die for?

The tranquillity, satiety, and calm that fills our lives, or with which we strive to infuse them, our foremost aim being satisfaction, a state in which hardly a cloud smudges the sky, is reminiscent of the life Stefan Zweig describes in his memoir *The World of Yesterday*, a life that came to such an abrupt end in those days of August 1914. The question we must ask is whether the war was caused by political circumstance and historic, societal factors, unthinkable in our own postwar societies, or whether it came about because of a release of certain forces that have always been present in man, a part of our makeup as human beings, present in every one of us, and which may be released again at any time from now. In that case the only thing we might say with certainty is that it will come in a different way, in a different form, because the form in which it came in 1914, and again in 1939, has now long since been identified and all conceivable outlets blocked. There will be no marching in the streets, no seas of steel helmets on the city squares. Yet in my mind, as I sit here in the spring, in a room in Glemmingebro outside Ystad, the sun pouring onto the greening landscape I have blotted from view by means of a travel rug so as to concentrate on my work, though not without interruption by the children, who run in and out of the house with the same eagerness and joy, the same urge to express themselves and their existence as I remember from my own childhood, while my mother is in the garden weeding the flower beds, Linda at the shop buying food for the Easter dinner, her brother hammering nails into the pent roof that collapsed under the weight of snow in the winter, her mother at work next to him trying to straighten a thick bush that also collapsed at the same time, I can feel a yearning for something else, and that yearning, I assume, must be felt by others too, because surely people of the same culture cannot be so different from one another that an emotion can exist in one person only? I don't know what this yearning represents, but I do know that it does not involve any dissociation from what is here, from that which is mine and in which I live, that's not it at all, there is nothing I despise about any of that, and I realize and understand the value of the unwavering regularity of this existence, and its necessity too. And yet, a yearning. For what?

Or more than a yearning it is perhaps a want. A feeling of something not being here. In the midst of life and the living, as if swathed in the chirping and wing-beating of all the birds building their nests nearby, beneath the sun, surrounded by vegetation in every direction, something is wanting.

Is the want in me?

Am I simply unable to grasp hold of my own time, my own place, to see it the way it is, the way it really is, to know that it is everything, and to be filled with joy by that knowledge? For an entire world opens up inside even the smallest plant one stoops to inspect, a living organism bound up with everything else that is living too, growing on the brink of the dizzying precipice of time at which we too stand. Is it my responsibility to validate that world, to fill it with value? Is that possible? Or is it empty, a simple, ongoing state of serial reproduction, copying itself and copying itself again, on and on into infinity? An emptiness that moreover is the foundation of our own biological reality, our life as human beings? If so, why do we imitate the emptiness of serial life in the culture we create? Should our culture not instead establish difference, which is the stuff of all worth, in which value resides and from which it is released, and thereby of all meaning? Does that meaning not exist? Or is it concealed? Concealed then by what means? Concealed by our social existence, whose differences exist in order to keep in place, not to set free, and which indeed keep us in place within our particular lives, our routine lives, from whose viewpoint the entire world dissolves and becomes the same?

But if this is so, where does the idea come from that it might ever be different? We don't believe in God, which means God does not exist and never did.

If this is so, then he existed only in our human minds, as a kind of existential tool, and what was necessary for that to be meaningful was that the insight of this instrumental aspect should not become conscious. It became so only when material reality was identified as instrumental, and from then on there was no turning back, since meaning precludes the deception of open eyes, faith is to know, and just as they knew that God was real, we know that God is not real. The link with the authentic, which resided in religious ecstasy, was broken because the authentic did not exist; ecstasy too, that fervent emotion of the human, was false, a delusion.

But the sun beats down, the grass grows, the heart pounds in its darkness.

"But the sun beats down, the grass grows, the heart pounds in its darkness."

Why did I write those words?

Such language is hollow. It looks like the language of the Nazis. Yes, the sun is actually beating down, the grass is actually growing, the heart actually pounding in its darkness, but the factuality of these things is not what is significant about their linguistic expression, what is significant is what that language evokes, that the sun, the grass, and the heart are in a way elevated, made to be something more than themselves, as if somehow they become bearers of actual reality. It is the same language that says civilization is detached from our basic urges, our sufferings and the brilliance of genius, whereas the sun, the grass, the blood are connected to the authentic, whose two great expressions are war and art, as Mann wrote in 1914.

This language is hollow, and it became the language of the Nazis, but is it untrue?

Paul Celan's poem was a response to that language, which had destroyed the entire culture. It did not first arise in *Mein Kampf*, but was gathered and concentrated there and through the author of that book disseminated into an entire society with the aim of turning it completely on its head. Everything that language brought with it we have since discarded. All thoughts of the hallowed, all thoughts of the authentic have been eliminated from our minds. We live our lives surrounded by commercial goods, and spend great swathes of our waking hours in front of screens. We conceal death as best we can. What do we do if out of all this a yearning arises for something else? A more real reality, a more authentic life? Such a yearning would be founded on false precepts because all life is quite as authentic, and the hallowed is a notion belonging to life, not life itself. Yearning toward reality, yearning toward authenticity expresses nothing other than the yearning for meaning, and meaning arises out of cohesion, in the way we are connected to one another and our surroundings. This is the reason I write, trying to explore the connections of which I am a part, and when I feel the pull of the authentic, it becomes another connection I feel compelled to explore. That war and art are related, as Mann wrote in 1914 though of course later dissociated himself from, is something I am convinced of, since both seek the very extremity of existence, which is death, against the backdrop of which life gleams radiant, suddenly precious and inalienable, which is to say meaningful. I have always felt this in art, a powerful sense of meaning, almost always in paintings of the period from the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, though seldom in modern art, albeit with some shining exceptions, the paintings of Anselm Kiefer, for instance, to which I have always felt a strong sense of connection. But then four years ago, on a trip to Venice, it was as if all of this suddenly fell apart. I was looking at the paintings at the Accademia and found them "saying" nothing to me, as if somehow they belonged to a room outside the one in which I existed. What applied there did not apply here. This felt strange, for death is death, life is life, man is man regardless of culture, was that not how it was supposed to be? We had hurried through the exhibition rooms, the children impatient, though Vanja noted the forbidding gruesomeness of all the skulls, the rearing horses and crucified figures, and when we came out and had found a place to sit at a quiet café with a view of the lagoon, and were drinking our Sprite with ice, I was struck by the thought that what those paintings represented, in their age and beauty, which for so many years I had held so highly and striven in so many ways toward, its allure seeming to me to be not merely necessary, but absolutely vital, was perhaps, when everything boiled down, without worth. Suddenly it felt like a burden we bore, a kind of shadow that had fallen upon us, dead and cold. The beauty of the paintings was the beauty of death, the insight they awoke in us was in what was dead and nothing else.

The same day I saw something utterly sublime and quite different to anything else on that trip. I was out with John in the area surrounding the apartment in which we were staying, walking through the narrow, dark, and damp passages where little bags of rubbish with knots tied in their tops had been left outside every door and clothes had been hung out to dry on washing lines that ran up above between the houses, it was late afternoon and we were approaching the square facing the lagoon where the vaporettos came in, when an enormous ship suddenly appeared above the rooftops, gliding slowly away. We emerged onto the square, from where the sea opened out and the very special light that is always in Venice, under cloud or sun, in autumn as well as in spring and summer, made everything, the walls and roofs of the buildings, the paving stones and the surface of the water, shimmer.

The ship was indeed gigantic, towering above the city, passengers milling on all its decks. A loudspeaker voice blared out tourist information, and the air was a glitter of flashing cameras. Something welled inside me. A shiver ran down my spine.

"Look, John," I said, crouching down beside him. He smiled and nodded, and pointed to one of the many pigeons strutting about the square. "Dah!" he said. I rose to my feet again, looking up once more at the vessel, which was now just far enough away for me to be unable to pick out the features of the faces that filled the decks, all I could see was a blur of human figures and the camera flashes momentarily lighting it all up, and then I turned the stroller around and headed back through the passage to a tiny café where John had a bread roll and I had an espresso.

Why did the sight of a cruise ship send a shiver down my spine? What was it that made me think it so sublime?

In classical aesthetics the sublime lay in the beholding of something that rocked the very foundations of the beholder on account of its magnificent or unfamiliar nature. A volcanic eruption, a sinking ship, a tall and rugged mountain, an event, a state of affairs, or an entity before which the beholder has a distinct sense of feeling small or inconsequential. Beauty, synonymous as far back as Antiquity with proportion and harmony, which is to say something within the scope of human control, was incorporated into the notion of the sublime in the Romantic age, perhaps because the idea of the divine had ceased to be a fulcrum of human existence, something all concepts, all human thinking issued from or strove toward. But the sublime and the divine are two different things, the revelation of nature's alienness is different from the revelation of the nearness of the divine, since the nearness of the divine makes conspicuous not only remoteness, not only the gruesome, nagging realization of nature's blindness and inhumanity, but also the opposite, a promise of cohesion and belonging. A we. The divine, or the holy, indicates the boundaries of this we, at the same time as it accords it meaning, not individually but as a collective, a whole. And the nature of the revelation must also have been radically different, for the experience of the divine or the holy was of something transcending an otherwise regular reality, and one can imagine how terrible and fearful that must have been. To stand before an almighty creation that is neither human nor animal, a creation that conceals itself and yet is present where you stand. Rudolf Otto wrote that religious emotion can fill the soul with almost insane force and endeavored to describe the numinous in all its various phases. The sweeping, tide-like moods of tranquil worship that can pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away, the soul resuming its more profane, everyday, nonreligious mode. The strong, sudden ebullitions of personal piety from the depths of the soul, with spasms and convulsions, leading to the strangest excitements, frenzy, transport, ecstasy. It may sink to almost grisly horror and shuddering. The numinous has its crude and barbaric antecedents, Otto states, which may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. "It may become the hushed trembling and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of – whom or what?"

When I read Rudolf Otto or Mircea Eliade, both of whom circle around the experience of the divine or the holy, in order to gain an understanding of that experience and to define it, and when I read the writings of Christian mysticism or the Church Fathers, pervaded as they are with the rapture of religious excitement, I find myself confronted by something utterly alien to me, which does not occur at all in my life or in the world around me, other than the occasional glimpse offered by TV into some ecstatic religious movement. This weakens an otherwise fundamental conviction of mine that says the emotional life of the human is constant, that the feelings that stream through us have always streamed through all human beings, and that this is the reason why it makes sense for us to consider even the oldest works of art, or to read even the oldest texts of literature. To be human has forever been the same, I tell myself, quite independently of the ways in which our cultures have evolved. But the kinds of experience that were once the most important of all, meditations on God and the divine, holy rituals and cults, visions and raptures occurring in lives wholly devoted to God and the divine mystery, this resolve to seek meaning, this fervor, with all its spectra of intuitions, moods, and emotions, is no longer sought or, if it is, then only on the peripheries of society, outside our field of vision, perhaps occasionally evoked in respect to some odd and obsolete phenomenon in TV entertainment: So, you're a *monk*? What's it like not having sex? When we closed the door on religion, we closed the door on something inside ourselves as well. Not only did the holy vanish from our lives, all the powerful emotions associated with it vanished too. The idea of the sublime is a faint echo of our experience of the holy, without the mystery. The yearning and the melancholy expressed in Romantic art is a yearning back to this, a mourning of its loss. This at least is how I interpret my own attraction to the Romantic in art, the short yet intense bursts of emotion it can discharge in my soul, the sudden swell of joy and grief that can arch up inside me like a sky if I happen to encounter something unexpected or something commonplace in an unexpected way.

A cruise ship thick with people, an industrial landscape mantled by snow, the red sun that illuminates it through a curtain of mist. An old man in blue overalls tossing a cardboard box onto a bonfire, this too in a landscape of snow in which all is still apart from the old man's movements, with which I am so familiar, he being my mother's father, and the fire's cautiously flickering flame. The flame, the fire, what else is this but something opening into the world? Something that occurs is here and then gone? Always and yet never the same. When I see the image in my mind's eye I am transported there, and with all my being I become aware not only of my own existence, but of my own self. For a brief moment it floods my consciousness, and in those few moments I am quite oblivious to my own problems, the things I have done or need to do, the people I know, have known or will know in the future, and everything that connects me to the social world is gone. For five seconds, perhaps, or ten, maybe even for as long as thirty seconds, I exist in that state, in the midst of the world, watching a bonfire burn and a man step back from it in a soundless, snow-covered landscape, and then it is gone, the magic broken, and everything is as it was before, me included.

But so small and insignificant that experience is compared to the rapture of the mystics, so sad my own quest for meaning, forever interrupted, compared to their lifelong devotion, so pathetic my rituals in front of the television screen, compared to those that once took place in the world. Oh, I can hardly bear to speak of it, the difference between the stirring emotions that run through me when a Norwegian skier wins the world championship, and those that run through a person kneeling before the holy itself, whose soul is elevated by that experience.

Oh, for crying out loud, what do I even know of the divine? What gives me the right to even use the term? I, a secularized man of the West, forty years old, as naïve as he is unschooled, one of the world's multitude of unspiritual and unremarkable individuals? Did I not seat myself, two days after seeing the cruise ship, at a Venetian sidewalk café and drop my fork on the ground, prompting the waiter to bring me a clean one, which I declined – no, it's all right, I've got one here, look – oblivious to the context of my fork having been on the ground, for which reason it was to the waiter's mind dirty and unusable? Indeed I did, and in the company of Espen and Anne to boot, who smiled overbearingly before Espen hesitantly suggested that the waiter might have wanted to give me a clean fork because mine had been on the ground and was dirty. How could such a clumsy creature even contemplate letting a phrase such as "the divine" pass his lips? A man who moreover did not believe there to be a God, nor that Jesus was the son of that God; why in all the world should he poke about in such matters?

What was I even looking for?

Meaning. Most likely it was that simple. In my day-to-day life I was filled by a sense of loathing, quite bearable, never threatening or destructive in any way, most of all a kind of shadow that blanketed my existence, the logical conclusion of which was what might be described as a passive yearning for death, so on a plane, for instance, I could find myself thinking I wouldn't care if it crashed, though I could never dream of ever actively doing anything that would put my life at risk. In this state of loathing, meaning could detonate inside me. It would be as if I were suddenly brought to the threshold of something radically significant into which I was then absorbed, only to be expelled again. As if the meaning I was looking for was there all the time, and what kept me from it was *me* and *my* way of seeing things.

Was that it? Was there something out there, something objectively true and real, a constancy of life and the living, there always, to which I only seldom, hardly ever, had access? Or was it just something inside me?

I could have kneeled, put my hands together and directed trembling prayers and lamentations to God, Our Father, but I was living in the wrong age, for when I looked up toward the sky all I saw was a vast and empty space. And when I looked around me I saw a society we had fully and completely organized to lull us all to sleep, to make us think about something else, to entertain us. The quick and easy, the soft and comfy, that was what we wanted, and it was what we got. The only remaining space where life was taken seriously was art. In art I looked only for such fullness of being. Beauty and fullness of being. On occasion I found it, and when I did it consumed me, yet the experience led to nothing, was perhaps nothing but the projections of an overtense soul, little lightning flashes in the darkness of the mind.

I see a cruise ship thick with people gliding past, high above the rooftops of an ancient, sinking city, and a shiver goes down my spine. So what? Is that all?

James Joyce, brought up in Catholicism, familiar with the great Fathers of the Church, typically for him called such moments epiphanies, a word originally used to denote the revelation of the divine nature of Christ to the three wise men that starry night in Bethlehem, but which for him stood for the worldly revelations of life in the streets around him. In his sketchy, unfinished novel *Stephen Hero*, he defines epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation." Joyce takes as his point of departure here Thomas Aquinas's definition of beauty, or what is required for beauty in any object, yet shifts the focus from the properties of the object itself to our own perceptions of them. This is a three-stage operation: first, the object must be lifted away from everything else, and then we perceive it as *a* thing (Aquinas's "integrity"); then it must be analyzed, considered in whole and in part, in relation to itself and to other objects, the mind recognizing then that it is indeed a *thing* (Aquinas's "wholeness"); finally, and this is the moment of epiphany, we recognize that the object is *one* integral thing, that it is *that* thing (Aquinas's "radiance").

Joyce calls this the soul of the object, its whatness.

The starting point for this reflection, which Stephen details in a conversation with his friend Cranly, is a little intermezzo he witnesses one evening in Eccles Street, where a young lady was standing on the steps of a house and a young man was leaning on the rusty railings below:

> *The Young Lady – (drawling discreetly) . . . O, yes . . . I was . . . at the . . . ch . . . pel*
>
> *The Young Gentleman – (inaudibly) . . . I . . . (again inaudibly) . . . I . . .*
>
> *The Young Lady – (softly) . . . O . . . but you're . . . ve . . . ry . . . wick . . . ed.*

To apply a concept denoting the revelation of the divinity of Christ to such a mundane occurrence as this is blasphemy, the distance between the two domains being as great as it is, yet there is surely an equally great distance between the occurrence and the scholarly aesthetic into which Joyce lifts it up, making fun of the gap between reality and its academic interpretation, at the same time as he is without doubt circling in on something important concerning his own aesthetic. What he is describing is the mundane, everyday world as we know it, and what he wants to probe into are the things going on around him here and now, for everything is local, to everyone, for all time. But in Joyce's epiphanies there is nothing else, this is what characterizes them, they are an expression of themselves only, and the author's task is to view them in exactly that way, in their own right. The examples he cites of epiphanies are certain modes of expression that crop up in conversation, certain ways of gesticulating, certain thoughts that pass through the mind, in other words, fully and completely attached to the human sphere, more particularly to our social existence, life the way we live it in relation to ourselves and to one another. There is something almost anti-essentialist about his aesthetic, so unconcerned with the authentic and indeed the transcendental, seeking all meaning and significance in the river of movement and language that flows through our lives each day. The language in which he captures this is itself a river, and like all rivers it has a surface, that part of it that first catches our eye, and below the surface its depth, words beneath the words, sentences beneath the sentences, movements beneath the movements, characters beneath the characters. Everything in *Ulysses* is moreover always something else, not because the world is relative, but because the language through which we see it is. The transcendency of *Ulysses* lies in the language, it opens up a chasm in the now, which is thereby no longer epiphanic – neither isolated, whole, nor particular – and if Joyce's portrayal of the world is true in its relativity and in its massive intertextuality, it is then cerebral and at root scholarly in its determination toward systematics and cohesion, hurtling away from physical reality and the realistic novel, much as the medieval Church Fathers detached themselves from the Bible and the concrete, action-oriented, physical reality found in it, and arced into the hugely abstract, bodiless canopy of speculation and reflection they stretched out over their lives. In that one may lose oneself, as one may lose oneself in *Ulysses* and the other great works of modernism, with all the intellectual enjoyment and aesthetic pleasure they have to offer, for their turning toward form and language makes them all the more works in their own right, something in themselves, at the same time as they have so plainly lost something too, for as Henry James once suggested, *in art, the emotions are the meaning.*

To those who consider art from that perspective, form means nothing in itself, possessing meaning only as the bearer of something else, and modernism, which is to say most of what has taken place in art from the beginning of the last century to the present day, has abandoned that dimension. The work of those who do not consider art in that way is tinged with the Romantic. Hermann Broch, for instance, in his *Death of Virgil*, one of the most hardcore modernist novels of the nineteenth century, whose opening, in which the dying Virgil is lying in a boat on its way into a Roman harbor, contains one of the finest sentences of prose written in Europe during the last two hundred years:

> *Steel-blue and light, ruffled by a soft, scarcely perceptible crosswind, the waves of the Adriatic streamed against an Imperial squadron as it steered toward the harbor of Brundisium, the flat hills of the Calabrian coast coming gradually nearer on the left, and here, as the sunny, yet deathly loneliness of the sea changed with the peaceful stir of friendly human activity, where the channel, softly enhanced by the proximity of human life and human living, was populated by all sorts of craft – by some that were also approaching the harbor, by others heading out to sea and by the ubiquitous brown-sailed fishing boats already setting out for the evening catch from the little breakwaters which protected the many villages and settlements along the white-sprayed coast – here the water had become mirror-smooth; mother-of-pearl spread over the open shell of heaven, evening came on, and the pungence of wood fires was carried from the hearths whenever a sound of life, a hammering or a summons, was blown over from the shore.*

A singular joy comes over me every time I read this. It is sublime. But why? What is it about this passage in particular that can give rise to such strong emotions? What the sentence describes, a boat entering a harbor one late afternoon, is trivial and recognizably commonplace, at least to anyone who grew up near the sea, at the same time as it takes place in Ancient Greece, to us a lost and unreachable world. Is that why? The interplay of the general, true of any harbor, and the specific, true only of this harbor, long since lost. Yes, this does give me joy, awakening personal memories of the smells, the sounds, the light, and not least the gusting wind as the sun moves slowly across the sky, the way it can fill a person with its thriftless extravagance, but it is not sublime. The sublime comes not from familiarity, but from the opposite. The sublime in this passage is the movement from the sea toward the land, "here, as the sunny, yet deathly loneliness of the sea changed with the peaceful stir of friendly human activity."

The sunny, yet deathly loneliness of the sea – I have never thought about the sea like this, and yet I must have felt it because when I read those words something inside me, faintly, as if from some remote distance, recognizes what they are saying to me. It is a recognition of something whose more exact nature has eluded me. And a recognition of the vast and to us unknown quantity that is death. The transition from there toward the peaceful stir of human activity is what the sentence describes, and what it detaches, because besides applying there, in Broch's imaginary scene at the harbor in Brindisi some time in the last century BC, as well as in the physical reality the sentence evokes, it also applies to the place in which I am seated at this moment, on June 2, 2010, at one minute past four in the afternoon, in the study of this sixth-floor apartment on the Triangeln Square in Malmö, the stir of human activity all around me, which is to say the traffic going past on the roads outside, the people on the street below, their occasional shouts and cries, the blaring horns of this year's high-school graduates on their parade, their music systems thumping and pounding as they make another tour of the city, the elderly black saxophonist sitting leaned up against a pillar, playing the same piece over and over again. This stir of human activity, which is the social world, is what we approach in the opening scene of *The Death of Virgil*, sailing toward it in anticipation of entering into and becoming a part of it, and as long as we see it in this way, as something gradually emerging before us, so far only in the form of sounds and smells, we see it for what it is, which is to say a haven. During the time Broch was writing about, people were few in number, towns and cultures were separated by great distances, and crossing the divides between them was a slow and perilous business. Everything has changed now, and the stir of human activity, our haven from an indifferent and mortal universe, is no longer local and constrained, but exists wherever we care to look, no longer is something we leave and approach, but something that's all around us, all the time, regardless of where we are or what we are doing. This does not mean that the circumstances of life have changed from that time, only our perception of them. This is why Broch's opening passage has such a powerful effect, since it directs attention toward a fundamental circumstance we increasingly tend to ignore. That it does so in such a simple way, by relating it to a physical landscape in the world, to a particular moment, an early evening outside the harbor in Brindisi, the elements of which, the steel-blue sea blushed by the sun, the rose-colored tinge of the sky, the white-sprayed coast, the glittering houses there, bringing forth similar recollections from the depths of the reader's memory, means that the moment and its potential for creating awareness become something *experienced*. An experience is what is seen, colored by emotion. Reason ignores emotion, addressing only the mind, but to the mind the fact of endless numbers of people having lived and died before us, and the fact that we who are alive now will also soon be dead, is a banal insight, something we have known since we were five years old. Only by experience, by feeling the gaping void in even the most trivial of surroundings, do we *grasp* it. Only then does it become an insight. This insight is to all intents and purposes inarticulable, so vast is its content. Since it is so fundamental, so completely central to our lives, Broch could naturally have produced reams on the subject, discussing numerous aspects of death in nature and the havens we make to safeguard ourselves from it, but he wrote this when he was at the height of his career, keenly aware that what the text says in words and what those words awaken in the reader are two different things. He wrote about the sea with only the merest intimation of death, and about the peaceful stir of human activity toward which a boat slowly came drifting, so simply as to allow us to see each element for what it is, and with such meticulous concretion as to allow the image to pass into the reader's imagination, there to unfold and be fleshed out in the wealth of human mood and emotion.

Day passes toward night, soon we are in our final hour, which is the time of Broch's novel. In the boat immediately after Caesar's lies Virgil, poet of the *Aeneid*, the mark of death on his brow. He is acutely conscious, sensitive to everything, knowing it will all soon be gone. Day passes toward night, everything blazes up before him one last time. In Nordic mythology the realm of death is Hel, a word deriving from *hylja*, meaning to hide or cover up, an apt name indeed, since the realm of the dead is beyond our sight, and yet, I think to myself now, it can also mean the opposite, that the world of the living hides from the dead. Only a few weeks before we went to Venice we were in Norway, in Vestland, and besides seeing my mother and having John christened, we drove out one day to visit my cousin Jon Olav, he had bought a summer retreat not far from the place he grew up, a small farm to be more exact, on a ridge above the Flekkefjorden, with some land, a bit of woodland, and a small stretch of coast. We drove there in the morning, one of many gorgeous days that summer, the sky was bright blue, the fellsides lush green, a blaze of dazzling sunlight flooding the landscape. The water in the fjords and rivers glittered, the peaks shimmered with snow, the leaves of the trees winking and fluttering in occasional breaths of wind. Mom drove first with Linda and Heidi in her car, while I followed behind with Vanja and John in the backseat. There was hardly any traffic. The car I was driving was one we had borrowed from my mother's sister Kjellaug, Jon Olav's mother. An old Toyota. After the new driving-school and rental cars I'd been driving it felt like a vehicle from another age, the mechanical twentieth century. It was as if I were seated just above the surface of the road, everything rattled and shook, even the slightest acceleration could be felt. The other cars I had driven were dark and sleek, like something out of a computer game, as if the traffic surrounding us were just a projection on a screen, speed, whether 100, 110, or 130 kilometers an hour, merely numbers on a display. This was something else entirely, and I was enjoying it. We came around a bend in the road and there was a river, cool and green, rapids hurtling over the rock, an effervescence of white. We came through a tunnel, and there was a fjord beneath us, its blue expanse with farms dotted about the shore on one side, steep, treeless fells on the other like slabs of iron in the haze. There were no people anywhere to be seen, only old and sagging structures, the occasional flashy home from the 1980s, agricultural machinery lying around, fields and enclosures, forest, fjords, fells. And Vanja's voice from the backseat:

"How much farther, Daddy?"

"It won't be long now. Just be patient!"

"I'm bored!"

"Look over there, look! A waterfall on the other side!"

"I know, I can see."

"Do you want some music on?"

"Yes."

I put Dennis Wilson on. Vanja calls it car music when we listen to it at home. In the mirror I could see her lean back in her seat and stare out with an empty look in her eyes. John was fast asleep next to her.

We came down into Dale, its two gas stations making it a metropolis in this scarcely populated wide-open place where I had spent so many weeks of summer when I was growing up. On the other side of the town a minute later, the steeply sloping ridge of the esker rose up to our right, crowned by Kjellaug and Magne's farm. Shortly after, as we got out of the car at Jon Olav's place, everything was still. I heard bees, a busy hum wafting back and forth, rising and falling in the quiet air. I opened the door on Vanja's side and unfastened her seat belt, she climbed out and looked up at me. John was still asleep and started to cry when I bent over him and began to extricate him from his belts and buckles, but when I lifted him out he hushed and put his head against my shoulder. The house was set back from the road at the top of a steep meadow running down to the deep-blue fjord, whose waters lapped lazily against the shore. The trees on the other side shimmered.

We were there all day. I dived into the fjord in my underpants as Vanja and Heidi stood and watched me from the rocks, we rowed out in a little boat with Johannes, Jon Olav's eldest son, guiding us, and when the afternoon came I took Vanja fishing with a rod we borrowed. Vanja had never been fishing before, now I had to teach her, and so that she wouldn't be disappointed, neither the weather nor the time of day being especially suited for fishing, I kept telling her we probably weren't going to catch anything. As long as you know, I said. Yes, I know, she said. We pushed through some bushes, picked our way over the rocks, and came onto a little point of land that jutted out into the water, where I cast the spinner. It glittered in the sunlight as it arced through the air and landed with a little splash, and as it sank I handed the rod to Vanja so she could reel it in. Is this right, Daddy? she asked. Yes, that's fine, I said. I've got one! she said. You're joking, I said. A moment later a fine codfish lay flapping at our feet. Your very first cast! I exclaimed, and she beamed with pride. It was the only bite of the day. Back at the house, Linda took a picture of her with the fish in her hands. For once I felt like a real dad. Liv and Jon Olav were busy making dinner, his whole family was coming, Ann Kristin with her two girls, and Magne and Kjellaug. An hour later, as the sun nestled on the treetops to the west, we numbered eight children, five parents, and three grandparents, all of us seated on the slope, each with a plate in our lap, eating sausage stew and rice. On the outside it was just like any other cozy family get-together, but beneath the surface it was a different story. Magne, whom I had known all my life, was terminally ill. He had always been a strong and vigorous man, a focal point in any gathering, a man of immense charisma, impossible to ignore. Sitting there now he was hardly recognizable. Physically he wasn't much changed, but his presence had gone. He was hardly there, and it pained me the whole time, even when he was out of sight, I couldn't grasp it, that such a total transformation could be possible, I'd always equated his presence with *him*, the person he was, to me they were the same. Now he was a shadow of himself. He chatted a bit, ate a little, occasionally gazing out over the fjord, surrounded by his children and grandchildren, on what was perhaps the most beautiful day of that whole summer.

Everything he saw would soon be gone to him, and would never come back.

Not just his family, whose fates and destinies he would never know, but also the fjord and the fell, the grass and the humming insects. And the sun. He would never see the sun again.

These thoughts tainted everything I saw that day. The beauty of the world became enhanced, and yet it seemed crueler too, for one day it would be gone to me too, and continue to exist for those who remained, as it had done since the beginning of time. How many people had sat where we were sitting and looked at the same view? Generation after generation stretching back in time, all here once, all gone now.

When evening came and it was time to go home, Vanja wanted to go with Heidi and Linda, so I drove with John, who slept, an hour and a half beneath the towering fells, through the valleys where the shadows of approaching night grew long, past the racing rivers and gushing waterfalls, and all the time I sang out loud, drunk on the sun and death.

What else could I do? I was so happy.

It was the same sun Broch had written about in the thirties, the same sun that sank into the sea off Brundisium that evening in the year 19 BC. And it was the same sun Turner let shine upon his picture of an ancient harbor, painted some hundred years before. Turner found his motif in Virgil's epic *Aeneid*, more specifically in the story of Dido, who falls in love with Aeneas and takes her own life when he parts from her. However, it is not so much the drama of the events Turner is interested in as the place in which they unfold. His painting depicts the harbor at Carthage on the northern coast of Africa and appears markedly Romantic in both its exoticism and its rubble-strewn *ruin lust*, the many monumental, half-collapsed buildings that fill its canvas. At least this was what I thought the first time I saw it. On closer inspection though, I realized these were not ruins at all, but the opposite. The great chalk-white buildings of Antiquity were actually under construction, and what the painting shows is a city rising rather than falling. It's a splendid painting. On the right of the picture a cliff thick with vegetation drops steeply away to a river, which then opens out into a harbor. On the other side of the river, in the left of the picture, a building is under construction, and below it are some people, figures made small by the imposing cliff and the buildings. A woman in white, Dido, stands in the midst of a group of men, one of whom, seemingly a soldier, is turned away from the beholder, and most likely this is Aeneas. Building materials lie scattered about, and in the background a number of men seem to be at work, hauling something ashore from a boat. A cluster of boys, almost detached from all this activity, are gathered at the water's edge, they are naked and have either just climbed out of the water or are about to jump in. While they may be detached from the goings-on at the riverside, they are not detached from their surroundings, on the contrary, the feeling I get when I look at the picture is that everything seems to hang together, the boys are in some way joined up with the vegetation and the water, with the people behind them and the mighty buildings, and the masts of the boats in the background seem almost to melt into the haze that pervades the activity taking place at the river on this particular day.

While cold light makes everything sharp and separates things out, warm light blurs contours and makes the elements of the scene seep into each other. This was primarily what Turner was interested in, I imagine, since so many of his paintings display this feature, the one of the train, for instance, almost completely blotted out by the snowstorm, hardly a definite line or contour in the picture, everything a blur, everything in flux. Seeing in color, this is what we see, the objects vanishing, or their functions, and the eye that puts aside all it knows, that puts aside all preexisting insight, is the eye that can see the world anew, as if it were emerging before it for the very first time. Turner was interested in the relationship between the inconstant and the immutable, the solid and the fluid, and in that way the train becomes an expression not of anything else, one of the many categories into which it might be placed to do with modernity, industrialism, civilization, and the man-made, but only of what it is in itself, in pure physical terms, an enormous iron object proceeding along an iron track, almost obliterated by the snow, which would obliterate almost any other object in the same way: a sailing ship, a horse-drawn carriage, a funeral procession, a bear. When it comes to *Dido Building Carthage*, his interest lies similarly in the near endless ways in which light alters the landscape, from its shimmering in the river to the haze that absorbs it into the horizon, and this focus naturally affects the scene unfolding there. Dido is perhaps seeing Aeneas for the first time, something is beginning there, yet something is coming to an end too, for what she sees will soon lead her into death. The fact of there being so little difference between what is built up and what comes crashing down, the fact that the buildings under construction could just as well be ruins, compounds this impression. The tropical vegetation also plays a part, growing so wildly, so blindly and with such vigor as to pose a threat to the civilized world, which by comparison is so neat and orderly as to be reminiscent of death. All this exists in Turner's painting, and yet none of it is central, for its principal motif is the sun.

The first time I saw the painting, which hangs in the National Gallery in London, I was filled with a sense of welling emotion, it was all I could do to remain standing in front of it, so huge was the impression it made on me. This was of course down to its sheer beauty, but also to the way in which the sun is presented, the way it actually dazzles the beholder. The sun is the primary subject, suspended high above the scene, its rays pervading everything, illuminating all surfaces, either directly or indirectly, conjuring forth all colors, warming the air, making it thick and consuming all distinctions, in a way tying the various elements of the scene together, though without any of the people present even being aware of it. How can this be possible, I thought to myself as I stood there. How can they go about beneath something as mighty and immense, such an insanely creative principle, this enormous sphere of gas aflame in the sky, and yet ignore it so completely? They do not see the sun, but Turner did and, thanks to him, we do too. The sun in this painting is so predominant it is hard not to think of it as holy, and that Turner was worshipping it. Indeed, he valued this particular canvas highly, so highly that an early version of his will declared that he wanted to be buried with it. Later he abandoned this bizarre wish, donating it instead to the National Gallery on condition that it be displayed next to a painting by Claude Lorrain, also of an ancient seaport, a picture he greatly admired and on which his own canvas can be taken to comment. And so it came to pass: in Room 15 of the National Gallery, Turner's painting now hangs next to Lorrain's. The similiarities between the two are striking. Both motifs are classical and centered around a female figure – in Lorrain's instance the Queen of Sheba – both are set in a port lined by ancient buildings, far below that which so dominates both canvases: the sun and the sky. But this similarity serves only to make their differences all the more marked and significant. The most obvious of these is that Lorrain's harbor opens out on the sea, whereas in Turner's painting the sea is not visible at all, the harbor all but enclosing the river. And whereas the light in Lorrain's painting is sharp and clear, in Turner's it is thick and always somewhat hazy. This makes the effect of the two canvases quite different. In Turner's, life is hemmed in, there is an inertia about it, in the sense that it rises and falls in the same place, with no way out. This is emphasized by the motif, which on the one hand is death – Dido burying her husband – and on the other, life: Aeneas, the great survivor, has come, and with him love, which is to say the vital force of life and the future, which for Dido, bereaved and emotional as she stands there at the river, is to be her death.

This claustrophobic sense of being hemmed in is essential to the feeling or understanding of life the painting manifests or explores. The sun too is part of this, its static aspect being likewise compounded, and while it may give life to everything, it precipitates decay too. In Lorrain's seaport, depicted some hours later, at evening, the breezy air of passing day blowing in from the sea, everything by contrast appears wide open and in motion. The motif here is the Queen of Sheba's embarkation, but around this event all sorts of other things are going on too, boats putting in and rowing away, sailors clambering up a ship's rigging or leaning against the gunwales, people going about the quayside, pausing to chat, gazing out at the royal vessel or keeping an eye on a scampering child at the water's edge, and all of this with the open, sun-drenched sea stretching out toward the horizon. The majestic pseudoantique buildings, the finely dressed people and the many boats in the harbor in front of them are clear and distinct. This has a particular effect on the main event, the embarkation of the queen, which becomes just one of several things going on, significant to those who are a part of it in that precise location, but nowhere else, paling as one shifts one's gaze outward to the sea or inward to the town. Entities that vanish in the open, existing only locally, are a frequent phenomenon in Lorrain's work.

Recently I visited the Metropolitan Museum in New York, and there was a painting by him entitled *The Trojan Women Setting Fire to Their Fleet*, another scene from the *Aeneid*, where this very aspect is perhaps even more pronounced. It shows a war fleet at anchor near the shore, some women are standing with flaming torches, some are in a boat on their way out to the ships, but the intense drama of the scene, its momentousness, seems to be taking place among these people only, while the landscape stretches out beyond, unmarked by these events, submerged in the deep slumber of uneventfulness, and above them is the immutable sky with its still-burning sun. Was it viewed in that way when it was painted, four hundred years ago, in Lorrain's own time? To us the local aspect of any major event is hardly ever present, both because every part of it is focalized and because it is made to exist in all places at once.

No matter where we happened to be on September 11, 2001, we heard about or saw the same thing, the two planes crashing into the twin towers. This event was in all our minds, there was no outside – apart from the place one happened to be, physically, wherever in the world. This bipartite operation, so characteristic of our age, where something is on the one hand almost completely focalized, and on the other almost completely spread out in all directions, was of course unknown in Lorrain's day, the technologically unsophisticated seventeenth century, when an event was for those who happened to be there when it took place. When Lorrain interprets a scene from the *Aeneid*, he brings it across to us in a way not unlike that of a news photographer in our day and age, as a kind of witness – the fact of the former being a fictive witness, and the latter being an actual witness, makes no difference to the form – but he shows us something more besides, which has to do with the time and space in which the event took place. The great, eventless landscape that surrounds what is going on makes it so obvious to us that it is going on only in the scene's here and now, and that this is the most important, essential, aspect of any event. Oh, how simple and plain an insight, yet it is one thing to know the nature of something, quite another to feel and experience it. How hidden the actual nature of events has become to us is something we understand only when we see something unexpected happen in front of our own eyes. Only then, at such a moment, do we realize how unimaginably few unexpected events unfold in our world, how incredibly systematized and regulated our every movement, even in our largest cities, and, moreover, and this is perhaps the most shocking aspect, the way such an event vanishes again the same moment it occurs.

Some years ago, when we were living in Stockholm and I kept an office on Dalagatan, I was out walking with Linda, we had eaten lunch together, she was on her way home, I wanted to stop at a record store before getting back to work. It was snowing, the street was full of slush, the sky above us gray and leaden. The cars with their yellow headlights and red taillights, their growling engines and swishing wiper blades, the people on the street with their heads bowed to the sidewalk, beneath the vertical faces of the buildings, made the moment a cacophony without my thinking of it in that way, everything was simply how it was supposed to be. Suddenly, something happened, there was a thud, my eyes were drawn to the middle of the road. A car braked, and a man flew through the air above it. He landed heavily on the road surface, and a short distance away a bicycle hit the ground the same moment the car jerked to a halt. The other cars behind it stopped. On both sides of the street pedestrians stood motionless on the sidewalks, eyes fixed on the middle of the road. The man, wearing a thick blue down jacket, sat up slowly. He had a big, bald head. He sat there, looking emptily into space. Blood trickled from his forehead and down his nose. Great flakes of snow whirled in the air around him. The thought occurred to me that I should do something, and I opened my bag to get my phone, but then I saw a young man just in front of us with his own phone pressed to his ear, I heard him say there'd been an accident, so I put mine away again just as the car door opened and a man got out. He crouched down in front of the cyclist, said something to him, gripped him under his arms, helped him up, put him in the front seat of the car, clicked the seat belt into place, slammed the door shut, climbed in behind the wheel, shut his own door, and drove off.

The street had opened like a flower, now it closed again. Apart from the bike, which was still lying there on the road, everything was exactly as before.

The young man on the phone said there was no need for an ambulance after all.

I looked at Linda.

"What happened?" I said.

"I'm not sure," she said. "It all went so fast. I suppose he took him off to the hospital?"

"I suppose so," I said.

The young man swiveled to face us.

"He drove off with him," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"I called an ambulance. No need now, though."

"No," I said.

"He drove straight into him. It was the driver's fault. He might not be taking him to the hospital. He could just leave him somewhere and clear off."

"No, I can't imagine that," I said.

"Why else would he be in such a hurry?" he said, then walked over to the bike and leaned it up against a lamppost, raised his hand to Linda and me in a wave and went off toward the center while we ambled away in the opposite direction. Linda went home, I turned around and went back to the office.

I felt shaken. But why, exactly? There was nothing puzzling about what I had seen, and it was hardly spectacular either. It was a minor accident, that was all, a motorist knocking a cyclist off his bike in busy lunchtime traffic. The next day I checked the paper to see if there was anything about it. There wasn't. Of course there wasn't. Not a word. But still I felt shaken. It wasn't because I felt for him, or because there had been blood, it was something else, something to do with the very nature of the occurrence. Fifty meters away no one knew what had happened, and to the few people who were there it was all over and done with as quickly as it took place. Had there been some mention in the paper, I would probably have calmed back down, order would have been restored. The newspapers are full of that kind of thing, events deviating in some way from the norm, and our reading about them there lends them a kind of fixedness they don't have in real life, where they are over the moment they occur and no one who witnesses them can quite grasp what actually happened. That fixedness is a fiction, but we understand it to be reality, and thereby the real world remains under our control, and this is our haven. The event is lifted out of its physical environment and its particular moment and goes from being without continuity to becoming a part of an ongoing system, so-called news. Anything that cannot be explained, any unexpected accident or catastrophe, any instance of sudden death or incomprehensible malice is gathered here in the form of small narratives, and the mere fact of their being told is sufficient to put us at ease, to assure us that order exists. This system is completely irrational, such order being but fiction, and in this it resembles other systems people have seemingly always sought to establish. Order operates in the social domain but relates to what lies outside that domain. The fear of natural forces, inorganic as well as organic, has always needed to be assuaged, and since the human is what is known to us, and such forces are alien to us, they have been incorporated into the human sphere, still as alien, yet alien within our own domain. The classic trope here is the ghost, death in human form. One of the places where this aspect of the relationship between man and nature is clearest is in the work of the author Olav Duun. One of his most important books is called *Menneske og maktene* (published in English as *Floodtide of Fate*), the original Norwegian title evoking the human struggle against the tide of inhuman forces, a theme that runs throughout his work. His masterpiece, the six-volume saga *The People of Juvik*, is steeped in it. Though Duun was only ten years older than Broch and they wrote and published their novels during the same period, *The People of Juvik* is so unlike *The Death of Virgil* that they could be attributed to different civilizations if one did not know any better. Broch's opening scene, with its Imperial Adriatic squadron and the dying Virgil, is worlds away from this:

> *The first Juviking they can tell us about came from the south, from Sparbu or Stod or wherever it was. His name was Per. He had been married, it was said, and had had house and land, and he brought his mother with him. What had driven him out the Lord only knew. He leased a piece of land from Lines.*

Whereas Broch's novel takes place in the very epicenter of power, with the empire's greatest poet as its main character, and explores the relationships between ethics and aesthetics, politics and literature, Duun's novel is set in the very margins of civilization, a tiny and in every respect insignificant village community on the coast of Nord-Trøndelag in preindustrial Norway, with a family of uneducated farmers and fishermen as its main characters, the political upheavals and transformational occurrences that might take place in the wider world washing up onto their shores only in the aftermath, like historical driftwood. Naturally, this is not the way they see things themselves, to them this is the center of the world, and so closely does Duun zoom in on them that the reader feels this too, following the family's tale as individual existences are established and eked out, a society formed and maintained. Land is cleared and cultivated, houses are built, children are born. This is the foundation of their lives, on which they could stand so firmly if not for the crackling force field that exists between them, the invisible sphere of emotions, jealousy and resentment, love and benevolence, greed and arrogance, suspicion and fathomless naïvety that drives them here and there, lumping together in great knots, dissolving, lumping together, dissolving, and lumping together again. The narrow horizon within which this takes place and the long period of time the saga covers make it seem like it's the place itself that finds expression in its people, as if they are their place more than they are themselves, in contrast to Hamsun – probably the most obvious writer to compare with Duun – in whose work such an idea could never arise. Hamsun's characters are alien, belonging to no place, they are tourists of the mind, somehow, without a past, without origin. Hamsun's characters come barging in. Emotions occur within rather than between individuals, in contrast to Duun. The difference reveals itself too in their understandings of irrationality. Both Duun and Hamsun are interested in the notion. In Hamsun the irrational is often fine and delicate, a reflection of the nobility of the nerves, romantically maniacal, as rich as it is a thing of beauty. In Duun the irrational is bound up with popular belief, superstition, misunderstanding, and darkness, a thing that occurs between people, often helpless and impoverished. When Per Anders, the first of the saga's series of protagonists, dies, Duun describes it like this:

> *The maids dared not lie down to sleep that night. They sat downstairs in the parlor and slept. For they heard a braying outside. They heard queer noises in the old house. Ane sat half-covered up in her shawl. She was reading a hymn, or perhaps the Lord's Prayer itself.*
>
> *Then he jumps to his feet and listens out: "Hear, the buck!," only to lie down again smiling: "Oh, never mind, it's only the ladder and the birch. They don't frighten me."*
>
> *There was something terrible outside the house, this they felt. There sat an evil spirit, riding on the roof. It was a night of ill fortune.*
>
> *Per Anders had a dire fit of coughing and rattling of the throat. Then he said: "Come now, Ane. Give me the staff."*
>
> *"Pray to the Lord, pray to the Lord!" she whispered anxiously.*
>
> *"M-m. If I have never prayed to him before, why – "*
>
> *It was the last he said. Ane opened the door, that the soul might depart, and then she laid out the body the way it was supposed to be done. She noticed little Anders standing in the doorway. At the same moment, Valborg saw him too, and both of them asked him: "What are you standing there staring at, Anders?"*
>
> *The boy pointed to the foot of the bed. "Who was that man there?"*
>
> *"There?" They looked at each other. Their knees trembled. Valborg took the boy and put him to bed.*

Death in Duun's writing is shrouded in terror and superstition. They open the door to let out the soul of the deceased, they see a ghost sitting at the foot of the deceased's bed, or perhaps it is the devil himself come to collect him. The next morning they burn the *likhalm*, the straw on which the corpse has lain on the bier, and when the wind blows the smoke back toward the farmhouse they are gripped with fear, taking it to be an omen of impending death. When the son rings the church bell for the deceased, it feels unusually heavy and sluggish, a bad sign, he lies and tells his mother all went well. The corpse is laid out on straw inside the farmhouse, his hymnbook under his chin and a coin on each eye, one of which slips from its place, the deceased staring at them all, a couple of the women gasping in fear. He lies there a week before the wake and the burial. "The women dared hardly go outside after dusk, they thought they had a white one at their heels wherever they went; and all sorts of ugly noises were to be heard in the evenings." On the day of the wake a crow settles on the roof of the farm, they chase it away, but it keeps coming back; again they take it to be a sign that someone else is soon to die. Yet the deceased makes them think of other things too besides ghosts and spirits. Per Anders's son Per visits the corpse daily.

> *It seemed to him like it wanted to tell him something. But when he was there it told him nothing: it slept as before.*
>
> *Ay, he thought, here lies the last. Of them.*
>
> *And when he came out, he said out loud to himself: "And so the fell ends at the sea. It wants no further. And as death has drawn this face, so does evening lift hills and fells toward the sky: still and stone-dead, so far removed from life and all that lives and moves."*

It is the sunset Duun is describing, when evening rises in the landscape and all becomes still and dark. The foreboding of death Broch invests in his glittering sea is effectuated here to the full, though without the landscape losing its beauty. "So does evening lift hills and fells toward the sky." That we are bound up with stillness and the dark, and seemingly become one with them when we die, is the oldest mystery of all, for we are here one moment and gone the next, never to return, but to remain there, blind and still, for all time. The endeavor of Duun's characters is to give voice to this blindness, this stillness, thereby drawing the unknown into the known. The smoke of the *likhalm* is a sign, it *tells* them something, The sluggish church bell tells them something. The black crow tells them something. And the corpse, when the coin slips from its eye, tells them something. When this dark and silent world speaks, a path is opened between the living and the dead, which in itself is meaningful. The inexplicable, such as a person in the prime of life, wholly involved in human reality, suddenly being struck down without anyone being able to do anything about it, snatched by death or else spared to recover, makes any occurrence a meaningful sign: the smoke blowing back to the farm, the omen of what was to come. Order exists, nothing in the world is arbitrary. The order Duun describes is a blend of Christianity, paganism, and homespun fatalism, and much of the story's value lies in the way he shows how the great superstructures that exist independently of the people there are adapted to the real-world lives they live, hauled down into praxis, a day-to-day existence of plows, fishing nets, livestock, and outhouses, by which they are changed. In their pure form myths are complete depictions of reality, closed upon themselves, yet the way they work, what they do, resembles what Duun's characters do. Myth lends a face to the unknown, giving it body, place, and time, establishing connections between the human world and nature, between death and life, between past and future, creation and destruction. When a figure such as Odin dangles from the branches of Yggdrasil, half dead and half alive, to obtain its knowledge, or when Eve is coaxed into eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, thereby becoming mortal, in both cases a connection is established between the tree, death, and knowledge. Of what does that connection consist? The roots in the ground, the branches in the sky, these are the world and life, which is endless, forever sprouting anew from dead stubs. Knowledge comes from the dead, everything we know we have learned from them. Life is the life of the one and the life of us all. Death is the death of the one and the death of us all. The sun is forever being seen for the first time, always a new pair of eyes squinting up at it, and forever being seen for the last time, other eyes closing, losing sight of it once and for all. These connections are what our myths and rituals manage and administer, and the same applies to them, they are already there for us. They are a language, a different language, and what they communicate can be communicated in no other way. In this respect the Enlightenment, resting on the idea that myth, ritual, and religion were a form of superstition, represented decay. We call the mythological view of the world unenlightened, and obviously, four hundred years after the beginning of the Enlightenment, we now know more about the material world and how it works than those who lived before that time. And not just more, but unimaginably more. But what is knowing? Throughout the *Völuspá*, the *völva*'s questions are repeated in what seems like a refrain of reluctance: Do you know enough yet, or what? Knowledge is concealed, connected to Hel, the dead and the past, out of sight, and access to it comes at a price. "Do you know enough yet, or what?" says the *völva*, and in that lies an evaluation of those listening in, their thirst for knowledge, at which she sneers. To drink from Mimir's Well, Odin sacrifices an eye, quite unthinkably to us, since what we know is so bound up with what we see. For us knowledge comes from sight, this was the essence of the revolution that was the Enlightenment, no longer were we to be tied to the authority of religion's ancient scriptures, the texts of philosophy. In myth this is not the case, in fact the opposite holds, for in myth knowledge is bound up with what we cannot see, that which is secret and concealed. Moreover, the price to be paid for it is great. In the Bible's creation myth the fall of man is down to Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. "The oldest of our religious traditions considered knowledge to be guilty; we had thought it to be innocent," writes the French philosopher Michel Serres. The rituals, myths, and folktales that have been handed down through the generations, as far back as our collective memory can reach into the dark depths of history, of whose lives we are unknowing, are referred to by Serres as social or cultural technologies, industries that worked to "secrete time," as he puts it, "from whose compost the different traditions appeared." Language, which we take for granted, came once from nothing. The insight that the community lives on even when the individual dies, which we take for granted, came only gradually. Responsibility toward the future, of which they themselves were not a part, was not given but was won. There is a light in this, but it is directed toward what it means to be human, rather than toward the components of the human and how they work together. Our myths see us in terms of time, the Enlightenment sees us in terms of space.

Our world is very much about the space we inhabit, practically all our technology, industry, and science is organized according to its principles. The space we inhabit is seen, mapped, and explained, and subjugated at an increasing rate. The space we used to inhabit, and which Duun describes, characterized by repetition through generations, where people toiled by the sweat of their brows, made love, gave birth to children, and died, in other words the space in which they felt themselves at home, but which they also feared, surrounded as it was by the darkness of ignorance, no remoter to us in time than to be inhabited by the parents of my own grandparents in Vestland, who were fishermen and farmers, is now gone. We do not believe in omens, we do not believe in God, in fact we believe in nothing; instead we know. We know the wind's direction is determined by meteorological phenomena, and that smoke blowing toward a house means nothing other than that, a movement of air caused by differences of atmospheric pressure. We know the soul dies when we die, so we no longer open the door to let it out. We know there are no such things as ghosts, and that devils do not exist either; if a boy sees a figure in the half-light at the foot of the bed, it is a product of his imagination. We know that a sluggish bell cannot determine how the year will proceed. We know birds are not omens; a crow settling on the roof of a house where a person lies dead is a matter of coincidence, the whim of a bird; perhaps the roof gave it a better view of what it was after? Everything has a sensible, rational explanation, we know this and live our lives according to that knowledge. For that reason, we are not afraid of the dark and not afraid of death.

But what do we actually know?

In Duun's world everyone believed in God, this was a matter of course, anything else was unthinkable. But few had any real idea of what it was they actually believed in, few had anything more than a superficial knowledge of religion, that was what the priests were there for, they knew everything there was to know about the Scriptures. For ordinary people it was sufficient to know there was a god, and a son of that god, who took all their sins upon himself, and that there was a life after death. This applies to us too. We know how everything works and hangs together, nothing remains unexplained. Yet few of us know exactly what it is that we know, few are in any way genuinely familiar with the sciences. We know about atoms and electrons, we know about the theory of evolution and the big bang, yet would be hard put to explain any of these things ourselves; as long as we know someone else knows, we trust in that knowledge, that the world is organized in that way, and this puts our minds at ease and makes us feel secure. Duun's world revolved around repetition, time was mythical and static, whereas our world revolves around the new changing times, progress. The new is in everything; the things we use, for example, are continually being redesigned, cutlery made in the eighties is different from cutlery now, a house built in the 1950s is different from a house built in our day, but such change is for the eye only, visual rather than functional: a knife has a handle and a blade in 2010 as it had a handle and a blade in 1710 or 1310. In any mythological understanding of reality the eye does not count, meaning resides in what the eye cannot see, whereas any rational understanding of reality is visual, and that shift, which occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, comprises the very nucleus of the revolution that was the Enlightenment. The most important technologies developed in that age were the telescope and the microscope, without these two optical instruments the gradual insights of science would have been inconceivable. And perhaps the emphasis placed on design in our own age should be understood on that basis? Time is invisible, time can be neither enlarged nor diminished, evading all spatial technologies by virtue of that invisibility, but in design it is captured, in design it appears to us: the seventies looked like this, the eighties looked like this, the nineties looked like this. The old becomes the new in a system that in principle is the same as that of our former rituals, where each spring was a new beginning, though with the important difference that what we see is not the same, we do not see the repetition, only the new. The same is true of news, which removes events from their original time and their original place, inserting them into a flow of other events, the same from one day to the next, from one month to the next, from one year to the next, in that planes will continue to crash, people will continue getting killed, workers will always be on strike somewhere, there will always be car accidents, maritime disasters, elections, famines, and within this continuity, in which individual events are different but the form always the same, time is again static and mythical. Oh, our world is indeed a mythological world, above us a sky of images in which nothing ever changes and everything is the same. We have made a myth of reality, but unlike the people whose lives were determined by a mythological understanding of the world, we are unaware of it, thinking what we see and relate to to be reality itself, the world the way it really is. It is in this light that I understand the experience of the sublime, or the epiphanic, more particularly that something in the world emerges before us, passes through our conception of it and for a brief moment reveals itself the way it is. The things themselves are the same, only our perception of them changes, because in being unusually grand, unexpected, or in some other way departing from the norm, for a few seconds they contrive to put our expectations out of action. This is why Turner's sun, or the event depicted by Lorrain, or the sea and the harbor in Broch's opening passage, appear so intense and awaken such vigorous emotion. This is the truth of art. The truth of science is of a different nature, quite differently bound by time; practically all scientific research of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is unreadable today, certainly it has lost most of its relevance, whereas the art of that period still speaks to us and is laden with meaning. Indeed, across the chasm of familiar and unfamiliar time it speaks to us; a cave of paintings tens of thousands of years old leaves an impression on us and in a certain respect cannot be surpassed, the same is true of the first creation narratives, even though we know little if anything about those who wrote them or how they lived. Compared to the swell of generations who lived through the hundreds of thousands of years before the advent of Enlightenment philosophy, the ensuing four hundred years of rationality are but a ripple on the surface, a scratch on the rock of a fell, and from such a perspective concepts like "rational" and "irrational" are not particularly fruitful. It is all a matter of different ways of relating to the unknown. We have succeeded in exorcising the unknown, and we are at ease and secure, the first culture in history not to tremble in the face of our circumstances, life is under our control. But the price of such security is high, for it is a presence in our lives. And it reveals itself in death. We are no longer afraid of death, having lifted everything to do with it into the sky of images above us, because if one thing is prevalent there it is the image of people dying. In the world of images people die all the time, they are shot in the head or in the chest, they plunge from cliffs and waterfalls, they drown or crash in their cars, they perish in air disasters, they die on the battlefield, or fall victim to a suicide bomber at a checkpoint in the Middle East or Iraq, they are hacked to death with ice picks, slashed by knives, run through by swords or pierced by lances, they are gassed to death, they freeze to death and are incinerated in fires. They stumble and crack their heads open on the edges of bathtubs and doors, they fall on the steepest ski slopes and bleed to death when their arteries are severed, they die in childbirth, in their sickbeds, of cancer and plague, brain hemorrhages and heart attacks. They die on the cross, in the electric chair, on the gallows, and strapped to a table with poison injected into their blood. This death, which is visual and unattached in time or place, floating freely and weightlessly in our sky of images, is a surrogate, a substitute for real death, absorbing our fear and anxiety, while real death, the physical death of the body, the way it occurs in a certain place at a certain time, is hidden away as much as possible. And when it occurs, when we encounter it in the real world, the way it really is, when it descends from heaven to earth in all its chthonic longing, its lust for mull and humus, darkness and damp, and the corpse lies there in front of our eyes, stiff and dead, it is as if a veil is drawn aside, for we are not modern at all, we are old as the dolmens and barrows, kin to the grass and trees, the worms and snails that slither as best they can, one day simply to lie there, immovable beneath the sky, to disintegrate and be gone, a speck in all the world's jagged edges and swirling forms, made from dust, returned to dust, earthly in marrow and bone, hands and feet bound to the now that we today, despite all promises to the contrary, depart. But we cannot part from death, death will never betray us, death comes to us always, and with it life.

I saw a cruise ship thronged with people pass slowly through a sinking city, a loudspeaker voice blaring out, a glitter of flashing cameras, and was it death I saw?

Indeed, and it was sublime. The sublime is everything, though now, in our fracturing world, it has become almost extinct. We live under the hegemony of constituent parts, and death too is under its jurisdiction. It is the death of the individual that matters, we are snatched away one by one, hidden from each other's gaze, and only the specified death matters. Not Death, but the death of constricted arteries and overexerted hearts, the death of lungs eaten up by cancer. The same applies to beauty. The covers of chunky art books almost always show a small section of a painting, a hand, the gaze of an eye, a bird, a sky, a figure in the background, seldom the painting in its entirety. Inside their covers the painting appears together with various sections of it, often with an X-ray for good measure so we can study for ourselves the processes that went into making the finished painting. Aha, so he moved the hat? In the case of a famous painting, lesser-known paintings from the same period are shown alongside it, and in the accompanying essays the issues raised are most usually social in nature – the people in that Renaissance painting, what clothes are they wearing? What class do they belong to? What sort of economic system was the artist a part of? Where did they get their paints, did they leave any fingerprints anywhere? What currents made the perspective possible or necessary? Was the painter a homosexual, and in what ways does this show in what he chose to paint? Why were there so few women painters, and how has this affected the way we perceive quality? This atomization of everything, this is also a result of the primacy of the visual, since it is no longer the impression art or death or the divine awakens in us that applies, but what it looks like – in the case of the body, what kind of memories precede our expiry; in the case of art, not the impression itself, but the preconditions of that impression. This atomization, which Broch and many around him believed to represent a degeneration, but which of course may also be seen as an enormous revitalization of a slowly withering culture, something to which not least the paintings of the Baroque attest, the world there almost exploding in detail and the own beauty of our physical reality in everything from pheasant feathers to dead hares, apples, blunderbusses, skulls, and shells, was met by another, seemingly contrary tendency, a universal science, *una scientia universalis* to use the words of Francis Bacon, achieved through principles of observation, probability, and verification. It is impossible to think of a science that is local, that a phenomenon or object, for instance, should display properties that applied only in one place, only then. Seventeenth-century debate about the wonder or miracle, which until then had been fully believed in, the improbable event that occurred only once, in one place, never to be repeated, perhaps illustrates better than anything the new line that was drawn through the world, as well as its impact. In his *Religio Medici* from 1635, Thomas Browne writes:

> *That Miracles are ceased, I can neither prove, nor absolutely deny, much lesse define the time and period of their cessation; that they survived Christ, is manifest upon record of Scripture; that they outlived the Apostles also, & were revived at the conversion of Nations, many yeares after, we cannot deny, if wee shall not question those Writers whose testimonies wee doe not controvert, in points that make for our own opinions; therefore that may have some truth in it that is reported by the Jesuites of their Miracles in the Indies; I could wish it were true, or had any other testimony than their owne Pennes.*

On the one hand he argues in favor of the unchallenged authority of Scripture, doubting not for a moment the existence of miracles as a phenomenon, these being described in the Bible and therefore necessarily true; on the other hand he is troubled by doubt as to whether the miracle exists in his own time, Scripture in this instance falling short, requiring him to seek independent testimony. This new way of reasoning, based on observation, was gradually to displace faith and the idea of the holy, though the two viewpoints were nevertheless not dissimilar, since what characterizes the holy, its exclusion of all that is not holy, in like manner characterizes the rational, which excludes all that is not rational. This state of affairs still holds. Religion and art are no longer midpoints in our ways of perception, but exist at the periphery, without power or influence. While religion has become a personal matter – if a person is Christian, it is his own, private belief – art has turned to addressing issues that arise in the social domain in which our lives are played out, and on the odd occasion it chances to home in on that middle point of meaning where our world is defined, which is to say in the laboratory and the observatory, it invariably comes across as rather amateurish and undignified. At once ignorant and ingratiating, it talks big about string theory or quantum physics. A new path for the novel? For humankind? Party afterward? Anyone?

When I was a boy I wanted to be a surgeon. It was a wish that probably came from watching the medical programs shown on Norwegian TV in the seventies, long sequences of actual operations that had me completely captivated. The body was never shown in its entirety, only the parts of it that were cut into, the rest was covered up by material of the same kind and color as the aprons and masks worn by the surgeons and nurses. It was a smooth, pristine material without folds or stains, against which the white skin that lay like a crater in the middle with all its irregularities seemed almost obscene. When the scalpel was inserted and the section of skin cut open by the faceless surgeon under the light of a powerful lamp, it seemed as if a little ditch appeared. When held open by clamps it was seen to be full of fluids and pulsating organs impossible to distinguish from one another, much less identify, yet they gleamed like membranes in the light, and clearly some order did exist, for the rubber-clad fingers set to work swiftly and with obvious experience. And so it was I saw the heart, the blind beast that moves in the chest, and the blood in which it bathed. Many of my drawings from that time are of surgeons operating on patients, they were gory and full of blood, and my mother worried about me: perhaps there was something wrong? But surgery was part of a pattern; my other interests were diving and space exploration, all three areas having in common the fact that they served to open up the world, in the first instance the human body, in the second ocean life, in the third the vastness of the cosmos. I was fascinated by everything that was hidden to the human eye, longed to see into life's secret rooms, to be admitted into the unknown. Of those rooms, the human body was perhaps the most exciting in that the unknown was inside me and in everyone I saw, always there no matter which way I turned, and yet not, for the body's gurgling, blood-drenched inner realm remained out of reach, impossible to enter. Every summer we penetrated the surface of the sea and could glimpse the shimmering, darting life that existed there. The black universe of space revealed itself to us with twinkling stars on the clear nights of winter and autumn, when even planets might be visible too. Only the room of the body remained closed. The small gray sacks of the lungs; the spongy growth of the brain on its spinal-cord stalk; the tubes that transported the blood this way and that, through all the flesh and tissue of the body; these were things I had never seen. The closest I got were those images of operations on the TV screen. I have no idea how many such programs were broadcast, but presumably it was two or three series at most. Yet the impression they made remained, the fascination with the body's internal workings, the strangeness of that secret life never left me, though it became gradually more ambivalent, often merging with revulsion; the sight of the body's insides was at once revolting and alluring. As an adult I became absorbed by the exploration of the body that came with the Renaissance, when the physical human being was methodically mapped out for the first time, primarily by way of the dissection of fresh human corpses, often executed criminals, though sometimes bodies would be taken from churchyards, laid open behind closed doors or frequently in public in the context of anatomy lectures at the universities, in the so-called anatomical theaters. It was state-of-the-art science. Thomas Browne traveled from England to continental Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century so as to study anatomy at Montpellier, surgery at Padua, and pharmacology at Leiden. But it was also a spectacle and a form of popular entertainment, the internal physical body was a sensation, a fairground of flesh and blood.

Four hundred years on, what seems strange is not the phenomenon itself, but that such fascination did not emerge earlier. What prevented the people of the Ancient World or the Medieval Age from exploring the inner body? The ancient Egyptians were familiar with it due to their culture of embalming, but they were never fascinated by the workings and interplay of the human organs, their practice being completely focused on death and respect for the deceased. The Greeks, who took the practice of medicine from sorcery to rational science, based their knowledge of the internal human body on what they could observe and understand from the insides of animals and, one might imagine, on what was revealed by accidents or war, when the body revealed itself in various ways: the brain inside a shattered skull, the colon spilling from a slashed belly, the jutting bone and ragged tendons and arteries of a severed foot or arm. The idea that they might dissect a corpse themselves and study it at their leisure did not occur to them. The thought must have been impossible, for their thirst for knowledge was in every other respect insatiable.

Why was that thought so impossible?

Perhaps they regarded the body and life as one, so that the notion of dissection made no sense to them; perhaps they did not understand that the life of one body could be prolonged by the knowledge gained from dissecting another; perhaps they saw no worth in prolonged life. Or perhaps they simply considered the inner body to be sacrosanct. Whatever the reason, they did not cut up the bodies of the dead and consequently knew little about the functions of the internal organs. Their writings on medicine and biology, full of approximations and guesswork yet nonetheless surprisingly reliable in view of the absence of empirical observation, were standard through the hundreds of years before the Renaissance, when they continued to carry such weight that both Dürer's and Leonardo's anatomical studies, made with human corpses in front of them, contain errors, details of medical literature rather than the medical body, indicating that what they knew occasionally overrode what they actually saw. The same was true of Charles Estienne's anatomical drawings from 1546, which include details of Galen's text that were in fact nonexistent. But the new paradigm quickly replaced the old, the best anatomical drawings of the seventeenth century are so exact as to still be useful for teaching purposes. Naturally, such a radical modification of our human knowledge did not occur without opposition. In the mid-sixteenth century Paracelsus for instance wrote as follows on the matter of dissection:

> *It is in no way sufficient to view the human body, to dissect, then to view again, and finally to boil it and look at it once again. To view in this way is to be compared with the unlearned peasant reading psalms: he reads only the letters and there is nothing more to say about him.*

Paracelsus's alternative was magic. Only in the relations between the heavenly and the earthly, the concealed and the unconcealed could the true nature of things be explained. His arguments proceeded from a medieval conception of reality, a world consisting of correspondences between what was visible and what was not, between the microcosmos of the human and the macrocosmos of the universe, a God's book whereby everything was a sign of something else and nothing existed simply on its own terms. To describe what was evident in the material world was meaningless until rendered otherwise by demonstrating or establishing its connection to the immaterial world. Paracelsus, with his to our mind chaotic hodgepodge of natural science, morals, magic, and metaphysics, in a world populated by spirits bound respectively to the elements of fire, earth, water, and air, connected with the human sphere in a near-infinite number of ways, was oblivious to the significance of anatomy to medical science, and from the perspective of his writings the practices of a figure such as Leonardo da Vinci, two generations older than Paracelsus, come across as empty exercises, whereas to Leonardo himself his work must have felt like an adventure, a second Creation no less.

In his notebooks Leonardo seems almost obsessive in his urge to delve into our physical reality, and he makes no distinction between the human and the material, the living and the dead, he wants to describe and capture it all, to understand. How come the fossils of mussels and sea creatures can be discovered at the top of a mountain? How come older people see things better from a distance? How come the sky is blue? What is heat? He attempts to describe the causes of laughter and crying, the nature of a sneeze, a yawn. He wants to know all about the falling sickness, spasms, paralysis. Why do we shiver when we are cold, and why do we sweat? What are fatigue, hunger, thirst, lust? He wants to explore our beginnings in the womb and to discover why an eight-month-old fetus dies. He wants to detail which muscles decay when we grow fat, and which become pronounced when we are thin. He wonders why the spots on the moon change when observed over time, and explains them as being caused by clouds rising from its waters, coming between the sun and those waters, by their shadow depriving them of the sun's rays, the waters thereby remaining dark and unable to reflect the solar body. In all his observations and speculations he proceeds from what he sees with his own eye, and only that. Leonardo describes a world without transcendence, and yet it does not in any way appear closed, on the contrary, for not only is the richness of what his eye is drawn toward overwhelming, his very gaze is moreover so fresh that everything he sees, even the sun and the moon, the rivers and the floodplains, seems almost to engage and take part in the vigor and clarity of the new. The old world with its dizzying transcendence is quite absent, albeit still perceptible, in the will of the new. Little or nothing of that from which the need wrenches away is expressed, but it is found in the very sensation of that detachment, which is the sensation of freedom.

Oddly, Leonardo's paintings seem quite apart from that sensation. They are masterworks of course, but at the same time too saturated in a way; their vital sense is that of harmony and clarity, his technique of rounding shapes, allowing them to glide off into their surroundings without losing substance and solidity in the process, may have something to do with it, but also the regularity of his compositions, so perfect as to lose all tension and become . . . well, rather *lazy*. Leonardo's paintings are never arresting to me in the way his notebooks are arresting. I suppose it has to do with the simple fact that as a painter he belonged to a tradition and saw things with the eyes of that tradition, painted with its techniques, whereas as an anatomist, biologist, physicist, geologist, geographer, astronomer, and inventor he was forging his own path. "The tears come from the heart and not from the brain," he suddenly writes. Or, in one of his many strange prophecies, "Men will come out of their graves turned into flying creatures; and they will attack other men, taking their food from their very hand or table. (As flies.)" That tone, that temperament, which is not without wildness and which is quite as unpredictable as it is exact, is wholly absent from his paintings, with one remarkable exception: *Lady with an Ermine*. I bought a poster of it on a trip to Italy with Espen more than ten years ago, it's on the wall in my living room now and I still haven't tired of looking at it. The motif is simple, a young woman holding a white-coated stoat, an ermine, to her chest; the animal is looking the same way as she, right of picture, and her right hand rests against its back. It's a disturbing picture. Why, I don't know, but the background is completely black, there is nothing else but this woman and this animal, and perhaps what is disturbing about it lies in this very juxtaposition. The woman's face is sharper than any other of Leonardo's female faces, and the hand that rests on the animal's spine is thin and bony, slightly out of proportion to what we can see of the rest of her body, slightly too big, and while the model he hired may actually have had big hands, our gaze is nevertheless drawn toward it in such a way that along with the head of the animal it forms the focal point of the picture. The hand, placed there to soothe and comfort, makes plain to us the animal's unease. Its rather bony appearance emphasizes its physiological aspect, a rare occurrence in Leonardo's paintings, which are nearly always more immersed in their colors and forms, their saturatedness, and together with the animal's intensely nonhuman presence, seemingly outside the sphere of the woman's attention, it appears almost as if her body splits in two before our eyes, one part belonging to the physiological, biological, bestial, the fingernails on her hand, for instance, corresponding with the claws of the animal's foot, the animal's eye the same color as the woman's eye, the other part belonging to the human, that which has to do with her serenity, the fact of the animal being outside her consciousness, her mind concerned with something else, perhaps with what she is looking at, perhaps with something within herself, but whatever it is, she is serene. Her dress, the pearls around her neck, her hair band, these things belong to that sphere, outside of which is the animal. Part of what is disturbing about the painting lies in the exactness with which the animal is depicted, quite unlike other animals in Leonardo's paintings, his lions, for instance, his horses and lambs. The ermine is neither biblical nor mythological, it doesn't belong to the battle or to any idyll but is there in its own right, as this one, particular animal. One might imagine this to be themed in the shape of fauns, half human, half animal, or a Pan figure, or perhaps centaurs, mythology is full of all sorts of creatures existing in the space between human and animal, but that would have made the picture an illustration, and this is precisely what Leonardo shuns here, the illustration of a thought or notion: the picture *is* the thought.

His anatomical sketches exhibit nothing of this, although the encounter they represent, of art and the body, is the same as in *Lady with an Ermine*. Perhaps this is because in the sketches the two aspects are compounded, the sketches representing the body in themselves, whereas the painting exists in the space in between. Of course, the difference between the drawing and the drawn is quite as big in both cases, but when it comes to sketches of the human body, an enormous number have been produced since Leonardo's time, and what was then a new phenomenon is now so common we no longer see it as a phenomenon at all, or even as drawings done by a certain artist, they are merely a part of the anonymous flood of textbook illustrations and instructions in which we paddle for the first time in childhood and never really step out of again, where everything that exists and occurs is conveyed by diagrams, like the elements of the molecule, the chlorophyll production of trees, the orbit of the planets around the sun, or the components of the inner ear. It was most certainly different for Leonardo, he draws everything like it was for the first time, and so new and controversial is the practice of drawing the inner human body from the study of corpses that he feels the need to defend himself in the introduction to his anatomy notes, swiping at a fictitious *you* who claims there is more to be had out of watching the dissection itself than studying one of the drawings:

> *And you, who say it would be better to watch the anatomist at work than to see these drawings, you would be right, if it were possible to observe all the things that are demonstrated in such drawings in a single figure, in which you, with all your cleverness, will not see nor obtain knowledge of more than some few veins, to obtain a true and perfect knowledge of which I have dissected more than ten human bodies, destroying all the other members, and removing the very minutest particles of the flesh by which these veins are surrounded, without causing them to bleed, excepting the insensible bleeding of the capillary veins; and as one single body would not last so long, since it was necessary to proceed with several*

> *bodies by degrees, until I came to an end and had a complete knowledge; this I repeated twice, to learn the differences.*
>
> *And if you should have a love for such things you might be prevented by loathing, and if that did not prevent you, you might be deterred by the fear of living in the night hours in the company of those corpses, quartered and flayed and horrible to see.*

What Leonardo is pleading here is the utility value of simplification in a world unfamiliar with the diagram. His fictional opponent believes it better to watch the dissection as it takes place, since the dissection itself is closer to reality, whereas Leonardo holds that reality, in this case the body, is too complicated and is best understood when conveyed by means of a drawing, which brings out its essence; ten corpses were required before he knew enough about the blood vessels to be able to draw them. The line of progression is from the chaos and confusion of reality to the order and functionality of the diagram, but also from the truth of the particular instance, local and tangible, this particular body, to the truth of all instances, the universal and general, all bodies. Leonardo's drawings are not diagrams, he does not simplify what he sees, but rather endeavors to depict what he sees as accurately as possible, but in order to do so he must isolate the individual parts so that they may be presented more clearly, and as such he both removes himself from and steps closer to the reality he depicts, a progression that resembles a law: the closer you get to a true picture of the physical world, the more remote it becomes.

What makes Leonardo's anatomical drawings so interesting is that they are there at the very outset of that progression, or are perhaps even its instigation, at the same time as they are there too at another point of intersection, that between art and science.

What exactly is going on when a painting such as *Lady with an Ermine* generates all manner of emotions and moods, opening itself to the beholder, who more than six hundred years on cannot help but find it dense with meaning, while a picture of the inner body drawn by the same artist at much the same time is experienced as something neutral, a fact closed upon itself, apart from the vague impression it gives of the age in which it was produced, over which the artist has absolutely no control?

Art is what the institution deems to be art, that is a tenet of modernism, but such a distinction is of no use here, because although we might consider the anatomical drawings to be art, this says nothing of their radical distinctness vis-à-vis *Lady with an Ermine*, which so plainly is something else entirely. Nor is it helpful to suggest that one has more quality than the other, or that one is reductive, the other not, because such reduction is conspicuous too in *Lady with an Ermine*, the pure black of the background removing the motif from its context, and only its core elements, the female subject's upper body and the wriggling animal, being depicted. Yet one can stare and continue to stare at such a painting, which comes alive in the beholder's gaze and seems inexhaustible, whereas the drawings of the inner body saturate the senses in a different way entirely, constraining our gaze and the emotions that follow on: what we see is what there is. In other words, the painting contains more. But what is this "more"? What does the painting have that the drawings don't?

In Jorge Luis Borges's renowned first collection of stories and essays, *Labyrinths*, there is a short story called "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*." According to its narrator, Pierre Menard was a recently deceased, lesser-known French author, a symbolist and friend of Paul Valéry. The narrator wishes to honor his memory, which is already receding, and lists his few works, among them a number of sonnets and monographs, one of the latter concerning Leibniz's *Characteristica Universalis*, another on the subject of Ramon Llull's *Ars Magna Generalis*, which gives us an indication of where Borges is heading, before concentrating on Menard's most important work, described as perhaps the most significant of our time, comprising the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of the first part of *Don Quixote*, as well as a fragment of the twenty-second chapter. Menard did not merely copy these chapters, as anyone could have, instead he created them anew, an achievement characterized by the narrator as heroic, indisputably greater than

Cervantes's own in writing the novel in the first place. It is one thing to pen a chivalric satire and have a decrepit nobleman ride off into the villages of seventeenth-century Spain, easy enough as a Spaniard living in the seventeenth century, but quite another to do so as a Frenchman at the beginning of the twentieth century. The very premise is an improvement, the narrator opines, comparing two brief passages from the two works.

> *It is a revelation to compare Menard's* Don Quixote *with Cervantes's. The latter, for example, wrote (part one, chapter nine):*
>
> *. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past,*
>
> *exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.*
>
> *Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "lay genius" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical praise of history. Menard, on the other hand, writes:*
>
> *. . . truth, whose mother is history, rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past,*
>
> *exemplar and adviser to the present, and the future's counselor.*
>
> *History, the mother of truth: the idea is astounding. Menard, a contemporary of William James, does not define history as an inquiry into reality, but as its origin. Historical truth, for him, is not what has happened; it is what we judge to have happened.*

By juxtaposing the idea of originality with that of its repetition, which is impossible and therefore naturally ranks higher than any renewal, Borges rearranges the hierarchy between new and the same, bringing the two concepts into the light. The idea that *Don Quixote* cannot be written again is so obvious it probably never occurred to anyone before Borges wrote his story about Menard's fabulous achievement, and for that very reason it is significant: what we see but are not consciously aware of seeing, the invisible world of laws and rules in which we move about and by which we are governed, the time and space of the given, is our cage as well as our home. Art is what cannot be done again, Borges reminds us, and is as such akin to the miracle. That someone else by coincidence should happen to paint *Lady with an Ermine* exactly as Leonardo did is an impossible thought, whereas that of someone drawing the same picture of the heart or the chest or the arm with its exposed tendons and blood vessels is not. The painting has a time and a place, it is a situation encapsulated, with all its properties and details, whereas the drawings of the body are timeless and placeless. What matters in the painting is the particular woman, the particular animal, the unique and local, whereas in the drawings it is all bodies, the general and universal.

Art is unique and local, striving always toward the unique and local, resisting everything that seeks to pull it from that trajectory. Its entire value resides in this. Even a painting by someone like Malevich, whose simple geometric figures or wholly monochrome surfaces seemingly aim toward total generality, is unique and local, for rather than being the expression of those figures in themselves, the painting is Malevich's depiction of them, and this presence of another human being fixes the painting in time: it could not have been painted by anyone else. When this is copied, and inevitably any bold style will be absorbed by others, the art is no longer unique, it becomes less local, and anemic. Without exception the paintings of the Norwegian and Swedish Cubists pale beside those of Picasso and Léger. It is this notion of the unique that "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" is about. Art is what cannot be done again, but unlike the miracle, art extends in time and spans the generations, and it is into that temporal space Borges directs Menard when ingeniously he finds a way out of his own age and into the past without losing sight of either, enabling himself to perform the feat of making the copy original without alteration, the twentieth century's entire mind-set going back with him and exerting its own pressure on the sentences Cervantes once constructed, altering them as if from within, because what we know always shapes what we see. So enthusiastic is Borges's narrator about this new literary invention that he suggests the method be applied to other works, concluding with the question: "To attribute the *Imitatio Christi* to Louis Ferdinand Céline or to James Joyce, is this not a sufficient renovation of its tenuous spiritual indications?"

Nothing is coincidental in Borges's work, not even the choice of reference. The *Imitatio Christi*, or *Imitation of Christ*, is a collection of fifteenth-century texts attributed to the monk Thomas à Kempis, one of Christianity's most widely read books, renunciant of worldly life in its standpoint and holding up the life of Christ on earth as its ideal, hence the title, primarily motivated by a quote from Matthew:

> *Then Jesus said unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.*

The idea of denying oneself and living a life in imitation of another is even more radical and impossible than Menard's, and yet this was a genuine endeavor, not in detail, obviously, though the occasional wound may well have opened miraculously in someone's hand or side at various intervals throughout the Middle Ages, but in spirit, and this, the devotion of one's life to another, is the greatest sacrifice a human can make. The thought of Céline or Joyce, the two great idiosyncracies of twentieth-century literature, having written such a work is of course a joke, for if anyone ever invested themselves in their writing, and if anyone were ever as oblivious to the idea of humility, it was they. Their souls would have been damaged by it.

For us, the one true life is our own singular life, unexampled and individual, while imitation is false and submissive. In the *Imitatio Christi* imitation is the ideal, the possibility of withdrawing from life and devoting oneself fully to Christ being ever present, always hallowed, never anemic or strange. And while Scripture was paramount, governing people's understanding of everything, the material as well as the immaterial, while it was the form into which everything had to fit, a dizzying system of correspondences and connections devised in its name, an unparalleled instance of universalism, the body was always there, at the center of it all, the body of Christ, the flesh and blood of the Son of Man, which although dissolved in the text and in the language, was the point from which all theological abstractions radiated. This was evident not least in the relics that filled medieval churches, monasteries, and cathedrals. These were ranked according to a system based on physical proximity: first-order relics were everything that derived from the bodies of the saints or disciples – hair, nails, fragments of bone, even whole skeletons; to the second order belonged objects they had used or carried about their persons; the third order comprised things that had come into contact with them in some other way or had been stored in proximity to first-order relics. The most precious were those associated with the body of Christ and his life on earth, the holiest of all being those connected with the crucifixion: splinters of the cross, thorns of the crown, the head of the lance with which he was prodded, cloth from the garments of people who had been present, and, of course, the shroud itself. The adoration of all these objects, which could take on hysterical forms, many of them associated with miracles and healing, comprises the very core of Christianity, expressing its innermost truth and authentic nature: that God in Christ became man, was born into the human world, a living body, a person who for some thirty years lived *here* among us, in *our* world. The idea is so radical as to be impossible to take in, much less understand, other than in fleeting, emotional moments of insight. The relics opened that insight, the divine was local, could be associated with places to which one could travel and see with one's own eyes, and with identifiable people who once, not that many generations before, actually existed. The Old Testament was local too, almost all the places mentioned in it were still in existence, and if one cared to investigate one would find that all were close to each other. The River Jordan, the Sinai Desert, the Dead Sea, Mount Gilboa, the brook of Zered, the plains of Moab. Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Gaza, Beersheba, Ezion-Geber, all inside an area no bigger than a Norwegian *fylke*. For us this sense of the local trails off into the exotic and remote, everything in the Bible takes place far away, the narrative is all about others and their country. But what if it had been about us and our country? The local aspect would then have been plain to us. Moses and the children of Israel might have come into the Setesdal, having wandered about the Hardangervidda for forty years. Moses could have received the Tablets of the Law, inscribed with the Ten Commandments, on the Gaustatoppen, and the Promised Land he was allowed to see but not to enter might have been Aust-Agder. The Lord's speech to him about the Promised Land, following the Golden Calf incident, might have gone like this: "I will send an angel before you and drive out the Setesdalers, the Arendalites and the Frolanders, the Hisøyites and the Tromøyites. Go down to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people." And Deuteronomy's magnificent finale might have been as follows:

> *And Moses descended from the plains of the Hardangervidda into the Setesdal and went up into the hills there, over against Valle. And the Lord shewed him all the land: from Byggland unto Evje and Åmli, from Birkenes unto Hægebostad, and all of Agder unto Arendal and the utmost sea to the south, and Grimstad and Lillesand, all the land of the south unto Kristiansand. And the Lord said unto him. This is the land which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying, I will give it unto thy seed: I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither. So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the Setesdal, according to the word of the Lord. And he buried him in the Setesdal, over against Bykle: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day.*

But it is not just the geography that draws the texts of the Old Testament toward the sphere of the local, the people in them do too. Those who had in common the fact that God had appeared before them are named, they possess their own, clear character traits and personalities, from the fearful Lot to the cunning Isaac, and if nothing remains to testify to their existence outside these texts, it is not necessarily because they were figures of mythology created in the depths of popular imagination, but because the age in which they lived is so very remote. The way in which their stories are told reinforces the local aspect and anchors them in time, for there are no abstractions or systems, practically no mythological or fairy-tale-type constructions, everything conveyed is conveyed through descriptions of concrete events in the concrete world. Soil, sand, roads, houses, blood. Journeys, births, battles, flight.

Explanation is anathema in these texts, all meaning must be extracted from the events portrayed, which are not relative, only unfathomable. Why are they unfathomable? Events are not a language, though they may be conveyed by one. When we understand an event, we do so by virtue of the culture in which the event takes place. If that culture no longer exists, our understanding fails and the events are left behind, as mysterious to us as the statues on Easter Island. The stories of the Bible are ancient, and in them are traces of stories even more ancient.

When I started school at Sandnes primary in 1975, Christian studies was still one of the most important subjects, together with Norwegian, math, and the combined studies of science, history, geography, and social studies, and for the most part it consisted of our teacher, Helga Torgersen, telling us stories from the Bible, and our drawing or talking about them afterwards. It was a pastoral world we entered, dramatic and full of light. Being Christian was about being good and kind. All of us wanted that, but gradually, one by one, we fell by the wayside as we approached puberty. I held out for a long time, to me mopeds were bad, one-armed bandits were bad, even cola and peanuts were tinged with badness. To this day I remain wary of such deviations; driving above the speed limit fills me with guilt for days; killing a fly or watching a plant in the apartment die because I've forgotten to water it pains me unspeakably, for the desire to be good and decent has kept itself alive in me through all these years. What I know now, which I did not know then, is that there are forces inside us oblivious to good and bad, and emotions that can be so powerful as to override everything without our even knowing that we are in their grip, for the ego, the I, that thin sliver of light at the edge of our consciousness, contains our whole identity, colors our understanding of all the other forces, desires, and emotions that exist within us, much as the age in which we live colors our perception of the past, for there is no natural outside, neither in the body nor in society, and to arrive at such a place, from where we can see ourselves or the age in which we live, requires an effort, and that effort is huge, for the forces that pull on our self-awareness and on the contemporary age, drawing everything into their domain, are not gravitational, but centripetal. The Bible, however, is one such outside, particularly the texts of the Old Testament, simultaneously remote and proximate, familiar and strange. They are ancient and we are separated from the lives they portray by a chasm of thousands of years. At the same time they belong to our culture, our grandparents, great-grandparents, great-great-grandparents, and the generations before them, all the way back to the first millenium, read the same texts, which shaped them and their culture, in which we continue to live to this day, albeit its form has since become somewhat modified. A story such as that of Cain and Abel carries with it not only our prehistory but also the fifth century of Augustine of Hippo, the thirteenth century of Thomas Aquinas and Dante, the seventeenth century of Shakespeare and Bacon, as well as our own childhood and contemporary age. In translating that story into modern language, much of its strangeness disappears, whereas sticking closely to the Hebrew original makes it incomprehensible. A compromise might look like this:

> *And the man came to Eve, his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, The Lord has given me a man. And she bore his brother, Abel, and he was a shepherd, and Cain a tiller of the earth. One day, when his work was done, Cain brought grain from his field in offering to the Lord, while Abel brought the fattest cuts of the first lamb of his flock. And the Lord regarded Abel and respected his offering, yet ignored Cain and his. Cain was enraged and his face fell, and the Lord said to him, Why are you angry? Why has your face fallen? Lift it up and you will be accepted; if not, sin will gather at your door and you shall be its desire and rule over it. And Cain talked with his brother Abel; they were in the field, and Cain rose up against his brother and killed him. And the Lord said to Cain, Where is Abel, your brother? And Cain replied, Am I my brother's keeper? And the Lord said, What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground. And now you shall be banished from the good earth that has opened her mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. Tilling the land will no more yield its grain to you, henceforth you shall be a fugitive and a vagabond on earth. And Cain said to the Lord, My punishment*

> *is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me out this day from the face of the earth, and from your face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond, and anyone who finds me may kill me. And the Lord said to him, Therefore, whoever slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest anyone finding him should try to kill him. And Cain went from the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.*

It is a simple story, yet strange. A man kills his brother and God sends him away, at the same time placing a mark on him to prevent anyone from killing him. What does it mean? Oh, the blood and the earth are everything here. The Lord respects the lamb, the blood sacrifice, but not the grain. Cain kills Abel, blood is shed, the Lord curses Cain but does not kill him, and wishes him not to be killed by any other, for Abel is dead, and it is Cain who lives and may pass on the blood. And the blood is bound up with the earth, firstly through their father, who bears its name, *adama* in the Hebrew, which is to say through a creature of God, then by way of the blood that is shed, death, and the blood's return to the earth. The voice of the blood cries from the ground, the mouth of the earth opens to receive it. But neither the blood nor the earth are driving forces in the narrative, merely stations between which the story passes. What drives the narrative is the face and the gaze. The Lord regards Abel. Cain's face falls. The Lord admonishes him, he must lift his face, otherwise sin will gather at his door. He disobeys, kills his brother, and from then on he will be hidden from the face of the Lord. And since surface and face are the same word in Hebrew, his banishment from the face of the earth may be taken literally, the face, or gaze, of the earth.

Cain was enraged and his face fell.

Cain is ignored, the Lord does not regard him, this is the story's starting point. Ignored and unregarded, he is no one, and if he is no one he is dead, and if he is dead he has nothing to lose. What might he have lost? Might he have lost face? But his face was already lost. The crux lies in the void between Cain's face not being regarded and his lowering his face so that it can no longer be seen. The fallen face is directly associated with evil, for God says, "Lift it up and you will be accepted." See and be seen. If not, "sin will gather at your door and you shall be its desire and rule over it." To turn away, which is not merely not to see, but also not to be seen, is perilous, for there, in that gap, that uncorrected reservoir of space, sin gathers.

And his face fell.

Lift it up.

The face is the other, and in its light we become. Without that face we are no one, and if we are no one we are dead, and if we are dead we can do as we please. With that face, which sees us and is seen by us, we cannot do as we please. The face puts us under an obligation. This is why God says lift it up. Take that obligation upon yourself. But Cain does not lift his face, he does not take that obligation upon himself, he oversteps the bounds of the social and kills his brother. The transgression affects them deeply, since the person he kills is his brother, which in this archaic world is to say his own blood. And such violence against the self is the most dangerous of all, since it is almost impossible to guard against; it comes from the we, not from the alien without, not from any them, but from the you of the fallen face.

Fratricide is still going on around us, brother killing brother someplace in Africa, in Asia, in Europe; yesterday, today, tomorrow; it occurs, and then the occurrence is gone. Nothing of being human has changed since biblical times: we are born, we love and hate, we die. But our archaic aspect and the things we do are sucked up by our quotidian lives in the contemporary age we have created and which we comprise, where reality is above all horizontal and the vertical only seldom glimpsed and acknowledged. Yet all we have to do is to look up to grasp it, for above us is the sun, blazing, the same sun that blazed for Cain and Abel, Odysseus and Aeneas. The fells before our eyes are of similar dizzying age. That we are but the latest in a line of ancestry reaching back thousands of generations into the past, emotionally the same as them, for the heart that beat in them beats also in us, is a perspective we are unable and unwilling to take upon ourselves, for in it our uniqueness is erased and we become merely a locus of feelings and actions, much as water is the locus of waves, or the sky of clouds. We know each cloud to be unique, each wave to be unique, yet we see only clouds, only waves. Mythology points directly into that space, since each myth is about the one, yet what it expresses applies to us all. Cain is enraged, his face falls. Cain is assailed by hatred and is made blind, he assails his own brother and kills him. The myth is about forces in the human that cannot be subsumed into the individual's identity or the sphere of the social, instead breaking loose and running riot. It is about something out of control in the human itself, which we fear and tremble before, not unlike the way we react when confronted by the sublime in nature. This is the sublime in human nature, the wild and uncontrolled, the destructive aspect of our makeup that can be bridled neither by the individual nor by the structures of our social world, arising in one human being, who is all of us. The sublime in the one. But the sublime is also in the all, when we are one together, congregated in teeming numbers. The roar of a football crowd, the flow of mass protesters in the streets. Common to these two instances of the sublime in human nature is that both edge toward the place where what is individual and peculiar to the one ceases to exist. The place where our humanity dissolves into other forces of nature and loses itself. This is the boundary of the I, and it is the boundary of our culture, and as such it is justifiably feared. When the archaic is sucked into the quotidian and the sun that blazes in the sky is our sun, we live within culture, which relentlessly toils to confirm that idea, relentlessly drawing everything in toward the already known, whereas art quite differently is adjusted to what is beyond the boundary of the I and culture, the unfamiliar, and what used to be called the divine. Death is the gateway to the land from which we come and to which sooner or later we must return. It lies beyond language, beyond thought, beyond culture, and cannot be grasped but merely glimpsed, for example by our turning toward the mute and blind in ourselves. It is there always, even when we are having breakfast on a normal Tuesday morning and the coffee is a bit too strong, the rain is running down the windowpanes, the radio is sending out the seven o'clock news, and the living-room floor inside is littered with toys, even then the heart beats, the very muscle of the archaic, pumping its blood around the body. Culture is created to avoid that perspective, so that we might look away from the precipice at whose edge we exist, but contemporary culture, whose perspective belongs only to a couple of generations and which relates only to the most proximate history, what used to be called living memory, has never been absolute, for another age has always existed within it, the age in which nothing changes, where everything stays the same, the age of myths and rituals. That this aspect of our understanding of reality is gone does not mean that it is gone from reality. What did Hitler do when he withdrew into himself as a young man? He saw no one, and no one saw him. Not even as an adult did he attach himself to any you; when he was seen, he was seen only by a crowd, by the mass of an all, and the same was true when he wrote: *Mein Kampf* contains an I, contains a we, contains a they, but does not contain a you.

And his face fell.

Lift it up.

The story of Cain and Abel is about the elimination of the you as the source of violence, and the reader may stop there or continue, for it does not simply concern one brother killing another, but relates also to sacrifice: Cain slays Abel after God accepts Abel's offering, an animal sacrifice, while ignoring Cain's offering of grain. The French anthropologist René Girard reads the story as expressing the function of the sacrifice in respect to the act of violence. Sacrifice brings violence into relief and steps into its place as a way of controlling its otherwise unbound forces within society; Cain does not have the violence-outlet of animal sacrifice at his disposal, and kills his brother. The surrogate function of sacrifice is made plain in the narrative of Abraham offering his son Isaac in sacrifice to God, when God yields and asks him to sacrifice a ram instead. This ram, Girard writes, is in Muslim tradition the same ram as once offered by Abel. The sacrifice is a ritual, it is collective, and it construes violence as collective.

The concept of sacrifice is mythic, central to primitive cultures, abandoned in those more developed, such as our own, where violence is understood to be something individual, arising in a particular situation, among particular people, and dealt with by a judicial system that punishes the guilty individual. The most important aim of the process of socialization in any society is for the individual to control his impulses, emotions, and actions, to avoid what destroys and corrodes all structures and communities, violence among like kind, and if the individual is unable to do this, and kills one or more of his own kind, he will be punished by the community through the apparatus of law. The forbiddance of violence among like kind occurs in all societies, indeed one cannot imagine a society without it. In primitive societies the distinction between the I and the we is less clear, discriminating and legislative institutions do not exist, and the insight of violence among like kind, the peril of internal disturbance, is therefore greater perhaps, the community being that much more vulnerable to its consequences. Girard believes that the wish to deal with violence among like kind lies behind all notions of taboo, which is a means of avoiding anything that might bring it about. If this is so, rituals stand for the very opposite, being a means of venturing to the point where forces are controlled, the repetitions of the ritual nullifying the arbitrary and constraining emotion.

But repetition is also tabooed, the emulative and the echoic, imitation, mimesis being likewise associated with peril, and according to Girard this is quite fundamental. In some primitive cultures twins are killed at birth. Mirrors too are often associated with danger; some cultures forbid the imitation of others, whether by gesture or the repetition of utterances; the doppelgänger has always put fear into people; many religions prohibit the depiction of their deity.

One might imagine that the fear of duplication, facsimile, imitation has to do with the notion of identity, the individual becoming lost in its image in the event that identity is unstable, open to the world, and susceptible to impregnation, but Girard believes the opposite to hold, that likeness represents a threat to the collective in that the act of violence cannot then be construed individually, related back to its perpetrator nor even associated with its results, being viewed not as a completed event, but instead, and to a much greater extent than in our own culture, in terms of process, seeing in it symmetry and likeness: two rivals facing off, between them an object, the bone of contention, and on either side of it they are alike. If not stopped, this likeness will be reproduced serially, in retaliations, representatives of the first taking vengeance on representatives of the second, and such violence, the violence of the blood feud, can go on through generations, the original conflict long since forgotten, consumed into the seriality.

In any small community such escalation is catastrophic, and it is its fundamental pattern, one against the other, that gives rise to duplication taboos, the manifest and mysterious fear of symmetry. Violence is imitative and repetitive. If taboos are an avoidance measure in this respect, sacrifice confronts it, not only by being its imitation and by recreating it serially in ritual, but also structurally, the sacrifice on the one side, the members of the community on the other, though not divided, the surrogate victim as scapegoat bearing the division, but collectively: the all against the one, which is then duly killed. And when it is done, only the all remains, a single, stable whole.

On the other hand, imitation may also be a desirable phenomenon in a culture, nearly all learning and development occurring by way of repetition and duplication, directly too in the imitation of role models, though never without some degree of ambivalence, since imitation of the one by the other is down to the one wanting what the other one has, and this, in Girard's terminology mimetic desire, is no stable concept. When the final commandment of the Old Testament decrees that you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his ox, or anything else that belongs to him, the reason is of course that doing so would be a source of conflict, two facing off over an object desired by both; where two individuals confront each other in a state of mimetic desire, the object becomes the one subject by virtue of the imitation or duplication, which brings about an imbalance in the relation, whether it be the depiction eclipsing the depicted, or vice versa. The association of imitation with power, or lack of power, and in essence with violence, is according to Girard the reason for Plato's loathing of mimesis, the concept being unresolved in his writings; and he interprets the crisis of the we's collapse into the I as seen in schizophrenia as the expression of a lack of ability to imitate the other, something society is rooted in, and this is what manifests itself in the occasionally grotesque, parodic exaggerations often displayed by schizophrenics.

Girard's thinking concerning sacrifice and imitation is nonpsychological, seeking explanation not in the particular I, but in the collective, and construing violence as a structural entity. This aspect of violence has all but disappeared in our time, insofar as its containment has consisted of relating the act of violence itself, as well the emotions that give rise to it, to the individual in a system whereby the community steps in as soon as the trangressional act takes place, thereby regulating it and preventing its escalation, a fact that has led us to consider it in terms of the individual and accordingly made us blind to its collective aspect. But when any group emerges in society, placing value outside the individual and declining to identify with the authority of the state or with areas in which that power is weak, symmetrical, serial violence occurs once again; the Sicilian Mafia or the inner cities of the northeast of the United States are examples of environments in which the blood feud has recently been pivotal, and the gangs that populate the run-down areas of American cities gun each other down according to the same principle of retaliation. They destroy one another utterly, but the power of destruction lies not in their hands, it spirals out of control, and this was what primitive cultures sought to manage by their taboos and rituals, which nearly always ended in sacrifice. Their myths, and gradually their religions, were the expression of the collective, treating and concerning the whole, and as those cultures evolved, doing so in increasingly sophisticated ways. The Pentateuch, the Five Books of Moses, is the narrative of that evolution, from the emergence of man, the separation of culture from nature, to the establishment of a homogenous and civilized societal unit with laws, rules, forms of governance, and religion. What the sacrifice does is to establish differences in culture. Between life and death, animal and human, human and divine, but also differences within the human sphere, where the destructive power of likeness is separated out and dealt with by its transformation into unlikeness. The sacrificial offering is a language without words in which the unspoken is made manifest, not so much in order to be perceived as to be controlled, by being brought into existence. The sacrifice is a means of naming the unnameable, of giving form to the formless. The formless is likeness, there lies the point of departure of all creation narratives, including those of science. The first chapter of the Book of Genesis says, "And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." The void is nothing, emptiness is nothing, darkness is likeness, the deep is the boundless, the Spirit of God is the universe, the waters the undifferentiated. Then, by its very predication, land is separated from sea, night from day, sun from moon. God said let there be light, and there was light. When everything in the material world was separated, the animals that swim in the sea, creep on the land, and fly through the sky were created.

What is the nature of this first picture of life?

"Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life," it says. "And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl."

The emphasis here is on quantity and movement: "abundantly," "moveth," "living creature," the "moving creature." Against this blind abundance of life stands the categorization of "after their kind," but so unspecifically is life described, primarily in terms of its living abundance only, that its categorization becomes secondary, much like the rattling pots that enclose the living, crawling lobsters as they are lifted into a boat.

Then comes evening, and after it the morning of the sixth day, and God creates the animals of the land, and creates man, the male and the female. And to them he says, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have the dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

While the message in his commandment is that man is superior to all other living creatures, and thereby separated from them, distinct and on his own, the parallels in the choice of words pull the human irresistibly toward that abundance of life: "Be fruitful," it says, "and multiply, and replenish the earth," in other words man is considered as a mass, surrounded by the other masses of life, characterized by their movements, life that moveth, teeming, creeping, crawling.

And God says:

> *Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so. And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.*

The weight given to expansion is huge in this first chapter of the Old Testament, the idea of life extending out being presented as its fundamental condition. In this lies the notion of repetition, for what spreads is the same, life in its various forms, and it does so singly, the leaves of the deciduous tree that unfold every spring being the same leaf over and over again, as it does so together, the deciduous trees growing up in community, great forests extending ever deeper. Humanity is a part of this expansion, bound too by the imperative of multiplying and replenishing the earth, this being the very urge of life, to increase, and man is in this sense construed as life on the same level as all other living things.

But then something happens. In the second chapter of the Book of Genesis the narrative shifts from the remote to the near, and is no longer about the abstract universe, about the earth viewed generally, the sky viewed generally, life viewed generally, but about the particular place, this earth, this sky, the creation of these two particular people. Adam, whose name is associated with earth, and Eve, whose name is associated with life. Having breathed the breath of life into their nostrils, God places them in a garden, to the east, in Eden. And from the garden ran four named rivers: Pison, Gihon, Hiddekel, and Euphrates. After what happens there, when they eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and are banished, several names appear. Adam and Eve's son Abel, who dies, and all the descendants of their son Cain: Enoch, Irad, Mehujael, Methusael, Lamech, Adah, Zillah, Jubal, Tabulcain, Naamah. Then come the descendants of the third son, Seth: Enos, Cainan, Mahalaleel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. In the lifetime of these four latter persons, all life on earth is destroyed in the Flood, and a new lineage begins. After

Japheth, Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, Tiras, Ashkenaz, Riphath, Togarmah, Eishah, Tarshiss, Kittim, Dodanim. After Ham, Cush, Mizraim, Phut, Canaan, Seba, Havilah, Sabtah, Raamah, Sabtecha, Sheba, Dedan. After Shem, Elam, Ashur, Arphaxad, Lud, Aram, Uz, Hul, Gether, Mash, Salah, Eber, Peleg, Joktan, Almodad, Sheleph, Hazarmaveth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklah, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Ophir, Havilah, Jobab. After Peleg, Reu, Serug, Nahor, Terah, Abram, Nahor, Haran.

These names connect historical time with the mythic, illuminating as it were the darkness of history and forging a path directly into the moment of creation. The connection is real, if not factual, since there must be some particular point in time at which humanity emerged, and some particular place. Viewed in relation to the age of the earth, that time is not far from the present, some two hundred thousand years, somewhere in the region of ten thousand generations. It occurred on the African continent, where creatures resembling humans had already lived for millions of years, and for a time they must have lived alongside each other, perhaps until only forty thousand years ago. The first humans cannot have been many in number, a few small flocks at most, and they must have kept to the same places until some of them, about a hundred thousand years ago, began to wander, the species gradually spread across the globe.

When in the 1990s scientists began to identify and map our DNA, the paths these early humans wandered could suddenly be followed, deposited in our living bodies here in the present, an unfathomably long chain of inheritance enclosing us all in our history, or exposing us to the very depths of time: not only are we like them, in a sense we are them.

The emergence of the human being was a local occurrence, it took place in a certain geographical area; the idea of the Garden of Eden and man's dispersion from it expresses no more than that. Some caves, plains, forests, some lakes or rivers.

By the time the narrative gets to Abram we are somewhere between historical time and the void of prehistory, and what emerges from Abram are the foundations of a family, a people, and a nation, governed by the will of a single God, who gradually bestows on them laws and statutory instruments, which is to say civilization and religion. The relation between the divine and the nondivine, between man and the world, and between individuals, is regulated within those systems. And the future is a promise of descendants, for God brings Abram forth and says to him, "Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them. So shall thy seed be." And when Abram, who after his covenant with God becomes known as Abraham, is later instructed to sacrifice his only son, God intervenes with that same promise: "That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the seashore."

The stars and the sand are the mass, the many, but the many are also alike. The promise of God does not apply to all people, it is not humanity as such that is to multiply so infinitely, but Abraham and his kin, which is to say a singular we, and this is what makes God's words a promise and a utopia, since the expansion of a single family, a clan, a people, brings with it power and wealth. By virtue of sheer numbers, land may be conquered and empires won. The Bible's negative representation of innumerableness consists in the swarms of grasshoppers, the great clouds of insects consuming all in their path, unstoppable and merciless.

This distinction between we and they is consistently of the greatest significance throughout the biblical narrative. The Old Testament can be seen as a story issuing out of the various tensions that distinction creates. All the men of Abraham's family shall be circumcised, this being the sign of their belonging, their we, and in the covenant he enters into with God, the promise of their own land is the utopia the later stories seek, until it comes to fruition when before his death Moses sees the Promised Land, overflowing with milk and honey, and his people then cross the river to enter it. Until that point they have been slaves in Egypt, powerless, their lives in the hands of others, and in such a situation, possessing nothing of their own and without influence on their own days, not even on their own children, the only thing that keeps them together is their sense of particularity, the idea of their own, guaranteed to them by God, who is the one God.

The Egyptians murder all male children born to the Hebrews, but when Moses is born he is hidden in an ark among the bulrushes at the river, where he is found by Pharaoh's daughter, who takes him as her own. Not only is he then able to live safely among the Egyptians, he also enjoys the foremost privileges as a member of a hallowed, godlike family, yet so strong is the bond to the people from whom he stems, the slaves, that he renounces all of this, not in any planned or calculated manner, but in an act of passion, his blood brought to the boil when he sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew; Moses kills the man, buries the body in the sand and flees the country, whereupon God appears before him and a new covenant is entered into. Led by Moses, the Hebrews escape from Egypt into the desert. There the laws and rituals by which they must abide are delivered to them. And they are counted.

That laws are delivered to them is by no means surprising, this being a narrative of foundation, but counting and stating their own number is conspicuous indeed. One could conceive of it as some kind of bookkeeping exercise, an archaic urge to account completely for the situation at hand, where their number must have played a significant role given that they were in the desert at the time, in a landscape where food and drink must have been scarce, and because they were about to invade another land and the number of soldiers at their disposal would be one of the most important factors in determining the outcome. Nonetheless, the preciseness of the number stated seems odd, such exact detail occurring only seldom in the Scriptures, which elsewhere can report a people's suffering through centuries or the destruction of a city in only a single sentence.

The only other place where the text displays such exactness, allowing not a detail to escape, is in the listing of the laws and rituals the priests are to perform. But the laws are universal, immutable, and meant to apply through all time; the Hebrews' number is the opposite, capturing an inconstant entity at a certain point in time, applicable only to them, in that place, when Moses gathers the Israelites in the Sinai Desert. They are many, though not in the way the stars or the grains of sand at the shore are many; in total they number 603,550 able-bodied men spanning twelve tribes and with the following distribution:

> *The tribe of Reuben: forty and six thousand and five hundred.*
> *The tribe of Simeon: fifty and nine thousand and three hundred.*
> *The tribe of Gad: forty and five thousand and six hundred and fifty.*
> *The tribe of Judah: threescore and fourteen thousand and six hundred.*
> *The tribe of Issachar: fifty and four thousand and four hundred.*
> *The tribe of Zebulun: fifty and seven thousand and four hundred.*
> *The tribe of Ephraim: forty thousand five hundred.*
> *The tribe of Manasseh: thirty and two thousand and two hundred.*
> *The tribe of Benjamin: thirty and five thousand and four hundred.*
> *The tribe of Dan: threescore and two thousand and seven hundred.*
> *The tribe of Aser: forty and one thousand and five hundred.*
> *The tribe of Naphtali: fifty and three thousand and four hundred.*

Seen from the outside, as when later they conquer the new land, killing everything in their path, they are a faceless horde, but seen from within, all are bound to the familiar in lines of descent going back through families and through history, which in sum comprise the people.

Reading this ancient text today, perhaps the most remarkable aspect is the way the foundation of the religious merges into the social, as if they were two sides of the same coin. For the number's freezing of the multitude in time is just one aspect of this, what the number represents is another, and it is this that joins number and law together. The number stands open to the boundless, the uncontrollable, the identityless, the infinity of sand and stars; the names constrain and control in the identity of the name, the face of the language. Similarly, the law constrains and controls action; killing is forbidden, being a trangression of life, lying is forbidden, being a transgression of truth, adultery is forbidden, being a transgression of marriage. The punishment is expulsion from life, which is to say death, or, if the transgression is deemed to be minor, a sacrifice in place of death. And the boundary that emerges in this, which separates this people and their existence from all that is holy, is the most important of all, testified to by the text's richness of detail in describing the various rituals, the exactness required when the priests step into the hallowed space and dash blood on the sacrificial stone or burn animals or corn or oil. The sacrifice is not merely a reminder of the price of transgression, is not merely a symbolic act, but is in itself a price, in the way the ox whose head is severed is not merely a symbol of life and blood, but is in itself life and blood. That the language of the Old Testament is so specific, so proximate to physical reality and the events that take place within it, to body rather than spirit, is undoubtedly an aspect of the same thing. What is to be found beyond the holy, the boundless and infinite, is also nameless, indefinite, its identity construed by a verb, which is to say action or movement. I am what I am. The image of the nameless human is a grain of sand or a star, the loss of identity in the mass merely ostensible, for the number of stars or the number of grains of sand is not infinite, but finite, and only from a distance are they the same, seen up close each grain of sand is different, each star unique. They may be counted, and they may be named. The image of the nameless God, however, is infinite and identical, for it is fire. Its manifestations are always the same – to name an instance of fire would seem meaningless, to name a grain of sand would not – and yet each is different. Fire cannot be counted, cannot be named, cannot be delimited; doused in one place, it will burn in another. The stars and the grains of sand express the idea of the one and the all, the individual and the mass, whereas fire establishes identity between the two, the one being simultaneously the one and the all. Beyond the boundaries of law and ritual stands the boundless God, beyond the name stands boundless biological life, only concerted effort can prevent us from disappearing into or being consumed by its depths.

Religion, whose rituals gather together all time, tying it down in their gravity to only a single point in time, lay in this rural past close to the social world, whose horizons lay mere generations backward and forward in time, but whose practices, bound up with the land and the seasons, were mainly associated with repetition. They were distinct from one another regarding the local and the universal, where that which applied to all, that which for example regulated the total population of the earth, existed beyond the reach of humans and was identified in terms of external forces, fate and destiny, so strong that not even the thought arose of their being controllable other than by prayer and sacrifice. In the face of drought, floods, cold, and epidemics, man was vulnerable, fragile, and helpless. The relationship between the local and the universal, between individual and whole, was one-sided in that these mighty and impersonal forces intervened in individual lives, whereas the individual could never encroach on the universal. The universal was religious, rather than social.

When science becomes the language by which man construes the material world, the religious stepping aside to apply only to the spiritual aspect of life, the relationship between the local and the universal becomes radically displaced and ensuing technological progress, which in such an astonishingly short space of time completely alters the circumstances of production and distribution, causes our populations to skyrocket compared to the demographic calm of preceding centuries and millennia. Whereas there were some 250 to 400 million people in the world in 1350, and between 465 and 545 million in 1650, that figure rose to between 835 and 915 million in 1800, between 1 billion 91 million and 1 billion 176 million in 1850, between 1 billion 530 million and 1 billion 608 million in 1900, to 2 billion 416 million in 1950, in the region of 4 billion in 1980, and now, in 2011, to some 6 billion people. We have indeed replenished the earth and subdued it as the account of the creation would have it, and have become as many as the sand upon the seashore and the stars of the heaven.

In a way, such a radical rise in population changes nothing. What it means is simply more of the same. More births and deaths, more mouths and more food, more clothing, more houses, closer together and spread over greater areas of land. Humanity advances in much the same way as a forest, for whose trees the number of other trees changes nothing. The local does not cease to exist as a concept even if connections extend from there into the global, such as when the global market came into being with the Industrial Revolution, when goods began to be produced in one place, to be transported from there out into the wide world, for as the sociologist Bruno Latour puts it in his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, by following the process step-by-step "one never crosses the mysterious *lines* that should divide the local from the global." When does the train depart the local and pass into the global, Latour asks, and replies: never. All large organizations and associations comprise local units, armies are for instance organized in much the same way as armies were organized in Roman days, only multiplied, and the same is true of bureaucracy, the apparatus of state, the great commercial and international businesses. They comprise a single person with sweat blotches under his arms and his tie askew person in an office to the power of a thousand or hundreds of thousands. It is not the number in itself that has altered man's circumstance, but our perception of that number.

In the 1680s an anatomy professor of Oxford University, Sir William Petty, wrote a book called *Political Arithmetic* in which he endeavored to understand or capture society on the basis of mathematical terms, in other words to quantify and measure the sphere of the human. He wished thereby to establish laws to govern what was human, much as Newton had established laws to govern nature. That there should exist an absolute order, a firm set of rules behind the world's apparent chaos of variability and arbitrariness so exact and predictable they could be calculated and accounted for mathematically, was an irresistible thought in the seventeenth century and one that would moreover confirm the greatness of God; as if some hidden plan had existed all along, relating to the world the way a technical drawing related to an invention, in a system in which all fluctuation occurred according to a predetermined pattern where nothing could change and where all constituent parts worked together in a single glorious expression of the wholeness of the universe. Man, belonging to this universe, was a part of the same system, not only in the form of the individual human, with its blood and lungs, its brain and nerve paths, its muscles and tendons, which like cables enabled the arms to be raised and lowered, the legs to walk, but also as a mass, in the structures within which human beings lived, such as villages, cities, and states, where their numbers could be determined precisely, not just those who were living, but also those who died and those who were born – for in viewing such a whole one could see there were rules that governed it. The annual numbers of births and deaths, for instance, were not arbitrary; true, those numbers rose and fell, but they did so on the basis of parameters that could be identified and determined. The same was true of life expectancy.

But what drove society, what drove the people who lived in it, what decided their actions, made their bodies do one thing rather than another? Were there rules for such things that applied to everyone?

If the comparison between the body, society, and clockwork, as made explicitly by both Descartes and Hobbes, seems almost brutally simplistic to our minds, the clock not being a particularly sophisticated machine to us, the mind-set it revealed – the foundation of medical science on the one hand, whereby the body is made up of functional parts that may be exchanged quite mechanically, and the foundations of statistics and societal planning on the other, by which all human activity may be measured and quantified, captured in numbers, providing significant background for political decision-making. The list of numericized phenomena in society is almost endless, and they are broken down in all sorts of ways so that currents within people may be read and either diverted in the case of their being undesirable, or reinforced in the case of their being desirable. One may also see connections between the various parts. These statistics have a cutoff point; it would be meaningless to compile statistics of the number of people within a family killed in traffic or who have died from cancer, for instance, since such occurrences cannot be understood as the expression of anything quantative, because while Johannes belonged to the segment of young men most likely to die in traffic, to his family he was not representative of anyone, he was Johannes, who picked his car keys up off the table in the hallway one afternoon only a month ago and never came back. Not even in a small society, in one of the many village communities that line the coast of northern Norway, for example, with their two or three hundred inhabitants, where everyone knows each other, would the viewpoint of statistics make sense; he was Johannes. But at some point statistics do become meaningful. This is the point at which the observer loses overview of the "we" and can no longer identify the individual within the mass; a teacher in a school of five hundred students knows all those in his class, but not all those in the school, and while in the first instance it is meaningless to compile statistics of what marks the students have been given, the teacher knowing perfectly well how each student has performed in the different subjects, in the second instance, that of student performance in the school as a whole, statistics would indeed be meaningful. The tipping point between the individual and the individual within the mass is the tipping point between the I and the we, though not the personal we, this one borders on another, greater we, which is impersonal, no longer represented by any name, but by a number, and which thereby approaches the "it."

If we imagine humanity in terms of a scale, it would have to begin at one end with the impersonal, the materiality of the body, where in principle all parts are exchangeable, being the same for everyone, and where for that same reason the notion of the individual makes no sense – the human concept would thus proceed from the impersonal I, or the "it" of the I, shading in turn into the personal I, the personal we, and eventually the nonpersonal we, or the "it" of the we, humanity as a mass, the individual as a number.

The boundaries of both the I and the we in respect to the it are fluid and unclear, but nonetheless they are real, for in the it-zones humanity is characterized by sameness, predictability, and near-mathematical regularity, whereas in the I-zones and the we-zones it is quite differently free and individualized. The world of the inner "it" is that of biology, where thoughts are interactions between cells, emotions are chemical and electric impulses shooting through the nerve fibers, existing alongside all other bodily processes, which lie beyond their scope and cannot think or feel on their own, unless communication between the DNA spiral and the cell is a form of thinking at the most fundamental level of life, the one's duplication in the other, but no matter what it is or what it is called, it takes place at such depths within us that we neither feel, sense, understand, nor see it other than as a result, which is to say that which is brought forth within us.

These systems are uniform, what applies to one, applies to all, and they are continuous in the sense of their being transmitted as copies down through the generations. Their process is mechanical, a kind of biological-material industry, immeasurably finely tuned of course, and yet material, for which reason it has always been just a matter of time before human industry and its mechanical technology became sufficiently finely tuned to be applied inward, to ourselves. Its tentative beginnings were sometime in the Middle Ages, proceeding with astonishing velocity when religion no longer accounted for nature and man could intervene and take matters into his own hands, familiarize himself with nature's laws and principles, and its first practical results were crude Prometheus-like machines, monsters of iron and steel into which coal was shoveled, clouds of vapor and smoke billowing from their innards, but which were quickly refined and reduced in size until reaching such a level of sophistication as to be able to not only isolate our human cells and strings of DNA, mapping our entire microscopic genetic material, but also to intervene and modify it, altering and eventually manufacturing it too. These systems, which comprise the foundations of our self-awareness and our spirit, are biological and thereby mortal, and in them the I expires, which is not necessarily to say that I thereby am "it": we may feel the heart to be ours, but if our heart should falter, it has been shown that we can insert a new one, from a dead person, and go on living. We are not our hearts, we are not our arm, all we need to do is chop it off and look at it there on the table, what could such a blood-drenched object possibly have to do with me? We are constrained by this darkness of flesh and brightness of eye, by the insensitive beating of this simple heart, by the air inhaled and exhaled by the dismal gray twins that are these lungs, we are unthinkable without them, yet they live within themselves and do not know us, for they know no one, and the muscles cannot tell if their twitching occurs in someone dead or someone alive.

The difference between the "it" of the I and the "it" of the we is considerable. Whereas the former occurs in the material domain, the latter is relational, and while the former is therefore mortal, the latter is immortal in the sense that it lives on even when the individual dies. What they share is predictability and regularity, which in their different ways exclude the individual, and which in their different ways are associated with the extrahuman, characterized by the forces or phenomena that pervade great totalities, previously understood as powers, in the former instance those which give rise to life's beginnings and life's course, in the latter instance fate, by which it is steered.

When does here become there? asks Michel Serres. To which might be added, when do we become they? The notion of the local is geographic, but social too. The geographic sense, the space of the local, is defined by constraints. The walls of a city are such a constraint. The hedge around a house. And property rights attach people to place: room, house, farm, manor. Mine, yours, ours, theirs. Through the ages our world has been rural, consisting of small, bounded societies where all social structures were centered around the notion of the local, where people normally died in the same place they were born, rarely having ventured far from the area in which they lived their entire lives. In such a society, a German village in the fourteenth century for instance, knowledge was local too; since only a minority could read and write, that knowledge was transmitted orally and through practice, residing in the memory of the mind and the memory of the hands, bound up with the circumstances determined by its particular landscape, whether the occurrence of a certain type of rock in a quarry or a mine, the quality of the soil, or the types of trees in the forests. The idea that some kind of scientific industry could arise in one such place, a German village in the fourteenth century, or that some kind of machine, a combustion engine perhaps, a sewing machine or a microwave oven, could ever be made here is unthinkable, precisely because of the local nature of the circumstances and the shape they accorded all knowledge there. Constrained by the limitations of individual memory, the theory required would have been impossible to attain, each and every person would have had to start from scratch, on the basis of their own capabilities alone, and nearly all knowledge gained would be lost again when its host died. All text, all theory and philosophy was in such a world gathered in the hands of the few, all manuscripts were copied out by hand and existed only in very few locations, usually monasteries, and from the thirteenth century onward in the new universities of the major cities. From these environments came the alchemists, who like Paracelsus dabbled in this and that, and the itinerant Faust figure, whose knowledge was indeed systematic but bound to a community so narrow that all experimental endeavor was undertaken alone and without connection to other such endeavors, a circumstance that could hardly lead to anything but the repetition of each other's errors.

The new has to be required or desired, it must afford clear-cut advantages, and when the impulse toward the new arises, communities must be found in which it may be developed and maintained. Within local boundaries the new would be extinguished like embers on a stone. The new is possible only in structures where the local is dissolved. In the case of knowledge, the great advance occurred in Germany in the fifteenth century with the invention of the printing press, which enabled the reproduction of any book or any treatise, as well as its dissemination into the world, and then everything no longer hinged on the one or the few. Knowledge could be accumulated in ways until then unknown, to the point where no single individual could ever acquire even a fraction of that circulating in his or her lifetime. A theory put forward in one place could be strengthened or invalidated in another, no longer was it a matter of having to start from scratch every time, and once a small number of principles concerning verifiability and universality, and thereby comparison, were established, this overarching system meant that inventions could be made that no individual would ever have been able to create on his own, the train for example, or the machine gun. Nature was released from religion, knowledge was released from the local, and once freed these forces blew like the wind through the domain of the human.

"All people" was no longer a religious concept, but biological and social. The realization of biological sameness, the body as materiality, consisting of calculable and thereby manipulable parts amenable to instrumental and gradually chemical intervention, was without issue, posing no threat to the old religious division between body and soul; on the contrary this seemed consolidated: the I belonged to the flesh, and if its life could be prolonged by someone cutting into the chest and cleansing the heart of calcium, then all the better for it. The realization of social sameness, man as mass, it too consisting of calculable and thereby manipulable parts, it too amenable to intervention, was however not without issue, since the threat it posed to the I concerned not moderation but extinction, and in a strange way set previously well-defined concepts such as worthiness and goodness in flux.

All these currents through the centuries, and everything they brought with them, which can be seen as the dissolution of the local, were for the good. But with it all, in the midst of the human domain, came a shadow, something not for the good. Societal structures change, urban centers balloon, the young pack their belongings and leave for the city to seek their fortunes, and this goes on everywhere. One by one they have made the decision, but together they form a mass, each becomes another face in the flow, on their way to and from the factories, where they perform tasks that can be performed by anyone, or to and from their rooms, which are as good as identical. Smoke pours from the factory chimneys and settles in clouds upon the cities and towns, the streets are full of people, many are poor, and in the districts they inhabit, which are occasionally slum-like, hunger ensues, and the deepest hardship. Hunger is nothing new, nor the sense of powerlessness in its presence, but in previous times it was something inflicted from the outside, in the shape of floods, droughts, or cold, whose forces were ascribed to fate or to the heavenly powers, and as such were a part of man's given circumstance. This new circumstance, this new hardship, comes from people themselves, and thereby fate and the heavenly powers are drawn into the human domain, which in a way has taken on their responsibility: illness need not be fatal, it may be cured by human intervention, epidemics can be prevented, famine need not decimate a population, there being more efficient ways now to cultivate the land, making it possible to increase food production to the extent that there is now a safety margin, reinforced by a hugely improved infrastructure that means humans are no longer as dependent on local conditions. Poverty is no longer down to the heavenly powers, but to the people. This culpability cannot be isolated, cannot be attributed to this or that person or a particular group of persons, nor may it be localized to any particular place, for the consequence not only runs over from the actions of the one into those of the all, it also runs over from the local into the global, the invention of the spinning wheel being one example, basically a local occurrence, an idea conceived by a small number of individuals somewhere in England, quite innocuous on its own but with shattering consequence for all corners of society, its ramifications felt throughout the Western world, where the same thing occurs, the population explodes, the cities swell, work becomes mechanized, the market turns global – all these processes apparently unstoppable, unmanageable, incalculable, happening seemingly on their own. The blame for poverty, need, sickness belonged to no one, it was contained in the system, and if its consequences were to be prevented or modified, the system itself had to be identified and changed.

This was what Marx and Engels did: they identified the system, anchored it in history, and oriented it toward a utopian future. But a system is not human, it has no face, and "all" is by no means an unproblematic quantity, not even when divided into classes. There is no doubt that poverty and need were structurally determined, the work of a large societal group benefiting a small societal group, because if "all" is primary, "all" in the sense of a class of people living under the same circumstances and conditions, which is to say defined on the basis of what is common to them, their sameness, if it is the good of this "all" that matters, their common conditions that must be improved and changed, measured statistically in terms of average life expectancy, average child mortality, average income, average working hours, average living area, average food consumption, which are the parameters employed in *Das Kapital* to show and account for the inhuman conditions under which the working class lived, if the circumstances of the one are of secondary importance, then it is the good of the community that counts, the individual workers construed as a class or sum, and all atrocities that later took place in the name of communism, whether under Lenin, Stalin, or Mao, are a consequence, however unpredictably brutal, of that thought. The collectivization of agriculture was meant to benefit everyone, any hardship suffered by the individual in that context was of secondary importance. The same is true of the relocation of intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution.

How can the idea of a society in which everyone is equal and enjoys the same rights lead to the Gulag? Was the indignation Jack London felt on seeing the extreme poverty of the London slums misguided? Are we not to feel solidarity with others and try to help them in their need?

When hardship rises above a certain level it becomes unmanageable for the individual: even if London or Marx had spent their entire time working for the improvement of the slums and had donated their last pennies to the cause, their efforts would have been little more than a drop in the ocean. The poverty, violence, and need they saw were structural and could only be tackled and managed structurally. The premise of Marxism was that society's enormous problems, with large numbers of the population living in deplorable conditions, had to do with the distribution of social assets; as such the solutions it proposed were materialistic in nature. The issue consisted not of the forms of mass production, but of who controlled the means of production, which was not only determinative of inequality in terms of economic opportunity and huge differences in living standards, but also the alienation of the individual, which was a function of the extent to which the individual could dispose of his or her own labor. The idea was that a radical upheaval in the conditions of production would precipitate an equally radical upheaval of social conditions, evening out all economic inequalities and ensuring equal distribution of privilege, making each individual equal. However, if the main problem of industrialism was not the distribution of material wealth but was instead concerned with the reduction of the human, in a staggering process of shrinkage toward the material that all but appropriated the life of the individual, Marxism's solution was not utopian at all, but a continuation of the nightmare by other means.

Marxism was also a matter of identity in which the association of the I with the we lay not in the local dimension, following geographical boundaries, but in the new working class, which by the middle of the nineteenth century had spread throughout the Western countries, and the aim was for the revolution, the process of overturning the "they" and incorporating them into the "we," to span the world. The communist I located itself between the international we of the workers and the national they of the bourgeoisie, for while the wealth of the ruling classes knew no bounds, the self was certainly more constrained – it is by no means coincidental that the swelling I of the Romantic age, the genius and unrivaled human, emerges at the start of the nineteenth century, at the very outset of industrialism: people are becoming increasingly numerous and more alike, the unique and the local are diminishing, the concept of the mass human appears, and as if to counter this threat to the individual the grand I steps forth. The Gothic horror fiction of the same period concerns this very theme.

E. T. A. Hoffmann, who sensed more clearly than most the depths of the collective nightmare, wrote about automata so human in their appearance one could fall in love with them, and moreover about doppelgängers; Bram Stoker wrote about a person unable to die; Mary Shelley wrote about a scientist who created a human. The gripping fear of sameness encroaching upon the unique is the same fear of the inhuman encroaching upon the human, of nonlife encroaching upon life. Boundaries create distinctions, distinctions create meaning, and it is for this reason man's primeval fear is of the undifferentiated: in the domain of the undifferentiated everything is erased. To consider the unprecedented emphasis placed by the Romantics on the singular I, to which concept its construction of the genius belongs, as a way of compensating for the absence of God from the world, as well as of facing the increasing pressure of a growing sense of undifferentiation, is perhaps speculative, though not without justification; the work of Stoker, Shelley, and Hoffmann, expressions of their age, are about the boundary between the human and the nonhuman, and consider the distinction to be under threat.

These two great shifts of identity in the nineteenth century, toward the unique in the one instance and the undistinguished all in the other, were mutually exclusive, an impossible equation. Not the I and the we in themselves, but the perspectives on the human each entailed. The construal of man in terms of the mass, with its accentuation of sameness, arises out of the external and is conveyed by the external's language, which is the language of mathematics and the natural sciences, whereas the construal of man as unique and grand arises out of the internal I and its language. The signficance of the national is part of the same identity complex, where the concepts of nation and people not only constrain and make manageable the we, but also aggrandize that we in their turning toward history, which is consistently heroic. As such it is a direct reply of sorts to the dissolution of the structures of the local, the heroic occurred here rather than there, within a people from whom we descend, so belonging to us, as opposed to something that occurred there, among them.

The grand I of the Romantic age reinforces the name. The mass human of industrialism reinforces the number. The opposition has always existed; the line of motion from teeming, crawling life to the two named humans is all about this: differentiation, distinction, the accordance of meaning. The function of the sacrifice is of a different quality, not undermining the collective, not turned toward the individual, as in the case of the name, but establishing difference within and according meaning to the collective as a whole. But the function of the sacrifice changes too. The primitive nature of Abel's offering and Cain's fratricide, expressing in a single image the violence that issues from sameness, becomes cultivated and complex in the story of Abraham's offering of his son, there no longer being anything absolute about either the sacrifice or the God to whom it is offered, since God rejects the offering, and what's a rejected sacrifice worth? There are many signs that primitive cultures initially sacrificed humans, but later substituted animals, though not just any animal, they were always domesticated and thereby proximate to man's daily life. The story of Abraham seems almost to express that very transition. But there is more to it than that. There is no explicit involvement of the collective here, only Abraham, his son, and their God. God, the almighty creator of the universe, its very gestalt, who in demanding human sacrifice has demanded the inhuman, and Abraham, willing to sacrifice his son, thereby placing something else, God's name and honor, higher than death, and in that way overcoming death by not allowing it to be the ultimate end. Something in life is greater than death, therefore life may be sacrificed. Had he killed his son, he would have done so out of love – for God, but also for his son. When God rescinds the command and Abraham aborts this sacrifice of his dearest to the highest, his son thereby living on, another love arises, that between father and son, not concentrated in any pillar of fire, the very flash point of life and death, but spread out over endless days, so much time that it is continually being erased, and so near as to hardly be noticed, for in his son a father sees himself, and in his father a son sees himself, what belongs to one and what to the other is not always easy to say, and he who was below will one day be above, and he who was above will one day be below.

The story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son is one of the strangest in the Bible, not only because it is so unfathomable, for all mythological narratives are unfathomable, but because it departs from the absolute, generally a fundamental of mythic and religious narratives, a departure that is not merely peripheral to the story but which manifests itself at its very center. God is an absolute being, the sacrifice an absolute action. But here the sacrifice is not an absolute action, it is rescinded. God's command to Abraham is a test, and the locus of significance is displaced, shifted from the sacrifice itself to the willingness to sacrifice, which is to say from the connection between the human and the divine to the human. Sacrifice is never merely a loss, for something is always gained by sacrifrice, so what did Abraham lose when the command was rescinded? What he lost was the absolute, and triumph over death. In other words, he lost the uttermost meaning of life. What then did he gain? What he gained was the innermost meaning of life, his son's life, properly inalienable, but this in a world where "properly" conceals itself in the open and is not given like the offering, but instead must be taken. It is a conquest too, of human worth, as the Old Testament is a narrative on the same subject. That the relationship between the divine and the human is so ambivalent, the worldly weight of the mortal earth, pulling the divine toward the terrestrial amid the whirling sand and dust of the antiabsolute, which may also be seen as the opposite, the endeavor of the trivial toward the hallowed, forever halted in midflight, rescinded, half workday, half festival, half man, half god, petty at one moment, almighty the next, is what makes Judaism a religion of doubt, hesitancy, and postponement – and of ambivalence, for the forces of the opposite are always present too, in the symmetry of this clearest image of revenge: eye, eye, tooth, tooth.

If, with Girard, one considers the narrative of the life and teachings of Christ to be the consummation of the long story that is the Old Testament, it is in this respect particularly that the line of progression comes to an end, for what the New Testament means above all is the discontinuance of the notion of vengeance, the end of uncontrollable violence. Turn the other cheek, says Jesus, and this is the symmetry of the good, the one no more faced against the other, but turned toward his neighbor, which is to say that the other is no longer construed as a threat or danger, but as a part of the self.

The New Testament scene that measures up to the story of Cain and Abel, or that of Abraham and Isaac, is when Jesus stands up to the crowd as they are about to stone a woman accused of adultery. For Girard this scene is the conclusive curbing of the forces of mimetic violence. Jesus finds himself in the scapegoat's position, the one surrounded by the all, but instead of being destroyed by them he turns to face them, dispersing the crowd by means of a single utterance. Stoning is the manifestation of retribution and based on duplication, both ritual insofar as stoning is employed in all such cases of transgression, and individual insofar as everyone takes an active part. What Jesus says to them is simple: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." By that utterance he redirects responsibility for the act of violence to each and every one of them as individuals, and the collective dissolves. There is no all, only the one, responsible for his or her own actions.

But the good, and solicitude for one's neighbor and the dissolution of violence in forgiveness is indeed good, is not an expression of civilization, but of something radically different. The good does not solve the problem of violence, it is not instrumental in the way civilization's laws and institutions are instrumental, but the very opposite, a socially solvent force. The antithesis of violence is not the good, but the social. That equation does not work out, for violence exists within the social, embedded in the differences inherent to the domain, but it is the best we can do, and the violence on whose basis Girard construes his notions of taboo and ritual, the violence within, which tears the community apart from the inside, is something we control, the systems we have established deal with it, and it no longer poses any real threat to us. The control of such violence was made possible by transferring responsibility to the individual, in turn leading to the disintegration of our knowledge of the collective, for this was no longer neeeded, but with the huge population swell that occurred toward the end of the nineteenth century, flooding at the tidelines of the new structures of industrialism, came its violence, unprecedented in scope within that system – at no point in our world history have so many been systematically oppressed as at the close of the nineteenth century – utterly out of control, yet deriving from a single point, in itself insignificant and innocuous, the assassination of an archduke by a lone fanatic, sparking first regionally, a crisis in Austria-Hungary, then nationally, then internationally, and in the space of weeks the whole of Europe was at war, a war no one wanted and no one needed, profoundly destructive at every conceivable level, with no one able to prevent it, its avoidance beyond the scope of any single individual, and the violence it brought with it escalated out of all control. People who otherwise cooperated and collaborated, whose interests and goals were shared, destroyed each other with such attention to detail, such savagery and in such numbers as to eclipse all previous wars – and at last, when it was all over, it had taken eight million people with it. It was a storm of destruction impossible to command, as if it were taking place outside the domain of the human, and yet it was not, these were the very forces of human nature manifesting themselves, the same forces of which ancient cultures had been so fearful, for if they found form they would reproduce themselves and spread, and threaten to destroy everyone and everything entirely. This was the violence within, violence among like kind, but on a whole new scale and with new, serially manufactured weapons that redefined death in its image: serially manufactured, industrial.

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The Hitler we know was created by World War I. Nothing he became or did afterward can be explained without reference to that background. The war became a home to him; he did not apply for leave until he had lived in the trenches for two years, not because he was ineligible but because he didn't want to.

When Germany capitulated in November 1918 he was receiving treatment at a military hospital in Pomerania. He was shattered by the news. He wanted to fight until the last, anything else would destroy the foundation of everything he believed in. When the peace came, without defeat in battle, he saw it only as an act of faithless villainy. This is how he describes it in *Mein Kampf*:

> *The next few days came and with them the most terrible certainty of my life. The rumors became more and more oppressive. What I had taken for a local affair was now said to be a general revolution. To this was added the disgraceful news from the front. They wanted to capitulate. Was such a thing really possible?*
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> *On November 10, the pastor came to the hospital for a short address: now we learned everything.*
>
> *In extreme agitation, I, too, was present at the short speech. The dignified old gentleman seemed a-tremble as he informed us that the House of Hollenzollern should no longer bear the German imperial crown; that the fatherland had become a "republic"; that we must pray to the Almighty not to refuse His blessing to this change and not to abandon our people in the times to come. He could not help himself, he had to speak a few words in memory of the royal house. He began to praise its services in Pomerania, in Prussia, nay, to the German*

> *fatherland, and – here he began to sob gently to himself – in the little hall the deepest dejection settled on all hearts, and I believe that not an eye was able to restrain its tears. But when the old gentleman tried to go on, and began to tell us that we must now end the long War, yes, that now that it was lost and we were throwing ourselves upon the mercy of the victors, our fatherland would for the future be exposed to dire oppression, that the armistice should be accepted with confidence in the magnanimity of our previous enemies, I could stand it no longer. It became impossible for me to sit still one minute more. Again everything went black before my eyes; I tottered and groped my way back to the dormitory, threw myself on my bunk, and dug my burning head into my blanket and pillow.*
>
> *Since the day when I had stood at my mother's grave, I had not wept.*

His rage and ignominy at what he saw as a breach of faith formed the engine of hatred that drove his later political ideas and actions; without it they are unthinkable. The scene in which he buries his face in his pillow and weeps transforms into an ominous, heavily laden picture of the consequences of that breach:

> *And so it had all been in vain. In vain all the sacrifices and privations; in vain the hunger and thirst of months which were often endless; in vain the hours in which, with mortal fear clutching at our hearts, we nevertheless did our duty; and in vain the death of two millions who died. Would not the graves of all the hundreds of thousands open, the graves of those who with faith in the fatherland had marched forth never to return? Would they not open and send the silent mud- and blood-covered heroes back as spirits of vengeance to the homeland which had cheated them with such mockery of the highest sacrifice which a man can make to his people in this world?*

This host of spirits, these two million dead soldiers covered with mud and blood, were indeed to come home and haunt Germany, it was in order to restore their honor and accord meaning to their sacrifice that Hitler rearmed the nation in the thirties; defeat was to be avenged, the old enemies and the traitors who had worked for peace were to be crushed, but it was also because the war in itself had been so significant to him and so many of his generation. Nazism was also a death cult and a warrior cult; this gruesome image, the graves opening, the fallen rising up, bloodied and smeared with mud, as spirits of vengeance, was later to find further expression in the skull-and-crossbones symbolism of the SS.

In contrast to the majority he had nothing to come back to when the war ended, so what he did was to remain in the military, for besides meaning and direction the army had given him food, lodgings, and a well-defined job of work to carry out for four years. He went back to Munich and reenlisted with the reserve battalion of the infantry regiment with which he had served.

After returning to Munich, Hitler was assigned duty as a prison-camp guard for two months, subsequently carrying out guard duty at the city's Hauptbahnhof, and was selected as a representative of his company. In the spring of 1919, following a period of civil unrest, he was picked out by the officer in charge of an army information department, a captain by the name of Karl Mayr, whose job it was to monitor suspicious political elements, which is to say the radical left, and to combat subversion within army ranks. Hitler was undergoing an anti-Bolshevik "instruction course," Kershaw writes, and it was on this occasion his rhetorical talents first came to notice. A lecturer on the course, a Professor von Müller, mentioned these and pointed him out to Mayr, who recognized Hitler immediately as "Hitler from the List Regiment." Later, Mayr would write, "he was like a tired stray dog looking for a master . . . ready to throw in his lot for anyone who would show him kindness," Toland reports. The most remarkable thing about this description of Hitler, however, is that at this time he was "totally unconcerned about the German people and their destinies." This was hardly the fact of the matter; what Mayr observed was that Hitler was not talking about it. Introverted, silent, troubled, pale, without purpose – a stray dog hungry for kindness. Mayr gave him that kindness, or at least a small measure of purpose: toward the end of the summer Hitler was giving his own pro-nationalist, anti-Bolshevik "course" at a military camp outside Augsburg. In Hitler's own words:

> *One day I asked for the floor. One of the participants felt obliged to break a lance for the Jews and began to defend them in lengthy arguments. This aroused me to an answer. The overwhelming majority of the students present took my standpoint. The result was that a few days later I was sent into a Munich regiment as a so-called "educational officer."*
>
> *I started out with the greatest enthusiasm and love. For all at once I was offered an opportunity of speaking before a larger audience; and the thing that I had always presumed from pure feeling without knowing it was now corroborated: I could "speak." My voice, too, had grown so much better that I could be sufficiently understood at least in every corner of the small squad rooms.*
>
> *No task could make me happier than this, for now before being discharged I was able to perform useful services to the institution which had been so close to my heart: the army.*
>
> *And I could boast of some success: in the course of my lectures I led many hundreds, indeed thousands, of comrades back to their people and fatherland. I "nationalized" the troops and was thus also able to help strengthen the general discipline.*
>
> *Here again I became acquainted with a number of like-minded comrades, who later began to form the nucleus of the new movement.*

That he ever held the position of "educational officer" is a misrepresentation, and the number of students he lectured is grossly exaggerated, but his teaching was undoubtedly a success and his talent for winning over an audience was demonstrable. Professor von Müller describes the moment he first saw Hitler hold forth:

> *[A small group were] riveted to a man in their midst who, with a strangely guttural voice incessantly and with mounting passion, spoke to them. I had the*

> *peculiar feeling that the excitement generated by his performance at the same time gave him his voice. I saw a pallid, gaunt face under strands of hair hanging down in unmilitary fashion. He had a close-cropped moustache and strikingly large, light blue, fanatically cold, glowing eyes.*

Hitler's task was to give lectures to his fellow soldiers and to monitor the teeming numbers of political parties which had arisen in Munich at that time. It was in this latter capacity, in the autumn of 1919, that he attended a meeting of a small party called the German Workers' Party, whose political program was a blend of nationalism, socialism, and anti-Semitism, combating internationalism and Judaism its two primary causes. Shortly after this meeting Hitler applied for membership of the party, which would soon change its name to the German National Socialist Workers' Party, swelling from a few dozen members at the time of Hitler joining to become the largest political party in Germany in the space of little more than a decade.

Four days after his membership was accepted, Hitler was ordered by Mayr to respond to an inquiry the department had received from a former participant in one of the instruction courses asking for a clarification of "the Jewish Question." Hitler provided a lengthy and meticulous reply, writing that the Jews were a race, not a religion, and that anti-Semitism had to be based not on sentiment but on fact. An emotional reaction would lead to pogroms, whereas anti-Semitism based on reason had to lead to a systematic removal of the rights of the Jews. The "final aim," he concluded, "must unshakeably be the removal of the Jews altogether."

*

Three years later, in autumn 1922, the American ambassador to Germany dispatched a man to Munich to compile a report on the new and prospering National Socialist party and its leader, Adolf Hitler. The attaché's name was Truman Smith and his specific brief was to meet Hitler and provide an assessment of his character, personality, abilities, and weaknesses, as well as to investigate the strengths and potentialities of his party, the NSDAP.

The United States consul in Munich, Robert Murphy, informed Smith that Hitler was a "pure and simple adventurer," though nevertheless believed he was "a real character and is exploiting all latent discontent"; still it was questionable whether he was "big enough to take the lead in a German national movement," as Toland reports. At the invitation of newspaper editor Max Erwin von Scheubner-Richter, a member of Hitler's inner circle who assured him that the party's anti-Semitism was purely propaganda, Smith witnessed Hitler's inspection of storm troopers in front of the new party headquarters:

> *A remarkable sight indeed. Twelve hundred of the toughest roughnecks I have ever seen in my life pass in review before Hitler at the goose step under the old Reichflag wearing red armbands with Hakenkreuzen. Hitler, following the review, makes a speech . . . then shouts, "Death to the Jews!" etc. and etc. There was frantic cheering. I never saw such a sight in my life.*

Three days later, on the morning of November 22, Smith meets Hitler in person, and is given an outline of the party's politics. During the meeting Hitler states that "only a dictatorship can bring Germany to its feet," and that it was

> *much better for America and England that the decisive struggle between our civilization and Marxism be fought out on German soil rather than on American and English soil. If we (America) do not help German Nationalism, Bolshevism will conquer Germany. Then there will be no more reparations and Russian and German Bolshevism, out of motives of self-preservation, must attack the Western nations.*

While also discoursing on other subjects, Toland writes, Hitler avoids mentioning the Jews at all, until Smith asks him outright, Hitler disarmingly replying that he merely favors the withdrawal of citizenship and their exclusion from public affairs. By the time their meeting ended, Smith was convinced Hitler was going to be an important factor in German politics. Before leaving, Smith accepted a ticket from the party press secretary, Rosenberg, to a speech Hitler was giving that same evening. As it turned out, he was unable to attend, being called back to his embassy and having a train to catch, for which reason he passed his ticket on to Ernst Hanfstaengl, a Munich contact of Warren Robbins, who was a counselor at the embassy; the two had studied together at Harvard. Hanfstaengl's father was German, his mother American, both families belonging to the highest echelons of their respective societies. His mother was of old New England stock, his maternal grandmother was the cousin of General Sedgwick, who fell in the Civil War, his maternal grandfather was General William Heine, originally from Dresden, also a Civil War veteran, and a pallbearer at the funeral of Abraham Lincoln. Hanfstaengl's mother remembered the funeral and her father being visited in Dresden by Wagner and Liszt. On his father's side, two generations of Hanfstaengls had served as privy councillors to the Dukes of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, and the family were well-known patrons of the arts; his grandfather founded an art publishing house and had moreover photographed three German Kaisers, Moltke, Liszt, and Wagner, as well as Ibsen, and the family home in Munich was a favored rendezvous for such luminaries as Richard Strauss, Fridtjof Nansen, and Mark Twain. Hanfstaengl was in other words a person for whom the world stood open, a member of Munich's cultural glitterati as well as that of the American northeastern seaboard; during his time at Harvard he had met two American presidents, the then-incumbent Theodore Roosevelt, as well as his later successor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, not to mention the poet T. S. Eliot, a fact he makes abundantly clear in the blustering introduction to his memoirs, first published in the United States in 1957.

It was Hanfstaengl who took Smith to the train in Munich that November evening in 1922, meeting Rosenberg, who gave Hanfstaengl Smith's ticket to the evening's event and accompanied him to the venue. Hanfstaengl describes Rosenberg as "a sallow, untidy fellow, who looked half-Jewish in an unpleasant sort of way." They take a tram to the Kindl Keller beer hall, which is packed. Hanfstaengl sits down at the press table and asks one of the reporters there where Hitler is. The man points; Hitler is seated next to Max Amann, a sergeant from his old regiment, and Anton Drexler, founder of the party Hitler joined three years before. Hanfstaengl's first impression is this:

> *In his heavy boots, dark suit, and leather waistcoat, semistiff white collar and odd little moustache, he really did not look very impressive – like a waiter in a railway-station restaurant.*

When Drexler introduces Hitler, a roar of applause goes up. Hitler straightens up and walks past the press table to the platform with a "swift, controlled step, the unmistakable soldier in mufti." The atmosphere is electric, Hanfstaengl writes, and the speech Hitler proceeds to give is brilliant.

> *No one who judges his capacity as a speaker from the performances of his later years can have any true insight into his gifts. As time went on he became drunk with his own oratory before vast crowds and his voice lost its former character through the intervention of microphone and loudspeaker. In his early years he had a command of voice, phrase, and effect which has never been equaled, and on this evening he was at his best.*
>
> *In a quiet, reserved voice he drew a picture of what had happened in Germany since November 1918: the collapse of the monarchy and the surrender at Versailles; the founding of the Republic on the ignominy of war guilt; the fallacy of international Marxism and Pacifism; the eternal class war leitmotif and the resulting hopeless stalemate between employers and employees, between Nationalists and Socialists.*
>
> *As he felt the audience becoming interested in what he had to say, he gently moved his left foot to one side, like a soldier standing at ease in slow motion, and started to use his hands and arms in gesture, of which he had an extensive and expressive repertoire. There was none of the barking and braying he later developed, and he had an ingenious, mocking humor which was telling without being offensive.*

Hitler criticizes the Kaiser for being a weakling, he criticizes the Weimar Republicans for accepting the victors' demands, which were stripping Germany of everything but the graves of those who perished in the trenches. He compares the separatist movement and religious exclusivity of the Catholic Church in Bavaria with the comradeship of the soldiers on the front line, who never asked a wounded comrade his religion before leaping to his aid. He speaks at length on the subjects of patriotism and national pride, highlighting Kemal Atatürk in Turkey and Benito Mussolini in Italy as examples to be followed. He hits out at war profiteers and receives roaring applause as he tears them apart for wasting valuable foreign currency on importing oranges from Italy at the same time as half the country goes hungry because of inflation. He attacks the Jews, who are becoming fat on the misery of others, and he lashes out against the communists and socialists for wanting to disrupt German traditions.

> *I looked round at the audience. Where was the nondescript crowd I had seen only an hour before? What was suddenly holding these people, who, on the hopeless incline of the falling mark, were engaged in a daily struggle to keep themselves within the line of decency? The hubbub and mug-clattering had stopped and they were drinking in every word. Only a few yards away was a young woman, her eyes fastened on the speaker. Transfixed as though in some devotional ecstasy, she had ceased to be herself and was completely under the spell of Hitler's despotic faith in Germany's future greatness.*

When the speech was over Hanfstaengl went up to introduce himself to Hitler, who was still standing on the platform.

> *Naïve and yet forceful, obliging and yet uncompromising, he stood, face and hair soaked in perspiration, his semistiff collar, fastened with a square imitation-gold safety pin, melted to nothing. While talking he dabbed his face with what had once been a handkerchief, glancing worriedly at the many open exits through which came the drafts of a cold November night.*
>
> *"Herr Hitler, my name is Hanfstaengl," I said. "Captain Truman Smith asked me to give you his best wishes." "Ah yes, the big American," he answered. "He begged me to come here and listen to you, and I can only say I have been most impressed," I went on. "I agree with 95 percent of what you said and would very much like to talk to you about the rest some time."*
>
> *"Why, yes, of course," Hitler said. "I am sure we shall not have to quarrel*

> *about the odd 5 percent." He made a very pleasant impression, modest and friendly. So we shook hands again and I went home.*

There are many descriptions of Hitler's speeches from this time. Hanfstaengl's is special because he belongs to the apex of society, not the usual beer-hall crowd that is most often Hitler's audience, and the fact that he is so taken by Hitler's gifts indicates that the vulgar and tasteless, brutally simple strokes of *Mein Kampf* were absent from his public appearances. Hanfstaengl recognizes that Hitler is petty bourgeois, but also that as a speaker he is unconstrained by the fact, rising above it by virtue of his magnetism and oratorical skills, the almost hypnotic charisma he so obviously possesses, and is thereby able to capture the imagination of almost every member of the crowd, regardless of class. At the same time his petty-bourgeois nature is a crucial factor, for as Hanfstaengl thinks to himself that night, unable to sleep after listening to Hitler for the first time:

> *Where all our conservative politicians and speakers were failing abysmally to establish any contact with the ordinary people, this self-made man, Hitler, was clearly succeeding in presenting a non-Communist program to exactly those people whose support we needed.*

Once Hitler is encouraged to speak in public, finds the confidence and discovers that he is able to, and that people are interested in what he has to say, he is for the first time free to explore his abilities. He is now able to mine his inner being without the destructive checks and balances of the brain, existing simply in the moment, and that feeling of control, of mastery and skill, must surely have filled him to the brim. He is thirty years old and yet to experience success in anything to which he has applied himself. In fact he has failed in every endeavor, until now, stepping onto the platform and looking out at the crowd of people in the room in front of him. His sensitivity, which is so great and which compels him to sever himself from other people completely, either by withdrawing, avoiding the gaze of others, keeping to himself, or by talking incessantly to keep everyone at arm's length, this sensitivity, so unmanageable in the face of an individual you, now comes into its own, perhaps for the first time in his life, for while he is so aware of that you as to shut it out entirely, with near-autistic compulsion, his awareness of the we is quite as intense, and to this we, which is unthreatening, he is able to open himself. He opens himself to the we, heedful of what it says, sensing every nuance of its mood and playing on its strings, for he is not himself a part of this we, but stands outside it, rousing it, stirring it into life, taking it here, taking it there, and he is able to do so because he has always stood outside it. In order to see something, one must see from outside.

Only someone who stands outside the social world knows what the social world is; to those within it, it is like water to a fish. Hitler rejects the singular you, and stands outside the we, and yet he longs for it, and it is this longing his audiences sense when he speaks, the longing for the we being the very foundation of the human, swelling in times of crisis, swelling in chaos, as it did in the Germany of the 1920s, and in Hitler it burns fiercely indeed. There is no need to listen to what he says, his audience were oblivious too, but to the way he says it, the emotions by which he is filled, this is what they react to, this is what they feel, and they drink it up like water. Oh, this longing for community, this longing to be equal, this longing to belong. The simplest is the truest, and this is the truth of Hitler, his longing to be a part of the we touches something deep within that we itself – all accounts of his speeches from this time focus on the same thing, the way his raucous beer-hall audiences, for all their shouting and scuffling, their whooping and howling, hush and fall calm, and become as one. The simplest is the truest, and hatred of the Jews represents the simplest thing of all, the we's need of a they, the basic mimetic structure of violence, the one against the other, duplicated in ritual, us against them, the sacrifice of a they in order that the we may prevail. That need too swells in crisis, swells in chaos, one of the fundamental forms of culture, a condition to which we continue to return. For Hitler, longing for the we is also a longing for the war, and the role it played in what later occurred cannot be underestimated.

Ernst Hanfstaengl recognizes this more clearly than most, writing:

> *We all knew, but overlooked the deeper implications of the fact, that the first flowering of his personality had been as a soldier.*
>
> *When he talked of National-Socialism what he really meant was military-Socialism, Socialism within a framework of military discipline or, in civilian terms, police-Socialism. At what point along the line his mind took the final shape it did I do not know, but the germ was always there.*

When Hitler joined the German Workers' Party it was hardly a party at all. Its first public meetings in 1919, with Drexler speaking, were attended by audiences of ten, thirty-eight, and forty-one respectively. With Hitler speaking these numbers improved dramatically. In 1920 he spoke at more than thirty public meetings, drawing audiences of between 800 and 2,500 in every instance, Kershaw reports, party membership figures increasing similarly, from 190 in January 1920 to 2,000 a year later, and 3,300 six months after that. Hitler was being noticed, at first by other party members, subsequently by Munich's general public. Those who saw him speak at those first meetings had need of him and took care of him accordingly, which was a further boost to his confidence, extending his radius, bringing him into contact with new people in new contexts. An early member of the party, Dietrich Eckart, was especially important in this respect. Eckart was a poet, translator of Ibsen, a morphine-addicted anti-Semite who quickly took an interest in Hitler and became a mentor to him. He was twenty years Hitler's senior, as educated as he was cultivated, though often blunt in manner. He gave Hitler his first trip in an airplane, took him to the theater, bought him a coat, taught him writing, published his first articles, introduced him to circles he had not previously had access to, and generally paved his way into Munich's right-wing radical environment, as well as nourishing his anti-Semitic and anticommunist opinions and providing him with arguments in their support. "This man is the future of Germany," he would say of Hitler, according to Timothy W. Ryback. "One day the whole world will be talking about him." Eckart became a father figure to Hitler, who was flattered by his attentions and absorbed everything he taught him. Three years before Eckart was introduced to Hitler, he had found cause to proclaim:

> *We need someone to lead us who is used to the sound of a machine gun. Someone who can scare the shit out of people. I don't need an officer. The common people have lost all respect for them. The best would be a worker who knows how to talk. He doesn't need to know much. Politics is the stupidest profession on earth. Any farmer's wife knows as much as any political leader. Give me a vain monkey who can give the Reds their due and won't run away as soon as someone swings a chair leg at him. I would take him any day over a dozen educated professors who wet their pants and sit there trembling with their facts. He has to be a bachelor, then we'll get the women.*

Few could fit that description better then Hitler. When Hanfstaengl, born in 1887 and two years older than Hitler, met him, Hitler was thirty-four. For the first time in his life he was succeeding at something, for the first time in his life he was of worth to others and not just himself, but the portrait Hanfstaengl paints could quite as easily have been the young man Kubizek describes from his time in Linz and Vienna. After that first evening in the beer hall, Hanfstaengl attends another meeting and hears him speak a second time, and on this occasion his impression of Hitler is moderated somewhat, Hitler going further this time, with thinly veiled incitements to guerrilla warfare in the case of a French incursion on the Rhine, this sounding to Hanfstaengl like the language of a desperado. He finds Hitler's views on foreign politics alarming, disproportionate and extravagant. Yet he remains both captivated and intrigued, asking himself what might be at the back of this curious man's brain, and on attending a third meeting at which Hitler speaks he introduces him to his wife and to the wife of the Norwegian illustrator Olaf Gulbransson, and invites him to his home. Before long, Hanfstaengl is drawn into Hitler's inner circles, Hanfstaengl's wide network of contacts being of particular use to them. He pays for a new printing press for their weekly newspaper, facilitates the publishing of some articles on foreign affairs, and endeavors in his own words to influence

Hitler's views on foreign politics, which he finds too continental and narrow-minded, and overly determined by Rosenberg and his associates, whom he despises and whose anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism positively disgust him. Hitler listens attentively to what he has to say, Hanfstaengl writes, though would later become more indifferent; when it came to the United States, Hitler wanted to hear about skyscrapers and was more fascinated by details of technical progress than by political matters, though he was particularly interested in the Ku Klux Klan, which he thought to be a political movement much like his own, and in Henry Ford, not so much as an automobile manufacturer and industrial innovator but more as an anti-Semite.

In Hanfstaengl's home Hitler made a good impression, being especially taken with his wife, sending her flowers, kissing her hand, giving her adoring looks, and he played with the couple's son with the kind of spontaneity a child likes in an adult. His ill-fitting suit, his respectful diffidence and adherence to formal manners of address were all revealing of his class background, Hanfstaengl writes; Hitler spoke the way people of lower rank spoke to people of better education, title, or academic attainment. His table manners were good, though his tastes were occasionally curious; Hanfstaengl states that he had the most incredible sweet tooth of any man he had ever met. At one meal Hanfstaengl treats him to "a bottle of Prince Metternich's best Gewürztraminer" and coming back into the room after being called out to the telephone catches Hitler spooning sugar into his glass.

Hanfstaengl visits Hitler in his tiny flat at Thierschstrasse 41, where he lives extremely modestly, "like a down-at-heels clerk." His lodgings here comprised a single room with a large bed, too wide for its corner and with the head obscuring the single narrow window. The floor covering was cheap, worn linoleum, with a couple of threadbare rugs, on the wall opposite the bed was a makeshift bookshelf, the only other piece of furniture in the room apart from a chair and a table. The landlady, a Frau Reichert, was Jewish and found Hitler an ideal tenant.

> *He is such a nice man, but he has the most extraordinary moods. Sometimes weeks go by when he seems to be sulking and does not say a word to us. He looks through us as if we were not there. He always pays his rent punctually in advance, but he is a real Bohemian type.*

In the hallway there was an upright piano, and on one occasion when Hitler was due in court as a witness he asked Hanfstaengl to play something to calm his nerves. Hanfstaengl obliged with some Bach, to which Hitler sat nodding his head with vague interest. But when Hanfstaengl moved on to the prelude of Wagner's *Meistersinger*, Hitler switched on immediately:

> *This was it. This was Hitler's meat. He knew the thing absolutely by heart and could whistle every note of it in a curious penetrating vibrato, but completely in tune. He started to march up and down the hall, waving his arms as if he was conducting an orchestra. He really had an excellent feel for the spirit of music, certainly as good as many a conductor. This music affected him physically, and by the time I had crashed through the finale he was in splendid spirits, all his worries gone, and raring to get to grips with the public prosecutor.*

Kershaw describes the same occasion, and since this was a meeting that took place between Hanfstaengl and Hitler alone, there are no other sources than Hanfstaengl's memoir. Kershaw's account is as follows:

> *Hitler was taken by Putzi's skills as a pianist, especially his ability to play Wagner. He would accompany Putzi by whistling the tune, marching up and down swinging his arms like the conductor of an orchestra, relaxing visibly in the process.*

In the passages where Hanfstaengl is the source he is consistently referred to by the diminutive "Putzi," and Hitler's interest in Wagner comes across as comical and bizarre, as if only Hitler could find something so absurd to be relaxing. But Hanfstaengl does not portray Hitler as foolish, on the contrary he emphasizes his knowledge and his feel for the spirit of the music. The fact that he is able to whistle entire Wagner symphonies may indeed appear unusual, but the same was true of Wittgenstein, who could whistle Wagner to perfection and would often exploit his talent as a party trick to entertain his guests. It is hard to imagine the author of a Wittgenstein biography belittling the great philsopher's passion for music, even if it did manifest itself peculiarly in the form of whistling, but when it comes to Hitler the way Kershaw portrays him, everything he does is either sinister or ridiculous. Another example, Hanfstaengl writing:

> *Hitler's intimates were nearly all modest people. As I got to know him I started attending the Monday evening Stammtisch at the Café Neumaier, an old-fashioned coffeehouse on the corner of the Petersplatz and the Viktualien Markt. The long, irregular room, with built-in benches and paneled walls, had space for a hundred people or so. Here he was in the habit of meeting his oldest adherents, many of them middle-aged married couples, who came to have their frugal supper, part of which they brought with them. Hitler would speak* en famille *and try out the technique and effect of his newest ideas.*

And Kershaw's version:

> *Certainly by the time Putzi Hanfstaengl, the cultured part-American who became his Foreign Press Chief, came to know him, late in 1922, Hitler had a table booked every Monday evening at the old-fashioned Café Neumaier on the edge of the Viktualienmarkt . . . In the long room, with its rows of benches and tables, often occupied by elderly couples, Hitler's entourage would discuss politics, or listen to his monologues on art and architecture, while eating the snacks they had brought with them, and drinking their liters of beer or cups of coffee.*

Hitler's audience, his oldest adherents, middle-aged married couples of modest background, are in Kershaw's rendering "elderly couples" who "often occupied" the benches and tables, so not only does he alter their age, he also gives the impression they were simply customers there and Hitler knew them as no more than that. Why? Middle-aged couples of modest background gathered around Hitler in a cozy café lends an air of respectability and decency to Hitler that goes against Kershaw's image of him. This is why Kershaw's version also departs from "frugal supper" in favor of "snacks" and "liters of beer." The source text has no mention of beer or snacks, this is something Kershaw has added, presumably to enhance the impression of the place as a drinking joint, though certainly beer would also have been served there, and in the context of the juxtaposition the "cups of coffee" seem equally negative.

Hanfstaengl goes on to describe Hitler's inner circle at this time, all of whom are present at these Monday evening political and social meetings.

While Hanfstaengl perhaps might not be the most reliable source, having been close to Hitler for some ten years, for which reason he might well be considered a Nazi, with all that this entails as regards the need to explain things away, his memoir nonetheless does provide a balanced portrait of Hitler and his supporters, simply by not tending to any one side. It is this balanced nature of Hanfstaengl's account that makes it credible, and also what makes it interesting, in the picture it paints of Hitler and in its contribution to our understanding of his appeal, which cannot have been the appeal of a criminal, a clown, or someone of shallow nature, but must surely have been of a wholly different character, for how else would he be able to lead an entire nation with him into the abyss? He was human, the people around him were human, his party comrades were human. This is not the same as to say they were good, for the bad and the brutal too are human. Christian Weber, a burly horse dealer who enjoyed knocking communists about, has another side to him too. Hanfstaengl writes that Weber is flattered to be invited into the home of a person of the upper classes. How much this says of his sense of class belonging. All he really wants is a secure job and a measure of dignity in his life. And Hanfstaengl writes that Weber, this thug, possesses "an oddly intuitive sense of the bottomless pit of Hitler's mind" and realizes fully what Hitler is capable of – this is perceptible, at least to someone who knows, perhaps from himself, what humans are capable of and how that potential finds expression. Another who senses this is Eckart, Hitler's mentor, who "was already beginning to regret it." Why? And Drexler, the union man, who strongly disapproves of the violence that is becoming a growing factor in the party's activities. Those who accompany Hitler home from these Monday-night meetings are armed, Hitler himself carries a pistol in his jacket pocket, even when speaking. These evenings are strange in the way they bring together decent folk from meager backgrounds and raging fanatics, one of whom is perhaps mixed up in the most significant political murder to have taken place in the Weimar Republic, the assassination of the foreign minister, Rathenau. Hitler is the radial point of the group. He can whistle entire symphonies while air-conducting, he lacks the courage to approach a woman of his own age, he loves cakes and anything sweet, he holds the Iron Cross First Class, for bravery in combat, he lives a shadowy Bohemian existence in a shabby apartment, never keeps an appointment, is often seen in the showrooms of automobile dealers, and when in the company of others talks incessantly. He cannot tolerate anyone other than himself dominating any situation in which he is present, and in such instances will readily lie in order to regain others' attention, he always knows better, wears carpet slippers indoors, and has a nice line in impersonations, his take on Göring's wife and her Swedish accent being particularly funny, though he can do equally good ones of Max Amann in a rage and Quirin Diesl insulting a political opponent, his star turn however being the semiprofessorial, politically aware nationalist babbling on about Siegfried's sword and the German eagle in insufferably pompous fashion, Hanfstaengl writes, adding that Hitler had learned off by heart the greater part of a dreadful poem written to him by an admirer, containing endless half-rhymes on Hitler, which he recited with such passion he would have his audience in tears of laughter. Moreover he registers as a "writer" when checking into hotels, he has no eye for nature, never reads novels, admires Cromwell but most of all Frederick the Great; he is attracted by death, idealizes war, writes poems about his mother, hates the Jews and all things Jewish, he is interested in eugenics and reads everything there is about the biology of race, has never read Nietzsche, though he holds his prose to be the most splendid German, has in fact read Fichte and Schopenhauer, and his favorite motif in painting is Leda and the

Swan. This man it is who sits at the Café Neumaier every Monday night, surrounded by party comrades and supporters, with a pistol in his pocket and a militarized group of young men watching out for him who beat up communists and other opponents. He has written a letter in which he states that the Jews should be removed, and he has spoken out against them in all his numerous speeches. It is an opinion he shares with many, most prevalent among the lower classes, those higher up, where power normally resides, find it inappropriate and vulgar, a breach of a norm that is primarily aesthetic or founded on notions of class. Thomas Mann, who is in the same city, perhaps only a few streets away from the Café Neumaier, does not hate the Jews, such a notion would be unthinkable to him. He hailed the outbreak of the war, its blood stood for the authentic and significant, in contrast to the inauthenticity and insignificance of civilization, this too an extreme standpoint in our time, yet within the bounds of the acceptable not least because he took it all back after the war. But Hitler and Mann in the same city, at the same time. Is Hitler more evil than Mann? When neither has yet done wrong? What is evil? Anti-Semitism? What made Mann recoil from anti-Semitism while Hitler embraced it? Education? Is anti-Semitism a class issue? Or is it a question of personal decency, a qualitative difference between people who are unlike each other? Nazism plainly came from the bottom, Drexler was a blacksmith and a trade unionist, Weber was a horse dealer, most of the others were lower middle class like Hitler himself, functionaries and office workers, all in one sense or another having failed or been marginalized in some way. The exception is Eckart, but he is a deviant, not many poets were morphine addicts and Jew-haters, whereas figures such as Rosenberg and later Himmler and Goebbels are fanatics. The sympathizers, those middle-aged couples, also belonged to the working class and the lower middle class and were of slender means, those who suffered most from the crisis that had struck Germany. They took their frugal suppers with them to the restaurant from home. Such are the people closest to Hitler in 1922, before he took a step up and became a name throughout the land. But the simple fact of Truman Smith being dispatched to meet him, and Hanfstaengl joining his inner circle, indicates that the movement had started. Every premise of what would later occur is in place here. In Hitler, who has shown himself to be a brilliant orator, but who must also, on the basis of what Hanfstaengl writes, have revealed frightening sides of himself; in Drexler, who wanted decency, and in Hanfstaengl, who wanted the return of a strong and stable German Reich, and in Rosenberg, who with his Estonian background despised Russia, and whose east-European anti-Semitism, according to Sebastian Haffner, surpassed that of the west in its brutal and violent expression, and in the anonymous middle-aged couples of the lower middle class. Of this conglomeration, Toland writes:

> *Such were the men close to Hitler. His movement cut across all social classes and so all types were drawn to him – the intellectual, the street fighter, the fanatic, the idealist, the hooligan, the condottiere, the principled and the unprincipled, laborers and noblemen. There were gentle souls and the ruthless, rascals and men of good will; writers, painters, day laborers, storekeepers, dentists, students, soldiers, and priests. His appeal was broad and he was broad-minded enough to accept a drug addict like Eckart or a homosexual like Captain Röhm.*

Hitler never underrated a follower, Toland writes, no matter how humble, no matter how wretched he or she might be, he opened up the new party offices to down-at-heel and unemployed followers and party members who needed refuge from the cold. At the same time he looked upward, seeking out wealthy industrialists sympathetic to his cause to drum up financial support, and through Hanfstaengl he was introduced into upper-class society. Hanfstaengl introduced Hitler to William Bayard Hale, a classmate of President Wilson at Princeton and chief correspondent in Europe for the Hearst newspapers, to the artist Wilhelm Funk, whose salons were frequented by Prince Henckel-Donnersmarck and a variety of wealthy, nationalistically inclined business figures, Hanfstaengl reports, never concealing his own attraction to nobility and fame; he takes Hitler with him to visit Fritz-August von Kaulbach's family, patrons of the arts, Hanfstaengl hoping they would connect in that common interest and that Hitler would be influenced by their refinement; he takes him with him to visit the Bruckmann family, who run a large publishing house in Munich and published Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the well-known anti-Semite. Elsa Bruckmann, formerly Princess Cantacuzène, would take Hitler under her wing as a protégé, but when later she extends her patronage to Rosenberg, Hanfstaengl makes a point of no longer attending her salon, finding it unworthy that a woman from "a family which had entertained Nietzsche, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Spengler" should be taken in by such a charlatan.

There is something naïve and wide-eyed about Hitler in these contexts, he writes, particularly after a dinner given by the Bechstein family, the famous piano makers, where Hitler in his usual ill-fitting blue suit feels embarrassed in such splendidly elegant company. Frau Bechstein convinces him to acquire a dinner jacket and a pair of patent leather shoes, which he does, though apart from the shoes, which for a period barely leave his feet, he hardly ever wears the outfit, an appalled Hanfstaengl warning him that no leader of a workers' movement should be seen going around in the garb of the upper classes.

Both Frau Bechstein and Frau Bruckmann show maternal concern for Hitler, and Hanfstaengl mentions other such women in Hitler's life, much the same age as his mother would have been, to whom he is obviously drawn, presumably because they are maternal and caring and because sexually they represent no threat to him. He knows no other women, is uninvolved in any relationship, and, Hanfstaengl writes, has no sex life. He is taken with beautiful women, and develops an infatuation for some, Hanfstaengl's wife among them, but always platonically and without commitment.

> *One thing that became borne in on me very early was the absence of a vital factor in Hitler's existence. He had no normal sex life. I have said that he developed an infatuation for my wife, which expressed itself in flowers and hand-kissings and an adoring look in his eyes. She was probably the first good-looking woman of good family he had ever met, but somehow one never felt with him that the attraction was physical. It was part of his extraordinary gift for self-*

> *dramatization, part of hidden complexes and a constitutional insufficiency which may have been congenital and may have resulted from a syphilitic infection during his youth in Vienna.*
>
> *At this early period the details were unknown to me and one could only sense that something was wrong. Here was this man with a volcanic store of nervous energy, with no apparent outlet except his almost medium-like perfomances on a speaker's platform. Most of his women friends and acquaintances were the mother-type, Frau Bruckmann and Frau Bechstein. There was another woman in her sixties I met, named Carola Hoffmann, who was a retired schoolteacher and had a little house in the Munich suburb of Solln, which he and his cronies used to use as a sort of sub-headquarters, where the good lady mothered Hitler and fed him with cakes.*

His rage, not without lust, when he took Kubizek into the red-light district in Vienna, seemingly as terrifying as it was enticing; his total rejection of brothel visits and French women in the trenches, his sustained, remote infatuation with Stefanie in Linz, whom he never found the courage to approach, his tirades against the declining sexual morals of the day, his abstention from masturbation, his horror of germs and infection, his physical and moral meticulousness, not to say prudery. On the bottom shelf of the bookcase in his apartment he kept a small collection of semipornographic books, Hanfstaengl writes, and this is the essence, woman as pure, woman as image, an object he can admire and dream about as long as he can do so from a distance, but which poses an immediate and alarming threat as soon as it comes close to breaking into his world in the form of some physical reality. His fear of intimacy is immense, and with it his fear of sex; it is the bodily, physical nature of it he cannot stand, and the nearness of another. Woman as *it*, alluring and delightful in dreams, but never as *you*, in his intimate sphere. The few women he became involved with had in common that they were all much younger than him, barely of age. One such was Maria Reiter, whom he met along with her sister in 1926, just after the publication of *Mein Kampf*, she was very young and they met in a park where they were all walking their dogs. They chatted for an hour, Hitler invited them to attend one of his speeches, a closed event, glancing often at Maria as he spoke, accompanying her home afterwards, placing his hands on her shoulders, about to draw her toward him when suddenly in a fit of rage he felt compelled to thrash his misbehaving dog with the whip he was in the habit of carrying at the time. According to Liljegren they saw each other again on a number of occasions; Hitler asked her to call him Wolf, and he called her Mizzi. They visited her mother's grave, they went on picnics and for drives in the countryside. Hitler was thirty-seven, she was sixteen. Later she related that he had kissed her once. When her birthday came he gave her a yellow armband and the two volumes of *Mein Kampf* bound in red leather, with the inscription "Read these books and you will understand me." Her father, who was a social democrat, did not approve of his daughter being involved with the leader of the Nazis. In a letter to her, Hitler wrote:

> *Even if fathers sometimes don't understand their children any longer because they have got older not only in years but in feelings, they mean only well for them. As happy as your love makes me, I ask you most ardently to listen to your father.*

Less than a year later Hitler had started to lose interest in her, and when she discovered he had stayed the night in his Munich apartment without getting in touch she tried to hang herself with a clothesline, only to be saved by her brother-in-law, Liljegren writes. The relationship was by all accounts never consummated, nor was another discreet love affair a few years later with his niece Geli, who his sister Angela had been pregnant with at the time of his mother's funeral.

Geli was nineteen years old when she moved to Munich to study; at first she became involved with Hitler's driver, Emil Maurice, the couple going so far as to become engaged, which made Hitler furious. In a letter to Maurice, however, Geli writes that "we shall be able to meet and even be alone together, Uncle A has promised. He's a dear, as you know." Nevertheless, Maurice, who had been with Hitler as a minder and all-around gofer since 1921, was given the boot. Later, he would state that "Hitler loved her, but it was a strange kind of love to which he would never admit." Hitler himself would say, "There is nothing finer than to educate a young thing as one wants: a girl of eighteen or twenty is as malleable as wax." When Hitler moved into a larger apartment in 1929, Geli moved in with him. He hid her away, gave her what she wanted, unless it was freedom – if she was going out she would be escorted, and she enjoyed no social contact with anyone her own age, only Hitler's party comrades. After two years of living like this she committed suicide, Hitler was on his way to Bayreuth when she shot herself in her room with his pistol. The bullet went through her heart. Questioned by police, Hitler said the two had argued before he left, she wanted to go to Vienna and take up singing lessons, Hitler refused, but she had been calm and wished him a pleasant trip when he left. Hitler's housekeeper Anni Winter, however, claimed Geli had found a letter in Hitler's jacket pocket when they had been cleaning his room earlier in the day. The letter was from another young and innocent-looking girl he had started courting. She was eighteen years old, her name was Eva Braun, and she too would end up committing suicide.

When Hanfstaengl first met Hitler he was involved with no one; whether this means he was physically impotent, as Hanfstaengl suggests, is impossible to say, but there are many indications that he lacked interest in or was perhaps even afraid of sex. Hanfstaengl's wife called him sexless or asexual, which tells us something about the way he came across, his attentions were pantomimic and unphysical, a representation of courtship, a representation of desire, not desire itself, which was kept wholly under wraps, suppressed. There was something effeminate about Hitler too, as can be seen in the film reels of his speeches, his gesticulations are often delicate and womanly, the way he sweeps his hair to the side, his body thin and unmanly, his voice often ascending into the higher registers. At the same time he found his place in a supremely male environment and would adorn himself with masculine accessories, whip, pistol, Alsatian dog, military boots, uniforms, and this is hardly strange, since a masculine environment such as the army shuns intimacy, in favor of remoteness, is centered around action and the handling of situations, without hugging, touching, confiding, as such perfect for Hitler in that he thereby discovered he could be with others without being touched by them, physically or emotionally. His great sensitivity, to which he opened himself only in his boundless and unflagging fascination with Wagner, belonged also to his feminine side, as did his whole passion for art; much can be said of his painting watercolors during lulls at the front, but it was not the usual pastime of the hardened soldier in the trenches.

Hanfstaengl's wife puts her finger on what both of them find odd about Hitler, stating succinctly, "Putzi, I tell you he is a neuter." Hanfstaengl ruminates on the theme, noting how many homosexual men there are in Hitler's inner circle – three or four, of whom Röhm, who displayed "a normal" interest in women during the war, were not discovered to be homosexual until the late 1920s – and writing:

> *But even if he [Röhm] was not yet an active pervert there were plenty of others around who were. Heines and one or two other patriotic organization leaders became notorious for their tastes in this direction. And when I thought of my earliest contact with a Nazi recruiting agent, it occurred to me that there were far too many men of this type around Hitler.*
>
> *Part of the curious half-light of his sexual makeup which was only slowly beginning to preoccupy me was that, to say the least, he had no apparent aversion to homosexuals.*

The utterance is interesting on several counts, not least in revealing Hanfstaengl's own problems in respect to homosexuality, which was indeed prohibited by law when he wrote his book in the 1950s, but "active pervert" and "a lunatic fringe of sexual perverts," as he goes on, are wordings full of disgust and, by contrast, reveal Hitler's own lack of problems with the issue. What Hanfstaengl is reacting against is the very fact of Hitler failing to react as strongly as he. On the contrary, Hitler wants men without family in his ranks, considering them more likely to put their hearts into the struggle. Does this mean Hitler is a homosexual, or does it mean he is sexually indifferent? Hanfstaengl is right in his musings insofar as Hitler's apparent lack of aversion is striking, since normally he is so extremely petty bourgeois in his opinions, reacting hatefully against any deviation from the norm, opposing anything that goes beyond, apart, that is, from this supposedly abhorrent deviation, taken to be the very antithesis of the masculine ideal Hitler so flaunted. Presumably his stance on the matter was determined by the fact that it did not encroach on him personally in any way – his fear and loathing of other forms of transgressive behavior, particularly promiscuity, touched more obviously on his own emotional life, as witnessed by his linking together of the Jewish and the sexual in *Mein Kampf*, where he writes:

> *With satanic joy in his face, the black-haired Jewish youth lurks in wait for the unsuspecting girl whom he defiles with his blood, thus stealing her from her people. With every means he tries to destroy the racial foundations of the people he has set out to subjugate.*

While it is Hanfstaengl who removes himself from homosexuality and Hitler who accepts homosexuals in his ranks, this is reversed in the case of the Jewish issue, Hanfstaengl holding that anti-Semitism is untenably prejudiced and despicable, with Hitler the fanatical Jew-hater, though the congruence is far from unambiguous, Hanfstaengl's contempt for the most hard-core anti-Semites in the party stemming in part from their own unpleasantly "half-Jewish" appearance.

Hitler is an embodiment of conflict as he passes through the Munich streets in 1922 in his dark overcoat and hat, always with his Walther pistol in his pocket and his whip in hand, flanked by his Alsatian dog Prinz and his bodyguard Ulrich Graf, boiling with his hatred for the Jews, his fear of women, and his yearning for simplicity. In the latter he was not alone, it was in the air, as if the times had suddenly been overwhelmed by complexity and confusion and were reeling under the impact.

The crumbling of norms against which he reacts so strongly in his speeches and in *Mein Kampf* is of course not only going on out there, in the culture, but also inside him. There is an abyss between his inner emotional life and his outer behavior, and the rational explanations he gives as to his opinions and actions are clearly squeezed by other, baseless, yet by no means unfelt motives.

The great theme of the Weimar Republic, alienation, was illuminated and described from all angles, from the right and from the left, and the notion of life as a struggle was by no means confined to Hitler. Walther Rathenau, the Jewish Social Democrat minister of the Weimar government assassinated by right-wing extremists in 1922, wrote in 1912 of humanity that it

> *builds houses, palaces, and towns; it builds factories and storehouses. It builds highways, bridges, railways, tramlines, ships, and canals: water, gas and electricity works, telegraph lines, high voltage power lines, and cables; machines and furnaces . . .*
>
> *What then is the purpose of these unheard-of constructions. In large part, they directly serve production. In part, they serve transport and trade, and thus indirectly production. In part, they serve administration, domicile and health care, and thus predominantly production. In part, they serve science, art, technology, education, recreation, and thus indirectly . . . once again production.*
>
> *Labor is no longer an activity of life, no longer an accommodation of the body and the soul to the forces of nature, but a thoroughly alien activity for the purpose of life, an accommodation of the body and the soul to the mechanism . . .*
>
> *Labor is no longer solely a struggle with nature, it is a struggle with people. The struggle, however, is a struggle of private politics; the most risky business, practiced and nurtured less than two hundred years ago by a handful of statesmen, the art of divining others' interests and using them for one's own ends, to have an overview of global situations, to interpret the will of the times, to negotiate, to make alliances, to isolate and to strike: this art is today not only indispensable for the man of finance alone, but, in an appropriate measure, is indispensable to every shopkeeper. The mechanized profession educates one to become a politician.*

Peter Sloterdijk cites Rathenau here in his book *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Rathenau's analysis allows man two options: either to be consumed by production, thereby becoming a part of it, on a par with its machines and conveyor belts, or to stand up for himself and his own individuality, albeit using the system's own economic and political means, which in that way are pulled down from the superordinate structure into the sphere of the individual. The connection between the local and the global established by the new world-embracing modes of production and trade is something by which we, a hundred years after Rathenau was writing, have learned to express ourselves, indeed our lives have become as such in the peculiar interplay of individuality and mass consumption in which we live. The issue of authenticity, so precarious and acute in the period from the turn of the last century until Germany's collapse in 1945, has been solved by way of a grand flanking maneuver, a textbook display of pragmatics made possible by the two wars themselves. Each and every one of us lives as though we were our own statesman at the center of the world, where all that we believe and think is accorded the greatest weight, quite regardless of the fact that everyone else believes and thinks exactly the same thing. Culture's unprecedented and extreme cultivation of the individual, which takes place in the most equalizing culture the world has ever known, is a response to the problems that first appeared toward the end of the nineteenth century, which at the time were likewise perceived to be new. We simply close our eyes to the possibility of there being any discrepancy between the widespread perception of the one's unique individuality and the striking sameness of the all. In the 1920s, the sameness of the all was a dystopia. Throughout culture the threat of the mass human found expression, mask-like faces and uniforms amid huge cogs of clattering machinery in a world from which all individuality had been erased.

Rathenau:

> *The intellect, still shaking from the excitements of the day, insists on staying in motion, on experiencing a new contest of impressions, with the proviso that these impressions should be more burning and acidic than those that have been gone through . . . Entertainments of a sensational kind arise, hasty, banal,*

> *pompous, fake, and poisoned. These joys border on despair . . . The devouring of kilometers by the automobile is a graphic image of the deformed way of viewing nature . . .*
>
> *But even in these insanities and over-stimulations there is something mechanical. The human, simultaneously supervisor of the machine and machine in the global mechanism, under growing tension and heating, has surrendered his or her quantum of energy to the flywheel of the world's activity.*

The war that came two years after Rathenau wrote these words meant that the idea of the unique I came under further pressure, catastrophic to the individual self, since the medium through which it then might express itself, heroism, was closed off by the mechanization of weaponry; courage, ingenuity, cunning, resourcefulness, all were futile in the face of the machine gun or in the hail of shells: death was random, its forces unmanipulable, the heroic departure of the one became a mass slaughter. The war was a war of machines, and men were but one device among others. In 1932 Jünger described a society in which everyone was a worker, all subordinate to machines, in a world without borders, without individuality, only movement and dynamics, bodies and machines; life in the total state. In a strange, paradoxical way it is toward just such a world Hitler and his party are heading as their movement gains momentum in 1921 and 1922. Strange because it is this very de-individualisation Hitler fears in Marxism and capitalism, and which he believes has led to cultural decline and chaos in society. That he finds this decline so marked means there is no longer any concord between his feelings as to the way things should be and the way they are. In the case of such concord existing, inner morals give meaning to the external world so imperceptibly that one understands them to be natural, while external actions and events likewise giving meaning to the inner being. In the case of such concord being absent, it must be established and at almost any price, its absence representing a direct threat to our identity, which is to say the relationship between the I and the we.

Hitler is clearly a damaged individual, presumably by a process that began in his childhood and which because of some innate dynamic became reinforced in his youth and early adulthood, but that part of him that is damaged, which is the ability to approach and be close to another, the ability to empathize with another, which is to say to see the other in himself, himself in the other, has placed him outside himself, alienated him from his own emotional life, which is to say that an unbridgeable divide has opened up between his emotions and his understanding of his emotions, whereby he has been deposited outside the sphere of the social.

The damage was in the times, and many of those who suffered it became artists, for in art the divide could be bridged. Hitler tried but received no acknowledgment, was not strong enough or talented enough to overcome the resistance and would have spun away into the oblivion of the great social void had it not been for the fact that he at least in part overcame himself, firstly in the war, then in politics, where he was acknowledged from the outset and helped along, and where he fulfilled a need. When the emotions are so radically disjointed, when the inner being is a chaos, one looks for order, rules, boundaries. The order, the rules, and the boundaries Hitler knew were those he had grown up with in Linz, but that was a world he had hated ever since the age of sixteen, when he began to dress like a Bohemian artist, and it was a world too that was on its way out, whose morals and rigid structures were not applicable to what he saw and experienced in Vienna and Munich, which to a far greater extent were characterized by the new age and the massive social problems that had come with it. The confusion triggered by the radical nature of the new was especially vast in Hitler's case and could find no outlet, certainly not in the social sphere; he read and thought, striving to establish some other concordance between himself and the world he lived in, inflamed with resentment by the dereliction of morals he saw to be a fundamental expression of a societal form and an outlook on life that he despised. He forbade himself all manner of enjoyment, retreating into asceticism, descending into depression for long periods, emerging urgently again, manically active, living only in art, in his dreams, and in the ideal, until eventually finding himself in a place where he could be unburdened of all that he contained, that place being the army, the radical simplification of his life.

The organization he was a part of building up in Munich in the 1920s, with its storm troopers, uniforms and weapons, was an extension of the military, and the politics he put forward, with its starkly defined enemy and all its muscular aggression, was an extension of the war by other means. That his appeal should be so vast that he could draw many hundreds of thousands, indeed millions of people along with him seems unfathomable to us today; we read the arguments and the perils are plain to us, the idiocy, the sheer contempt for fellow human beings, yet it was not by arguments he won over the people, but by that very abyss that ran through his soul, or by what it generated within him, for what he thereby expressed, his inner chaos and his yearning for that chaos to stop, were curiously congruent with society's inner chaos and its yearning for that chaos to stop. His chaotic soul strove toward the boundaries by which it was constrained, his hometown morality and the order provided by the military, which is to say the petty bourgeois and the Prussian or Wilhelmian, both belonging to the past, which in the hardships of the Weimar years was where the majority, Hitler among them, turned. What made Hitler so different, however, was the flame he ignited in all who listened to him speak, his enormous ability to establish community, in which the entire register of his inner being, his reservoir of pent-up emotions and suppressed desire, could find an outlet and pervade his words with such intensity and conviction that people wanted to be there, in the hatred on the one side, the hope and utopia on the other, the gleaming, almost divine future that was theirs for the taking if only they would follow him and obey his words.

Hitler was the great simplifier, a mirror to his own yearning, but rather than merely paying lip service to that yearning in his political convictions he exploited it cynically as a rhetorical trope, even hitting out against sophistication and complexity in his speeches. On one occasion, on his way home from the Café Neumaier with Hanfstaengl one evening in 1922, he was almost apologetic about this:

> *Herr Hanfstaengl, you must not feel disappointed if I limit myself in these evening talks to comparatively simple subjects. Political agitation must be*

> *primitive. That is the trouble with all the other parties. They have become too professorial, too academic. The ordinary man in the street cannot follow and, sooner or later, falls a victim to the slap-bang methods of Communist propaganda.*

Hanfstaengl saw his role in respect to Hitler as saving him from Rosenberg and the fanatical anti-Semites, providing him with a wider, more international perspective than the provincialism Hitler and his party comrades otherwise stood for. He believed Hitler's political radicalism and leanings toward brutality derived from lack of education and would be consumed once he was introduced into the higher circles of society, the barons of industry he brought him together with, whose conservatism was the same as Hanfstaengl's own, extending no further into the utopian than the society their parents and grandparents had inhabited. Hanfstaengl believed they could make use of Hitler to reach down into the depths of the people, thereby failing to understand that he was uncorrectable, a revolutionary utopian and a fanatical racist. That this latter trait, specifically his anti-Semitism, could be moderated along the way as he gained in power and influence was a frequent notion of Hanfstaengl's. Hitler listened to him and needed him, but did not care for the things he said. For instance, whenever he tried to impress on Hitler the importance of a future alliance between the United States and Germany or spoke insistently about other issues of foreign politics, Hitler would lead him back to Clausewitz, Moltke, and Kaiser Wilhelm. Prewar Europe was his frame of reference for foreign politics, and as such it was not a question of whether Germany with him in charge should go to war, but rather of when. This was his position as early as 1922. Everything that happened in Hitler's life following the first war was a repeat of what had happened and existed in his life before it, only on a much grander scale and in reality, and the only true aim, to which everything had to lead, was a new war, bringing the first to its rightful conclusion. That he could achieve such a feat from the starting point he had in 1918 is hard to believe. But the very fact that all the odds were stacked so heavily against him, that he was such an underdog, was an important factor, certainly in the final years before he rose to become chancellor, it being widely held across a number of political parties that what would be most damaging to Hitler would be to hand him genuine power, because then he would be politically dead in no time, being nothing more than a charlatan, a bluffer, a simple little man of the lower middle class. Indeed, it is strange. That he, of all people, so alienated from his own emotions, sensing them only as they washed through his organism, blinding or darkening his soul and all his being, should become sovereign over those of all Germany.

Hitler would spend between four and six hours writing a speech, which he would then condense into ten foolscap pages with no more than fifteen to twenty words on each. As the meeting approached, Liljegren writes, he would pace the floor as if rehearsing in his mind the various points of his argument. At intervals he would speak on the telephone with someone inside the venue itself, asking how many people had come, what kind of mood they were in, whether opposition could be expected. He would dish out instructions as to how the audience was to be handled while waiting for him. Half an hour after the meeting had started he would call for his coat, hat, and whip, and go out to the car, preceded by his bodyguard and driver. On the speaker's platform he would place his sheets of paper with their cues on a small table on his left, moving each to another table on his right when he had finished with it. His pistol was in his back pocket. After the speech, which normally lasted some two hours or more, the national anthem would be played. Hitler would salute right and left, leaving the venue while the music was at its height, and was generally back in the car again before the singing was over. If he was speaking outside Munich he would go directly to his hotel. There he would take a bath, change, rest on the sofa, perhaps with Hanfstaengl at the piano, his entourage in the room next door. He made no contact with anyone in his audience either before or after his speech. It was him and the all, and no one else.

Hans Frank, then a young law student, saw him speak in 1919:

> *The first thing you felt was that there was a man who spoke honestly about what he felt and was not trying to put something across of which he himself was not absolutely convinced. He made things understandable even to the foggiest brain . . . and went to the core of things.*

The *Münchener Post* reported one of his speeches in 1920, Toland writes, and was amused by his imitations of Jews:

> *Adolf Hitler behaved like a comedian, and his speech was a vaudeville turn . . . One thing Hitler has, you must give him credit, he is the most cunning rabble-rouser in Munich practicing such mischief.*

Kurt Ludecke saw him in 1922:

> *Presently my critical faculty was swept away. Leaning from the tribune as if he were trying to impel his inner self into the consciousness of all these thousands, he was holding the masses, and me with them, under a hypnotic spell by the sheer force of his conviction . . . His appeal to German manhood was like a call to arms, the gospel he preached a sacred truth. He seemed another Luther . . . I experienced an exaltation that could be likened only to a religious conversion . . . I had found myself, my leader, and my cause . . . I had given him my soul.*

What was it about Hitler's speaking that awakened such emotion? That he came across as honest and genuine was important here, a person at long last who presented the unvarnished truth, unlike other politicians. Hardship was plain, discontent rising, verging on despair. Hitler gave direction to that discontent. The shame of Versailles, the November Criminals, the worldwide Jewish-Marxist conspiracy, these were the three points around which Hitler gathered his rage, and in this he was clearly not alone, but his special gift was to draw forth that rage and hatred in his audiences in a way that seemed utterly unmanipulative but true and obvious in the same way as that which may not be said but which nonetheless is known appears true and obvious.

His charisma as a speaker lay very much in the sense he gave that here was a man who said things the way they were, and the trust he thereby gained from his audiences, who in expressing their enthusiasm for him were also expressing their enthusiasm for themselves, the unity he created this way, was an unprecedented force he discovered himself able, like a magician, to direct wherever he wanted. This was power. Not the formal kind that came with a job or position, constrained by laws and regulations, those in writing and those unspoken, but real power, revolutionary and above the notion of the law. This probably only dawned on him gradually, for as Sebastian Haffner writes, he seemed for a long time to be satisfied merely with being his party's speaker, whose job it was to mobilize the masses, and the idea that he could become his party's and even his country's uncontested leader – an idea with a long German prehistory – did not become manifest until *Mein Kampf*, and became real only after the subsequent relaunch of the party in 1925.

But just as important as saying things the way they were was the way he did so. The language he employed was that of his audiences. Hanfstaengl writes that without stooping to slang, except for special effect, Hitler caught the vocabulary of the day as it rose from the people around him. Outlining the problems of a housewife without money to buy food for the family at the Viktualienmarkt, for instance, he would use just the words and phrases she herself would have used to describe her difficulties if she had been able to formulate them.

In this ear for voice, register, and sociolect, that which rises from the people and which differs from generation to generation, lay Hitler's talent. In it his sensitivity came into its own, the fact that he could not only listen to the voices of his day, but also convey them to his audiences in ways that were finely tuned, addressing each audience according to its own nature, depending on whether they were students or workers. He excelled too in the art of improvisation, pausing for instance if someone shouted a comment, folding his arms across his chest and delivering a bitingly satirical response that would have his audience in stitches. Always he spoke from within, in the language of the inside, rather than from above, in the manner of other politicians and speakers.

About a quarter of his audiences were women, and this too he would exploit to his advantage; often there would be opponents ready to heckle and interject, and in his search for initial support he would turn to the women, directing attention toward their everyday problems and domestic difficulties, the very proximate realities they lived and experienced, thereby, according to Hanfstaengl, eliciting his first bravos, breaking the ice between him and his audience. But all this is rhetoric, what he says and the way he addresses his audience, his ability to tune in to the will of the we and to stand as its rightful voice was certainly immense, but not immense enough to account fully for his success, neither at that particular time, having already spoken to a crowd of 6,000 in 1920 at the Circus Krone, nor later, when entire stadiums were filled to the brim with people wanting to hear him speak. More important than what he said and the way he said it must surely have been the fact that it was *he* and no other. In other words, his own personal presence, his appeal, what we call charisma.

Charisma is one of the two great transcendental forces in the social world; beauty is the other. They are forces seldom talked about, since both issue from the individual, neither may be learned or acquired, and in a democracy, where everyone is meant to be considered equal and where all relationships are meant to be just, such properties cannot be accorded value, though all of us are aware of them and of how much they mean. Moreover we attach value in our human sphere to that which is made, produced, or formulated, not to what is merely there to begin with; in other words, what is made, produced, or formulated is important, and what is merely there to begin with is not. In a university lecture hall, male attention is centered not on the woman with the most compelling arguments, she who speaks engagingly and with insight about Adorno or de Beauvoir, but on the woman deemed to be the most beautiful, and so it is in every space in which men and women are gathered, on every street and square, in every restaurant and café, on every beach and in every apartment, in every ferry queue and train compartment; beauty eclipses everything, bedims all else, it is what we see first and what we consciously or unconsciously seek. Yet this phenomenon is shrouded in silence inasmuch as we refrain from acknowledging it as a factor in our social lives, driving it out instead by our social mechanisms of expulsion, calling it stupid, immature, or unsophisticated, perhaps even primitive, at the same time as we allow it to flourish in the commercial domain, where it quietly surrounds us whichever way we turn: beautiful people everywhere. Beautiful people on TV, beautiful people in magazines, beautiful people in films, beautiful people in the theater, in pop music, in advertising, indeed our entire public space is packed with beautiful faces and beautiful bodies yet, at the same time, we consider beauty to be superficial, unconveying of the authentic, which is the inner being. Beauty belongs to the body and the face, which are mask-like outer expressions of the I, and its immutable, inevitable nature, the fact of it being given rather than chosen, is what disqualifies it, since after Nazism we can no longer attach value to what is innately human, the Nazis' division of the human into categories of the innate being what eventually led them into the final catastrophe. Which is to say: we attach value to it but do so in silence. This is similar to the relationship between individuality and sameness: the two things are mutually exclusive, but only if the connection between them is made – and so we refrain from making the connection. It is as if we live in two different cultures existing parallel to each other. One is the culture of commerce, in which everything is superficial, face, outer beauty, uniformity, sameness, properties we understand to be inauthentic, shadow-values existing only for the purposes of our entertainment; the other is the culture of the social, consisting of unique individuals, inner beauty, changing properties, diversity, things we understand to be authentic, values we take to be true. The untrue world is a place to which we escape in dreams, the true world is where we live. The sense of the untrue world becoming increasingly dominant in our lives, to the extent almost of becoming the world we live in, is what brings about the forceful craving for reality that has begun to emerge in the culture around us. But what is reality, if not the body? And what is the body, if not biology? Here we are within the realm of the given, to which all yearning inclined in the Weimar era, becoming apparent for the first time in the period leading up to World War I, when the pressures exerted by the inauthentic, by the many new and increasingly mechanized expressions of civilization, were displaced in favor of the authentic, which is to say the innate, which in turn is to say the body, blood, grass, death.

Charisma, which resembles beauty in that it cannot be learned or acquired, no matter how much we might practice or train, transcends the simple dichotomy of the inner and outer I, as well as that of the biological and the cultural in the human sphere, and may possess such force as to occasionally cancel out all other categories, causing them to disintegrate completely.

The charismatic human is truly unique, an individual who cannot be replicated, not because of his or her skills in argumentation but because of his or her presence alone, making plain the nonuniqueness, the ordinariness, of all others. So what kind of a value is charisma? And why are we so attracted by it? If a charismatic woman had been sitting next to the one talking about Adorno and de Beauvoir, and the other one, the one who was strikingly beautiful, all attention would have been on her, and not only all male attention, but all female attention too. Charisma is an unusual property, and what it consists of is almost impossible to say, and yet we recognize it instantly the moment we see it. If I see it in a woman, I desire her. If I see it in a man, I desire him too, in a comparable though not identical way, since what a charismatic man awakens in me is a wish to be there, in his presence, and to subordinate myself to him. There is an element of tenderness and affection in these feelings, there being an element in the charismatic, not of weakness, weakness is not the word, but vulnerability perhaps. The wish to be near, tenderness, affection, subordination; these are strong, direct emotions. But I cannot submit to them, cannot allow myself to want to be in the presence of a man as if I were in love with him, and I certainly cannot subordinate myself to him. Therefore I keep my distance, but not without observing the effect he has on everyone else in his presence, and in that I am consumed by jealousy, sometimes to unreasonable degrees, because I want to be him. This inner tussle goes on, I suppose, in the presence of all charismatic individuals, whether it is acknowledged or not. The charismatic I is so strong as to pose a threat to all other I's in its presence, who must fight to keep themselves afloat, or else give in and become, well, what? A part of the stronger I's we? A disciple, a follower, a yes-man. The aura of the charismatic individual contains an element of disinterest, of detached ease, an independence verging on the sovereign and somehow discouraging; to be seen or even liked by the charismatic individual is to be bestowed with favor, a gift with no ulterior motive, hugely covetable. Indeed the charismatic individual is free of the bonds of the social world, standing in a certain sense outside its domain, and this sense of boundlessness is what lends such force to their presence: the charismatic person is unrivaled.

As with all other human properties, charisma occurs in different degrees; many possess some small amount, few an abundance, hardly anyone has nothing but. Jesus was an extraordinarily charismatic person, his presence was so overpowering it illuminates the Gospels, which were written a hundred years after his death, and has continued to dazzle through the centuries that have passed. He, and what happened to him, cannot fully be understood without taking this into consideration. People stopped what they were doing to follow him. Enormous crowds gathered to hear him speak. He could disperse an angry mob by his sheer presence. His favor is a blessing, his disfavor a punishment. He demands of his disciples that they leave their families and friends, their entire social spheres, to live with him. When his mother and brother come to see him he sends them away. He is angered by the most trivial matters, like when he curses the fig tree outside Jerusalem, causing it to wither, or when he storms into the temple courts and sends the money changers scattering in all directions. His inner darkness as he sits in the Garden of Gethsemane, the self-destructive urge he feels within him becoming ever stronger, weighing him down during the days of Easter in Jerusalem, where he does nothing to save himself but follows the path that has been mapped out for him until, maimed and mutilated, he expires on the cross. Perhaps he was the most charismatic person ever to live. Someone must have been. Certainly his charisma continues to shine through to us today, two thousand years after his death. And it is not theology that has kept it alive; on the contrary, for theology is anticharismatic by nature, being abstract.

Nothing in Hitler's life before he reached the age of thirty indicates that he possessed any such remarkable charisma. Quite the opposite, for the descriptions we have of him from this time, from the flophouse in Vienna and the front in Flanders, suggest he is an odd little man with a somewhat unpleasant air. Captain Karl Mayr saw him as a tired stray dog looking for a master. But this changed drastically from the moment he began speaking in public. From then on the descriptions seem almost to be of a different person altogether. Socially too he was transformed; Rosenberg, Hess, Streicher, and soon Goebbels, all were in awe of him and more than willing to subordinate themselves to him. Yet Hitler himself was unchanged, his character and personality remained the same throughout. It was as if it were the very crowds themselves that conjured forth in him what they found so appealing. Without the crowd he was a nobody, a lonely failure of a man with an unjustifiably high opinion of himself, but in front of the crowd, in its gaze, his loneliness turned to independence, and the unjustified became justified as if by some covenant: he gave the crowd what it wanted, his I, independent of the we, and the crowd in turn gave him what he wanted, its we, dependent on the I. They saw him, and were drawn toward him. That pull was also of an erotic nature, the tension between him and the crowd is plainly sexual, though not unambiguously so, for he stands there not in absolute masculinity, and without absolute strength, which would have been cold and autocratic and forbidding; no, he is feminine too, which is to say ambivalent, and it is in that unclarified space that the tension exists and interplay with the mass becomes possible. It feels personal to watch him.

So it is with charisma, it becomes instantly personal. Watching a charismatic performer like Elvis in footage that might be forty years old, the way he relates to us feels personal, not because of his charm, or his sex appeal, or his good looks, or his body language, but because of his charisma, his unique presence, for which we can feel a kind of solicitude, and from which we could allow almost any indiscretion if we happened to be in its proximity. But those feelings might be peculiar to me alone, and other people might react less emotionally to watching Elvis in a forty-year-old TV show, because I had exactly the same feelings in relation to my father, seeing the same synthesis of remoteness and vulnerability in him, his unapproachability being so immense given that we occupied the same modest living space in the house on Tybakken all those years ago. But yes, there was something almost awkward about him that in the midst of all his forceful severity, so dislocated from my own existence, seemed to be asking for solicitude. I suppose I wanted to accommodate him in that, so it occurs to me now, though I have no idea how I would have reacted if any such thing had ever happened. But either it is the case that the state of subservience in which I existed at that time, that happy subordination, has meant that these feelings well up in me all too easily whenever I encounter the disinterested, independent type of person who is quite inaccessible, but who also exudes the opposite and thereby instills in me some sort of hope of community, of favor and blessing, or else I'm simply trained to see it like that, and am especially aware of it.

The summer has come. Warm streets outside the apartment, green parks, lightly dressed people. All winter and spring I've been getting up at three and four o'clock in the morning to write so I'd be finished in time for summer. I've promised Linda this, that the summer will belong to the family. Last summer we booked a holiday in Corsica, but Linda was ill and we couldn't go. I've always wanted to go to Corsica, so we booked again in the spring. The plan was to go away as soon as the novel was done. Now it looks like it's not going to work. But the holiday is paid for and they're going without me, taking Linda's mother instead.

I'm listening to Midlake, *The Courage of Others*, I've listened to it every day for months, and the last time I drove out to the house and listened to it in the car, the mood of Kubizek's book spread through me like a memory, as if it all stemmed from my own life. In a way it does, the books I've read are as inseparable a part of my history as everything that's ever happened to me. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is no exception. It's different from all the other books I've read. I'm not sure why, but it stands out. Kubizek's memoir, in which Hitler is the main character, does not. In that book Hitler is seen from the outside and is an ordinary young man, albeit extremely serious and unusually strong-willed.

When Hitler writes himself, appearing in his own right, the reconciling aspect of Kubizek's viewpoint is gone. There is a consistent pettiness throughout *Mein Kampf*, a complete lack of the grandeur we have come to expect of literature, philosophy, and art, where the deepest and sincerest, often hard-won insight is forgiveness for everyone, the recognition of the human in us all, the absolute equality of others with ourselves. There is no such universality in Hitler's book, in which everything gushes through his mind to be manipulated at his own convenience according to whatever emotions are awakened in him, and in which not a single face occurs, in the sense of any unique person, rather the mere representative of a type, a political standpoint or a public role, apart from his own. But if we lift our gaze, if we elevate ourselves to where the particular characteristics of others can no longer be differentiated, *Mein Kampf* is a book in two volumes published in 1924 and 1928 respectively, written by a man born into the lower middle class in a monarchy on the verge of dissolution due to major internal tensions of both ethnic and cultural nature as well as staggeringly huge social problems, where the old values, the slow-paced bourgeois world with all its little securities so vividly described by Zweig, stood in sharp contrast to the explosively increasing poverty among the lower classes, which the book's author, whose faith in others must have been small to start with, as is often the case with children who have been ill treated, and whose belief in meaning and justice in life must have been undermined by the deaths of first his brother, then his mother, not only saw with his own eyes but also came to experience himself. He cannot have felt that he owed anyone anything. Grace, forgiveness, understanding, sympathy cannot have been part of his repertoire. A generous person would have been able to express himself from there too, but the author of this particular book was not a generous person, he was embittered, vindictive, conceited, and, when eventually he had the chance, callous and without mercy. But even in that he fell short, unlike Homer's or Shakespeare's or Snorre's heroes, who can be callous and without mercy and still display greatness; in that too he was petty and grudging. But for this very reason *Mein Kampf* does still express something significant, for while it was written by a certain man of a certain character, it is also pervaded by the time in which that man lived, and the problems of that time, and the fact that he never raises himself above his own person and his own time, being so small-minded and unyielding that he fails even to see the possibilities, means that all that is base and bad about that time gushes through the book as it gushes through him. He is indeed the little man writing about the great age.

Mein Kampf received terrible reviews. It was totally destroyed wherever it was given attention. The *Frankfurter Zeitung*, under the headline END OF THE ROAD FOR HITLER, called it political suicide. One Berlin newspaper expressed doubts as to the author's mental stability, according to Ryback. And the *Bayerische Vaterland* dubbed the book *Sein Krampf* ("His Cramp"). Hitler's book was ridiculed in many circles. In his memoir Stefan Zweig writes that hardly anyone read it, and the few who did refused to take it seriously because it was so poorly written.

Hitler himself was proud of his book, handing out signed copies to all and sundry and sending a copy to his family in Austria, although he had not been in touch with them since well before the war. The terms of his prison sentence included a ban on public speaking that prevented him from engaging in political activities, and on his release he rented a cottage in the Alps and began work on a second volume, *Mein Kampf II*. Completed in the summer of 1926, the book was ignored by the newspapers and a year after publication it had sold only some seven hundred copies. But Hitler carried on writing. Following *Mein Kampf*, which had been put out by a small-scale local publishing house with only limited distribution, he contacted the publishers Elsa and Otto Bruckmann, presumably because the book he was now planning to write was not intended to be political but to deal with his time at the front, much in the style of Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel*, a book he admired. Jünger had sent him a copy with the inscription "To the national Führer Adolf Hitler," and the volume is full of Hitler's underlinings. Ryback, who saw it, writes that what Hitler was interested in, judging by his marginalia, were the emotional and spiritual aspects of the war rather than more descriptive passages detailing concrete events, though with two exceptions, both concerned with moments in which sensory impressions become so fierce as to make everything shimmer, all sound vanishing at once. In a letter to Jünger, Hitler wrote, "I have read all your writings. In them I have come to value one of the few powerful conveyors of the frontline experience." In August 1927, in a letter to her husband concerning Hitler, Elsa Bruckmann writes that "he is already reflecting on the form of his war book, and says it is becoming more vivid and alive in him." In December a date is fixed for publication the following spring. But Hitler never delivered the manuscript, and it was never found. Most probably it was burned in the spring of 1945 along with all the other private documents Hitler ordered his adjutant to collect and destroy. Ryback, however, unearthed a manuscript intended as a third volume of *Mein Kampf*, kept in a safe on premises belonging to the Eher Verlag in Munich and handed over to the Americans after the war by an employee. Unfinished and running to 324 pages, it was presumably written in the summer of 1928, when Hitler was thirty-three years old, as political events in Germany were gathering pace and he and his National Socialist party were moving in on the epicenter of power. While the first volume of *Mein Kampf* dealt with Hitler's life up to his joining the German Workers' Party, and the second concerned the party itself and its history, the unpublished third volume focuses according to Ryback on Germany's place in history. After 1928 Hitler seems to have given up writing completely, and his image of himself as a writer, which must still have been very much intact during the four years he spent producing two published books and two manuscripts, with ambitions in one of the latter of going beyond the political, was eclipsed by his political involvement, at the same time as he began to recognize his limitations in the field. Reportedly he once complained to his personal solicitor, Hans Frank, praising Mussolini for his splendid mastery of Italian in speech and writing, while regretting that he himself was incapable of matching him in German. "I just cannot keep my thoughts together when I am writing," he remarked, according to Ryback. And again to Frank, on another occasion: "If I had had any idea in 1924 that I would have become Reich Chancellor, I never would have written the book."

For a modern reader, and by that I mean someone reading it today, as I have, on May 4, 2011, society is in almost every conceivable respect far removed from that in which *Mein Kampf* was written, though not without occasional ties – as I write these words today the last surviving soldier from World War I has died. Claude Choules was his name, he fought on the side of the British and was 110 years old. It is three days since Osama bin Laden was killed in Pakistan by U.S. special forces, a man often compared to Hitler, as so often happens with important enemies of the West and Western values, but even if there are some similarities, in their irreconcilable hatred of international capitalism, in the victim mentality expressed by terrorism, where the cause is always greater than the individual, who not only gives up his life in its service but does so gladly, the differences are at the same time so vast that any comparison is irrelevant, be it in the case of Bin Laden or anyone else who wears and has worn the face of evil since Hitler's day, for instance Idi Amin, Papa Doc, Saddam Hussein. We are used to it always being the others, always the not-us, whereas Hitler was one of us, he pursued his will from within us, from our own European culture, and he did so as the leader of a community big enough not just to start a world war but to keep it going for five years, until twenty million human lives had been lost and the genocide of six million people had very nearly been completed, against which everything else simply pales. The most alien aspect of Hitler's writing is not the politics, for although such radical nationalism is anathema to us, it is not unrecognizable or impossible to relate to, rather it is the hatred of the Jews, set forth with such vigor it is hard to conceive, in the sense that to us today it seems unthinkable that someone could actually mean what Hitler writes about the Jews in *Mein Kampf*.

The other striking thing about *Mein Kampf* relates indirectly to the first and has to do with the often unpleasantly base style its author employs, normally absent from the writing of the day, which is to say the age of the Weimar Republic. Style is little more than self-awareness, not in the singular I, but in the I of the text, arising in assumptions about the receiver of the communicative act. These assumptions exist as a kind of horizon of expectation against which the I defines and molds itself. Style is to the written text as morality is to behavior, setting the boundaries of what may and must be said or done, and how. If I write the word "cunt," I am overstepping the boundaries set by normal style; if I do so fully cognizant of this it is because I am trying to achieve a certain stylistic effect, albeit not necessarily tastefully; as a provocation the word is devoid of meaning, mostly coming across as adolescent and almost impossible to use without it rubbing off adversely on the I of the text, unless of course it was being used as an example of a certain kind of language, to represent a character, to "say" something about that character. (After writing this, I added the word "cock," so that the sentence instead began "If I write the words 'cunt' and 'cock' . . ." and the reason I did this was because it struck me that "cunt" could arouse suspicions that I might be a misogynist, perhaps even afraid of women, having chosen that particular word, as if it were the most readily available, and in that way I might infelicitously be associated with Hitler – infelicitously because it might look like I was not aware of the fact, that I was blind to it, and around this point, my presumed misogyny and fear of women, a highly intricate web might then be spun out of whatever other indications might be discovered as to my lack of social intelligence, my sad and lonely life, and what I wrote about blood and grass, and all sorts of other things besides, could all be clustered around one single point of identification: Hitler. If such language occurs in a way that can be perceived as blind or unconscious, the entire credibility of the I may fall or be undermined, but if it occurs in a way that is clearly intended, and thereby calculated, it may in that case be perceived as heightening the relevance of the Hitler figure, perhaps even fleshing out the singular I of the text. Within that space, what the text knows and does not know about itself, tensions crackle always, though less so in texts in which the I is stylistically certain, precisely since it complies with all kinds of expectations the words create, having them under its control, knowing how to play on them, and that play, which takes place between reader and writer, two entities emerging in the very act of writing, becomes more invisible the more sophisticated the writer happens to be. That such play occurs is often impossible to discern before a certain time has elapsed, when what belongs to the age is no longer taken for granted, which is to say when the reader of the text is no longer a part of what the writer seeks to go toward. The writer's motion toward, which begins in the expectation of the I, does not find a way to implant itself in the reader, and the very gesture of proceeding toward meeting a reader in a text becomes plain. The epochal mood exuded more or less by all writing, which for instance makes all texts from the 1950s similar in style, is to do with this. When I typed the word "cunt" and intuitively realized it could be read in a certain way in respect to the text as a whole, which is to say that I "felt" a certain viewpoint, "sensed" a certain line of thought directed toward unrecognized or suppressed misogyny, I added the word "cock" in order that the two words together might be a better signal of the rather stupid transgression I was trying to illuminate, without the gender imbalance that could arouse suspicions [probably justifiably, though that would be another discussion], until I realized that it was the very process I was seeking to describe that was at work here, the considerations one makes when writing, the boundaries the very act of communicating establishes, which make up the morality of the text.) If I were to type "nigger" or "spade," the vast majority of cultured readers would turn away, such words being unacceptable, not because what they refer to, black people, cannot be named, but because they cannot be named in that way, with words so laden with contempt, used only by people who know no better because they grew up in parts of society that are largely uncultured in this sense, perhaps having been mistreated, now full of agression toward just about anyone and anything, which comes out in such expressions of the language, or else by people more cultured who know what they are doing, and who do so calculatedly, which is to say out of malice or spite, something which seldom occurs, no scientific paper would ever contain the word "golliwog" used in this way, no essay or newspaper article would contain the word "nigger," no novel the word "spade" in this sense, other than to provide a picture of people in uncultured, which is to say socially deprived, areas of society. If someone from such areas of society is to express themselves in public, they must learn to command the style that is prevalent there, and if they do, its implicit moral judgments come with it, meaning such thoughts and notions as prevail in the uncultured domain are invariably kept out and suppressed, not by some dedicated strategy but as a result of the mechanisms society always has at its disposal to control what is undesirable and make sure it never gets a chance to rise to the level at which political decisions are made.

The boundary between what may not be said and the ways in which it may not be said is so unclear that sometimes they look like two sides of the same coin.

Nearly all the literature of the Weimar years that is still read today, a striking number of classics coming out of Germany in the period 1919–33, is tasteful indeed, at the very highest cultural level in terms of style, and while to us the mind-set of that writing can be both outrageous and unacceptable, for instance Carl Schmitt's definition of politics as the business of distinguishing between friend and foe, the consequence of which has to be the physical elimination of the foe, or Walter Benjamin's notion of divine violence, we nonetheless accept that literature, studying it and discussing it in the same way as the unoutrageous, though taking care to state that such thinking is dangerous, that the texts in which it occurs are an exception, that they were produced in politically turbulent times. The mind-set is dangerous, but the style is exquisite, and for that reason we allow ourselves to handle them.

Hitler's *Mein Kampf* exhibits no style whatsoever, not even low style, its I simply gives vent to its opinions on a variety of different matters without at any time showing the slightest sign of being able to see itself; in other words it is uninhibited and excessive, seeking no legitimacy anywhere other than in its own self, which can say exactly what it wants because that is what it is, and because it knows no better. The I of *Mein Kampf* is self-congratulatory, self-centered, self-righteous, unrestrained, hateful, and small-minded, yet considers itself just and reasonable and grand, and it must have been this that resulted in such dismal reviews and meant that the book was never taken seriously, Hitler was showing his face without realizing it, revealing himself to be nothing more than an uncultivated, crude, and brutal man of the masses, who with his limited knowledge took a little here and a little there and stirred it about until ending up with something he thought was politics, but which was nothing more than a series of prejudices, anomalous opinions, and pseudo-scientific assertions. His strong anti-Semitism was another expression of the same thing. Anti-Semitism was widespread, although, as Hitler points out; in the quality newspapers and magazines it was nonexistent, they were above it, often to such an extent that they would refrain from addressing it, even though it was one of the major issues of the time. The newspapers and magazines in which it did find expression belonged to the lower levels of society, the vulgar and unrefined, and often, though not always, displayed contempt for all that was considered intellectual and high-cultural, not what belonged to the conservative middle class with its Wagner, but the culture of the growing avant-garde.

When the "Jewish question" was discussed at levels above these bubbling cauldrons of prejudice and stereotype, the language employed was without hatred and disgust, without visible emotion, but rational and investigative. In 1930, for example, toward the end of the Weimar period, the *Süddeutsche Monatshefte* devoted a special issue to "*Die Judenfrage*." The editors justified the move by stating that the matter was one of the most pervasive and complex issues since the war: "The diversity of explanations, interpretations, and attacks directed toward the Jewish person from without corresponds to what seems to the outsider to be a confusing diversity of ambition in Jewish society itself." The editors wanted as many voices as possible to be represented, Jewish as well as non-Jewish, Semitic as well as anti-Semitic. "We believe this to be the first time Jews and anti-Semites have collaborated in a single publication," they noted.

Ernst Jünger's contribution, *Über Nationalismus und Judenfrage*, concludes that the Jews in Germany were faced with the choice "either to be a Jew or not to be," Heidegren writes, by which he meant that the Jews needed to retain their particular Jewishness in order to remain Jewish, and that the values that lay in that particular identity were under fire from the equalizing mind-set of economic liberalism. Like Hitler, Jünger saw international capitalism and Marxism as posing a threat to Germanness, both were nationalists, but the crucial difference was that for Jünger this sense of the individual, rather than being restricted to what was German, also pertained to others, including the Jews. Jünger holds up this notion of particularity and differentiation, the qualities deemed peculiar to an area, a culture, a people, a nation, as a counterweight to sameness and undifferentiation, and in that respect the problem becomes more the assimilation of the Jewish into the German, comparable to the assimilation of the German into the international, rather than Jewishness in itself. But even in this brief, rational, and stylistically formal essay, as far removed from Hitler's prose as it is possible to get within the same culture, there are traces of anti-Semitism.

> *In order to be able to become dangerous, infectious, corrosive, it was necessary for him to first have a status that enabled him to be in his new figure, the figure of the civilized Jew. That status was created by liberalism, by the grand declaration of the independence of the spirit, and it likewise will be destroyed again by nothing but the complete bankruptcy of liberalism.*

That the Jew was "dangerous, infectious, corrosive" was by no means an outrageous claim in 1930, for such assertions were common. Jünger ties this to a shift in culture whereby Jewishness lets go of itself and becomes German as a consequence of liberalism rather than of anything inherent in Jewishness itself, its nature or essence, and this is the big difference between Jünger's utterance here and those of Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, yet it is impossible not to view them in the same context, for the elements are the same, Jewishness viewed as infectious and bound up with liberalism, and only that context – in which Jewishness was considered a problem, not only in the realm of the vulgar but also in that of the cultured, albeit far from universally so, and even among Jews themselves – for there were indeed anti-Semitic Jews – and Jewish identity, and what comprised it, was discussed without end throughout the interwar period – makes it possible to understand that a man such as Hitler, who had written such a book as *Mein Kampf*, in which anti-Semitism was the core from which everything radiated, could eventually end up chancellor of the Reich.

If we compare Hitler to one of the most important intellectuals of the same period, the Jewish philosopher Theodor Adorno, this aspect of *Mein Kampf* becomes clear, for what would Adorno have made of it? He would have been unable to challenge it with his rational, finely tuned, unimaginably precise and subtle arguments, for there is nothing there to challenge, Adorno is at a level so far above *Mein Kampf* that he would not have been able to take it seriously, to consider it worthy of his attention. Had he done so, he would have elevated it to something it was not, lending it legitimacy by his very interest. He could have ridiculed it, as it was ridiculed elsewhere, but doing so would not have served any purpose; the only sensible strategy would be to pay it no heed. *Mein Kampf* was too base to be made the object of rational discussion, and as such could simply be rejected without argument.

Had Hitler not been self-taught, had he, say, studied philosophy during his time in Vienna and formulated the ideas put forward in *Mein Kampf* within that horizon, it would have been fair to discuss it, analyze it, dissect it, but that would not have been possible unless it had vented something other than was the case, the main thing about the book being that it has no such horizon, that its I does not direct itself toward any singular you, only toward a we, and stands furthermore outside that we. It is in the singular you that the obligation exists, and it is that obligation, which comprises a community, that makes a discussion possible. Hitler's I lacks a you, is unbound by any obligation, and so ultimately is immoral, or devoid of morality in any sense. Jünger's I possesses a you, meaning it can be argued against, for example by saying that the word "infectious" not only denotes something that spreads between humans, but also has strong connotations with sickness and disease, something pathological, and that the connection between liberalism and Judaism is too weak for the pathological aspect of the argument not to cling to the particularly Jewish, or to the Jew, who precisely in this way is construed as corrosive and dangerous, or disposed to be so, and in other words to be qualitatively apart from you and I, who are non-Jews, and surely you cannot claim this to be the case? But indeed I can, he would then be able to counter, or no, that's not what I mean at all, but whatever he might say, the text and the opinions it makes manifest would be amenable to discussion, and Jünger and those who agreed with him would, in principle, be able to accept the counterargument and change their opinion accordingly, or adjust their arguments so as to reduce the risk of misunderstanding. In that process, which should not only be taken literally but also figuratively in terms of the conscious or unconscious reflection any text invites, between the singular I and its you, the boundary is set for what is possible and what is not possible to say in any day and age; this is where contemporariness exists, and crossing that boundary, which is also the boundary of obligation and morality, is only possible by transcending the you of the I, which presupposes that it is weak or nonexistent. Jünger did not, his assertion was good seen from the perspective to what was acceptable in society at the time, and yet it was dubious. But dubious in respect for what? The law? The courts? Public to opinion? Societal norms?

An utterance being anti-Semitic cannot be relative, but the way we understand the anti-Semitic may indeed be relative. We explain Jünger's utterance in terms of him being a right-wing nationalist, a glorifier of war, and a person held in esteem by Hitler, without that necessarily meaning he was a Nazi himself, and yet there is a connection, and on the basis of that contextualization we think to ourselves that he was indeed morally dubious, and consider his utterance about Jewishness in that light. But how are we to understand another person of the same generation, one of the twentieth century's most significant literary figures, Franz Kafka, a Jew, writing disparagingly about the Jews? In a diary entry from August 6, 1914, he writes:

> *Patriotic parade. Speech by the mayor. Disappears, then reappears, and a shout in German: "Long live our beloved monarch, hurrah!" I stand there with my malignant look. These parades are one of the most disgusting accompaniments of the war. Originated by Jewish businessmen, who are Germans one day, Czech the next; admit this to themselves, this is true, but were never permitted to shout it out so loudly as they do now. Naturally they carry many others with them. It was well organized. It is supposed to be repeated every evening, twice tomorrow and Sunday.*

The utterance is by no means anti-Semitic, but "Jewish businessmen" is nevertheless associated with "malignant" and "disgusting," and their identity construed as something they choose according to whatever is most advantageous, and this, that Jews are businessmen ready to abandon almost anything for personal gain, even their identity as Jews, is a standard trope of anti-Semitism, and even though Kafka does not state that it is a property of all Jews, but only these particular Jewish businessmen, his utterance might certainly have been used as evidence to that effect if it had been presented as something the likes of Jünger or Hamsun had written. If it had occurred in a book by Jünger or Hamsun, we would have deemed it inappropriate but, if we held those authors in sufficiently high esteem, perhaps explained it as being a mere expression of political naïvety in confusing times, whereas if we had not held them in esteem we would have taken it to be another indication that they were bad and immoral individuals, yet coming from Kafka's pen we construe it quite differently. This suggests that the morality of an utterance is not absolute, but is determined also by its style and its signature, and may change as its framework of interpretation, which is to say culture, changes. *Mein Kampf* did not mean the same in 1924 as it did in 1934, and it did not mean the same in 1934 as it does today. Both Kafka's and Jünger's utterances were fully acceptable in their day, they were by no means outrageous, whereas Hitler's utterances in *Mein Kampf* were definitely so. They were not forbidden, and were not even controversial, in the sense of causing scandal, they were merely vulgar, simple, tasteless, and malicious.

The story of *Mein Kampf* is the story of how, from being something to dissociate oneself from in 1925, it becomes transformed into something to espouse in real life in 1933. Hitler himself did not change, he held the same opinions in 1925 as he did in 1933 and 1943, but the people around him changed, and that change is perhaps the most significant thing of all about the Nazi movement in Germany, that what was previously wrong with the movement became right, what was previously immoral became moral, and that this did not occur by any change in legislation or any other instrument at the disposal of the formal institutions of society, but by a change in the very community, which is to say in the social world, the societal we, whose expression in the individual is called conscience.

If Hitler's I is lacking the singular you, both in life and in literature, this does not mean that he lives or writes in a vacuum, only that what he does, thinks, says, and writes is unconstrained by obligation to anyone else but himself and what he believes to be right. He does so within a system where "the other" exists only as "the others," either in the great we, the community of nation, the Germans, or in the great they, the enemies of the nation, the Jews. Inside this system, ideas and notions circulate, lifted from various aspects of life in society, put together in totally idiosyncratic, often idiotic ways, which is one thing that can happen when an individual is unamenable to correction, another being that moments of genius may occur, and what emerges from all this, in a text that pays no attention to what ought or ought not to be said, to what is decent and what is offensive, is the blind side of society, that part of it we try to avoid and which the power structures of style and taste keep hidden away in the dark. In 1910 it would have been unthinkable that a man who had written a book such as *Mein Kampf* could become a head of state.

Heads of state were either monarchs, as in Britain or Germany, the ministers they appointed coming from the upper reaches of society, from the finest families and the finest schools, cultivated individuals held in the highest esteem for this very reason, or else they were presidents, elected from the same elevated and culturally and economically affluent circles. This system was suppressive, keeping the lower classes in their place, but suppression is not unambiguously an ill as we are taught to think, the exercise of power is not the same as the abuse of power, which is to say that abuse of power can have other functions besides maintaining the privileges of a certain class. It excludes what is undesirable, and the undesirable is of course that which undermines the privileges of the ruling class, but also that which is destructive of the values and stability of the society the ruling class is entrusted with governing. Revolution overturns the structure of society, destroying the values on which it is built, and doing so by violence. Revolutionary violence may be construed as a reaction to the structural violence inherent within a societal system – the need, poverty, and gross injustice it generates – but is nonetheless unlawful, for revolutionary violence is also violence among like kind, which no society can tolerate, and the first thing that happens when revolutionaries seize power is that they set up new laws quite as inviolable as the old, with the same purpose, to control that violence within and ensure order and stability in society. This was what happened in France in 1789, in Russia in 1917, and in Germany in 1933, the difference being that the revolution in Germany was not simply a class revolution from below, but involved the lower, middle, and upper classes at once, though primarily the lower middle class, and set the law aside largely without bloodshed. This was possible because societal structures had already broken down or were in the process of breaking down. The state apparatus belonged to the old monarchy, parliamentary democracy was weak, and when inflation and unemployment rocketed with the Depression in a context of humiliation following the debacle of the war, democracy became a paradox, voting for its own dissolution, which is to say handing power to Hitler and the National Socialists, who were antidemocratic. What had existed only as a miscellany of phenomena and shifting currents at the bottom of society only ten years before was suddenly the ideology of a supreme governing party, no longer base and contemptible, but elevated and noble.

Hitler expressed what the average German thought but declined to say, and he did so compellingly and with such conviction as to make it legitimate, and the more people who followed him in that direction, realizing that what one thought in one's own mind yet was perhaps wary of expressing could indeed be expressed, the more legitimate it became. The opinions Hitler expressed were clear and unambiguous, he concealed nothing, and they could easily have been repudiated, he and his party having no power on their own, such power being granted by those who listened to them and who in doing so heard themselves, their own voice of reason, the voice that said this is the lay of the land. That nothing suppressed that voice, those hitherto quiet thoughts, and that the structures to reject such baseness had ceased to operate became Germany's tragedy.

This is the lay of the land, said Hitler, this is the lay of the land, said the people and cheered Hitler, and in doing so they cheered themselves and their own. Hitler gave self-righteousness a voice, we could say, but only if we are above that voice, only if our taste is superior, our judgment superior, only then is it the voice of self-righteousness. If one is a part of it, it is righteous. And who is to say where the boundary lies between righteous and self-righteous? Who is the arbiter of a society's morals, who decides what is acceptable and what is not? Not the one, but the all. Morality does not exist outside society, outside its institutions, in the form of something absolute that we humans may invoke at any time, no, it is a part of us at this very moment and moreover was different in the time of our parents, as it will be different in the time of our children, though perhaps not by much, for the most desirable thing for a society is for its moral structures to remain the same and to appear for as long as possible to be absolute and extrasocietal. This, however, is not feasible, as events in Germany after World War I made abundantly clear. The philosopher Hannah Arendt writes of this issue in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*:

> *And just as the law in civilized countries assumes that the voice of conscience tells everybody "Thou shalt not kill," even though man's natural desires and inclinations may at times be murderous, so the law of Hitler's land demanded that the voice of conscience tell everybody "Thou shalt kill," although the organizers of the massacres knew full well that murder is against the normal desires and inclinations of most people. Evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognize it – the quality of temptation. Many Germans and many Nazis, probably an overwhelming majority of them, must have been tempted* not *to murder,* not *to rob,* not *to let their neighbors go off to their doom (for that the Jews were transported to their doom they knew, of course, even though many of them may not have known the gruesome details), and not to become accomplices in all these crimes by benefiting from them. But, God knows, they had learned to resist temptation.*

Conscience is morality as it appears in the individual. For an individual such as Hitler, who was bullied and beaten by his father and lost his siblings and his mother, who grew up to adulthood in a society whose enormous transformation dislodged forces that were to exert such tremendous pressure on its structures as to gradually cause them to cave in and collapse, and who lived through the mass slaughter of World War I and all its subsequent turbulence, who was surrounded by violence on all sides – for such a person conscience did not speak in the same way as it speaks to those of us who have experienced none of the above. But it did speak to others of his generation, for none of the things Hitler experienced were unique to him, and nothing of what he wrote in *Mein Kampf* was unprecedented, which is to say that everything that exists in *Mein Kampf* also existed elsewhere in society at that time. One of Hitler's most important sources of inspiration in writing *Mein Kampf* was Henry Ford's book *The International Jew*. Ford, the American industrialist and car manufacturer, was famous throughout the world, and his book caused a stir when it was published in Germany. According to Ryback, the *New York Times* could report in 1922 that Hitler had a framed photograph of Ford on the wall next to his desk, and paid tribute to him in speeches at the time. Ryback cites Baldur von Schirach, a teenager when Ford's book came out, who claimed that he became an anti-Semite on reading it. "In those days this book made such a deep impression on myself and my friends because we saw in Henry Ford the representative of success, also the exponent of a progressive social policy." Other books Hitler read prior to writing *Mein Kampf* included Hans F. K. Günther's notorious *Racial Typology of the German People*, while Otto Strasser, a member of Hitler's staff, according to Ryback identified the main concepts of *Mein Kampf* as stemming from conversations Hitler conducted with Feder, Rosenberg, and Streicher and, most significantly, with Eckart, conversations in which books by authors such as Chamberlain and Lagarde were a staple topic.

None of this is mentioned in *Mein Kampf*, whose anti-Semitism and attendant theorizing is presented as something Hitler arrived at himself, long before he entered politics. He construes his anti-Semitism as something near a revelation, as if some crucial piece of a jigsaw had fallen into place, allowing him at last to grasp the great scheme of things. In *Mein Kampf* he ties this revelatory experience to his first autumn in Vienna, but since there is no evidence of any anti-Semitism in his life at that time, this can hardly be correct. However, the actual structure of his epiphany, the way it occurs, may still be an accurate account of the way he later experienced it. This is how he describes it:

> *Today it is difficult, if not impossible, for me to say when the word "Jew" first gave me ground for special thoughts. At home I do not remember having heard the word during my father's lifetime. I believe that the old gentleman would have regarded any special emphasis on this term as cultural backwardness. In the course of his life he had arrived at more or less cosmopolitan views which, despite his pronounced national sentiments, not only remained intact, but also affected me to some extent.*
>
> *Likewise at school I found no occasion which could have led me to change this inherited picture.*
>
> *At the Realschule, to be sure, I did meet one Jewish boy who was treated by all of us with caution, but only because various experiences had led us to doubt his discretion and we did not particularly trust him; but neither I nor the others had any thoughts on the matter.*
>
> *Not until my fourteenth or fifteenth year did I begin to come across the word "Jew," with any frequency, partly in connection with political discussions. This filled me with a mild distaste, and I could not rid myself of an unpleasant feeling that always came over me whenever religious quarrels occurred in my presence.*
>
> *At that time I did not think anything else of the question.*
>
> *There were few Jews in Linz. In the course of the centuries their outward appearance had become Europeanized and had taken on a human look; in fact, I even took them for Germans. The absurdity of this idea did not dawn on me because I saw no distinguishing feature but the strange religion. The fact that they had, as I believed, been persecuted on this account sometimes almost turned my distaste at unfavorable remarks about them into horror.*
>
> *Thus far I did not so much as suspect the existence of an organized opposition to the Jews.*
>
> *Then I came to Vienna.*
>
> *Preoccupied by the abundance of my impressions in the architectural field, oppressed by the hardship of my own lot, I gained at first no insight into the*

inner stratification of the people in this gigantic city. Notwithstanding that Vienna in those days counted nearly two hundred thousand Jews among its two million inhabitants, I did not see them. In the first few weeks my eyes and my senses were not equal to the flood of values and ideas. Not until calm gradually returned and the agitated picture began to clear did I look around me more carefully in my new world, and then among other things I encountered the Jewish question.

I cannot maintain that the way in which I became acquainted with them struck me as particularly pleasant. For the Jew was still characterized for me by nothing but his religion, and therefore, on grounds of human tolerance, I maintained my rejection of religious attacks in this case as in others. Consequently the tone, particularly that of the Viennese anti-Semitic press, seemed to me unworthy of the cultural tradition of a great nation. I was oppressed by the memory of certain occurrences in the Middle Ages, which I should not have liked to see repeated. Since the newspapers in question did not enjoy an outstanding reputation (the reason for this, at that time, I myself did not precisely know), I regarded them more as the products of anger and envy than the results of a principled, though perhaps mistaken, point of view.

I was reinforced in this opinion by what seemed to me the far more dignified form in which the really big papers answered all these attacks, or, what seemed to me even more praiseworthy, failed to mention them; in other words, simply killed them with silence.

*I zealously read the so-called world press (*Neue Freie Presse, Wiener Tagblatt, *etc.) and was amazed at the scope of what they offered their readers and the objectivity of individual articles. I respected the exalted tone, though the flamboyance of the style sometimes caused me inner dissatisfaction, or even struck me unpleasantly. Yet this may have been due to the rhythm of life in the whole metropolis.*

These newspapers, however, frequently disgust him in the way they grovel to the Court, presenting themselves in glorified colors and reminding him of "the mating cry of a mountain cock." He finds them "a blemish on liberal democracy." Moreover, they wage war against the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, whom they criticize "with supposed concern, yet, as it seemed to me, ill-concealed malice." The fact that the same press "made the most obsequious bows to every rickety horse in the Court" simultaneously airing doubts about the Kaiser and "poking its finger around in the wound" as if it were a scientific experiment, soon made him lose faith in them, whereas he found the *Deutsches Volksblatt* more decent in such matters. Another issue he had with the big newspapers was the way they cultivated admiration for France, which he found repugnant, writing:

> *A man couldn't help feeling ashamed to be a German when he saw these saccharine hymns of praise to the "great cultural nation." This wretched licking of France's boots more than once made me throw down one of these "world newspapers." And on such occasions I sometimes picked up the* Volksblatt, *which, to be sure, seemed to me much smaller, but in these matters somewhat more appetizing. I was not in agreement with the sharp anti-Semitic tone, but from time to time I read arguments which gave me some food for thought.*

When he first arrived in Vienna, he writes, he had felt opposed to the city's mayor, Dr. Karl Lueger, and to his Christian Socialist Party, finding both the man and the movement "reactionary." However, he came to change his opinion as he became more familiar with their politics, judging him more fairly, his attitude eventually growing into admiration. Lueger and his party were anti-Semites, and this, along with his lack of faith in the press, was what swayed him.

> *My views with regard to anti-Semitism thus succumbed to the passage of time, and this was my greatest transformation of all.*
>
> *It cost me the greatest inner soul struggles, and only after months of battle between my reason and my sentiments did my reason begin to emerge victorious. Two years later, my sentiment had followed my reason, and from then on became its most loyal guardian and sentinel.*
>
> *At the time of this bitter struggle between spiritual education and cold reason, the visual instruction of the Vienna streets had performed invaluable*

> *services. There came a time when I no longer, as in the first days, wandered blindly through the mighty city; now with open eyes I saw not only the buildings but also the people.*
>
> *Once, as I was strolling through the Inner City, I suddenly encountered an apparition in a black caftan and black hair locks. Is this a Jew? was my first thought.*
>
> *For, to be sure, they had not looked like that in Linz. I observed the man furtively and cautiously, but the longer I stared at this foreign face, scrutinizing feature for feature, the more my first question assumed a new form:*
>
> *Is this a German?*
>
> *As always in such cases, I now began to try to relieve my doubts by books. For a few hellers I bought the first anti-Semitic pamphlet of my life. Unfortunately, they all proceeded from the supposition that in principle the reader knew or even understood the Jewish question to a certain degree. Besides, the tone for the most part was such that doubts again arose in me, due in part to the dull and amazingly unscientific arguments favoring the thesis.*
>
> *I relapsed for weeks at a time, once even for months.*
>
> *The whole thing seemed to me so monstrous, the accusations so boundless, that, tormented by the fear of doing injustice, I again became anxious and uncertain.*

The crucial argument that according to *Mein Kampf* removed that uncertainty and turned him conclusively into an anti-Semite has to do with Zionism and the attitude to it of liberal Jews, who rather than disowning the Zionists as non-Jews, as they perhaps would have done had it been purely a matter of faith, instead made sure that all Jews "remained unalterably of one piece."

> *In a short time this apparent struggle between Zionistic and liberal Jews disgusted me; for it was false through and through, founded on lies and scarcely in keeping with the moral elevation and purity always claimed by this people.*
>
> *The cleanliness of this people, moral and otherwise, I must say, is a point in itself. By their very exterior you could tell that these were no lovers of water, and,*

> *to your distress, you often knew it with your eyes closed. Later I often grew sick to my stomach from the smell of these caftan-wearers. Added to this, there was their unclean dress and their generally unheroic appearance.*
>
> *All this could scarcely be called very attractive; but it became positively repulsive when, in addition to their physical uncleanliness, you discovered the moral stains on this "chosen people."*
>
> *In a short time I was made more thoughtful than ever by my slowly rising insight into the type of activity carried on by the Jews in certain fields.*
>
> *Was there any form of filth or profligacy, particularly in cultural life, without at least one Jew involved in it?*
>
> *If you cut even cautiously into such an abscess, you found, like a maggot in a rotting body, often dazzled by the sudden light – a kike!*
>
> *What had to be reckoned heavily against the Jews in my eyes was when I became acquainted with their activity in the press, art, literature, and the theater. All the unctuous reassurances helped little or nothing. It sufficed to look at a billboard, to study the names of the men behind the horrible trash they advertised, to make you hard for a long time to come. This was pestilence, spiritual pestilence, worse than the Black Death of olden times, and the people were being infected with it! It goes without saying that the lower the intellectual level of one of these art manufacturers, the more unlimited his fertility will be, and the scoundrel ends up like a garbage separator, splashing his filth in the face of humanity. And bear in mind that there is no limit to their number; bear in mind that for one Goethe, Nature easily can foist on the world ten thousand of these scribblers who poison men's souls like germ-carriers of the worst sort, on their fellow men.*
>
> *It was terrible, but not to be overlooked, that precisely the Jew, in tremendous numbers, seemed chosen by Nature for this shameful calling.*
>
> *Is this why the Jews are called the "chosen people"?*

He goes on to link the Jews with prostitution and the white slave traffic in Vienna, declaring that he no longer hesitated in bringing up the Jewish problem, but was determined to bring it to light, and that now that he knew what signs to look for he would constantly discover new connections and manifestations, until suddenly coming upon Jews in a position where he had least expected to find them:

> *When I recognized the Jew as the leader of the Social Democracy, the scales dropped from my eyes. A long soul struggle had reached its conclusion . . .*
>
> *Gradually I began to hate them.*
>
> *All this had but one good side: that in proportion as the real leaders or at least the disseminators of Social Democracy came within my vision, my love for my people inevitably grew. For who, in view of the diabolical craftiness of these seducers, could damn the luckless victims? How hard it was, even for me, to get the better of this race of dialectical liars! And how futile was such success in dealing with people who twist the truth in your mouth, who without so much as a blush disavow the word they have just spoken, and in the very next minute take credit for it after all.*
>
> *No. The better acquainted I became with the Jew, the more forgiving I inevitably became toward the worker . . .*
>
> *Thus I began to make myself familiar with the founders of this doctrine, in order to study the foundations of the movement. If I reached my goal more quickly than at first I had perhaps ventured to believe, it was thanks to my newly acquired, though at that time not very profound, knowledge of the Jewish question. This alone enabled me to draw a practical comparison between the reality and the theoretical flimflam of the founding fathers of Social Democracy, since it taught me to understand the language of the Jewish people, who speak in order to conceal or at least to veil their thoughts; their real aim is not therefore to be found in the lines themselves, but slumbers well concealed between them.*
>
> *For me this was the time of the greatest spiritual upheaval I have ever had to go through. I had ceased to be a weak-kneed cosmopolitan and become an anti-Semite.*

The first phenomena he attributes to the Jews are all concerned with cultural decay. The decay of the press, the decay of literature, the decay of art, in other words decay within the public domain. This decay, perceived by many, could be seen either as the expression of moral decay or as the cause of moral decay. Hitler believed the latter, and his implication of the Jews in this respect may similarly be understood in two ways, as the expression either of the base morals of the Jewish people or of an attempt to corrupt existing moral structures, in other words to destroy the people from within. Hitler seems to believe it to be a combination of the two and that it is through the policies of the Social Democrats that the categorization and calculation applied to send those areas into decay, absent in other areas, become visible. Opinions, beliefs, and morals, whether expressed publicly or by the individual in private, in a work of art or a political utterance, are by such reasoning relative notions, like degrees of good and bad on a scale of morals. Eventually he shifts this relative boundary in toward the absolute, by posing the question: "Have we an objective right to struggle for our self-preservation, or is this justified only subjectively within ourselves?" Or, put differently, are culture and morality relative, something we decide for ourselves, or is their basis objective? Is there something external that lends credence to our moral beliefs, something external that defines our culture, something fundamental and given? He believes the answer to be yes, setting the boundary between nationalism and Marxism, which is basically an expression of the boundary between the German and the Jewish, in a notional space he calls the handiwork of the Lord. He writes the following:

> *The Jewish doctrine of Marxism rejects the aristocratic principle of Nature and replaces the eternal privilege of power and strength by the mass of numbers and their dead weight. Thus it denies the value of personality in man, contests the significance of nationality and race, and thereby withdraws from humanity the premise of its existence and its culture. As a foundation of the universe, this doctrine would bring about the end of any order intellectually conceivable to man. And as, in this greatest of all recognizable organisms, the result of an application of such a law could only be chaos, on earth it could only be destruction for the inhabitants of this planet.*

> *If, with the help of his Marxist creed, the Jew is victorious over the other peoples of the world, his crown will be the funeral wreath of humanity and this planet will, as it did thousands of years ago, move through the ether devoid of men.*
>
> *Eternal Nature inexorably avenges the infringement of her commands.*
>
> *Hence today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord.*

The most significant rhetorical turn in this line of reasoning, forming the kernel of Hitler's political ideology as it is formulated in *Mein Kampf*, and thereby the point from which all subsequent actions performed by the Nazis issue, including those which in sum comprised the most comprehensive disaster in our human history, the Holocaust, is its arguments to the effect that anti-Semitism is not emotionally founded but the very opposite, a rational standpoint at which he has arrived by way of common-sense reasoning. This is a crucial distinction. Crucial for Hitler himself, in that if the hatred he felt toward the Jews had no rational foundation, which is to say if it were not accountable for by reference to something inherently Jewish, then it would necessarily come from him and be the expression of his inner feelings, whose existence he barely acknowledged, and crucial for those he was addressing, since by stating that his first, intuitive emotion in respect to the Jews was that anti-Semitism was a terrible thing, he thereby preempted an important and very human objection, that the Jews were people like them, with joys and sorrows, children and parents, friends and colleagues, and so one could not possibly hate them, could not turn against them, it being unreasonable and wrong. This is what you feel, Hitler says, and there is nothing wrong in feeling it, I did too. Anti-Semitism is outrageous. The pogroms are a terrible thing. But these feelings, which are deeply human, cloak the true state of affairs. And it is thus, concealed as if in disguise, that the activity of the Jew, which is directed toward destroying precisely what is good, precisely that which gives rise to the feeling that anti-Semitism is wrong, is taking place. It must be exposed, and this can only occur by way of rational arguments such as those he provides in his book. This is the rhetorical crux: I say things as they are. Germanness is associated with differences: the individual has value as a person, in that they belong to a race and are a part of that race's political expression, which is the nation-state. The value of what is German resides in its spiritual ideals.

Jewishness, equated with Marxism, is associated with sameness: for the Jew and the Marxist alike there are no individual differences between people, the individual is expendable, of value only in belonging to the mass, and there are no differences of race, which is to say no *Volk* and no nation-states. Jewish-Marxist value is material and monetary. Everything is the same in the Marxist world, and that lack of differentiation, that reality of no distinctions, is akin to chaos. Germanness is founded on values that form the basis of moral distinctions, good and bad, which is to say the qualitative, whereas the Jewish-Marxist domain is based on numbers and masses, which is to say the quantitative. Germanness finds its legitimacy in nature, which is to say the living world, the biological, which natural science has divided into classes, families, and species, and whose principle, the very principle of life itself, is the survival instinct, the right of the strongest. The Jewish-Marxist domain too finds its legitimacy in nature, but in that part of nature that is lifeless, which is to say in the material, that which is dead. The consequence of the Jewish-Marxist view is chaos, sameness, eventually death and the absolute void, which is the final and most undifferentiated state of all.

A biological mind-set comes out on several levels of the text; when Hitler writes about areas of cultural life in which Jews feature strongly, they are likened to an abscess into which "you cut," a dissection that reveals, like a maggot in a rotting corpse, a Jew. The activities of the Jews are likened to a pestilence, worse even than the Black Death, a poison. All this, filth, plague, poison, decay, comes from outside the human sphere to spread within it, eventually to destroy it. To Hitler's mind, the body is at the outset pure, morally and physically, and may remain so by maintaining its remoteness from other bodies in a meticulous system of constraints regulated by morals. Syphilis, he later states, diseased sexuality, comes of prostituting love, which in turn is the fault of the Jews. “This Jewification of our spiritual life and mammonizing of our mating instinct will sooner or later destroy our entire offspring,” he writes. Money converts all values into pecuniary values, even the most hallowed of all, love, and the consequence is not just decay of the spirit, but also decay of the flesh, which becomes sick and riddled with disease. The image of the Jew as a kind of sprinkler spraying filth into the face of humanity would seem to adequately sum up Hitler’s mind-set, the threat of transgression, diffusion, disease, and chaos, the worst imaginable scenario, finding simple, striking, yet absolutely ambivalent expression.

But thus far in his reasoning the distinction between the Jewish and the German is yet to be conceived as absolute, Marxist-Jewish understanding of the human domain as being amenable to quantification, capable of being weighed and measured, expressed in numbers, is yet to be construed as an expression of Jewish nature, that is as a part of the racial makeup of the Jews, but as belonging to their culture. The right to fight for one’s moral beliefs and culture is something Hitler finds in nature, where the strongest prevails, which makes the struggle absolute, though as yet it is not the object of his endeavor. This changes, however, as he proceeds to racial anthropology toward the end of the first volume of *Mein Kampf*, following his account of the capitulation and the resentment and hateful darkening of his soul it precipitated.

What racial anthropology does is to transpose elements of nature onto culture. Nature is the biological world of animals and plants, of all things living, and it expresses nothing other than itself, refers to nothing other than itself; it is a godless universe Hitler writes about, though by no means valueless, for the principles that govern nature, its biological laws, are in themselves generative of value, and among those values the survival and development of the species is primary. That value is regulated by two principles, delimitation and selection.

> *There are some truths which are so obvious that for this very reason they are not seen or at least not recognized by ordinary people. They sometimes pass by*

such truisms as though blind and are most astonished when someone suddenly discovers what everyone really ought to know . . .

Thus men without exception wander about in the garden of Nature; they imagine that they know practically everything and yet with few exceptions pass blindly by one of the most patent principles of Nature's rule: the inner segregation of the species of all living beings on this earth.

Even the most superficial observation shows that Nature's restricted form of propagation and increase is an almost rigid basic law of all the innumerable forms of expression of her vital urge. Every animal mates only with a member of the same species. The titmouse seeks the titmouse, the finch the finch, the stork the stork, the field mouse the field mouse, the dormouse the dormouse, the wolf the she-wolf, etc.

Only unusual circumstances can change this, primarily the compulsion of captivity or any other cause that makes it impossible to mate within the same species. But then Nature begins to resist this with all possible means, and her most visible protest consists either in refusing further capacity for propagation to bastards or in limiting the fertility of later offspring; in most cases, however, she takes away the power of resistance to disease or hostile attacks . . .

The consequence of this racial purity, universally valid in Nature, is not only the sharp outward delimitation of the various races, but their uniform character in themselves. The fox is always a fox, the goose a goose, the tiger a tiger, etc., and the difference can lie at most in the varying measure of force, strength, intelligence, dexterity, endurance, etc., of the individual specimens. But you will never find a fox who in his inner attitude might, for example, show humanitarian tendencies toward geese, as similarly there is no cat with a friendly inclination toward mice.

Therefore, here, too, the struggle among themselves arises less from inner aversion than from hunger and love. In both cases, Nature looks on calmly, with satisfaction, in fact. In the struggle for daily bread all those who are weak and sickly or less determined succumb, while the struggle of the males for the female grants the right or opportunity to propagate only to the healthiest. And struggle is always a means for improving a species' health and power of resistance and, therefore, a cause of its higher development.

This is a duplication of Darwin's notion of the survival of the fittest, laden with values. Delimitation, purity, development, these are Hitler's key concepts, first establishing them in nature, then transposing them onto the culture on the premise that man is first and foremost a biological being, but also that man's ideas and conceptions are keyed to the biological in such a way that superior ideals may be developed only by superior races, and that the survival of these ideals is a function of the survival of the race. Such an ideal is unselfishness. All living organisms possess the instinct of self-preservation, which in the case of the most primitive species operates entirely on the I. What makes the Aryan race superior, according to Hitler, is not that the instinct of self-preservation is stronger than in other races, but that it expresses itself in a more advanced manner, rising above simple egotism, allowing its own needs to recede into the background so that it may work for others, make sacrifice for others, working for the good of a community greater than itself.

> *The Aryan is not greatest in his mental qualities as such, but in the extent of his willingness to put all his abilities in the service of the community . . .*
>
> *This state of mind, which subordinates the interests of the ego to the conservation of the community, is really the first premise for every truly human culture. From it alone can arise all the great works of mankind, which bring the founder little reward, but the richest blessings to posterity. Yes, from it alone can we understand how so many are able to bear up faithfully under a scanty life which imposes on them nothing but poverty and frugality, but gives the community the foundations of its existence. Every worker, every peasant, every inventor, official, etc., who works without ever being able to achieve any happiness or prosperity for himself, is a representative of this lofty idea, even if the deeper meaning of his activity remains hidden in him.*
>
> *What applies to work as the foundation of human sustenance and all human progress is true to an even greater degree for the defense of man and his culture. In giving one's own life for the existence of the community lies the crown of all sense of sacrifice. It is this alone that prevents what human hands have built from being overthrown by human hands or destroyed by Nature.*

> *Our own German language possesses a word which magnificently designates this kind of activity:* Pflichterfullung *(fulfillment of duty); it means not to be self-sufficient but to serve the community.*

The biological perspective on the human applies in other words not only to the purely physical, is not simply a question of hair color, eye color, skin color, height, and strength, but also of less tangible properties and ideals, which is to say of what traditionally is thought of as the spiritual side of man: this too is a matter of biology, race, and blood.

The objection that nature and culture are two separate entities, and that culture is superior to nature in exploiting it to its own ends, managing and mastering it, is countered by Hitler in the following argument:

> *Here, of course, we encounter the objection of the modern pacifist, as truly Jewish in its effrontery as it is stupid! "Man's role is to overcome Nature!"*
>
> *Millions thoughtlessly parrot this Jewish nonsense and end up by really imagining that they themselves represent a kind of conqueror of Nature; though in this they dispose of no other weapon than an idea, and at that such a miserable one, that if it were true no world at all would be conceivable.*
>
> *But quite aside from the fact that man has never yet conquered Nature in anything, but at most has caught hold of and tried to lift one or another corner of her immense gigantic veil of eternal riddles and secrets, that in reality he invents nothing but only discovers everything, that he does not dominate Nature, but has only risen on the basis of his knowledge of various laws and secrets of Nature to be lord over those other living creatures who lack this knowledge – quite aside from all this, an idea cannot overcome the preconditions for the development and being of humanity, since the idea itself depends only on man. Without human beings there is no human idea in this world, therefore, the idea as such is always conditioned by the presence of human beings and hence of all the laws which created the precondition for their existence.*
>
> *And not only that! Certain ideas are even tied up with certain men. This applies most of all to those ideas whose content originates, not in an exact scientific truth, but in the world of emotion, or, as it is so beautifully and clearly*

> *expressed today, reflects an "inner experience." All these ideas, which have nothing to do with cold logic as such, but represent only pure expressions of feeling, ethical conceptions, etc., are chained to the existence of men, to whose intellectual imagination and creative power they owe their existence. Precisely in this case the preservation of these definite races and men is the precondition for the existence of these ideas.*

If there are superior races, there must also be inferior races. And if high ideals and noble qualities are associated with biological race, lack of ideals and poor qualities must be too. In this system, where everything is biology and heredity, the big threat is therefore the degeneration of the race, which can happen from within, as a result of superior individuals mating with inferior, and from without, by means of an inferior race merging with a superior. Hitler gives an example of such blood-mingling and its dangers by pointing to the differences in North American and South American cultures, where in the former instance the population is largely made up of Germanic elements intermingled with inferior peoples only to a small extent, whereas in the latter instance the population is largely made up of Latin immigrants who often mixed with the original inhabitants, on a large scale, as he puts it.

Hitler divides mankind into three categories: founders of culture, bearers of culture, destroyers of culture. The Aryans represent the first, the Jews the last. The Jews possess a strongly developed instinct for self-preservation, but their readiness for sacrifice extends only seldom beyond the purely egotistical instinct of individual preservation. Their sense of solidarity, seemingly so robust, is in Hitler's view nothing but the primitive instinct of the herd.

> *In the Jewish people the will to self-sacrifice does not go beyond the individual's naked instinct of self-preservation. Their apparently great sense of solidarity is based on the very primitive herd instinct that is seen in many other living creatures in this world. It is a noteworthy fact that the herd instinct leads to mutual support only as long as common danger makes this seem useful or inevitable. The same pack of wolves which has just fallen on its prey together disintegrates when hunger abates into its individual beasts. The same is true of horses which*

> *try to defend themselves against an assailant in a body, but scatter again as soon as the danger is past.*
>
> *It is similar with the Jew. His sense of sacrifice is only apparent. It exists only as long as the existence of the individual makes it absolutely necessary. However, as soon as the common enemy is conquered, the danger threatening all averted and the booty hidden, the apparent harmony of the Jews among themselves ceases, again making way for their old causal tendencies. The Jew is only united when a common danger forces him to be or a common booty entices him; if these two grounds are lacking, the qualities of the crassest egoism come into their own, and in the twinkling of an eye the united people turns into a horde of rats, fighting bloodily among themselves . . .*
>
> *So it is absolutely wrong to infer any ideal sense of sacrifice in the Jews from the fact that they stand together in struggle, or, better expressed, in the plundering of their fellow men.*
>
> *Here again the Jew is led by nothing but the naked egoism of the individual.*
>
> *That is why the Jewish state – which should be the living organism for preserving and increasing a race – is completely unlimited as to territory. For a state formation to have a definite spatial setting always presupposes an idealistic attitude on the part of the state-race, and especially a correct interpretation of the concept of work. In the exact measure in which this attitude is lacking, any attempt at forming, even of preserving, a spatially delimited state fails. And thus the basis on which alone culture can arise is lacking.*
>
> *Hence the Jewish people, despite all apparent intellectual qualities, is without any true culture, and especially without any culture of its own. For what sham culture the Jew today possesses is the property of other peoples, and for the most part it is ruined in his hands.*

If this is the case, that human properties and race are connected, that culture and human ideals are in essence expressions of biology, that the lowest, the Jewish, exists within the highest, the Aryan, with no clearly defined boundaries between the two biological entities, then racial intermingling indeed represents the system's greatest peril, overshadowing all other issues. The struggle to maintain racial purity overrides all other struggles.

> *Everything on this earth is capable of improvement. Every defeat can become the father of a subsequent victory, every lost war the cause of a later resurgence, every hardship the fertilization of human energy, and from every oppression the forces for a new spiritual rebirth can come – as long as the blood is preserved pure.*
>
> *The lost purity of the blood alone destroys inner happiness forever, plunges man into the abyss for all time, and the consequences can nevermore be eliminated from body and spirit.*
>
> *Only by examining and comparing all other problems of life in the light of this one question shall we see how absurdly petty they are by this standard. They are all limited in time – but the question of preserving or not preserving the purity of the blood will endure as long as there are men.*

For Hitler, the Jewish question was in other words the single most important political issue in Germany in 1924, more important than poverty, more important than the Armistice and the Treaty of Versailles, inflation, and unemployment, because, in contrast to all those other issues, it was bound up with the notion of the authentic and the most fundamental of all things, life itself, human life. As such, the body was drawn into the very center of the political field. The body was an expression of the state, whose purpose it was to keep the body pure and ensure it developed in a desirable manner, physically and morally, and that it did not propagate with those inferior to itself. The biological perspective was superordinate to the individual, the human being as a body came before the human being as a person, and the properties of the individual were unimportant, for regardless of how good and unselfish a Jew might be, regardless of how hard-working and innocent, he or she was nonetheless guilty by virtue simply of being a Jew. In this way, the individual Jew was absolved of guilt, he or she being unable to do anything about it, whereas the Jews collectively were condemned, associated with a whole range of properties they could never escape, and without having any say in the matter.

This is exactly how we have always regarded animals, which are condemned to expressing themselves by way of the properties of their species, a relationship they are unable to escape, a cat or a rat always at first being a cat or a rat and only then perhaps the cat or the rat. To conduct court proceedings against a cat or a rat would be meaningless, for they possess no guilt, are mere expressions of their species, without a say in the matter, a concept such as morality would be equally meaningless when applied to their lives. In the event of their doing something we find undesirable, making a nuisance of themselves in some way, nothing stands in the way of our removing them, for since they cannot possess guilt, they accordingly have no individual rights. Animals are outside the law, unless as a collective, a protected species for instance, but this too is independent of inherent properties, provided they are not directly harmful to man.

The biological perspective, whereby the human primarily is regarded in terms of race, a collective with certain properties, characteristics, and ideals and, secondly, in terms of individuals deemed worthy or unworthy according to the race to which they belong, and only then as people with particular names and faces, would, if it were to be applied in any future state, require the introduction of new legislation and a new system of law, the notion of individual responsibility and personal guilt standing so firmly in culture, with roots going back to the beginnings of civilization. The only exception to this rule of civilization would be war, only in war could individual responsibility and personal guilt be abolished, for in war every soldier on the other side was firstly an enemy, representative of a collective, who could be killed as a matter of course, and only then an individual. It is this collectivity that is signaled by the uniform, and which marching makes manifest: the one, the individual, the personal name and face are always subordinate to the community, the all, the name of the nation, and the flag. These two aspects, both canceling out the individual, one by construing the human in terms of biology, bound by the laws of nature, the other by seeing the human as a creature at war, a state in which the laws of civil society are nullified, are what makes Hitler's reasoning as to the Jews in *Mein Kampf* possible. Both perspectives were common in the society in which he wrote, directly and indirectly. Alongside Henry Ford's *The International Jew: The World's Foremost*

Problem, Günther's *Racial Typology of the German People*, and the writings of Chamberlain, Eckart, and Rosenberg, the American writer Madison Grant's book *The Passing of the Great Race* was likewise important to Hitler at this time. Ryback states that Hitler referred to it as "my Bible" and traces several lines of argument in *Mein Kampf* back to its pages.

But such racial thinking was more than paranoid, pseudoscientific theory, it was also widespread in serious scientific environments in academia, where it was presented as objective truth on a footing with other scientific truths, thereby lending legitimacy to Ford's, Grant's, and Hitler's thoughts, for if they carried its consequences to the furthest extreme, they could nevertheless claim their ideas to be based on an accepted notion that race was a relevant compartmentalizer of human beings, and that racially pure and impure existed, based on facts that could be expressed in figures. In 1926, the year after *Mein Kampf*, a work came out in Sweden called *The Racial Characters of the Swedish Nation*, published by scholars of Uppsala University affiliated to the Swedish State Institute for Race Biology. It was a far-reaching and prestigious publication, setting standards for similar works that would subsequently see the light of day elsewhere. In one of its essays, "An Orientating Synopsis of the Racial Status of Europe," Rolf Nordenstreng defines "race" as follows:

> *The meaning of the word race, from a scientific point of view, is a group of individuals of one and the same species, which differ from other individuals of this same species in showing a peculiar combination of certain hereditary characters. A race is always a product of selective factors in cooperation with still unknown factors, which in some way or other transform the hereditary characters.*
>
> *A race is a purely anthropological concept, its characteristics are above all physical. To be sure, there must also be mental differences among the races, and these are by no means less important; but they are exceedingly difficult to find out and to prove. At present they are little more than guesswork, and though the attempts that have been made to define the mental characters of the races are likely to contain a great deal of truth, based upon good and sound*

observations, they also contain a considerable quantity of prejudiced and arbitrary statements. In time there may be developed something like a scientific racial psychology – at present nonexistent.

As rather certain we may venture to state the existence of the following five greater races: 1) the Nordic, *2) the* East Baltic, *3) the* Mediterranean, *4) the* Alpine, *and 5) the* Dinaric. *To these may be added, though they are not in the proper sense of the word European, but mainly Asiatic, the* Anatolian (Armenoid, Anterior-Asiatic), *and the* Semitic (Araboid) *race, the latter name being a bad one, because it is also a linguistic term, but inevitable, as no better one has been suggested.*

The name of the Nordic race is not quite appropriate, the adjective being in many languages used also as a linguistic term, meaning "Scandinavian"; most persons of this race speak languages that are not Scandinavian. But the term is customary, and North Europe together with North Germany is the distributing center of the race, and it is in the northern countries, on the Scandinavian Peninsula, that it is found most commonly and in its relatively greatest purity. This race it is which one often hears called the "Teutonic" or "Germanic," and it has also been termed the "Kymric." German archaeologists sometimes call it the "row-grave-type," Reihengräbertypus. *Its characteristics are a light, translucent, rosy skin; a fair, sometimes reddish, soft, often wavy or curly hair; a rich beard-growth; clear blue or blue-gray eyes; a tall stature, with proportionately long legs and a firm, elastic gait with stretched legs; a strong frame; a long and rather narrow face with a narrow, usually high, straight, or somewhat bent nose, often with a little bump at the transition from the nasal bone to the cartilage; a narrow, high nasal root; very slightly or not at all prominent cheekbones; nonsalient jaws with the rows of teeth standing nearly vertically, each against the other; somewhat thin lips; a strongly projecting chin; a narrow, somewhat sloping forehead; weak, but quite perceptible eyebrow ridges; rather deep-set eyes; a long and rather narrow braincase (head length about 195 mm, cephalic index about 77) with a nearly horizontal crown line and strongly elongated occiput. It must, however, be observed that both the color of the hair and the shape of the nose vary a great deal. Nearly every imaginable shade of fair hair color occurs, from flaxen yellow through reddish yellow to light golden-brown*

> *and through light ashy-blond to the darker grayish-blond. And together with the straight and the bent noses there are somewhat cocked ones, with the tip turned a little upward and the bridge somewhat depressed in the middle – a shape widely distributed over the whole sweep of this race.*
>
> *The* Semitic *race, which perhaps also might be called the* Araboid *race, because its characteristics seem to be more common among the Arabs than anywhere else, is considered to be an offshoot from the Mediterranean race. It differs from this race mainly in having a higher, more bent, but also thin and narrow nose; fuller, though not thick lips; a rather light, though never rosy complexion; and an almond-shaped eye (the inner angle of the eye being more rounded, the outer angle more pointed). The hollow between the chin and the lower lip lies higher than in other races. There is a great deal of Semitic blood in the Sephardic Jews and less in the Ashkenazic ones, and very likely there must be some of it in the population of most South European countries.*

Cephalic index is the percentile relation between head breadth and head length, German *Kopfindex*, not to be confounded with the corresponding relation for the cranium, German *Schädelindex*, as is stated in the introduction to one of the book's chapters, full of tables, graphs, and diagrams detailing the results of the scientists' fieldwork throughout the country. *The Racial Characters of the Swedish Nation* measures the cephalic index in all Swedish *landskap* (provinces), all Swedish *län* (counties), all Swedish rural and urban communities, the latter including the four biggest cities, mapping distributions according to occupation and social class and drawing comparisons across the other Scandinavian countries, and this is repeated for all other anthropological characteristics – trunk length, arm length, leg length, head breadth, head length, face breadth, morphological face height, morphological face index, jugo-frontal index and jugo-mandibular index, nose, ear, nasal bridge profile, eye color, eyebrow color, pubic hair color, all broken down into the various geographical and social divisions, all then correlated in a dedicated section on the relations between anthropological characters and indices revealing, for example, the relation between face height and arm length, rural community and province. The final part of the book consists of full-page plates, photographs of naked racial types, children, women, and men, a farmer from Norrbotten for instance appearing in the section *East Baltic Types, Relatively Pure*, a nomad from Jämtland in the section *Lapp Prototype, Relatively Pure*, a working man from Lappland in the section *Race-Mixed Types, East Baltic-Lapp*.

The most important difference between these texts and Hitler's has to do with their style. The racial theory expressed in Nordenstreng's article is penned in the objective, matter-of-fact style employed by all scholarly discourse, a style we take to indicate truth. Truth, objectivity, meticulousness, overview, certainty, insight, all these things are inherent in the style. The figures, the tables, the Latin terminology, everything connotes truth and absolute reliability. This is reinforced by the text delimiting and keeping apart what it can state with certainty and what it cannot state with certainty. A link between race and psychology, a biological connection, is likely but cannot yet be asserted on the available evidence. In this way, the text suggests that everything else it says about race may be asserted with certainty on the available evidence, at the same time as it opens the possibility of race and psychology indeed being biologically linked. The immediate association of truth with the style employed here, its rhetorical figures and tropes, is plain to us now that the content has been so discredited, not only as speculative and unscientific, but also as dangerous and, at root, evil.

But wherein does this evil lie for us? In the scholarly, scientific style there is solicitude too, for what is presented here is knowledge, insights gained by these scientists, not on their own behalf, but on behalf of the community, and this knowledge is what they impart to us in their articles and papers. Solicitude and also a clear notion of progress; the field is new, no one has studied these things before, no one has considered them before, but with the giant strides taken in biology in the latter part of the nineteenth century, with Darwin's groundbreaking explanatory theory of the origin of species, and before that Linnaeus's all-encompassing taxonomy, this advance, the establishment of an institute of racial theory and the opening up of an entirely new field of research, we approach deeper insights into the human species that will yield obvious opportunities for further progress, for only a small step from this racial biology lay eugenics, the new theory of racial hygiene, whereby the health and procreation of entire peoples could be steered in whichever direction was found to be desirable, for instance by sterilizing undesirable elements such as schizophrenics, the mentally ill, habitual criminals, vagrants, and Gypsies, as actually took place in Sweden, Norway, the United States, and Germany in the 1930s and 1940s.

This occurred on the basis of this research, under state auspices, pushing back the boundaries of what the state was and could be: the concept of public health goes back to this period, for the idea that the state should be responsible for the health and well-being of the individual is by no means a given, and its attendant notions of healthy minds in healthy bodies, of poverty and darkness and poor health being swept away as the sun shone in on hardship and abjection, which then would jump up invigorated, of poor children being sent to the countryside in summer, of health visitors and vaccinations, were all about the conjugation of body and state. And it was carried out by decent people with decent intentions, the thought that it might be wrong to sterilize a woman suffering from delusions and unable to look after herself being not at all obvious, since there was a risk, if she became pregnant, that she might pass on her affliction to the detriment of her child, and thereby also burden society as a whole.

The division of human beings into the racially pure and the racially impure, superior and inferior by implication, belongs to the same paradigm, and it is this scientification or biologization of the human, and nothing else, that makes Hitler's racial theory, and his subsequent racial policy, possible. Without it, anti-Semitism is just an irrational emotion, an obvious scapegoating, a paranoia within the culture that can be taken more or less seriously, but never be employed as the basis of any political program. Hitler kept up with international research in eugenics as it was conducted in Europe and the United States, before and after he became Reich chancellor. He was familiar with the work of leading American eugenicists such as Leon Whitney, director of the American Eugenics Society, Charles Davenport, a Harvard-educated biologist and prominent representative of the American sterilization program, and Paul Popenoe of the Human Betterment Foundation. Ryback quotes the following from a speech given by Hitler in the mid-1930s:

> *Now that we know the laws of heredity it is possible to a large extent to prevent unhealthy and severely handicapped beings from coming into the world. I have studied with interest the laws of several American states concerning prevention of reproduction by people whose progeny would, in all probability, be of no value or be injurious to the racial stock.*

According to Ryback, Hitler also met the American eugenicist and fiercely anti-Semitic racial theorist Lothrop Stoddard in 1939, when Stoddard was working as a correspondent in Berlin and received a personal invitation from the Führer on account of his work in the field. Stoddard promised Hitler that he would not make reference to their meeting, but he would later state that Hitler's handshake had been firm, though he had not sought eye contact, subsequently writing more generally of Germany's relationship with racial hygiene:

> *The relative emphasis which Hitler gave racialism and eugenics many years ago foreshadows the respective interest toward the two subjects in Germany today. Outside Germany, the reverse is true, due chiefly to Nazi treatment of its Jewish minority. Inside Germany, the Jewish problem is regarded as a passing phenomenon, already settled in principle and soon to be settled in fact by the physical elimination of the Jews themselves from the Third Reich. It is the regeneration of the Germanic stock with which public opinion is most concerned and which it seeks to further in various ways.*

The scientification of racial thinking, the entire scientific apparatus that was set up around it, with its specially constructed instruments for cranial measurement, its tables and graphs, its Latin terminology, and technical vocabulary, lent such thinking legitimacy, and although Hitler's book contains no trace of the scholarly style, it is nevertheless *Mein Kampf* that makes the connection between culture and nature possible, the coupling of state and body, politics and biology, all so central to Hitler's ideology. *Mein Kampf* is an extreme version of that mind-set, and while many found it exaggerated and bordering on the paranoid and could not believe he meant it seriously, certainly not as he approached the corridors of power and thereby became outwardly more respectable, they did not question the fundamental goal of such a policy, which was to improve the stock, the race, to lift it upward into a resplendently healthy, morally unassailable future.

Hatred of the Jews was nothing new, it was prevalent in the world of Faust; Martin Luther hated the Jews, and their persecution went far back into history, as ancient as themselves, an integral part of their own self-image and of the cultures that surrounded them, as though somehow it were embedded in the villages and forests, a mythical fabric from long before the Enlightenment, yet still in force, for example in the great impoverished rural areas of Poland, where the familiar prejudices relating to the Jews – that they were rich, that they hoodwinked and cheated people, that they took care of their own – were ingrained in the culture and explanatory of the indigenous population's hardships and miseries. The Jew-hatred of Hitler and the Nazis, however, was new in the sense that it was related to modernity, to the cities and the mass human, not to the Jewish peddler Papst encountered in Hamsun's *Wayfarers* but to international finance and international Marxism. Racial theory was new as well, and provided the mind-set with a legitimacy that removed it from the mythical and placed it firmly within the realms of the rational and the modern. Most striking, however, is the coming together of the mythical and the modern in propaganda, where the images of that ancient hatred – the Jews portrayed as rats, the Jews portrayed as pigs, the Jews portrayed as evil – are projected through the new technology, in moving pictures on cinema screens, living voices on the radio, drawn thereby into a world of automobiles, neon lights, factories, telephones, and films, as its antithesis and primitive prelude.

Hitler was just as forthright about his thinking on propaganda in *Mein Kampf* as he was about his anti-Semitism, his antidemocratism and his Lebensraum ideology, whose consequence could never be anything else but war.

But whereas his anti-Semitism and nationalism were idealistic in nature, amalgamated by racial biology, his thoughts on propaganda were pragmatic. Propaganda was the most important means of carrying through his idealistic aims, and so convinced was he of its power that he was quite open about it. As Peter Sloterdijk notes, Hitler was so sure of himself when it came to the potency of propaganda that he felt he could afford to reveal his recipe. Hitler referred to propaganda as a weapon, "a frightful one in the hand of an expert."

> *The second really decisive question was this: To whom should propaganda be addressed? To the scientifically trained intelligentsia or to the less educated masses?*
>
> *It must be addressed always and exclusively to the masses . . .*
>
> *The function of propaganda does not lie in the scientific training of the individual, but in calling the masses' attention to certain facts, processes, necessities, etc., whose significance is thus for the first time placed within their field of vision.*
>
> *The whole art consists in doing this so skillfully that everyone will be convinced that the fact is real, the process necessary, the necessity correct, etc. But since propaganda is not and cannot be the necessity in itself, since its function, like the poster, consists in attracting the attention of the crowd, and not in educating those who are already educated or who are striving after education and knowledge, its effect for the most part must be aimed at the emotions and only to a very limited degree at the so-called intellect.*
>
> *All propaganda must be popular and its intellectual level must be adjusted to the most limited intelligence among those it is addressed to. Consequently, the greater the mass it is intended to reach, the lower its purely intellectual level will have to be. But if, as in propaganda for sticking out a war, the aim is to influence a whole people, we must avoid excessive intellectual demands on our public, and too much caution cannot be exerted in this direction. The more modest its*

> *intellectual ballast, the more exclusively it takes into consideration the emotions of the masses, the more effective it will be. And this is the best proof of the soundness or unsoundness of a propaganda campaign, and not success in pleasing a few scholars or young aesthetes.*
>
> *The art of propaganda lies in understanding the emotional ideas of the great masses and finding, through a psychologically correct form, the way to the attention and thence to the heart of the broad masses. The fact that our bright boys do not understand this merely shows how mentally lazy and conceited they are . . .*
>
> *The receptivity of the great masses is very limited, their intelligence is small, but their power of forgetting is enormous. In consequence of these facts, all effective propaganda must be limited to a very few points and must harp on these in slogans until the last member of the public understands what you want him to understand by your slogan. As soon as you sacrifice this slogan and try to be many-sided, the effect will piddle away, for the crowd can neither digest nor retain the material offered. In this way the result is weakened and in the end entirely canceled out. Thus we see that propaganda must follow a simple line and correspondingly the basic tactics must be psychologically sound.*

The most crucial aspect of propaganda, however, is not its simplicity, that it may be understandable even to the least intelligent member of the crowd, but rather that it is entirely subjective, without so much as a hint of objectivity about it, and displaying not the slightest form of nuance as to any subject.

> *What, for example, would we say about a poster that was supposed to advertise a new soap and that described other soaps as "good"?*
>
> *We would only shake our heads.*
>
> *Exactly the same applies to political advertising.*
>
> *The function of propaganda is, for example, not to weigh and ponder the rights of different people, but exclusively to emphasize the one right which it has set out to argue for. Its task is not to make an objective study of the truth, insofar as it favors the enemy, and then set it before the masses with academic fairness; its task is to serve our own right, always and unflinchingly.*

What is intriguing about this section of *Mein Kampf* is that Hitler is telling it like it is, propaganda is manipulation, often presenting pure lies so repeatedly and so insistently as to make them truths. One would think that for a politician to write something of this nature would be to undermine his entire credibility and kill him off politically, yet Hitler ventures to do so for two reasons: firstly because propaganda is a means to an end, that end being so important and so just, so beneficial to society, that any means are permitted in search of its achievement, including lies – pragmatism exists for the sake of idealism and is its servant, not the other way around; secondly because he is so certain propaganda works and is so robust in itself as not to be threatened by any such synopsis or admission; this is what he is saying, that the complex, the objectivized, the nuanced will never reach a wide segment of any audience and find effect there, this moreover being true of his own words here.

The dialectic is anything but unfamiliar to us in our day, everyone knows that advertising, which exists all around us to such an extent that it fills our lives almost to the brim, is manipulative and untrue, that the picture advertising paints of the world is a lie, which nevertheless does not stop us from being influenced by it and doing what it wants us to do: I know that drinking Coca-Cola is not going to turn me into an unworried American teenager, but I still prefer it to Jolly Cola when I am out buying in the supermarket, and I know too that Dove soap is basically the same as any other brand, the only difference being in the packaging and advertising budget, but whose soap do I put in my basket? Advertising seems immune to any critical insight into its nature, and in this respect Hitler was right. As such, advertising is indeed related to beauty and charisma: we may want complexity and knowledge, but in the final analysis other, simpler, more immutable forces prevail. The difference between our society and Hitler's is that we have banished all such forces and all that we associate with them to an unthreatening domain, one which is least accountable to reality, the world of fiction and images, which is to say entertainment culture, refusing to allow them into other domains that are highly accountable to reality, such as politics, education, administration, or the private sphere, unless in the guise of the inauthentic. The fact that we operate with one compartment for the authentic, another for the inauthentic, to which advertising and the power of advertising belong, is perhaps what saves us from some of the forces that were set free in Europe three generations ago. Though not forever, there being an element of the unknown in this, the system always containing something that cannot be said although it is true, and at some point, one might speculate, the power of truth will prevail. In a society without physical hardship, where violence among like kind is regulated, it is hard to imagine that this could happen; never has a society been further from revolution as our own, never has any human population been so comfortably dulled in *hygge* as our own, but our world too has its downside, the so-called Third World, where structural violence is quite as merciless and destructive as it once was in Europe, and if it were to be set in motion against us, it is by no means certain that the good and the bad, the moral and the immoral, the true and the untrue could be kept apart from each other as they are today.

Hitler's insight was that emotions are always stronger than arguments, and that the power that resides in a we, the yearning and desire for community is unfathomably greater than that which resides in solicitude toward a they. Propaganda directs itself to emotions, not to intellect, which it insults, and some of this same dynamic applies to what he writes about the precedence of the spoken word over the written; the spoken word goes at least potentially directly to feelings and so works from within, since what a person feels always eclipses what they might think, an emotionally based opinion is felt to be exactly what it is, something one *knows*, as opposed to a rationally based opinion, which is quite differently relative in nature, being open to objective, reasoned argument and thereby capable of being changed by such argument.

The written word complicates, the spoken word simplifies, at least when directed toward moods and emotions, something the written word, or at least the political and argumentative written word, cannot. This is why firstly music and secondly painting are Hitler's preferred art forms; both communicate without words, through emotion. That he understood this, and understood how to exploit it politically, was what set him apart from all other politicians of his day.

When Hitler was appointed Reich chancellor in 1933 and the Nazis assumed power, a shift occurred in public language in a number of respects. It became simpler, the same words repeated over and over again. Victor Klemperer traces this back to Hitler and *Mein Kampf*, published eight years earlier, which he sees as establishing every characteristic of Nazi language use. With the Nazi takeover in 1933, what previously had been group-speak became the language of the people, a *Volkssprache*, Klemperer writes, and the significant thing about that shift was that this language took possession of the entire spectrum of German life, its private as well as its public aspects. Politics, the courts, the economy, art, science, school, sport, family, nurseries, the armed forces. The Nazis intervened in everything, and they did so by means of their language. It was simple, uniform, and based on speech. The new technologies such as radio and film turned communication between the one and the all into something that happened in the moment – as opposed to the printed word, which could be read at any time, in any place, and as many times as the reader wished – and meant that the message reached everyone, even those unable or unwilling to read. Klemperer writes of how the Nazis erased the distinction between written and spoken language, turning everything into oration, address, exhortation, invective. There was no difference between the propaganda minister's speeches and tracts, and no longer any divide between public and private. This is what Klemperer describes, the shift that occurs, starting in 1933, not only in the language of the state but also in the language of the individual. The state speaks in the guise of the one, one voice penetrating into the all, and the one among the all soon begins to speak in the manner of the state, becoming its own expression. All newspapers, all magazines, all radio programs, all novels, all poems, all textbooks are colored by this language, which does not stop there, but spreads everywhere and to all.

> *I listened to workers while sweeping the streets and working in the machine room: it was always, be it printed or spoken, from the mouths of the educated*

> *or the uneducated, the same clichés and the same tone. And even in the case of those who were the most persecuted victims and of necessity mortal enemies of National Socialism, even among the Jews, the LTI [*lingua tertii imperii*] was ubiquitous – in their conversations and letters, even in their books, insofar as they were still able to publish, it reigned supreme, as omnipotent as it was wretched, omnipotent indeed in its very poverty.*

As an assimilated Jew, Klemperer stands from the very first on the outside; what this language does, by building up an enormously strong sense of community, a we that cuts across all political and class distinctions, by embracing the most destitute of vagrants and the wealthiest families of upper-class society within the same overarching whole, which is to say Germany and Germanness, is to exclude Klemperer and the other Jews; the we does not include them, instead it expels them in just as many ways as it includes the others. The Jews become they. Jews with German-sounding forenames are compelled by the state to add a supplementary Jewish name, such as Israel or Sara, so that their Jewishness may be plain in all circumstances, the opposite being introduced for Germans, who are now forbidden to bear Jewish-sounding names. No German child was to be called Lea or Sara. When letters of the alphabet were to be made clear over the telephone, it was no longer permitted to say "D for David" – this was actually banned by the authorities in 1933. Before long, Jews were forced to wear the yellow Star of David with the word *Jude* in lettering reminiscent of Hebrew. The designation *J* appears in official documents; Klemperer writes that eventually the full word "Jew" occurs some sixty times in every tiny section of his ration card. They are singled out immediately through language. The name, the badge, the letter. The Germans become correspondingly more German; the names of the newborn shift toward the Germanic. Dieter, Detlev, Uwe, Margit, Ingrid, Uta are among those Klemperer notes in the birth announcements of a Dresden newspaper. Place names too are changed, the Slavic giving way to the more Germanic. In Pomerania 120 Slavic place-names, in Brandenburg 175, in Silesia 2,700, in Gumbinnen 1,146. Street names too are replaced, often with historical references. Klemperer comes across one such in

Dresden, Tirmannstrasse, with the explanation underneath: "Magister Nikolaus Tirmann, Mayor, died 1437."

The German, the local and the historic, are cultivated in the language, which with the advent of new technologies and the total state is no longer either local or historic, as can be seen in slogans of the time, the modern and the medieval melting together in "Fallersleben, Site of the Volkswagen Plant" or "Nuremberg, City of the Reich Party Days." The old suffix *–gau* is added to denote a province, Klemperer writes, harking back to ancient Germanic custom, border regions similarly being dubbed *mark*, as in Ostmark for Austria and Westmark for the Netherlands, thereby establishing connections to these countries that would later legitimize their invasion and occupation. All these changes are about creating identity. Klemperer stands outside this identity, though not entirely so, being married to an "Aryan" and thereby in principle assimilated, meaning his identity is with neither the we nor the they, and consequently he sees the formation of both clearly. The transformation of identity that the systematic, all-encompassing, all-pervading language of the Nazis establishes and reinforces day by day, week by week, month by month, impacts directly on his life.

In 1933 Klemperer was still a professor at the university. He tells of one of the staff there, Paula von B, an intelligent, good-natured woman "no longer in the first flush of youth," assistant to a professor in the German department. She hailed from an officer's family belonging to the old nobility, and Klemperer finds her obviously liberal and European, "despite the odd wistful reminiscence of the glorious Imperial era," and nothing to suggest that politics is an issue for her. On the day of Hitler's ascent to Reich chancellor he bumps into her in the corridor. Usually so serious, she is now suddenly cheerful with a youthful spring in her step.

"You look radiant!" Klemperer says. "Has something good happened to you?"

"Something very good!" she replies. "Do I really need to explain? I feel ten years younger, no, nineteen: I haven't felt like this since 1914!"

"And you are telling me about it? You can say all this even though you can see, read, and hear how people who used to be close to you are being denounced, how books which you once respected are being condemned, how people are rejecting the very intellectual things that you used to – "

She interrupts him, alarmed, and yet lovingly, he writes:

> *My dear Professor, I hadn't expected you to overreact so nervously. You should take a couple of weeks' holiday and not read any newspapers. You are allowing yourself to get upset at this moment, and allowing yourself to be distracted from what really matters by minor embarrassments and blemishes which can scarcely be avoided during periods of such radical change. In no time at all you will judge things quite differently. Can I come and visit the two of you sometime soon?*

With that, and a heartfelt "kind regards to your family," she exits through the door "like a bouncy teenager," Klemperer recounts. Over the following months he doesn't see her, until one day she turns up at their place. As a German, she feels it her duty to make an open confession to her friends, she says, while hoping that she could still be considered a friend of theirs.

"Duty as a German is not something you would have said in the past," Klemperer interjects. "What has being German or non-German got to do with highly personal or universal human questions? Or do you want to discuss politics with us?"

"Everything is related to the issue of being German or non-German," she replies, "this is all that matters; you see that's what I, what we all, have either learned from the Führer or rediscovered having forgotten it. He has brought us home again!"

"And why are you telling us this?"

"You must recognize, you must understand that I belong entirely to the Führer, but I don't want you to think that as a result I have renounced my affection toward you."

"And how can these two feelings be reconciled? And what does the Führer say concerning your former boss Walzel, the teacher you admired so much?

And how can you reconcile this with the humanitarianism of Lessing and all the others about whom you had essays written? And how . . . but it's pointless asking any more questions."

In response to each sentence he utters she merely shakes her head and has tears in her eyes.

"No, it really does seem to be pointless," she says, "because everything you are asking is based on reason, and the accompanying feelings stem from bitterness about insignificant details."

"And what are my questions supposed to be based on if not reason? And what is significant?"

"I've told you already: that we've really come home! It's something you have to feel, and you must abandon yourself to your feelings, and you must always focus on the Führer's greatness, rather than on the discomfort you are experiencing at present . . . And our classical writers? I really don't think they are at variance with him in any way, you just have to read them properly, Herder, for example, and in any case they would certainly have been convinced sooner or later!"

"And where does this certainty come from?"

"Where all certainties come from: faith. And if all this doesn't mean anything to you, then – yes, then the Führer is right after all when he comes out against the . . ." Here Klemperer states that she just manages to swallow the word "Jews" before continuing: ". . . against the sterile intelligentsia. Because I believe in him, and I had to tell you that I believe in him."

"Well in that case, Fräulein von B, the best thing is to postpone our friendship and the discussion about faith indefinitely . . ."

He sees her again five years later, in 1938, when opening the door of a bank where everyone inside was standing stiffly erect each with an outstretched arm listening to a voice on the radio proclaiming the annexation of Austria to Germany. She was, he writes, in a state of total ecstasy, her eyes sparkling, not simply standing to attention like all the others, the rigidity of her posture and salute more like a rapturous convulsion. Later, he hears it reported with a chuckle that she is one of the Führer's most devoted followers, though utterly harmless. The first woman, who gave him an apple, was ambivalent with regard to the Nazis, whereas the second, this assistant to Professor Walzel, was a true believer. Both were ordinary people, and both made Nazism possible in their own ways. Klemperer fails to understand them, seeing in Hitler only the yelling monomaniac, in Nazism an untenable constraint upon the human. It is what we see too. Yet clearly others must have seen something radically different which gave them hope and a belief in the future and aroused in them such fervor.

It seems no coincidence that Paula von B should compare the spring days of 1933 with the summer days of 1914, the enthusiasm in Germany for Hitler's coming to power being so reminiscent of the tide of emotion that washed across the land at the outbreak of the war. In his biography of the philosopher Martin Heidegger, Rüdiger Safranski describes the buoyant mood in academia during those months, when even Jews allowed themselves to be carried away. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, in a lecture given in 1933, opined that the National Socialist revolution represented Germany striving to realize Hölderlin's vision. And in Kiel, Safranski reports, Felix Jacoby begins a lecture on Horace in the summer of 1933 with the following words:

> *As a Jew I find myself in a difficult position. But as a historian I have long learned not to view historical events from a private perspective. I have voted for Adolf Hitler since 1927 and I am happy that in the year of the National Rising I am allowed to lecture on Augustus. Because Augustus is the only figure in world history that may be compared to Adolf Hitler.*

This was after the boycott of Jewish businesses that came into effect on April 1 that year, and after the dismissal of Jewish public employees on April 7, Safranski notes. Heidegger, who along with Wittgenstein was among the most prominent and significant philosophers of the century, became a Nazi himself, a fully fledged member of the NSDAP. What he and others saw in National Socialism, and in Hitler, was a political movement that penetrated the membrane of politics, reaching in to the authentic, the deepest seat of all that was human, the locus of emotions, community, truth, and morality, far beyond administration, bureaucracy, and day-to-day pragmatics, and so very much greater. Heidegger had described public life as the antithesis of the authentic in his concept of *das Man* (often rendered as the "they"), the inauthentic being who expressed the mean, where individual modes were regulated and to a certain extent subsumed by the others. He referred to this as "the dictatorship" of *das Man.*

> *In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the "they"* [das Man] *is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as* they *take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as* they *see and judge; likewise we shrink back from "the great mass" as* they *shrink back; we find "shocking" what* they *find shocking. The "they," which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness . . .*
>
> *Distantiality, averageness, and leveling down, as ways of Being for the "they," constitute what we know as "publicness." Publicness proximally controls every way in which the world and Dasein get interpreted, and it is always right – not because there is some distinctive and primary relationship-of-Being in which it is related to "Things," or because it avails itself of some transparency on the part of Dasein which it has explicitly appropriated, but because it is insensitive to every difference of level and of genuineness and thus never gets to "the heart of the matter." By publicness everything gets obscured, and what has thus been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everybody.*

The dictatorship of *das Man* sanctions and reduces the unique, who become trivialized to such a level as to become amenable to commentary by all, though in a form beyond recognition, radically deconstructed, diluted, and essentially without quality. In mass society, through the mass media that atunes itself to the mean, this happens every day. From such a perspective, the business of politics, whose players pursue their own agendas and lobby according to personal interest, at the same time as leveling down to *das Man*, allowing nothing to remain unique or unexampled, is the very arena of the inauthentic. Heidegger's existentialism, in which the state of being, in its true and authentic form, is construed as something beyond language, moreover, one must assume, inaccessible to language and rational thought, approaches mysticism, standing at the *vedbande*, the forest fringe, to use Olav Nygard's expression, which is to say at the fringe of the holy. Our being in the world is something we grasp with our rational minds, but the rational mind comprehends by representation, and the sense of being we grasp this way is thus a simulation. The moods we feel, always a part of us, are another fundamental way in which we relate to the world. We do not know where they come from or what they mean, only that they are always there. They are given to us, as our existence is given to us. In such a system, speech, or *logos*, is neither language nor reason, Heidegger's Norwegian translator Lars Holm-Hansen writes, but the articulation of what is understandable, that which is possible to understand. Speech is not the same as language, but is the foundation of language. Language is a representation of what is already articulated in speech. Speech also suggests listening, and that we may also refrain from speech. In these instances we are quite beyond the rational. Moods, silence, listening, all that cannot be articulated by language but nonetheless is present in speech, the speech of being. Here, in this extra-rational space, in the realm of our moods and emotions, in the borderland of religion and mystical ecstasy, far, far removed from the newspapers and their self-important political editorials, fashion shows, cabarets, and sporting events, was where Heidegger came together with Nazism. True being against untrue being. The nonlinguistic expression of feelings against linguistic rationality.

Safranski describes the mood as follows:

> *There were overwhelming demonstrations of the new community spirit, mass oaths under floodlit cupolas, bonfires on the mountains, and the Führer's speeches on the radio – people would assemble, festively attired, in public places to listen to them, in the great halls of the universities and in taverns. There was choral singing in the churches in honor of the Nazi seizure of power.* General-superintendent *Otto Dibelius, in his sermon in Saint Nicholas's church on March 21, 1933, the Day of Potsdam, said: "Through north and south, through*

> *east and west, there marches a new will to a German state, a yearning, to quote Trietschke, no longer 'to be deprived of one of the most noble sensations in a man's life,' that of the enthusiastic pride in his own state." The atmosphere of those days is difficult to describe, writes Sebastian Haffner, who experienced it himself. It formed the real power base of the new führer state. "It was – there is no other way of putting it – a widespread feeling of deliverance, of liberation from democracy."*

We can gain some sense of this aspect of the Third Reich – the popular demonstrations, the torchlit parades, the songs, the sense of community, all of which were unconditional joys to anyone who participated – by watching Riefenstahl's films of the Nuremberg Rally the following year, 1934, where all these elements are present. The spectacle is staged, but its content far eclipses the fact, because emotions are stronger than all analyses, and here the emotions are set free. This is not politics, but something beyond. And it is something good.

The philosopher Jaspers visited Heidegger in his office in May 1933, describing their meeting as follows, in Safranski's account:

> *Heidegger himself seemed to have changed. Straight away on his arrival there arose an atmosphere dividing us. National Socialism had become an intoxication of the people. I went to Heidegger's room to welcome him. "It's just like 1914 . . ." I began, intending to continue: "again this deceptive mass intoxication," but when I saw Heidegger radiantly agreeing with my first words, the rest stuck in my throat . . . Face-to-face with Heidegger himself gripped by that intoxication I failed. I did not tell him that he was on the wrong road. I no longer trusted his transformed nature at all. I felt a threat to myself in view of the violence in which Heidegger now participated.*

The yearning for simplicity proved quite as vigorous in Heidegger as in his contemporaries, Hitler and Wittgenstein, but whereas the latter drew a boundary as to what could truthfully be said by means of language, construing this in terms of mathematical quality, Heidegger found his own truth on the other side of that boundary, that which could not be spoken. Speaking in Tübingen on November 30, 1933, Heidegger said the following, once again according to Safranski:

> *To be primitive means to stand, from an inner urge and drive, at the point where things begin to be primitive, to be driven by internal forces. Just because the new student is primitive, he has a calling to implement the new demand for knowledge.*

In National Socialism, philosophy and politics come together at a point outside the language and beyond the rational, where all complexity ceases, though not all depth. It can be seen as such: the rational and objective, analysis and argument, associated with the written word, moves horizontally, between people, is always external to them, always between them, always in motion, in networks of overwhelming complexity and of such scale as to correct and mold the I, and this to an infinitely greater degree than it may be corrected and molded by the I; whereas emotion and mood, associated with speech, the tangible presence of the one in the face of the other, are vertical in nature, associated with the biological and ultimately with death, but also with all else that is biological and mortal, in ways that cannot be predicated, but merely sensed: we are alone, we are one and one, but in the voice, always concrete, always bound up with a particular human in a particular place, our solitude is overcome, this is the promise it brings with it, and in that voice, in its final consequence, death too is overcome. All flags and banners, symbols and rituals are directed, wordlessly, toward this. A torch burning in darkness can make a soul shiver, the cheer of a crowd send it into transports of elation, and in that instance it is the elation of existing and belonging it recognizes and reacts to. Oh, we all know this, it is the heart beating and the blood rushing, it is life and the world, the rivers, the forests, the plains, the wind in the trees. What can the rational mind do that could ever measure up to this? The difference between a poem and the hundred different analyses of a poem, this is what I am talking about. Or as Hitler said, speaking in Potsdam on March 21, 1933:

> *The German, at odds with himself, with deep divisions in his mind, likewise in his will and therefore impotent in action, becomes powerless to direct his own life. He dreams of justice in the stars and loses his footing on earth . . . In the end, then, only the inward road remained open for German men. As a nation of singers, poets, and thinkers, they dreamed of a world in which the others lived, and only when misery and wretchedness dealt them inhuman blows did there perhaps grow up out of art the longing for a new rising, for a new Reich, and therefore for new life.*

The language employed by the Nazi state was also directed toward the emotions; what was important in that language was not its lexical meaning, not its analytical and argumentative side, but everything else, that which was said without being said, that which resided in the tone of the language, its voice, in speech. "You are nothing, your people is everything," ran a Nazi slogan of the time, Klemperer notes, and this was the message, directly and indirectly repeated and repeated again. The people, came the cry, Germany, came the cry, we, we, we, everywhere.

Personally I have never felt myself to belong to any we; right from when I was small, I have always felt myself to be on the outside. Not because I have thought myself better, quite the opposite, I have never felt good enough to be a part of any we, never felt like I deserved it. Nor do I have any clear feelings of belonging to a particular place; we were newcomers to Tromøya, where I grew up, and so I had, and still have, no right to say that is where I am from. This feeling of being on the outside was most acute during my time at the *gymnas*, everyone could see I was not good enough, and my realization of that served merely to reinforce my outsideness, there was something odd about me. Oh, how I tingled with joy when the others let me in, like on the day of our graduation parade, and yet I knew that I did not really belong with them, but on my own. Always, I have had only one friend at a time, never more, never any *we*. I reconciled myself to this when I was a student, stopped hoping for anything else, tagged along with my brother, played in his band, knowing it was the only reason I was allowed to be in it. The role of the writer saved me; being on my own became legitimate, I was something special, an artist.

This summer I experienced something different for the first time. It was paradoxical, because I was on my own when it happened. Nevertheless, I felt myself suddenly to be a part of a we, and that feeling was so enormous and so good that I wept. At least that was one reason I wept. There were many others, for what I am writing about now is the Utøya massacre, when a Norwegian man only a few years younger than myself went through the woods on that tiny island shooting the young people who were gathered there one by one, sixty-nine lives in all. I wept as I would not have wept had sixty-nine youngsters been killed by a bomb in Baghdad or died in an accident in São Paolo, but the feeling that overcame me was that what had taken place had taken place at home, and this, the feeling that I actually possessed a feeling of home, was something I had never felt before. I wept when I saw the images. I called Mom, I called Linda, I called Geir, who was in Norway. No thoughts or feelings existed for anything other than what had happened. Now and then the full reality of what had taken place on the island, and its consequences, occurred to me in all its horror, but then it would go away again. It seemed all to be engulfed in darkness. It was the darkness of grief, but also the darkness of atrocity, and the darkness of death. But the broadcast images showed light, and I knew that light, it was the light of a Norwegian fjord on a rainy day in July. Indeed, all the images that came out from there were recognizable to me, the dark green of the pine trees that extended down to the water, the white-gray of the rocks, the water itself, heavy and motionless below, also gray. There, amid all that was so familiar to me, lay dead bodies, covered by plastic sheeting. From the land came images of the survivors. Some were lying on the ground receiving treatment, some were boarding buses, some were walking away, wrapped in woolen blankets. Some stood and held each other. Some were calling out, some were crying. These were ordinary Norwegian children. The ambulances were ordinary Norwegian ambulances. The police cars were ordinary Norwegian police cars. And when pictures of the man who had done this, who had gone around the island shooting all these people one by one, appeared in the media, they showed an ordinary Norwegian face with an ordinary Norwegian name. It was a national tragedy, and it was my tragedy too. I felt the need to be there, a powerful urge, for the people, the Norwegian people were gathering in huge, silent demonstrations, hundreds of thousands of people standing in the streets clutching roses in their hands. What I felt was the pull of the we I knew, the pull of belonging, of being a part of what is good and meaningful. More democracy, greater openness, more love. This was what Norwegian politicians said, it was what the Norwegian people said, it was what I said to myself as I sat and wept and watched it on TV, the pull it exerted on the emotions was so strong, so vigorous and strong, and the feelings I felt were real and authentic, they came from the heart; this had happened at home, and those gathering in the streets were my people.

Now that I am removed from them I have difficulty grasping those feelings. They seem false, induced only by the power of suggestion, I knew none of the dead, how could I grieve for them as I did? How could I feel such a strong sense of belonging? And yet the feelings were quite incontestable, and swept everything else aside during the time of the tragedy.

Only afterward did I realize that these must have been the same forces, the enormous forces that reside within the we, that came over the German people in the 1930s. That was how good it must have felt, how secure the identity they were being offered must have appeared to them. The flags and banners, the torches, the demonstrations: that was what it must have been like.

Against this *we* stood the *they* of the Jews. The language by which the we was conveyed, and of which it consisted, constitutive of the new identity, may be understood in two ways, as a language invoking grandeur, the emotions that lie beyond the language, having to do with ideals and nearness to the world, but conversely also as an enormous depreciation of the possibilities of language, a violent constraint, a *straitening*, in which the human itself is rendered mute. Klemperer saw it like this:

> *And here a more profound explanation for the impoverishment of the LTI opens up from beneath the obvious one. It was poor not only because everyone was forced to conform to the same pattern, but rather – and indeed more significantly – because in a measure of self-imposed constraint it only ever gave expression to one side of human existence.*
>
> *Every language able to assert itself freely fulfills all human needs, it serves reason as well as emotion, it is communication and conversation, soliloquy and prayer, plea, command, and invocation. Regardless of whether a given subject properly belongs in a particular private or public domain – no, that's wrong, the LTI no more drew a distinction between private and public spheres than it did between written and spoken language – everything remains oral and everything remains public. One of their banners contends that "You are nothing, your people is everything." Which means that you are never alone with yourself, never alone with your nearest and dearest, you are always being watched by your own people.*

Something is denied a place in the language, on the one side the individual and the unexampled, on the other that which makes complex, which accords subtle differences, the tentative, the uncertain, and the slow, and when everything belonging to this is silenced, no longer finding space in which to articulate itself, it disappears. Whether it disappears only from the language or if what gives rise to it disappears too, ceasing to exist, is perhaps the most burning question of all raised by Nazi rule, pointing as it does toward a problem of identity that is by no means neutral, which is to say of a technical or instrumental nature, but directly tied up with the dreadful shadow cast over humanity by the Holocaust.

No one among us can say what the reason was for the Holocaust, any link between, for example, the brutalization of human minds that occurred in the trenches of World War I, the *Völkisch* preoccupations of pre-war German culture, the flourishing nationalism of the interwar period, the stock market crash of 1929, inflation and mass unemployment, the growth of racial biology, Hitler's pathological hatred and charisma, Germany's humiliation with the Treaty of Versailles, and the extermination of the Jews is impossible to draw, for the simple reason of not being real. The Holocaust came of society, an occurrence within it, but was something to which society would or could not give name, and which already at that point, as the first trainloads of Jews trundled eastward, was something barely real, taking place at the very margins of humanity, mute and practically invisible to the eye, for if there is one thing shared by the few who witnessed it, it is that they turned away. The silence described by the Polish railway official interviewed in *Shoah* is telling. That silence was the extermination of the Jews. The sound of the human suddenly ceasing to exist, the stillness that cloaked the landscape in which it had echoed only a moment before. The occasional rush of wind in the trees, a faint hammering in the distance, the sounds of emptiness. How was it possible that so many people, more than a thousand, could fall so silent? Where were they? That stillness is the stillness of the void, descending when what *was* no longer *is*, and it is this that makes what took place so impossible to comprehend, for the extermination of the Jews is that which *is not*. Indeed, it is nothing. How are we to relate to it in any real way? If we select someone to represent it, an individual with a name and history, family and friends, we are addressing it through the fate of the individual, thereby lending it dignity, for the person in question was indeed dignified by virtue of being human, yet it was precisely that human dignity that was absent in the Holocaust, and that absence which made it possible. If we do not select someone to represent it, we are depriving the victims of their names, construing them as the six million, generalizing the atrocity, and thereby falling quite as short, since it was not six million Jews who were exterminated, but one and one and one, six million times. The two perspectives cancel each other out.

Shoah, which not once in its nine-and-a-half-hour entirety abandons its obligation to that problem, resolves it in what is presumably the only way possible, by considering the Holocaust as a contemporary occurrence on the basis that we can only fully relate to those parts of it that still exist around us, to the places as they are now, all but Auschwitz long since gone, and to the recollections or nonrecollections of those who were close to it, as guards, survivors, neighbors, railway officials, bureaucrats, and nothing else, pure present time, of which such recollections are a part. Absence thus becomes the form itself, people talking about what is not, in what is, and the impossibility of this, on every level, is the film's theme. How can we talk about what cannot be talked about? How can we talk about something that escapes designation by language insofar as designation itself makes it something it is not?

The extermination of the Jews took place outside the language, undesignated by any linguistic form, a silent occurrence, and the Jews themselves were outside the language too, banished to their bodies, to the "it," the nameless nothing, which eventually was itself destroyed. One of the most telling scenes in *Shoah* is the interview with Czeslaw Borowi, who lived next to the railway station in Treblinka during the war, then a young man who saw the trains come every day with their wagonloads of Jews, saw them wait their turn, after a time fully aware of what was going on only a few hundred meters away. As he describes what he saw he suddenly recounts the voices of the Jews from the packed wagons. Ra ra ra ra, he says. Ra ra ra ra. It sounds like animal noise, bird noise. This was their language to him.

Richard Glazar, who was on board one of those trains, in a normal carriage with passenger seats, as if on a holiday trip, recalls that after the station at Treblinka the train moved very slowly, at walking pace, through the forest, it was summer and the weather was hot, and there through the window they saw a boy gesture to them, a slice of his hand across his throat, as if to indicate decapitation. Glazar didn't know what he meant. Two hours later his fellow passengers were ashes. Glazar himself was spared, they needed labor and he survived.

Czeslaw Borowi uses the same gesture during his interview, a slice of his hand across his throat, and likewise, in quick repetition, two brothers who lived on the farm next to the camp and would hear the screams of terror and smell the rotting, burning corpses daily as they plowed the soil and tended their livestock, the smell hanging in the air even kilometers away. It must have been one of these brothers Glazar saw from the train, the gesture, if not directly sadistic then at least full of *Schadenfreude*, was the only communication that took place between them and the Jews. Ra ra ra ra was the language from the Jews to them, the slice of the hand across the throat was the language from them to the Jews. What is apparent in that particular scene is that those interviewed are oblivious to what they reveal. They are clearly anti-Semites, and although they are among a very small number of witnesses to the extermination, they are ignorant of what this means and display no perspective whatsoever on the dimension of that human disaster. The fact that they put their fathomless ignorance on show in this way is extremely painful to watch, because they do so in all innocence. They simply have no idea.

Quite as powerful is another scene in which some inhabitants of Chelmno are interviewed. Chelmno was where the industrial extermination of human beings first took place. Human beings have been exterminated throughout history, but what occurred in Chelmno represented a qualitatively new step, something that had never occurred before. Those who were to be killed were transported to a castle where they were forced to strip naked before being herded along a corridor onto a ramp and into a truck. The doors were closed, and a tube attached to an exhaust pipe filled the truck with carbon monoxide. When everyone was dead, the truck drove into the forest outside the village. There, the bodies, gathered around the doors they had instinctively tried to prize open, were tipped out onto the ground, and thrown into mass graves. After a time a huge incinerator was set up in the forest and the corpses that had been buried were dug up again and burned, all other bodies from then on simply being incinerated. What was new about this was that it was not a single occurrence, but took place several times a day over a period of two years. Today the castle has been demolished, the incinerators dismantled, and the only thing that remains is some rubble in a clearing.

Dark is the forest, and still. A river runs by below. Here the flames leaped into the sky, Simon Srebnik recalls, a boy of thirteen in 1941, who worked at the incinerator. More trucks were deployed to increase capacity, and after a while the arriving Jews were gathered in the church rather than the run-down castle. It is outside this church that the people of the village are interviewed, Simon Srebnik, whom they all remember, in their midst: he sang for the German soldiers, was almost their mascot, they taught him German songs, and as they stand there gathered around him, the boy now a middle-aged man, it is with the obvious joy of reunion. They recount what happened in detail, the things they saw. How the church behind them was filled with Jews, the vestry piled up with the suitcases they had brought with them, the number of trucks required before the church was emptied. One of them steps forward and recalls a rabbi he heard about at the time who said the Jews were to blame for the death of Jesus, that his blood was upon them, and when the interviewer asks him if he believes it was the Jews' own fault, he replies that he is merely repeating what the rabbi said. More accounts follow, in the same detail, and more villagers congregate in front of the camera, which they stare at with ill-concealed interest and glee, like children. Soon after, a procession comes out of the church and the villagers busy themselves making sure no one gets in the way of the camera, holding the children back so that it can film the procession, a proud tradition of the village. They are oblivious to what they are showing us, have no idea what the camera sees, no grasp of what happened there, it is something they regret, naturally, that much is understood, but nothing of it has sunk in. As all this is taking place, in front of the church where hundreds of thousands of Jews spent their final hours, in the midst of this flock of villagers, stands Simon Srebnik. It is impossible to tell what he is thinking. His face is unfathomable.

Later he says the only thing he wanted when he was tending the incinerators, thirteen years old, was five slices of bread. He had no understanding of what was going on, he was too young, he says, and used to people dying in the ghetto, people dropped dead all the time. When the Germans left, they shot him in the head, but he survived, and in the film he returns for the first time, sitting in a boat on a narrow river singing the old German soldier songs. In another village those now living in the former homes of the Jews are interviewed, one of them proud of her child's education, another saying that the Jewish women stole their men, and one of the men saying that he is pleased the Jews have gone but not that they went the way they did. Most of all they seem simply to be flattered by the attention. All these people were there at the time, from their midst, their local communities, the Jews were collected and taken away, in their districts they were gassed and burned. The interviews took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By then some thirty years had passed, and what happened had become an occurrence among other occurrences. The obvious anti-Semitism they display has an element of innocence about it, since they have absolutely no idea what they are revealing of themselves, or rather to whom they are revealing it. It is small-minded, socially inherited, a function of poverty and no education. But is it evil? Were the people evil who appropriated the houses of the Jews and were glad of the improved living standards that came with them? Are they evil, these people who so eagerly swivel round to point to where the suitcases of the Jews were piled up, excited at the prospect of being on television? They know not what they do, for they are innocent. They would not be capable of perpetrating such crimes as they witnessed. The extermination of the Jews organized and carried out by the Germans was qualitatively apart, something other and far greater than popular Jew-baiting.

To organize something of that nature first of all requires an enormous volition; we know what resistance the human being feels to killing its own kind, even for the soldier at war, faced with an armed enemy and in danger of being killed himself, the effort required to overcome that resistance is great, but in this instance we are dealing with unarmed people who never raised a hand against them, even toddlers of two and three years old, boys and girls, young women and men, the elderly and infirm, and over a period of some two years on a scale three times that of the total number of Germans killed in World War I. This is not something that simply happens. It can occur only on the basis of an immense will, since so much human resistance must be overcome in order for it to take place, yet if we look at the sequence of events, how it came about and was carried out, that will seems almost entirely absent, it appears more like something that just happens, wearily and without exertion, something to be gone along with.

The peasants of the Polish village had not understood what had taken place and what it meant. The question is whether we have. For it was not the simple peasants of the Polish village with their uninformed anti-Semitism who exterminated the Jews. It was the Germans, from Berlin, Munich, Dresden, Frankfurt, the big cities of Europe, a modern and in every respect informed society, technologically and culturally among the most advanced, this being true also in Hitler's own generation, only three generations older than ours. We might posit that the circle of individuals governing Germany at the time were barbaric and brutal, ruthless criminals, and indeed they were, but they were but a tiny handful in a population of sixty million, they were in power because they gave expression to what the people wanted, they were their representatives. But restricting the blame to Germany, the suggestion that the cause lay in some degeneration of things German, would be something of a simplification. It was not German but Norwegian police who identified, tracked down, collected, and dispatched the Norwegian men, women and children who were burned to ashes in Auschwitz. And the Norwegian men, women, and children who were burned to ashes there had neighbors, acquaintances, colleagues, and friends. They bowed their heads, they looked away as if it was not happening. So it was in Norway, so it was in Germany, so it was over the entire continent. It was not happening, or only barely so. No one knew what was going on. No one saw. It scarcely happened. And then it was over. Then we realized that what had taken place had not been inconsequential at all, but the opposite, something so extreme and so huge in scale that nothing like it had ever happened before.

How are we to make sense of this? That while it is happening it is scarcely of consequence, since it happens namelessly and imperceptibly, and those who see it do not know what it is they see, whereas afterward, when it has happened, it is understood to be the very end point of humanity, our outermost boundary, something that must never, ever be repeated. How can one and the same event give rise to two such different perspectives? And how can we know what we must never, ever repeat, when we did not even know what was happening when it happened? Why was it seen only when it was over and there was no longer anything left to see? At that point all the people were dead, the barracks bulldozed and the incinerators dismantled, trees planted, and traces removed.

We still don't know who died. They lost their names and became a number, and their names have yet to be reclaimed, they remain a number, six million. I don't know the name of a single person who perished at Chelmno, first gassed to death in a truck, then burned to ashes in an incinerator and scattered into the river there, the remains of those who were not burned, the largest bones being crushed to bonemeal and likewise scattered into the river, all I know is, their number, 400,000. Nor do I know the name of any one of those gassed and incinerated at Treblinka, only their number, 900,000.

But I do know the names of the most important figures in the German Nazi Party. Hitler, Göring, Goebbels, Himmler, Bormann, Hess, Speer, Rosenberg. Not only that, I also know their faces and quite a lot about their lives and what kind of characters they possessed. The imbalance is striking. Hitler is a name known by everyone and triggers associations in us all. The people he exterminated could be exterminated only by expelling them from the language, taking away their names, making them one with their bodies, severing their connections to the social world, which is the human world, in a process of reduction that ended in them becoming nothing, which is to say a number, their status to this day. The power of the name becomes plain if we bring them together. Hitler on one side, six million Jews on the other. Hitler resurrected two million Germans from their graves in *Mein Kampf* and led them back to Germany, covered with mud and blood, to remind the population of the sacrifice they had made for their sake. If in our minds we resurrect from their graves the six million people who were exterminated under cover of World War II, bring them together on the plains of Poland, and place Hitler in their midst, the true relationship between them becomes apparent, for his name is then but one among millions of names, his voice one among millions of voices, his life one among millions of lives. The nature of this vast multitude changes according to how far away or how close we stand to observe it. If we are far away, looking at it from high above, we see simply a mass of bodies – limbs, heads, eyes, hair, mouths, ears – man as the creature he is, the human being in terms only of its biology and materiality, and this was what made it possible to incinerate those people, and what their incineration moreover revealed, as if it were some new perspective on the human, our worthlessness, our interchangeability, life rising up in a well. Human life as a cluster of mussels clinging to rocks in the sea, human beings as beetles and vermin, man as a shoal of writhing fish brought gasping to the surface in nets. If, however, we stand up close to each individual, so close as to hear each name as it is whispered, to look into each pair of eyes, where the soul of every human is revealed, unique and inalienable, and listen attentively to the story of a day in the life of each and every one of them, a day in the company of loved ones, families, and friends, an ordinary day in an ordinary place, with all its joy and delicacy, envy and curiosity, routines and spontaneity, imagination and boredom, hate and love, then the opposite becomes apparent, the one, not as I, but as the I's necessity. Which is you.

When Simon Srebnik, the thirteen-year-old boy with the beautiful singing voice, who bundled dead bodies into the enormous incinerator so the flames leaped into the sky in the forest gloom, thought about the future he would see two things in his mind's eye. One was five slices of bread, the only thing he wanted. The other was that when all this stopped he would be on his own. That there would not be a single person left on earth but him. So it was that he went about his work beneath the sky, dragging the corpses, singing his delightful songs in the fields, without feeling anything else but that beyond all this, if he survived, nothing would be left. And Richard Glazar recounts the moment they began burning the bodies at Treblinka, it was dark and the forest rose like a wall outside the camp, the flames leaped into the sky, and one of the other Jews who worked there, an opera singer, began to sing, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken us?" That moment, described to Gitta Sereny in *Into That Darkness*, her book about Treblinka and the camp commandant there, Franz Stangl, and related also to Claude Lanzmann, is not shocking in the way the atrocities themselves are shocking, since they, in all their inconceivable vileness, are perpetrated by "them" and are impossible to entertain as belonging within the realm of one's own capabilities, for which reason we refer to them as evil; no, that moment shocks in a different way entirely, since in its very monumentality, its invocation of God, and, in that, its overwhelming beauty, it betrays our human truth in favor of divine truth.

In that moment, God dies. Not because he has abandoned them, but because the divine belongs to the very perspective that made the Holocaust possible.

As I write about the Holocaust I sense its unmentionable nature. It feels as if there exists some right of ownership to it that means not just anyone can write about it, one has to have earned the right in some way, either by having lived through it or by writing about it in a manner that is morally binding and unambivalent. To write about the Holocaust one has to be irreproachable, only then is it possible. One's motives have to be unselfish, uncommercial, unspeculative, good and decent. A writer can say what he or she wants about God in a novel, it may be condemned as blasphemous, but not in all seriousness, for the moral indignation entailed by blasphemous violation no longer exists. But when it comes to the Holocaust the writer certainly cannot say what he or she wants, indeed it is the only phenomenon in our society to which the notion of blasphemy remains applicable, in the sense that the indignation brought about by any violation is unanimous and fierce. There lies the boundary. But what kind of boundary is it? Why is it there and not somewhere else? And why is it so fragile?

When we condemn any joking about the Holocaust with such moral force it is because we are defending and protecting something, a value we consider to be inviolable. But what is it exactly that we are protecting in this case? What do we achieve by making that event so invulnerable? What value exactly are we talking about? The British historian David Irving was sent to prison for claiming the gas chambers did not exist. This is an opinion, not an action. What other opinions can we be sent to prison for expressing? Not many, certainly. In fact, I can't think of any.

The Holocaust has taken on all the characteristics of a taboo. The taboo is society's way of protecting itself against undesirable forces. It is a way of making them plain by negation, fencing them in by a *not*, thereby turning them into something that exists outside our daily lives, outside the zone in which normal life, by virtue of its very existence within the field of the normal, unfolds in a continuous flow of possibility. What is particular about the Holocaust is the opposite of what we have made it. What is particular about the Holocaust is that it was trivial, proximate, and local. The Holocaust was families being singled out and made to assemble. It was trains leaving the ghettos in Poland, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Latvia – all countries under Nazi control – trundling through Europe, coming to a halt at tiny stations outside Polish villages, Treblinka, Sobibor, Auschwitz, Belzec, where those inside were bundled out if they came from the east or instructed to alight if they came from the west. The places they arrived at were what they believed to be relocation camps or work camps. Here they were segregated, women and children to the right, men to the left, made to strip naked, then led through a corridor into a chamber where they were gassed to death, their bodies removed and incinerated or buried. These camps were small, Treblinka was six hundred by four hundred meters in area, and those who worked there were relatively few, a hundred and fifty Ukrainian soldiers, fifty German SS. Treblinka moreover housed a thousand so-called work Jews who carried out hard labor, before they too were gassed and incinerated. On any normal day in what Glazar refers to as the peak periods ten thousand Jews would arrive at the camp by train. Hours later their bodies were gone. This industrial destruction went on for two years. In that time somewhere between 800,000 and 1,200,000 people were murdered there. No human being is capable of grasping this figure and the events it represents. Yet at the same time it was commonplace, a routine, what they referred to themselves as production, though production of death. The production of death at Treblinka was primitive compared to what took place at Birkenau, according to Franz Suchomel, an SS soldier assigned to the camp.

What I am trying to say is that all this was real. And in being real, it was tangible. And in being tangible, it was local. And that it was incorporated into the realm of the normal. So wholly incorporated, in fact, that it could take place and scarcely be noticed. All horror converges on this. The first people to be gassed to death in the Third Reich were not Jews, but people with mental and physical disabilities. They called it euthanasia and it was an extension of legislation passed in 1933 sanctioning the sterilization of people with serious hereditary illness. According to Sereny, the Nazis commissioned an opinion from a professor of moral theology at the Catholic university in Paderborn, Joseph Mayer, seeking support before implementing this "merciful" program. Mayer's hundred-page report firstly provided an historical review, then moved on to discuss the pros and cons, before proceeding to cite the Jesuit moral system of probability:

> *there are few moral decisions which from the outset are unequivocally good or bad. Most moral decisions are dubious. In cases of such dubious decisions, if there are reasonable grounds and reasonable "authorities" in support of personal opinion, then such personal opinion can become decisive even if there are other "reasonable" grounds and "authorities" opposing it.*

On which basis Mayer concluded that euthanasia was justifiable, as there were reasonable grounds and authorities both for and against. The report, which according to Sereny was found in five copies only, has never come to light, does not exist; like almost everything else to do with this it has either been destroyed or is merely rumor, initiated with the purpose of legitimizing or whitewashing something incriminating. The silence surrounding these murders and their administration is near total. But the euthanasia program was effectuated, more than a hundred thousand people were exterminated. It was about racial purity and was founded on science and law, it began with sterilization and continued with the gassing of people so badly afflicted and helpless it can be assumed it was seen as a blessing to themselves and those who cared for them.

In *Mein Kampf* the Jewish question exists in principle within the same sphere, racial purity versus racial impurity, the control of the state over the biological body, racial hygiene, and public health, but whereas sterilization and euthanasia were within the bounds of the law and what the authorities and ordinary people found acceptable, albeit controversial, the matter of wiping out an entire people was of course utterly unprecedented and quite as unthinkable. When the decision to exterminate the Jews was taken, probably somewhere toward the close of 1941, almost certainly in the form of a spoken order given by Hitler to Himmler, and the first death camps were set up that winter, most of the central figures involved were drafted in from the euthanasia program. Killing people on that scale had never been done before, there was no precedent, nothing to refer back to other than the gas chambers of the euthanasia program, and these were accordingly taken as the blueprint. The murders of Jews on the Eastern Front, which were pure executions, not only of men but of women and children too, were too costly in terms of time and personnel and would have been impracticable. What they were looking at was a question: how to kill as many people as possible, in as short a time as possible, using as few human resources as possible? Much trial and error was involved before the system became effective. No budget existed, the whole endeavor financed by the confiscation of the personal assets of the victims. An ordinary travel agency took care of the practicalities of chartering trains in exactly the same way as they dealt with such matters normally. Ordinary railway staff were deployed to organize the logistics of the transports, plotting train times into the schedules, passing information on through the system. The camps were built, personnel received their orders, the industry began. Some of the soldiers must have been picked out on account of their brutality, many being obvious sadists who could find outlets and indulge themselves here, while others were ordinary and, in any other context, considerate men doing a job.

Two years later they tried to remove all traces; having demolished Treblinka's every structure they built a farm on the site and instructed the Ukrainian family they installed in it to say they had lived there always. The same occurred in Sobibor, Belzec, and Chelmno, all traces gone. All around, life went on as if nothing had happened.

What had happened?

I think it would be correct to say that what happened was not inhuman at all, but human, and that this is what makes it so terrible and so closely bound up with our own selves and our human lives that in order to see it, and thereby take command of it, we must remove it and place it beyond ourselves, outside the boundaries of the human, where it now stands, sacrosanct and inviolable, mentionable only in certain, meticulously controlled ways. But it began in a we, and came together in an I, who concentrated its essence into a book, from where it swelled into the social sphere, unfathomably silent in its seeping pervasion, thought morphing into action, a tangible, physical presence in the world we inhabit, questioned by none of those involved, but carried out and done.

Train after train, transport after transport, human being after human being.

Clickety-clack. Clickety-clack. Clickety-clack.

*

During these past weeks writing about *Mein Kampf* I have been contemplating what I know about evil. Before I started I never gave it a thought, it was an issue belonging to my teenage years, my Bjørneboe period, when I felt personally reponsible for all humanity. The question of the possible existence of God belonged to the same period. I still remember a page from my diary when I was sixteen, starting with the question "Does a God exist?" and ending in the conclusion that it did not. Now I am forty-two and back at the start. I am no longer the same person; what for so long seemed so near, my teenage years, exist now on the other side of a vast ocean of time. And what I related to then only instinctively or emotionally, the social world, whose power I felt whenever my cheeks burned with shame or I was consumed by self-reproach because of something I had done that made me feel so inadequate, so awkward, so indistinct, so totally stupid and foolish, but also unprincipled and dishonest and fraudulent, I now see more clearly, not least after having written these books, which in their every sentence have tried to transcend the social world by conveying the innermost thoughts and innermost feelings of my most private self, my own internal life, but also by describing the private sphere of my family as it exists behind the façade all families set up against the social world, doing so in a public form, a novel.

The forces that exist within the realm of the social reveal themselves only when they are exceeded, and they are powerful indeed, almost, no, *absolutely* impossible to break away from. I imagined I was going to write exactly what I thought and believed and felt, in other words to be honest, this is how it is, the truth of the I, but it turned out to be so incompatible with the truth of the we, or this is how it is meant to be, that it foundered after only a few short sentences. I came to understand what morality is, and where it is found. Morality is the we within the I, which is to say a concept of the social world, and it stands above the truth. The "ought" of morality is the voice of decency that saves us. But it is also the voice of I-constraint, the antithesis of truth and freedom, the voice that stands in our way. It is this latter dimension to which Heidegger alludes with *das Man*, the dictatorship of the we, the tyranny of the mean, the middle-class mind-set that transforms everything into its own image. That he failed to see through Hitler, so petty bourgeois in everything he did and thought, and Nazism, which was the revolution of the petty bourgeoisie, but was instead duped by their symbols of greatness and constructs of authenticity, unseeing of the fact that greatness and authenticity were the same as death, is astonishing. When Jaspers asked him how such an uneducated man as Hitler could ever govern the country, Heidegger replied infatuatedly, *Education doesn't matter at all, just look at his wonderful hands!* Only decency could have saved him, as with all others who followed Hitler. Jaspers was saved by decency, Jünger and Mann likewise. But not Heidegger. And certainly not Franz Stangl, the commandant of Treblinka. To him, decency was remaining at one's post and making sure ten thousand people were gassed to death and incinerated every day, ensuring the system ran smoothly and without backlogs. How treasonable the social world could be, and how powerful its forces, revealed itself in Stangl as it did in nearly all other Germans under the Nazi regime. Had he possessed the strength to break the bonds imposed on him by the social world, he would never have found himself in the diabolical madness in which he stood, would never have had the lives of 900,000 people on his conscience. In the Third Reich the voice of human conscience did not say it is wrong to kill, it said it is wrong not to kill, as Hannah Arendt so precisely observes. This was made possible by a shift in the language, displayed in its purest form in *Mein Kampf*, which contains no "you," only an "I," and a "we," which is what makes it possible to turn "they" into "it." In "you" was decency. In "it" was evil.

But it was "we" who carried it out.

To protect ourselves we use the most potent marker of distance we know, the line of demarcation that passes between "we" and "they." The Nazis have become our great "they." In their demonic and monstrous evil, "they" exterminated the Jews and set the world aflame. Hitler, Goebbels, Göring and Himmler, Mengele, Stangl, and Eichmann. The German people who followed "them" are in our minds also a "they," a faceless and frenzied mass, almost as monstrous as their leaders. The remoteness of "they" is vast and dashes down these proximate historical events, which took place in the present of our grandparents, into a near-medieval abyss. At the same time we know, every one of us knows, even though we might not acknowledge it, that we ourselves, had we been a part of that time and place and not of this, would in all probability have marched beneath the banners of Nazism. In Germany in 1938 Nazism was the consensus, it was what was right, and who would dare to speak against what is right? The great majority of us believe the same as everyone else, do the same as everyone else, and this is so because the "we" and the "all" are what decide the norms, rules, and morals of a society. Now that Nazism has become "they," it is easy to distance ourselves from it, but this was not the case when Nazism was "we." If we are to understand what happened and how it was possible, we must understand this first. And we must understand too that Nazism in its various elements was not monstrous in itself, by which I mean that it did not arise as something obviously monstrous and evil, separate from all else in the current of society, but was on the contrary part of that current. The gas chambers were not a German invention, but were conceived by Americans who realized that people could be put to death by placing them in a chamber infused with poisonous gas, a procedure they carried out for the first time in 1919. Paranoid anti-

Semitism was not a German phenomenon either, the world's most celebrated and passionate anti-Semite in 1925 being not Adolf Hitler but Henry Ford. And racial biology was not an abject, shameful discipline pursued at the bottom of society or its shabby periphery, it was the scientific state of the art, much as genetics is today, haloed by the light of the future and all its hope. Decent humans distanced themselves from all of this, but they were few, and this fact demands our consideration, for who are we going to be when our decency is put to the test? Will we have the courage to speak against what everyone else believes, our friends, neighbors, and colleagues, to insist that we are decent and they are not? Great is the power of the we, almost inescapable its bonds, and the only thing we can really do is to hope our we is a good we. Because if evil comes it will not come as "they," in the guise of the unfamiliar that we might turn away without effort, it will come as "we." It will come as what is right.

*

Reading texts written in the decades leading up to World War II is like reading the legislation of a former society whose laws no longer apply. The ideas expressed make up a system which in itself is comprehensible and meaningful but which is no longer connected to any practical reality. The notions of what constitutes a human being, what constitutes a society, and what is most important in our human life are inapplicable to the society in which we live today. No student of any high school today would lay down his life for his country, no twenty-five-year-old today would find any value at all in the deaths of two million people. The phenomenon is simply inconceivable, other than as an abnormality. Anyone today who suggested democracy was an expression of decay, liberalism a disgrace, would be hung out to dry in all our media. Antidemocratic sentiment is a taboo in the original sense, something society eems cannot be touched on. When it is approached, it is approached in ways that shield us from its content, much like the rituals of primitive societies, in this case by the texts of the era being accorded a particular status where, in the same way as the holy excludes that which is unholy, all but their purely textual properties are ignored. In this way we are able to approach notions like divine violence, central to an essay written by Walter Benjamin in 1921, which, because he is one of the most recognized thinkers of the Weimar period, perhaps of all modernity, must be rescued from its antidemocratic implications, and we may also investigate ideas concerning the arbitrariness of law without lending them any significance other than that which they command in the internal world of the text, whose propositions go back to Antiquity, to Plato, Aristotle, or even to the Presocratics, as far forward as to Nietzsche, back to the Romans and Roman law, further to Heidegger, back to Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, on to Benjamin, back to Descartes, and all the way up to Kierkegaard, but never at any point reaching into our time and our society, never in any binding sense, for the insights gained in such texts find no consequence in the reality outside them. The problems they raise are addressed and aired, but their validity is restricted to their own delimited context, exactly as rituals once addressed the chasms within their own societies. The best example is Nietzsche, one of the most influential figures in the field of the humanities, referred to in almost every discussion of society and culture, yet the reassessment of values that takes place in his philosophy, which absorbs and fascinates generation after generation of students, never genuinely impacts in the sense of any obligation being established between the texts and the present-day reality of the reader. All thoughts in this respect, relating to the undemocratic, to qualitative differences between human beings, to the nihilistic, to the amoral, and to the arbitrariness of law, are treated as text, and any fascination or relevance made a matter of internal fascination or relevance.

This distance between the text and the world emerges in exemplary fashion in an essay by Girard in which *Hamlet* is construed as a drama dealing with Hamlet's attempts to put an end to vengeance, which is the fundamental trope of mimetic violence. Hence the postponements, the doubt, the hesitation, the lack of initiative, the impotence. In this essay Girard disqualifies almost all previous interpretations, such disqualification eventually becoming a point in itself as he considers how so many scholars of literature, so many professors over the past hundred years and more, could have construed Hamlet's reluctance to avenge his father as a failure, an expression of faltering will and faltering ability, even going so far as to pathologize Hamlet's resistance to such an act. When these texts on Hamlet are read a thousand years from now, in another culture, their readers will surely think that professors and other scholars of literature were a bloodthirsty and vengeful lot. *Hamlet* is a portrayal of a human being, professors and other scholars of literature are human beings too, yet this identification is never touched on, the connection is simply never made, for the morals and ethics of *Hamlet* are morals and ethics applying within the text or system of texts, not to the human beings who read those texts in their own lives. The question professors and other scholars of literature ought to ask themselves in order to understand Hamlet is this: What would I have done if my father died and I suspected someone of killing him? Would I have gone to the person I thought had killed him, who it turned out was my uncle, and avenge my father's death by killing him? No, nobody would, to do so would be quite atrocious, a deeply archaic and absolutely immoral act. What we would do would be to go to the police and allow the law to preside. This is Hamlet's dilemma, Girard tells us, he is one of us, a so-called modern man caught up in an archaic system of vengeance and violence. To his mind this system is not anchored in anything absolute, it is arbitrary, and if it is arbitrary it is also a game, and if it is a game then indeed everything else is a game too, the social world is nothing but counters on a board which may be moved in one direction if this set of rules applies or in another if another set of rules applies. Such arbitrariness only becomes clear the moment we step outside the system, or when the system goes from following one set of rules to following another. Both before and after such a transfer, the social world and the system of rules are one and the same, difficult to separate, as if the rules are not applied but come from within, from the social world itself, like nature, with the same conditions as exist between the laws of nature and natural matter.

The question of what I would have done and thought had I been Hamlet is one of identification, and identification concerns likeness. In an essay about Rembrandt, Jean Genet describes a train journey he once made and how he was seated in a carriage opposite a particularly loathsome man with bad teeth, who smelled awful and spat tobacco on the floor, and how all of a sudden it came to Genet, out of nothing and with the force of every revolutionary idea, that all men were of equal worth. This is an idea that is more than familiar to us, and we are brought up to believe it to be right, but what Genet describes is the abrupt insight into what it actually entails, its utterly wild radicality. Was this wretched and despicable person on the seat opposite *equal* to him? Are you *equal* to me? It is an impossible thought. Genet stares at him and their eyes meet. What he sees in the man's eyes, what reveals itself to him there, in that fleeting moment, makes him wonder if there is something in our identity, far within its depths, that is absolutely the same. In other words absolute identity. Genet does not link this idea in any way to Rembrandt, but it is rooted in Rembrandt's paintings, and this I know to be true; I saw a self-portrait by Rembrandt in a London gallery, and the powerful sense of nearness in its gaze, as if risen through the four hundred years that have passed since it was painted, now to meet our own, told me exactly what Genet was talking about. While I have never put it into words, I have nonetheless felt its truth.

I am you.

This has nothing to do with the social we, for only the unique I can express it, and all art, in conveying and communicating what is shared within a culture, concerns this. Any art that expresses only the social we is art that becomes isolated by time, a hundred years later it is the expression only of its era, of what was going on in the social world at that particular time and nothing else. This social we was what Nazism destroyed, and what Paul Celan's poem is a response to. "Engführung" is the end of what began with Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, written in the remains of the language the Nazis destroyed, not with the intention primarily of displaying that destruction, though in 1959 that must also have been important, but to forge a new path from language into reality. To do so, Celan went to the most basic components of the language, its very foundation, which is I, you, we, they, it – and is, was. Against the void of death and absence they discharge new meaning, which is unexampled, which is to say inimitable, valid only here, in this single poem. The boundary of meaning is also the boundary of community, and to that place only the one may go. So far does the poem reach into the idiosyncratic that no name can be mentioned, the name being a superordination, something general, unaffected by time, always the same, and yet steeped in time, whose associations flow steadily through it. Thus Celan approaches the it of the I, though not in the form of the body's namelessness, not in the form of the silence of biology, but that part of the human self which is the same in all of us. The poem's archaic feel, the historic events addressed as something outside the name, which is to say in the undifferentiated, which is always the same, or borders on sameness, comes from this. In a strange though absolutely significant way, the namelessness of the Jews who were executed in World War II seems at variance with the namelessness within the poem, which is not in any way bound to the body, not deadlocked by silence, but on the contrary seeks to give the silence that is the relationship between the nothing and the all, between the linguistic conception of the world and the world itself, a voice. That voice is the voice of the one, and it is the voice of the all. It is I, it is you, it is we, it is they, it is it, and it is time, flowing through it all.

I am you.

Jesus said, Your neighbor is like you. The consequence of that idea, so wildly radical, is that Hitler is worth as much as the Jews he ordered to be unprecedentedly to death and incinerated. Genet said, Your neighbor is you. From this too there is no exception, not even in the case of someone such as Adolf Hitler. We are opposed, and rightly so, to everything he stood for. Hitler is our antithesis. But only in respect to what he did, not in terms of the person he was. In that, he was like us. Hitler's youth resembles my own, his remote infatuation, his desperate desire to be someone, to rise above the self, his love for his mother, his hatred of his father, his use of art as a space of great emotions in which the I could be erased. His problems forming relationships with others, his elevation of women and his anxiety in their company, his chastity, his yearning for purity. When I watch him on film, he awakens the same feelings in me as my father once did. In that too there is likeness. He represented conservative middle-classness in so many respects, and this too I know, it is the voice, trembling with indignation, that says you are not good enough. He also represents the defiance of conservative middle-class values, the young lad sleeping until midmorning, refusing to look for a job, wishing instead to write or paint, because he is something more and better than the others. He was the one who opened a we and said you are one of us, and he was the one who closed a we and said you are one of them. But above all he was the man who emerged from the bunker, with the world in flames and millions of people dead as a result of his volition, to greet a line of young boys, his hands shaking from sickness, and there, in a fleeting gleam of his eyes, revealed something warm and kind, his soul. He was a small person, but so are we all. He must not be judged for what he was, but for what he did. What he did, however, he did not do alone. It was done by a we, that we was put under pressure, it gave way and something collapsed. Only those who were strong enough in themselves could withstand it. They were the self-willed and the disloyal, who refused the ideology, which is the community's idea of how the world should be. Paul Celan's poem is a nonideological poem, expressing the antipode of ideologies. Even a name is expressive of ideology, an idea of a person, at the same time as it is that idea that saves a person from extinction within the mass: the name is the one. Hitler made his name the all, emptying from it any semblance of individuality, as Hess once said, You are Germany. After the Holocaust his name remained, his face endured, whereas the six million Jews who perished remained nameless, faceless nobodies. This too is a theme of Paul Celan's poem. A story ended there, in that zero point, in that oblivion, desolate and forsaken, all that is human obliterated, worthless. Another story began there, our story. Who covered it up, Celan asks in "Engführung," who concealed the uniquely and authentically human of this catastrophe in the general, emblematic, and common language if it had not broken down?

A story ended there, but it was not a story of evil. The time from the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of World War II was a period when the fundamental building blocks of our human existence and organizational structures were in flux, not to say disintegrating, and the unprecedented radicality of those fifty years, which gave rise to the last two great utopian movements, Nazism and Communism, can only be understood on the basis that the societal order suddenly, because of a massive buildup of pressure arising in industrialism's changes – in time, extremely compressed while in volume expansive, no longer could be taken for granted, it began to crack and appeared increasingly arbitrary, governed by rules imposed from without, in a civilizational system at odds with its people, from which they, or many of them, felt utterly alienated. Those who experienced this strove toward a new foundation, a new society, and since this was not self-evident the way democracy and liberalism are self-evident to us, they endeavored to find it in what presented itself as such in the realm of the human, in other words the absolute. The core, the essence, the authentic.

Our society and culture, which not only surround me on all sides as I sit here in a room inside an apartment in the city of Malmö in southern Sweden, listening to Iron & Wine in the early morning, alone, with Linda and the children vacationing in Corsica, but also pervade me completely, as they pervade my language and pervade my thoughts, shaping my instincts and ideas, setting my boundaries as to what may or may not be done and thought, in short, all that which comprises my particular self, and which also connects me to all other selves, were founded in two crises of massive upheaval, two periods of extremely compressed structural transformations within our human existence, the first occurring with the advent of the scientific revolution in the sixteenth century, the second with the advent of industrialism in the mid-nineteenth century, which sent the world spiraling into fifty years of chaos culminating in the fall of Hitler's Germany in 1945. The human world exists not as an abstract, but in the sum of individual human beings, and it was there, in every single one of them, that the transition from the religious to the secularized occurred from the sixteenth century onward, which is to say in the self, in the I's understanding of itself in relation to the it, the we, and the they.

In the fourteenth century it was impossible for any person to dissect a human corpse in order to see what it looked like inside, the way the internal organs functioned and were ordered. This was so not because it was forbidden in the sense of being punishable by law, what made it impossible was not the fear of reprisal but the fact that it was quite simply unthinkable. In the fifteenth century Leonardo was dissecting corpses and meticulously drawing what he saw, by then it was possible, albeit only to a certain extent; he cut up his bodies in the night, in secret, alone with the dead, but for him the boundary could be exceeded. Today dissecting corpses has not only become institutionalized, it comprises one of the most important foundations of our medical science, and is an absolutely uncontroversial practice.

This is the case because the idea of what we are has changed, and with it the idea of what we can and must do. That change is not instrumental, although the practices that come with it are that too; as Latour writes, there is no such thing as science, only scientists, fragile and small in themselves, shuffling about in laboratories in their slippers, with their freezers and microscopes, their test tubes and computers, drinking coffee with their colleagues, going home after work and wondering whether to barbecue or if the clouds above the hills mean it's going to rain. That this is so means "science" is something that cannot be localized without violating that singularity, but which at the same time obviously exists, as the sum of activities performed by scientists.

Here, in the transition between the one and the all, resides the problem of our time. On the one hand, we live in a society in which a whole set of evaluations in one way or another deemed threatening to the status quo and associated with violence, revolution, and utopia are treated as taboo in the sense that they may only occur in contexts of ritual, moored only figuratively in reality; on the other hand, we live in a society that is changing in ways we cannot consider to be anything but revolutionary, along lines of flight that are directly connected with those taboos, which then are of such form and nature as to preclude that connection. We can talk about the one thing, but only as something outside ourselves, inside a closed system; the other, happening in our midst, is hard for us to see, since the correspondence between those events and our understanding of ourselves is so great, and the door of the external perspective closed.

In practice this means we live in a society which on the one hand has made the utopian and the revolutionary impossible, and which moreover resists any real change to its system on the basis that it is as good as it can get, certainly better by far than the alternatives, all of which degenerated into systems of escalating inhumanity and ended in disaster, but which on the other hand renews itself so swiftly and with such radicality as to be essentially revolutionary, leading directly toward the utopian, construed as the next place. That passage occurs as if in secret, because it is fundamentally undemocratic, for although it affects every one of us, the decisions made along the way are made by the individual. The individual is neither a utopian, nor a revolutionary, nor an antidemocrat, but a devoted democrat and citizen of society, and if there is any trace of revolt in him or her, any suggestion of an urge toward societal change, it is directed toward the distribution of wealth, which at any time is either more or less fair. Together and in this way we venture into still new areas, some so new to us as to require new legislation, not to prohibit or exclude such advances, but to include them in the existing order. We have cloned animals, we have mapped the human genome and are able to modify its genes, we have transplanted hearts and lungs, we have created children outside the womb, and we have even created new species, creatures without origin with properties we alone have decided.

To us these appear to be minor matters in that the industry that has brought them about is made up of small units in which the rest of society is uninvolved, but also because after Nazism and the genocide of the Jews we have suspended the validity of the grand scale, consistently avoiding points at which several values converge into a single trope, such as the idea of the genius, the idea of the sublime, the idea of the divine, the idea of the chosen people, in a construal of the world that leaves no room for a concept such as veneration, this sounding too hollow, or, even more hollow, veneration for the human; this is rhetoric, we consider, it refers to something bigger than us, a trope that with Nazism showed itself to be destructive.

The consequence of this is that there is no longer anything bigger than ourselves, no longer anything to die for, and therefore no longer anything at which to stop in veneration. But to clone an animal, to manipulate human DNA, to create a new creature, is no minor matter. To split the atom is no minor matter. It is to exceed a boundary never before exceeded, it is to intervene in the very constituents of life, though we are ignorant of its origins and have always through all time considered it to be a gift and a mystery, something inviolable. That mystery is not solved by our manipulations, but its boundary is violated. The inviolability of individual life is the very foundation on which we build our society. What does it mean to violate an individual life? It means to kill it, to abuse it, to steal from it, to rape it, to torture it, to victimize it. To act against it in a manner contrary to its own wishes. That boundary is something we protect by means of the bonds that tie together the social world, and if those bonds are broken and the boundary exceeded, we impose sanctions.

But who protects the inviolability of human life when understood not in terms of the individual, but in terms of the collective life, the all? Previously it was religion and the laws of religion. But what about now, with religion gone? The state? The state is an instrumental entity, a more or less pragmatic steering mechanism of the community, whose success is largely measured in terms of gross national product and rates of unemployment, and because science is instrumental too, and its pushing back of the boundaries profitable, there is little motivation for the state to legislate to the effect that life be held sacred and that its boundaries remain unviolated.

We have gone beyond the absolute, for it led us to unprecedented atrocities, but without the absolute everything is relative, a matter of good or poor argument, negotiable, within the domain of reason. Reason is to us the same as profitability. What happens to that which is outside reason? In a world governed by profitability, lack of profitability has no bearing, and the absolute is that which is not exchangeable, neither in money nor in arguments.

The absolute is neither reasoned nor unreasoned, it is what exists outside categories. The absolute may be reached only by the emotions. The absolute belongs to religion, mythology, and the irrational. The absolute is what propels someone to die for a cause greater than himself, faith in the absolute was once the foundation of law. The absolute is death, emptiness, nothingness, darkness. The absolute is the background against which life is lived.

The absolute is eternity. The relative is day-to-day existence. These are the two fundamental tropes of our lives. We hold the absolute at bay, firstly by leveling down the bigness of our existence, that which has to do with the very boundaries of life and materiality, to the commonplace, addressing the issues that concern us all, the great collective, mankind, only in the quotidian; secondly by ritualizing the absolute in an unreal world of images: death is to us not the physical death of the body, but the figurative death, as it occurs in images, in the same way as violence is not physical violence, but figurative violence. Heroism is no longer a possibility, there being no arena for it, those arenas have all been shut down, for the heroic belongs to the bigness we do what we can to shun, yet in the world of images, which any one of us may enter at any time, the heroic lives on: entire worlds and societies have emerged in Internet gaming, where anyone can pick up a machine gun and venture out into the world to shoot the enemy for a few hours. Practically all the films we watch are about exactly this: heroism, violence, death. And the people we watch carry out these heroic deeds in our name, in our place, are all physically beautiful or charismatic, or both. Indeed, that world, growing and expanding with every year that passes, celebrates all the worlds we otherwise reject. Outer beauty, charisma, heroism, violence, and death are not relative, they belong to the pure, the unambivalent, the simple. Our need for this, to see the magnification of our existence and what borders the absolute, is insatiable.

But since the two systems, relativized reality and absolutized pseudo-reality, are mutually exclusive and can exist only separately, the question is what happens if they are measured against each other, if a person not simply applies the yardstick of the absolute to relative reality, but moreover acts on that basis. This is what happened in Norway this summer, when a man only a few years younger than me went out to an island and began indiscriminately shooting and killing young people. He acted like a figure in a computer game, but the act of heroism he thought he was performing, and the carnage he brought about, did not belong to the world of images, was not abstract and without consequence, did not occur in some other place, detached from the time and place of his physical body; it was real, tangible, absolute. Every shot he fired lodged in human flesh, every eye that closed was a real eye belonging to a human being with a real life. Only remoteness can make such an act possible, since in remoteness consequence ceases to exist, and the question we must ask ourselves is not what kind of political opinions this person held, nor if he was mad, but more simply how such remoteness could ever arise in our culture. Did he feel a yearning for reality, for an end to relativity, for the consequences of the absolute? We must assume he did. Do I feel such a yearning? Yes, I do. My basic feeling is that of the world disappearing, that our lives are being filled with images of the world, and that these images are inserting themselves between us and the world, making the world around us lighter and lighter and less and less binding. We are trying to detach ourselves from everything that ties us to physical reality; from the bloodless, vacuum-packed steaks in the refrigerated counters of our supermarkets, the industrially produced meat of cooped-up animals, to society's concealment of physical death and illness, from the cosmetically rectified uniformity of female faces to the endless flow of news images that pass through us every day and which together, in sum, erase all differences and establish a kind of universal sameness, not only because everything is conveyed in the same language, but also because what thereby is so incessantly conveyed inexorably, albeit gradually, recreates what is conveyed in its own image. The symbol of this trend is money, which converts everything into monetary value, which is to say numbers. Everything we have is mass-produced, everything is the same, and our entire world, which is commercial in nature, is based on that serial system. The values in our sky of images are Nazi values, though everyone says differently. Beautiful bodies, beautiful faces, healthy bodies, healthy faces, perfect bodies, perfect faces, heroic people, heroic deaths, the same images prevalent during Nazism, the only difference between theirs and ours being that we refrain from letting them loose on reality, but keep them there, in the domain of the unbinding, and say it is not the value of the image that counts, but the value of the human, which is different. Yet the gap between them is so vast, and the rush of the authentic, which here is fictitious, so compelling, that someone sooner or later is bound to bring the sky down to earth and let it apply here. The perpetrator of the Utøya massacre did so, unbound by any relationship to reality, to the physical bodies he killed, but bound to the image of reality, in which no real consequence exists. In the days following that horrific event a story came out about a boy who had swiveled to face the killer, who in turn had looked into his eyes and told him he was unable to shoot him. And he did not. He shot everyone else he could, with this one exception. Why? Because he saw his eyes, and in doing so his actions became binding. A similar story, reported by Liljegren, exists from Hitler's life. In his time as Reich chancellor, Hitler became attached to a child, a blue-eyed little girl by the name of Bernhardine Nienau, whom he invited out of a crowd and treated to strawberries and whipped cream. So taken was he by the child and the conversation they had together that he told her she could come and see him whenever she wanted. They exchanged letters after this first meeting, but investigations initiated by Martin Bormann found the girl's grandmother to be Jewish. Hitler was annoyed, Liljegren writes, and commented, "There are some people who have a positive genius for spoiling all my little pleasures." However, they continued to correspond until 1938, and Bernhardine visited him on several occasions at the Berghof, again according to Liljegren. All this says nothing about Hitler's evil or goodness, and nothing about the ferocity of his hatred for the Jews, but rather a lot about its anatomy: Hitler was consumed by hatred and had been ever since he was growing up, and he had established a world for himself in which it was important to maintain remoteness from others, a world without family, close friends, and romantic attachments, an irreparable system in which all that was inside him found outer manifestation, including his hatred, which following Germany's defeat in World War I he directed toward the Jews and everything they stood for in his system. There, in that system, his hatred was absolute. But when something encroached upon it and entered the space between his own I and his convictions, a space which, besides whatever passageways there may have been within it that were unfamiliar to him, was quite empty, his hatred did not apply. His hatred applied to the others. In that space was the memory of his mother, for instance, and that it had remained so strong becomes plain to us in the fact that every Christmas, the time of his mother's death, he would descend into silence and dejection, as he did in 1915 at the front, and in that space too were the Jewish doctor, Bloch, and this ten-year-old girl, therefore his kindness to both. To Bernhardine's eyes he could maintain no remoteness, she was real, in that space together with him. The yearning for reality, for the authentic, and for nature is not dangerous. The dangerous force of Nazism was the exact opposite, remoteness to the world and the regimentation of the human that all ideological thinking creates. But if our culture removes itself from physical reality by placing the image before it, and if it levels out all differences in its extreme seriality, then it must be judged in the same way as Hitler, according to what it does and not what it is. The fact is that it does not exterminate people, either literally or metaphorically, that it does not persecute people or prevent their voices from being heard, and the question is then whether this culture, when all is said and done, provides an adequate response to an insoluble problem of the modern world that relates to the one and to the all. There is a difference between a country waging war and trying to wipe out an entire people in its name, and a lone killer taking the lives of sixty-nine children. We endeavor continually to safeguard ourselves against the former, but cannot safeguard ourselves against the latter. Both are to do with violence among like kind, and both arise out of remoteness, but there the similarity ends. Remoteness is the opposite of authenticity, and it is not the yearning for authenticity that is the problem, but the remoteness that gives rise to it. The unique is what cannot be replicated, existing only in a particular place at a particular time. It is the art of the one, and the life of the one. What took place in Germany was that the one dissolved into the all, the sky of ideals descended to earth, and the image of the absolute, which is without consequence, became a point of reference for human action. The absolute, in this case construed in terms of race, biology, blood, soil, nature, death, was not only set against the relative, construed in terms of the stock market, the entertainment industry, democratic parliamentarism, as occurred throughout the period leading up to World War I, but was also carried through into life itself, as action: Nazi Germany was the absolute state. It was the state its people could die for. Watching Riefenstahl's film of the rallies in Nuremberg, its depiction of a people almost paradisiac in its unambiguousness, converged upon the same thing, immersed in the symbols, the callings from the deepest pith of human life, that which has to do with birth and death, and with homeland and belonging, one finds it splendid and unbearable at the same time, though increasingly unbearable the more one watches, at least this was how I felt when I watched it one night this spring, and I wondered for a long time where that sense of the unbearable came from, the unease that accompanied these images of the German paradise, with its torches in the darkness, the intactness of its medieval city, its cheering crowds, its sun, and its banners, whether it was something I imposed upon them, knowing how this paradise arose, what it would become and at what cost, and what happened to it, but I came to the conclusion that this was not the reason, that it came not from what was in me, the knowledge I had of what lay behind the images of those days, but from something in the images themselves, the sense being that the world they displayed was an unbearable world. Not that it was a false world, because this was obvious, its every image meticulously created from scratch for that particular occasion, it was more that this false world, one of the few pure utopias to be established in the last century, in which everything was exactly the way it was supposed to be, was unbearable in itself. What was unbearable about it lay in its undifferentiatedness. Everything affirmed one and the same thing, and when this is the case no other thing exists but that one, and without the other the one dissolves into itself and vanishes. The one without the other is nothing. The society Riefenstahl portrayed, this utopia of the one, had to establish an other in order for its own simplicity, its own undifferentiatedness, to be maintained, and this is what lies beneath those peaceful and harmonious images and fills them with such foreboding: the inevitability of war. It was not the absolute values of Nazism that led them to war, for birth and death, homeland and belonging are characteristic of all people and all peoples, it was the utopia of the one and the same. It was the fall of the name into the number, it was the fall of the differentiating into the undifferentiated.

If we say that our present culture was founded in the seventeenth century, in the sense that all the elements that characterize our age appeared for the first time in that century, then two particular portal figures flank its door: Hamlet and Don Quixote. The creators of these figures, Shakespeare and Cervantes, died in the same year, and their understanding of the human condition, as radically dissimilar as they might appear in respect to each other, form two poles in the way we understand ourselves. In their day, the absolute, familiar to them under the name of the divine, was drawn increasingly closer to the relative, which is to say the interhuman domain, the social world. Hamlet doubts, and seemingly finds doubt to pervade everything. Don Quixote does not doubt, he believes, but what he believes in, and what he sees, since it fills his vision, is not real, belonging not to the world but to fiction. He sees sheep, aims his lance and attacks, imagining he sees an army of enemies. He sees a windmill, aims his lance and attacks, imagining he sees a giant. Don Quixote is a hero in a world without heroes, or in a world where heroes and the absoluteness of their lives belong to the pseudoworld, irreconcilable with the relative reality of the quotidian. Don Quixote is a comic hero. Hamlet is a hero too, but for the opposite reason, he doubts and relativizes in a world of absolutes. Hamlet is a tragic hero. Don Quixote sees the old world as if for the last time. Hamlet sees the old world as if for the first time. Through them we see ourselves, for our culture is founded on doubt, and our scope extends from the relative reality of the quotidian to the skies of our grandest conceptions. Hitler eliminated doubt and lowered the skies of our grandest conceptions to the relative reality of the quotidian, which is to say he inserted fiction into material reality and made reality a play, binding the individual to the mask.

As early as 1934, the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas wrote the following about Hitler and Hitlerism:

> *The body is not only a happy or unhappy accident that relates us to the implacable world of matter. Its adherence to the Self is of value in itself. It is an adherence that one does not escape and that no metaphor can confuse with the presence of an external object; it is a union that does not in any way alter the tragic character of finality.*
>
> *This feeling of identity between self and body, which, naturally, has nothing in common with popular materialism, will therefore never allow those who wish to begin with it to rediscover, in the depths of this unity, the duality of a free spirit that struggles against the body to which it is chained. On the contrary, for such people, the whole of the spirit's essence lies in the fact that it is chained to the body. To separate the spirit from the concrete forms with which it is already involved is to betray the originality of the very feeling from which it is appropriate to begin.*
>
> *The importance attributed to this feeling for the body, with which the Western spirit has never wished to content itself, is at the basis of a new conception of man. The biological, with the notion of inevitability it entails, becomes more than an object of spiritual life. It becomes its heart. The mysterious urgings of the blood, the appeals of heredity and the past for which the body serves as an enigmatic vehicle, lose the character of being problems that are subject to a solution put forward by a sovereignly free Self. Not only does the Self bring in the unknown elements of these problems in order to resolve them; the Self is also constituted by these elements. Man's essence no longer lies in freedom, but in a kind of bondage . . . Chained to his body, man sees himself refusing the power to escape from himself. Truth is no longer for him the contemplation of a foreign spectacle; instead it consists in a drama in which man is himself the actor. It is under the weight of his whole existence, which includes facts on which there is no going back, that man will say his yes or his no.*

This is man at one with himself, unified and whole. It is man as the one. Levinas, who became the philosopher of the other, turned in this reasoning as much to Heidegger as to Hitler, according to the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who cites the passage in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. For it is here, in the human construed as the one, at one with itself and its body, with no division between the being of the I and its ways of being, that Heidegger and Hitler come together, Agamben believes, where all anthropological distinctions – between spirit and body, sensation and consciousness, I and world, subject and properties – are abolished.

> Dasein, *the Being-there who is its There, thus comes to be placed in a zone of indiscernability with respect to – and to mark the definitive collapse of – all traditional determinations of man.*

The relative in our existence – all that may be chosen – is bound to that which is not relative but absolute and unambiguous, which in the case of the I is the biological body. Thereby the I approaches its "it," where all voices fall silent and the darkness of the undifferentiated prevals, and this movement toward life's absolute, its "it," is what makes it possible to separate the Jewish from the German, for the important distinction between they and we was drawn in the body, in race, which is to say in the immutable, whereas all other distinctions, such as those of language, thought, and culture, which may be learned and adapted, moderated and discussed, were absolutely invalid. Everything was pressed in toward the body, everything gathered in the body, and the final consequence of the human being at one with itself, which we tentatively call the monophonic human, at one with itself and shoulder to shoulder in unbroken series, for the next was not the other but the one again, the final consequence of this turning of the I toward the body, which is uniformity and unvariedness, was the extermination of the Jews, in which the Jew was body and limbs only. By the time they arrived at the extermination camps and were bundled from their cattle wagons they were no one. Deprived of their civil rights, deprived of their human rights, deprived of their names. They were the "it." On leaving the wagons, they were ordered to strip. Those then herded toward the gas chamber, which in Treblinka was situated on a small hill, were without citizenship, without name, without clothes. They were the naked human, without anything but its body, in the midst of what Agamben calls "bare life." What emerges before us in this image, which is not a metaphor, but an actual event, is what a human being is, and what it becomes. The human being, naked and bare, is this not the true and authentic human? The natural human, the human as a biological creature, as it is beneath the cloak of civilization and culture? If we imagine a world without language, without countries, without names, we would all have lived a life such as this, naked, nameless bodies in a nameless world, until death came and transformed the naked body into a corpse to be cast into the world of the dead, which is the world of decomposition and erosion. Such a life would take place in the very midst of the world, among its trees, waters, fells, and dales, upon the soil of the earth and beneath its sky, and yet it would be a life lived outside. Outside what? Outside the human world. For it is this that emerges before us in the image of the naked human; it is outside the law, outside the social world, outside the name. Only then, in that absence, are we able to see the nature of the law, the social world, the name. The law regulates violence among like kind, according responsibility for it to the individual, moreover at the same time institutionalizing it for the purposes of self-preservation in the police and military. The social world regulates the community; in it, all those it comprises are gathered in groups of greater and smaller we's, both formal and informal; and the name guarantees the individuality of the individual in the community of the all. If a person stands outside the law, they may be killed. If a person stands outside the social world, they are no one. If a person stands outside the name, they are a number. The Jews who were not immediately killed in Auschwitz were identified by a number tattooed on their forearm. But the matter is not so simple that we may say the Jews could be killed because everything belonging to the human domain was taken away from them, that civilization was negated in them and their fate, for the forces that took them there, outside the community of the human, were forces within that community, which is to say within civilization, our we. The bringing together of the I and the being of the body, drawing the human closer to the "it" of the I, thereby removing it both from history and from the moment, masks the human in uniformity and sameness, the play, which has always represented the possibilities of man, no longer a play but life itself, the way it unfolds. This bringing together occurred in parallel with, and was perhaps only possible by virtue of, a similar movement toward the it within the collective; the we, too, was drawn toward the it, which is to say the number. In bureaucracy the human is a number, and in the mass the human is a number. This dehumanization of the we, whereby the other may be reduced to a number, is necessary in war if the enemy is to be killed, and it is necessary in the administration of large numbers of people even now, for a modern state without statistics is unthinkable, but in Hitler's Germany the state became a total entity, the we merged completely with the state, they were one and the same, and in much the same way as the I was bound to the body and possessed no space of its own outside, the we was bound to the state and possessed no space of its own outside, and in much the same way as this made it possible to push the Jewish I into the "it," reducing it to body alone, it also made it possible to push the Jewish we into the "it,"reducing it to number alone. Neither the I of the body nor the we of the state contained any singular you. It was for this reason that millions of Jews could be sent to the gas chambers before the eyes of everyone, without anything happening other than that they looked down, they looked away, for what was there to see? There was nothing to see. They saw nothing, they heard nothing, they said nothing. The it of the body: undifferentiated. The it of the we: undifferentiated. Outside the language they were driven into the terrain, along the unmistakable track, and became, in undifferentiated night, ash.

Nowhere does anyone ask after you, for "you" does not exist.

*

It's evening already. I'm on my own at home, Linda and the children are still in Corsica with Linda's mother. Heidi has lost a front tooth there, she told me proudly on the phone. I'm looking forward to seeing her smile when she comes home. John has got a new air bed in the shape of a crocodile and fell and hurt his knee, as far as I could make out from his incoherent and breathless report. Vanja didn't want to talk on the phone, but she cried when I said goodbye to them on the train platform and walked away, and she's never done that before. Since they left, four days ago now, I've spent every day and evening writing, watching *Shoah* into the night, apart from yesterday when I read Sereny's book about Treblinka. *Shoah* doesn't get to me, either because I'm keeping a distance or because it works through insight rather than feelings. Which isn't entirely true because suddenly, out of nothing, a scene made me weep, a single stab of empathy, and that was it, I carried on watching as before. Sereny's book, which almost paralyzed me the first time I read it, left me unmoved too. But that's when I'm awake. When I'm asleep, I dream about it.

Earlier today I was sitting on the balcony, smoking and looking out over the rooftops as I always do. The sky was pale blue, typical for May, and the usual sounds rose from the city below: the rumble of buses, the squealing of brakes, the hum of tires moving over the road surfaces, an occasional shout. On the roof of the apartments opposite some Polish builders have a project going, they've been there for months now, putting in roof terraces and converting the loft space into living units. Suddenly a child laughed somewhere. It was such a joyful laugh, so overwhelming and gleeful and utterly abandoned to the delight of the moment that I felt it too. I smiled, and got to my feet to see where it was coming from. It sounded like a young child, maybe three or four years old. There was a man's voice in there too, and I imagined it was a father tossing his child into the air, again and again. But there was no one there when I looked down into the street below, no one in the parking spaces, or outside the garage. Then there it was again. I guessed it had to be coming from the little passage connecting the pedestrian street with the street behind our building, and that they were hidden from sight by the building in between. I sat down again, poured myself some tepid coffee from the thermos, and lit another cigarette.

Part 2

When the alarm clock rang it was still dark outside. I turned it off and got up. Linda lay still in bed, her face on the pillow almost completely obscured by her hair, which spread out in all directions. It was half past four, and my whole body ached with tiredness, I had lain awake for so long before I fell asleep. That seldom happened; if there was one thing in my life that worked it was my sleep. I was what they call a sound sleeper. I could sleep on the floor without any problem, and with children screaming a meter away from me, it didn't make any difference; if I was asleep, I was asleep. Once I had thought it was a sign that I wasn't a real writer. Writers slept badly, had ravaged faces, at the crack of dawn they sat at the kitchen table staring out the window, tormented by their inner demons, which never rested.

Who had ever heard of a great writer who slept like a child?

To think that was a bad sign, I reasoned. Because tomorrow my third book was coming out. Reviews in all the newspapers.

I grabbed the clothes I had laid out the night before and padded into the bathroom to shower. The sight of them triggered a fit of nerves. My hand holding the showerhead shook with unease as I clambered into the bath. I turned on the water and shivered as the hot jets hit skin which had just emerged from the warm depths of the duvet and would have preferred to stay there. But then, after only a few minutes, everything changed, and getting out of the shower was what would make me shiver.

After the thrum of the shower, everything was silent. Not a sound from the streets outside, not a sound from our apartment or the apartments below. It was as though I was meant to be alone in the world.

In the harsh light I rubbed myself down with a large towel, and once my skin was relatively dry I wiped the steam off the mirror and put styling gel in my hair and deodorant under my arms while observing my reflection, which slowly became less and less sharp as the water molecules, or whatever they were, attached themselves to the glass again.

I donned my Ted Baker shirt, which stuck to my still-damp shoulder blades and would not hang straight at first, then I got into my Pour jeans with the diagonal pockets, which usually I didn't like, there was something so conventional about them, all Dockers trousers had slanting pockets, but on a pair of jeans there was so much else working against the Dockers look that they actually looked good, for then it was the jeans style that was being challenged and as a result a kind of tension grew, not much, but in a world where all denims looked identical, it was enough to make these just that little bit different.

I wiped the floor with the used towel and draped it over the side of the bathtub, went into the kitchen, put on the kettle, spooned some Nescafé into a cup, and looked out the window while waiting for the water to boil. The window faced east and a patch of something brighter in the distance had begun to emerge from the darkness. Impatiently I lifted the kettle before the water had started to bubble, and the crescendo of noise was interrupted and replaced by a soft murmur as the coffee rose inside the cup, at first a golden brown from the powder, visible as an earthy clump at the bottom, until over the next few seconds it completely dissolved and the surface became an impenetrable black with some lighter-colored froth at the edges.

Cup in hand, I went out to the balcony, sat down, and took out a cigarette. A plane passed high above like a small ball of light; it was still too dark for me to distinguish the fuselage from the sky around it. In an hour and a half I would be sitting up there myself, I reflected, and then I thought of the Cortázar short story which so often surfaced from my subconscious when I was sitting here because it shifted perspective in such a dizzyingly abrupt way between someone on board a plane and someone on the ground, to be precise on an island in the Mediterranean. Cortázar was the master of giddy shifts of perspective, and even if his short stories occasionally bore a likeness to those of Borges, in this respect he was unrivaled.

The man reading about the man reading about the man reading. The line of faces which disappeared into the illusory depths of the mirror when, as a boy, I had stood in front of it holding another mirror to reflect the image. Smaller and smaller and smaller, deeper and deeper into the distance, into all eternity, for it was impossible to stop this movement, it could only become so small that it could not be distinguished from its surroundings.

I drew the smoke deep into my lungs. I was cold, partly because I was wearing only a shirt, partly because I was tired. And partly because I was afraid.

But there was nothing to be afraid of, was there?

The plane was no more than a tiny dot now while daybreak seemed to have come closer to the town, and the darkness in the air between the buildings below me was filled with a kind of light so hazy that it was as if someone had stirred the gloom, causing the light hiding at the bottom to mingle and rise to the surface.

Ever since I was in my teens I had imagined that the universe might well be microscopic and perhaps encapsulated in an atom belonging to a different universe, which in turn was enclosed in an atom in a different universe, and so on ad infinitum. But it was only when I read Pascal and saw the same idea there that it gained validity and authority as a distinct possibility. Yes, that was probably how it was. The fractal system, on which so much in our world is based, was like that: an image within an image within an image, ad infinitum.

I stubbed out my cigarette in the ashtray, chucked the rest of the coffee over the railing, heard it hit the roof far below as I opened the door and went in. Placed the cup on the counter, put on my new suit jacket and new shoes, packed a tub of hairstyling gel, an extra pair of underpants, and a shirt in my backpack, passport, plane ticket, cigarettes, and lighter in the outside pocket, hung one strap over my shoulder and was about to open the door when Linda came in.

"Are you off?" she said.

"Yes," I replied.

"Well, good luck," she said.

We kissed briefly.

"See you tomorrow!" I said.

"Yes, looking forward to that," she answered.

I walked out to the elevator. She closed the door behind me, I averted my eyes from the mirror on the way down, lit a cigarette as I emerged onto the street. There were two taxis outside the hotel, I ambled toward the traffic lights and crossed over to them. The driver in the first car was asleep. I leaned forward and knocked on the window with one knuckle. He didn't give a start, as I had expected, but instead opened his eyes without moving his head or body, evincing a kind of out-of-place regal dignity.

The window slid down.

"Are you free?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied. "Where do you want to go?"

I opened the rear door and got in. Actually the plan had been to catch a taxi to the railway station and then the train to Kastrup, but it didn't feel right to wake him up for such a short trip, which would earn him no more than a hundred kronor, besides which I needed the immense feeling of power and luxury it would give me if I went by taxi all the way to the airport, something I had never done before, apart from once with the children when we were going to the Canary Islands and had so much luggage we didn't feel like lugging it all onto the train.

"Kastrup," I said. "Is it a set price?"

"Yes," he said, flashing his left indicator.

It cost four hundred more. Almost as much as the plane ticket. But what the hell. The novel was coming out tomorrow. I would be getting at least sixty thousand kroner for it. Surely I could indulge myself. Besides, I was going to do a lot of interviews, so it was important I was rested and my energy levels were up, after all, this was my job.

I leaned back in the seat and looked at the town, its lights glinting in the gray dawn, and another wave of nerves surged through me.

For nearly two years I had worked as a language consultant on the new Norwegian translation of the Bible, and I had caught the plane from Kastrup to Gardermoen so often, there and back in a day, that what I had previously considered unremarkable, though it was certainly unusual, a kind of travelfest, had now become routine, as commonplace as catching the bus. I collected my boarding pass from one of the machines in the departure hall and walked up to the first floor and over to the security control in the long corridors there. My jacket over my arm and belt in hand, I put the backpack on the carousel when it was my turn, picked it up on the other side, surrounded by besuited men in their fifties and equally professionally dressed women, some cheery and outgoing, others withdrawn into themselves, standing like trees. I presumed that I would give the same impression if anyone looked at me when I looked at them. I put my belt back on and then my jacket as I walked through the tax-free shopping area to the café at the entrance to the B gates, where I would usually sit after buying Norwegian and Danish newspapers in the big kiosk there, and had a coffee at the bar.

I had hardly talked to anyone about the novel, apart from those closest to me, and they saw me and themselves in it with none of the objectivity a normal novel required, so I knew little about how it seemed from the outside, to people who had nothing to do with me. It was difficult to predict what questions the journalists would ask. But as soon as they began, a certain way of regarding the book would be established because they always thought alike, always asked the same questions, and once I had said something to one of them, then I said the same to the next, it became a kind of platform for the book, which in turn became the book because what was written in the newspapers the following day was further reinforced by a fairly large circle of readers and interested parties, who discussed it on the basis of this same platform. The next time I did interviews the journalists had prepared by reading earlier interviews and reviews. In the process everything apart from a couple of points was filtered away, and these were then so squeezed and wrung dry until the book completely lost any signs of life and lay dead and buried in a warehouse somewhere outside Oslo.

But one thing was certain this time, and that was that they'd ask about the autobiographical element. Why did I write about myself? What was it that made me so interesting that I could write not only one novel based on my life but six? Was I a narcissist? Why did I use people's real names? That would be fine, they weren't impossible questions to answer, but if they honed in on individual names, my father and his mother, for instance, and their various relatives, and were bent on talking about the novel's depiction of reality in specific rather than general terms – Grandma and Dad and those days in Kristiansand – it could turn out to be a nightmare.

A clue as to what they would be asking about was given in the three interviews I had done in Malmö: one for *Dagbladet*, one for *Dagens Næringsliv*, and one for *Bokprogrammet* on NRK. Both *Dagbladet* and *Dagens Næringsliv* had been preoccupied with what I had written about myself, about the person I was now. About having no friends, no interest in social life, and about getting so drunk that I lost all self-control. These matters had been almost impossible to talk about. Who would want to state in the newspaper that they don't have any friends? When I was writing this wasn't a problem since what I wrote was how things were for me, sitting alone in my room. This novel was tightly drawn around me and my life, but as soon as it all came out into the open, everything changed. An immense distance appeared within this private world that belonged to me and my family, it became an "object," something public, while in reality that which we moved about in, without this ever being formulated, was not a thing, admittedly in the novel it had been given form, but the big difference between a novel and a newspaper article was that the first belonged to an intimate sphere – it was closely associated with an "I," a specific voice – which the novel reached beyond, as it also addressed itself to one or more readers, although it never left what was its own and what was personal; a newspaper article, on the other hand, had no such personal ties, and therefore it changed everything that was in the novel and turned it into something else, something public and general, with the power of a judgment: Knausgaard has no friends, Knausgaard loses control of himself when he drinks, Knausgaard yells at his children. And that was how it was with everything I wrote in that novel. The novel is an intimate genre and its intimate nature doesn't change even if eight thousand copies are printed, because it is read by only one person at any one time and would never leave the private sphere. But when the newspapers discussed what I wrote, there was no longer any connection with this private sphere, there was no longer any connection with the intimate sphere, it was objective and public, detached from the "I," and even though it was still related to me and my world, it was solely via my name, its exterior, "Knausgaard," one object among other objects – and only then did what the novel was about become a "thing." I had decided not to read any of the interviews I was going to do, or any of the reviews, they would make me die of self-hatred when I saw my inner self from the outside like that, but the *Dagens Næringsliv* journalist, a young Sørlander, had insisted I read his review before it went to print, which I did, and I would never do that again. In an e-mail to him I compared my experience of this to an animal being transfixed in the beam of a searchlight.

I enacted various scenarios in my head as I sat in the airport, trying to find an answer to any questions that might crop up – while looking out the window at the planes standing in readiness and the small airport vehicles darting to and fro like toys against the backdrop of the vast, now sheer blue sky and the sun, which, shining from the other side, made the glass and metal sparkle wherever its rays struck; I gazed too at the throng of people, more here than anywhere else – until it was time to board, at which point I got up, put the newspapers in my backpack, and walked down the corridor to the gate, when another colossal surge of nerves, like a torrent of fear, quivered through my body as I sat down.

I had no doubt that *Fædrelandsvennen*, the newspaper in Kristiansand, would get as close to the truth as they could. They would probably be indignant, for one did not write about one's private life, and it was extremely likely they had spoken to Gunnar and would push me as hard as they could on that. Court case, lack of regard for the facts, unscrupulous exploitation of innocent people for personal gain.

I got up, I couldn't sit any longer, and went to the toilet, forced out a dribble of dark yellow pee, washed my hands, put them under the hand dryer or whatever they called the little hot-air machine attached to the wall next to the mirror. After coming out, I wandered down the corridor to a duty-free shop, cast an eye over the goods for a few minutes and walked back, the line for the plane had formed, the airline employee behind the gate desk had opened the door to the jet bridge and was busy checking passports and scanning ticket bar codes.

As the plane lifted from the runway and rose into the sky I scoured the land beyond the strait, searching for the house where we lived. It wasn't difficult; it was directly opposite the Hilton, which was the second-highest building in Malmö. It was incomprehensible that only two hours earlier I had been sitting there and looking up here, and also that everything down there had felt as big as up here, because from where I was now I could not only make out the balcony where I usually sat, I could also see all the square kilometers of buildings around it where several hundred thousand other bright sparks sat looking at the world as if they were the only ones in it.

Linda and the children must be up by now, I thought, and recognized first Landskrona, then Helsingborg below me, after which the countryside became anonymous and featureless and somehow homogenized: fields, yeah, right; roads, yeah, right; villages, yeah, right. I took out the newspapers and read until the plane started its descent toward Gardermoen, and I looked down on the sunlit woodlands, dark green with the scattered reds and yellows of autumn, like cries from more unruly trees rent with yearning and happiness and death amid the tranquil, paternal spruces and firs.

A river, dark, some fields, yellow. Some cars, which seemed lonely even when in long lines of traffic. Everything below bore all the signs of waiting for winter not even the Indian-summer sun could erase.

Slowly the plane descended from the sky until the wheels hit the ground and began to roll along the runway, the flight attendant's voice welcomed us to Oslo and asked us to keep our seat belts fastened, which almost everyone ignored, we knew it wasn't dangerous anymore, no one would punish us if we didn't obey, that was what you call freedom.

Click, click, click, everywhere. I usually waited until almost everyone had left the plane before I got up, but now I was short of time, so I pushed my way into the aisle, shrugged on my backpack, and switched on my phone, as everyone around me was doing. I hadn't received any text messages of course, I never did, but no one else knew that.

I put the phone in my inside pocket and met the gaze of a woman in her fifties, she had just lifted a bag down from the overhead bin and was twisting around to place it on the floor.

"Fantastic books you write," she said. "Thank you very much."

Embarrassed, I returned her gaze, my cheeks warm, my lips forming a half smile.

"*A Time for Everything* is the best book I've read in years," she continued.

"Thank you," I said. "That's nice. I'm happy to hear that."

She gave me a warm smile and then turned to face the front again.

A stranger had never addressed me to talk about my books before. If that wasn't a good sign, I didn't know what was.

An hour later I got out of a taxi in Kristian Augusts gate, paid, and walked through the gateway of the building where Oktober had its offices. The publishing house had just extended its premises and now occupied two floors; I assumed it was the money that Anne B. Ragde's books had generated that had made this possible. I rang the bell, fortunately someone buzzed the door open without asking who I was, I hated standing in front of those little boxes and introducing myself. When I got up to the first floor there was Silje, waiting for me. I was given a cup of coffee, we went up to the floor above and I sat down on the black leather sofa just inside the door where the first interview was to take place and lit up. Geir Berdahl came in to say hello, perhaps it had been the smell of cigarette smoke that had reached him in his office at the other end. He told me the book hadn't arrived yet. It was supposed to have been here the day before, but the truck had been involved in an accident in Sweden; as far as he understood, it had gone off the road to avoid a wild boar. He laughed, I smiled. Then he turned serious, as was his wont, reined himself in after all his merriment and said this wasn't good, tomorrow it was being reviewed in all the newspapers and there wasn't a single copy in any of the bookshops. But he would personally drive a consignment to the big bookshops in Oslo early tomorrow, he said with a fleeting smile, and returned to his office after wishing me good luck. I sat back down on the sofa, Silje came in with a thermos of coffee, a cup for the journalist, water, and some glasses. I visualized a truckload of books between lines of trees in a Swedish forest, the driver climbing down from his cabin, a phone pressed to his ear, smoke rising from the hood, total silence after the door has slammed shut. Then I pictured Geir Berdahl with disheveled hair and tousled beard driving through the streets of Oslo in a small Toyota crammed with books. That must have been how he worked in the seventies when Oktober was a Marxist-Leninist publishing house with its own chain of book dealers through whom they distributed translations of Marx and Mao to the Norwegian population. I knew next to nothing about that period, everything was wreathed in myth, and I decided I would ask him the next time an opportunity offered itself. In fact I had given him nothing but trouble; I owed the company a lot of money because I hadn't had a book published for five years – although I had no idea how much; it could be anywhere between three and seven hundred thousand kroner, and now that I had finally finished a novel he had to deal with my uncle, who was sending him malicious, rabid e-mails, and talk to him on the phone, as well as having to engage a firm of lawyers to scrutinize my manuscript and all the details of the case. That this should happen to me was actually pretty damned idiotic and unbelievable. I had never gone looking for trouble in my life, as far as possible I tried to be kind and friendly and polite and decent, I just wanted everyone to like me, that was all, and here I was, in such a storm of aggrieved people and lawyers, not through ill fortune but following a reasonable response to an act I had committed. I wanted nothing more than to write and be an author, so how could I have ended up in a situation where lawyers had to read everything I wrote? I had their observations at home along with the usual consultants' reports I had received over the years, and it was remarkable how different the lawyers' ones were. In normal circumstances this would have been interesting because the law was language, and when it had to be applied, it wasn't in any absolute way, it was always a question of an assessment, which had to be formulated with as much precision and exactitude as possible. The lawyers had to describe whatever the case might be, in other words what had happened, and in court this was of course often the crux of the conflict: what had actually happened? And once this was established, with what motives? And to what effect? It was not unlike a novelist's work.

The difference was that the lawyers not only had to understand the acts in themselves but also how they applied to the law, which furthermore was in writing, formulated on the basis of expectation regarding future events, thus as a kind of prognosis – based on thousands of years' experience of mankind, which indicated that theft, embezzlement, and murder would continue to occur while some of the more culture-specific laws died as the culture that had necessitated them also died. Actions were languageless, while the law and its interpretation were language-based. A law without language was as inconceivable as a poem without language. Law and poetry were connected; they were two sides of the same coin.

One of the other editors walked past, smiled, congratulated me on my book, and disappeared into his office. Silje talked me through the schedule, I listened with half an ear; it was a long time since I had dreaded anything so much. The doorbell rang, that would be the journalist, and I went into the bathroom for a pee and to put some more gel in my hair, there was to be a photo session after the interview.

When I returned, the journalist from the Norwegian News Agency had arrived. She was dressed in a way, or had an air about her, that I associated with motorbikes. We shook hands, she said the photographer was on his way, we sat down, she began to ask her questions, it was going very well, I thought, and the questions were of a general nature except when they concerned me. Half an hour or so later I was in the backyard being photographed and then I was ready for the next item on the agenda, the telephone interview with *Bergens Tidende*. I spent the intervening minutes in Geir Gulliksen's office; he had come while I was doing the interview with the NNA journalist. We talked about the next novel. We had edited the first one together here, he had sat with the manuscript in front of him, I had the computer, and we had worked through his suggestions, most of which were deletions. Apart from the opening, which we considered removing because the tone was so different from the rest of the manuscript, and the long passage about the new year's party, which he wanted to take out, I did exactly what he recommended. I could see at once it was better. The text was tighter and had more force. Now, sitting there, him on his swivel chair by the desk, me on a chair up against the wall, I asked him when we should begin editing the second volume. It had been ready for a while, but when all the fuss surrounding the first started I realized it couldn't come out in its present form, it was far too aggressive and in some parts almost slanderous, I had been frustrated and angry when I wrote it, and the frustration and anger had occasionally infused it in ways that would damage both me and those I had written about. I had deleted the worst of it, but the balance was still wrong. The idea was that I should write about my life as it was now and then go back in time, through my childhood, up through my teenage years into adulthood, to end with meeting Linda in Sweden, in such a way that our love story, which was so intense, would cast its light back on the events of the second book. But the patience this required was inhuman, the picture I painted of us too one-dimensional, and it felt as if what was supposed to provide depth and perhaps give a rationale was too far ahead for it to work. So one morning, only a week earlier, I had sat down and written the story of when we met and what happened between us. Almost exactly twenty-four hours later I had finished, the story had turned into fifty pages and exuded the light the novel needed so that all the rest would not be incomprehensible. I had an hour's sleep, then I left to do an interview with *Dagbladet* in the café in Malmö Art Gallery, exhausted in a way I felt only when I had been drinking the night before.

"We don't need to do any more," Geir said now. "We'll publish it as it is."

"Do you mean that?" I said.

"Yes, I do," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I can be."

"No deletions? Nothing?"

"The little there is we can do at the proofreading stage."

"I'll have to trust you," I said.

"Yes, you will," he said with a laugh. "By the way, how did it go with the NNA?"

"It went pretty well, I think. But now it's *Bergens Tidende*. I'm dreading it."

"It'll be fine," he said. "I talked to him yesterday, as I told you. What was his name? Tønder?"

"Yes."

"First off he said he just wanted a bit of background info about you. But I knew right away he had an agenda."

"What was it then?"

"Well, it was all about the biographical details."

"So he knew about Gunnar?"

"He did."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him I couldn't talk about your book in those terms. I think he understood. He just asked about this and that. I don't think you have anything to fear."

"I hope not," I said.

Silje knocked on the half-open door and popped her head in.

"You can call him from an office on the floor below," she said.

"Now?" I asked.

"Yes, I think he's probably ready and waiting."

I got up and followed her down the stairs. The office was at the back to the left. The coffeepot and my cup had mysteriously moved to the desk there. Beside the phone lay a pen and a pad. Silje passed me a slip of paper with a phone number on it.

"Here's his number," she said. "Dial zero first."

"Thank you," I said, and sat down. She left and closed the door behind her. It went through my head that I didn't have to call. I doodled on the pad. Then I pulled myself together, lifted the receiver, and dialed the number.

The voice at the other end spoke Bergen dialect, and whenever I've heard anyone speaking Bergen dialect since, I have heard that voice resonate and it's sent shivers down my spine. It is the most unpleasant voice I have heard in the forty-nine years I have been alive and it was the most unpleasant conversation I have ever had. It wasn't what the voice said, I don't remember that very clearly, no, it was the tone it was said in, which fluctuated between flattery and condemnation, though without ever relinquishing a sense of self-righteousness, however insidious or covert.

During the two years that have passed since the first volume of this novel appeared I have met a lot of journalists, and I have always had something good to say about them, there has always been something conciliatory about them, whatever they have written and however stupidly or nonsensically or uncompromisingly they have described me, but there was nothing conciliatory about this voice, it was just hideous, and I never want to hear it again. After the interview was over I felt nauseous, and repulsive to myself, the voice had been in my ear, in my head, and I had never realized before that a voice was an alien force that could penetrate your body and fill you with its being. The worst thing about this voice was that it seemed to be trying to lure me into a trap, a bit like the way you can imagine the police interrogate their suspects, switching between everyday topics in order to gain their confidence and give them enough scope to slip up, to say more than they should, only then to ask a question that can nail them. You weren't there, were you? You were actually there, weren't you? You can tell me. I know what really happened.

The voice was like that. It asked me why I hadn't written about my mother in the novel. That is a strange question to ask a novelist who has written about his relationship with his father and his father's death. Why did Kafka write letters only to his father and not to his mother? The voice didn't ask the question because it wondered why my mother wasn't in the novel, it knew that very well, underlying the question was an accusation, unformulated but obvious, and all it wanted was for me to admit it. I didn't, of course. Instead I said it was a book about my father and my father's death, not about my mother and my mother's death, and the voice, which didn't believe a word of what I said made a mental note to be used later when I contradicted myself and was beginning to fall into the trap. It was an interrogation, not an interview. The voice assured me it had really enjoyed the book and asked some relatively harmless questions. It wanted to know in what way the novel related to reality. After my answer he said that I had claimed the novel was about reality, but it was also at odds with reality, and he wanted to know how I could explain that.

"You write that your father lived for two years with his mother. But that's not true, is it? He stayed there for only two months, didn't he?"

"I did not write that," I said. "That's not in the book. It doesn't say anything about how long he lived there."

"Yes, it does. It says he lived there for two years."

"No, it doesn't. I took it out. You couldn't have read that. It's not there."

The voice was silent for a few seconds. Then, in a confidential, deeper tone, it said:

"As you know, I've spoken to your family."

"You've spoken to Gunnar?"

"Yes. He says what you've written doesn't correspond with the facts. In the book you're presented as a hero. But actually you're not such a fine fellow. You didn't really clean the whole house, now did you. You don't know how to clean, isn't that the truth of the matter?"

I said I had cleaned the house exactly as I had described, and that cleaning was about the only thing I could do well, but it wasn't possible to talk about the novel in this way, discussing whether it was me or my uncle who had cleaned the house, this was absurd. Again I could tell the voice wasn't taking in a word of what I said, and I had myself lived with the image it had of me ever since I hit puberty, I was an untrustworthy little shit with a high opinion of myself, no morality, no self-restraint, none of the common decency necessary to be a respectable person. And I had written that I had cleaned my grandmother's entire house after my father's death to present myself in a favorable, honorable light whereas in fact it had been my uncle who had cleaned the place. And I had turned my father's death into something verging on the grotesque and transformed what had been an ordinary heart attack into the result of a self-destructive hell on earth and, not content with that, I had even dragged my ever kind, sweet old grandmother through the mud and mire, which was mine and no one else's. And behind all this towered my mother, the Knausgaard-Avenger, who had turned her son's head.

Why hadn't I written more about my mother? Why had I described her in such positive terms and my father in such negative ones? Why had I written that my father lived with my grandmother for two years when the truth was that he had stayed there for two months, and barely that? Why had I written that I had cleaned the whole house when I barely knew anything about cleaning and had actually got in the way?

It wasn't just that the voice obviously believed everything that Gunnar had told it, including the theory that it was my mother who had indoctrinated me, which upset me so much I felt nauseous sitting there with the phone in my hand, it was also the insidious way this was expressed, faintly acknowledging I was good at writing while at the same time maintaining I lied and was mendacious, an immoral person, yes, that voice spoke to me as if I were a criminal. It was one thing for Gunnar to do this, after all he was deeply involved in this business, and I was the one who had involved him, against his will, so regardless of whatever accusations he came up with, I was to blame. But this voice wasn't involved, I wasn't to blame for any of its accusations, yet it passed judgment on me, with all the moral legitimacy and self-righteousness the post of journalist at Bergen's biggest newspaper could accord while nonetheless wanting something from me and needing me, for the sake of the news story. It knew: no me, no article, so it both condemned and begged me at one and the same odious time.

Yes, it was an odious voice.

I knew it had believed Gunnar. Berdahl, who had also spoken to Gunnar on the phone, said he came across as collected, sensible, and moderate. It was only in his e-mails that he unleashed his fury. The crime correspondent at *Bergens Tidende* had spoken to him on the phone and believed him. Gunnar was an accountant, a respectable citizen, as was the voice, I could imagine, and when my novel was read with that in mind he saw exactly what Gunnar saw: I was untrustworthy, mendacious, and had written the novel because I hated the Knausgaard family and, prompted by my mother, wanted to take revenge on them. With that Gunnar had deprived me of all my independence and individuality: even hating was not something I did of my own accord but on behalf of my mother. He had turned my novel into a burlesque, something unworthy and contemptible. *Bergens Tidende* agreed with him about everything. I had lied, and what I had written was not a novel but trivial and socially unacceptable, an attack on living people in book form.

I didn't think any of this during the conversation with that insidious, half-begging, half-condemning voice because it had taken over, I had more than enough to do defending myself, and not even when the interview was over did I think about it. The sense that I was a criminal and the fear of the consequences of what I had written, which was now beginning to make itself felt, shut out everything else. It was these same feelings that had raged inside me throughout the end of summer. Completely under their sway, my mind in turmoil, which can happen when a catastrophe beckons but still hasn't struck, I left the room, went up to the floor above and into Geir's office. I felt sick and my insides were trembling. But just sitting there helped. I told him what had been said and when Geir Berdahl came in I repeated it. Geir told me the journalist had said the same to him the evening before: my father hadn't stayed for more than two months with his mother and I hadn't cleaned the house as I had written. Geir had thought the journalist was testing this out on him and wouldn't make the same allegations in an interview with me.

"But I soon realized he wasn't interested in the novel. He was only interested in this. It was his news story."

"Fortunately I told him I wanted to read everything connected with Gunnar," I said. "So he said he would e-mail it to me in the course of the day."

"That's good," Geir said. "It'll be coming out soon and we'll have to take a stand on it. I'm not sure it's going to be much of a problem."

"Actually Siri Økland was down to do this interview," I said. "Einar Økland's daughter. But then they put him on it. Slightly heavier artillery. He's a former crime correspondent, you know."

"That's right. You said."

"Oh, shit," I said.

Geir laughed.

"It'll be fine, Karl Ove," he said.

"That's the most unpleasant conversation I've ever had. He flattered and humiliated me at the same time. My God, and in such a creepy way."

"Yes, he was unpleasant. I thought the same."

"And now it's *Fædrelandsvennen*'s turn. This is the one I've dreaded most. If *Bergens Tidende* rang around my family what do you think they would have been up to?"

"I don't think they'll have done anything," Geir said.

"I hope you're right," I said, getting up. "That *BT* interview was the worst experience of my life."

I went down into the street with Silje, where the sun was shining, bright and clear, past the National Gallery and down Karl Johans gate. On the way I stopped outside a newspaper kiosk and picked up a copy of *Morgenbladet*. Silje, who understood what was going through my mind, said there wasn't a review section today. I put it back on the stand, we entered the Grand Hotel, where Ibsen used to sit with a mirror in his top hat, and took the elevator up to the bar at the top, where the journalist and the photographer from *Fædrelandsvennen* were waiting. I sat down with the journalist at a table on the terrace. She had made a point of wearing sunglasses so that she didn't have to look into my eyes. The book had shaken her, she said. From the way she spoke I realized she hadn't made any moral judgments. I talked about what she wanted to talk about, as warily as possible, beneath the blue, cloudless September sky, and afterward the photographer took pictures of me on the other side of the terrace. I did another interview, this time with a journalist from *Morgenbladet*, and I sat smoking and drinking Farris mineral water and coffee while answering his questions. His name was Håkon, I seemed to remember, or it might have been Harald, he came from almost the same place as me, had grown up on the other side of the bridge, and wanted to talk about it, and that was good because as a result there was some distance from both me and the book.

After lunch I took a taxi up to NRK. I arrived twenty minutes early, so I sat down on a rock outside and was having a smoke in the sunshine when I heard a Swedish voice from somewhere, I turned and saw Carl-Johan Vallgren, a Swedish writer I had met a couple of times in Stockholm, getting out of a taxi and walking toward the reception desk. He was about to launch his latest book in Norway. I stubbed out my cigarette and followed him. He was standing with his back to me as I entered, so I placed my hand on his shoulder, which normally I would never do to anyone, but somehow circumstances had colluded to bring me in here. He turned and when he saw who it was he smiled. He was wearing a suit, and his seventies shirt with large collar points was open at the neck. We shook hands, I said I had enjoyed his last book, he said all the writers in Oslo had been talking about me ever since he arrived, and their voices were not without a touch of envy. He was laughing as he spoke and turned to face the lobby, where someone was coming to fetch him. See you, I said, yes, see you, he replied, after which I went out for another smoke and to call Linda. Meeting him had put me in a better frame of mind, he was the kind of person who lifts your mood when you meet them, some people are like that, not many. I definitely wasn't one of them.

Linda was sitting outside at a café in Malmö, where the weather was good too. The morning had gone well, she said, her mother had arrived and in the evening my mother would be arriving. I said the interviews had gone fine and there were two more to do before I left to see Axel and Linn. Sounds good, I'm looking forward to tomorrow, she said. I answered that I was too, and then we said goodbye and hung up.

The interview with *Søndagsavisen* went pretty well. Afterward Siss Vik met me in reception and we went up to her office and did the interview for *Ordfront*. For the first time that day I spoke about literature. What I said was vague and not very good, but it was about literature and that in itself felt cathartic. I imagined it was a bit like how a shy plumber might feel after having to speak all day to the media about himself and his feelings, his family and friends, when at long last, late in the afternoon, he was able to talk about pipes and washers.

I took a taxi from NRK to Axel's, he didn't live that far away, and when I arrived he had made *fårikål*, lamb and cabbage stew, the whole apartment was full of a smell that took me straight back to the autumns of my childhood. He said he figured I didn't get much of this stew in Sweden, at any rate that had been his experience when he lived there, it had been one of the things he missed. He was right about that, apart from once during the first autumn Linda and I were together, when I was busy explaining to her who I was and where I came from and therefore made both *fårikål* and *pinnekjøtt*, mutton ribs, I hadn't tasted it since I moved to Sweden.

Linn, Axel's wife, had to go somewhere after work. I sat in the kitchen with Axel's sons, Erik and Johan, eating lamb stew and drinking beer. I had arranged to visit them for exactly this reason, being with a family was balm for the soul, there was something good about it, maybe also something innocent, certainly uncorrupted. If I had gone to a hotel room after the interviews everything that had been said and done in the course of the day would have still been there, washing back and forth inside me, and it was not beyond the bounds of possibility that I would have ended up lying on the bed crying, it had happened before. Geir Angell had laughed when once I told him this, he said that was just like Arthur Arntzen, the comic, performing as Oluf, he ordered sandwiches and milk to be brought up to his hotel room and then, after the shows, he sat there crying and eating. I'd laughed too, but when I was caught up in it I didn't laugh, I had more than enough to do just trying to survive. What actually upset me I had no idea, it was utterly indefinable, but it was as though all the malice I had in me opened up and had free rein on days like that. At the interviews it was all about pinning something down, giving form to something, in a way, in order to keep it at a distance, while that which was given external form created ever greater turbulence internally. When, some years ago, a TV channel ran a series of twenty-four-hour interviews with people in their own homes, including one with Jan Kjærstad, I discussed this with Tore, who told me I would have maintained the mask if they had done one with me, answering good-humoredly and politely throughout the day, but the minute they went out the door I would have gone to bed and burst into tears. I had never told Tore I cried after being on live TV, and I occasionally did so after run-of-the-mill literary events as well, so I gaped at him in puzzlement, how had he worked that out? Was I so easy to read?

So this, stew and beer, at a kitchen table in Oslo, with Axel and his sons, the sun low and the air cold outside, was exactly what I needed.

I had met Axel in Stockholm four years earlier, one evening Helena's actor friends had called her, they had a football team and were short of players and asked if Jörgen, her partner, could play for them. He phoned me and asked if I felt like coming out. I did. On a soft shale pitch somewhere outside Stockholm, in a sort of industrial area, it was cold and dark, the floodlights a bright yellow. I hadn't kicked a ball for many years and was put at left back, where I could cause the least damage. The team consisted entirely of actors, and it was comical, at half-time most of them talked about their own performances, what they had or hadn't done, with no regard for the team as a whole, in a cacophony of egocentricity. The coach, a man of around thirty who played at center half, gave his instructions in a dark Stockholm accent. He and the other center half came over to me after the game, it turned out they were both Norwegians. The coach's name was Axel, an Østlander, the other was Henrik, a Kristiansander, they had gone to acting school in Stockholm together and both lived in the capital. Karl Ove, Henrik said. You wouldn't be Knausgaard, would you? Yes, I said, and they laughed because they had both read my books and they must have thought the odds of bumping into me out here on a muddy field on the edge of Stockholm in the autumnal gloom were fairly low. I continued to play for them and then one Saturday Axel texted me, wondering whether I would like to go to his son's birthday party. I was sure he had made a mistake, sent the text to the wrong person, and I politely declined. But it hadn't been a mistake, he still got in touch now and then, we met a few times outside the football context, and when he and Linn came on the occasion of Vanja's second birthday, Linn was surprised to see a poster for a short film for which Linda had written the script and asked how it came to be hanging there. It transpired that Linn had produced the film. Their children were the same age as ours and we started seeing each other regularly.

Axel was a friendly, considerate person, but on the football field I had seen another side to him, an aggression and a drive that seemed alien to his usual self; once we had been to see a football match in Råsunda, on the way back we were in the crowd catching the metro when a man sat down on the seat I was about to occupy, Axel almost flew at him in a rage. I couldn't get these sparks to tally with the person he normally was because if anything typified his personality it was gentleness, and it was genuine, an innate quality from what I could see, not something he had learned. Linn was also considerate, although inside her there was an edge too, she wasn't afraid to be direct and she couldn't care less what others thought about what she said or did. As far as family life was concerned, they were on a different plane from us, they had a house and a car and order in their finances. She worked as a TV producer for SVT; he worked as a freelance actor. They had met on set while making an ad; that was one of the first things he told me. Sometimes we had lunch at my regular place next to the office, often we got together over the weekend, and every Monday during the season when we played a match. We kept in touch even after we moved to Malmö and they moved to Oslo, though the intervals between seeing each other were becoming longer and longer. Axel and Linn were generous sorts who invited us to all kinds of things and resolved all the practical details along the way. One Easter they asked us to stay with them at a mountain cabin his father owned, and once they invited us to Berlin, where he had been given the use of an apartment. We hadn't invited them to anything, how could we, there were no cabins or houses in our family and we didn't have the money to rent one. But they didn't seem to keep a tally.

After eating we flopped down on the sofa with a beer to wait for Linn to return so that we could go out. I was so tired that I barely knew what I was saying. It had been a terrible day. And tomorrow everything would be in the papers.

Sometime later, walking toward the center along the streets in the western part of town, the night sky was dense and star-spangled. Leaves lay under all the trees. The air was crisp, crystalline, though not cold, it still retained the heat of the day, which died away very slowly. We sat down at a table outside Tekehtopa, just by the hotel, had a couple of beers and chatted. As I had to do a reading at the Opera House the next day and the last thing I needed was a hangover, I left after an hour to go to bed. Axel accompanied me into the hotel as Silje had promised they would drop off two copies of the book when it came out, and the receptionist passed me the packet with a smile and glanced over furtively as I opened it. I signed one and gave it to Axel, said goodbye, and took the other up to my room, where I put it in my backpack, then undressed, switched on the TV, and lay watching until I could no longer keep my eyes open. At some point in the night I must have woken up and switched off the television because when I opened my eyes at around six the screen was black and silent. I showered, dressed, and went down for breakfast. All the newspapers were laid out on the table, but I gave them a wide berth, I didn't want to know. Got myself some scrambled eggs, bacon, sausages, and some bread, a little juice and a cup of tea, sat down, glanced across at the pile of newspapers. What I didn't want to see was the interviews. They were in *Dagbladet Magasinet*, *Dagens Næringsliv*, and *Dagsavisen*. But the reviews? I had decided not to read them. But I had to find out whether they were a catastrophe or had gone well. I had an agreement with Geir that he would text me when he'd read them, to say how they were. But it was only seven o'clock, he could be hours yet.

What the hell, a quick look at the intro couldn't hurt.

I got up and picked up *Dagbladet*, carefully avoiding the magazine section, flicked through to the culture pages. There it was.

I was burning inside as my eyes ran down the lines.

It looked good.

It had gone well.

I wondered if it had gone just as well in *Dagens Næringsliv*?

I put *Dagbladet* back and picked up *Dagens Næringsliv* instead, went to the table, did the same, avoided the interview and flipped through to the review.

This one had gone well too.

Phew.

With a cup of coffee in my hand I had a smoke outside the hotel entrance and watched the few people walking along the street at such an early hour. The sky was as blue as it had been yesterday and the sunlight was already streaming down over the roofs and spires.

The reading at the Opera House was part of a kind of book day organized by the book clubs. I didn't want to read anything from the first volume and had instead chosen a passage from the second, it was about a Rhythm Time baby class I had once been to in Stockholm, and I had selected this because I hoped it would make people laugh. I had done two readings from Book 1, the first at the invitation of Ingvar Ambjørnsen, who was the honorary resident writer at Bergen International Festival, on which occasion I chose the opening I had just written; the second was at a Litteraturhuset event, when I chose the scene where Yngve and I arrived at the house in Kristiansand. Both passages were about death, and if there was anything that dampened the atmosphere at a function it was of course a reading about death and decay, and as this was an autobiographical novel and not something I had made up I felt as though I was forcing myself and my gloomy personality on them and ruining their evening by my mere presence. After the last time at Litteraturhuset I had decided I wouldn't do it again. Hence comedy, hence the Rhythm Time scene. Book 2 was a comedy, but a comedy deep, deep below the surface. It was about a man who was trapped in his own self-delusions and a family which was also trapped in its self-delusions, and this led them into highly undignified situations, which would have resolved themselves if they had only looked at each other and said they had been deluding themselves, this is the reality and it didn't matter. But they couldn't, it was precisely this that was impossible, they did the opposite, they looked at each other and said it mattered.

The hotel was around the corner from the publishing house, and after a while I strolled over to print out the passage I was going to read; my printer at home hadn't worked. Geir Berdahl was there packing the books he was going to deliver by car with his daughter Maria, with whom I had only a passing acquaintance, I had never spoken to her. It was irritating that on the very day when the papers were full of reviews the book wasn't on the shelves, because this focus and interest lasted for only one day, by the following week all the attention would already be on the wane, unless the book was nominated for some prize or other, in which case it might be rekindled for a few days. When my debut book came out the publishers had gone for a very small print run, and when it sold out they printed another two hundred copies, no more than that, and so it went on, with the result that for the whole of December, the sole month when books actually do sell in Norway, it wasn't in any of the bookshops. Sales figures in themselves meant nothing to me, but money did, especially now that there were five of us in the family and the royalties from the books were our only source of income apart from my scholarship.

I put the printout in my backpack, said goodbye to Geir and Maria, and walked down to the Opera House. I hadn't seen it before, except for its anonymous façade from the railway station and, standing in front of it, I was surprised. It really was a magnificent edifice. All that white stone gleaming, ablaze almost, in the sun next to the cool blue sea from which it rose. I walked up onto the roof, surveyed the harbor area as I smoked a cigarette, an hour to go to the reading. Leaning against a wall I took out a half-liter bottle of Pepsi Max, had a swig, got out my phone, and called Linda. She had packed and would soon be off to Kastrup, she said. My mother had also arrived; right now they were with the children at a playground. I said I was nervous and that it would be wonderful to go out in Prague this evening. She wished me luck and we hung up. I switched off the phone and put it in my backpack. Once when I was being interviewed onstage it had rung and the audience laughed; it was just the sort of thing audiences laugh at. Audiences wanted to laugh, they zeroed in on anything comical and always burst into laughter when there was something funny, almost irrespective of how trivial. An audience over a certain size has its own dynamics and its own mind-set regardless of the individuals that constitute it. Something they would never have laughed at on their own, they would never have found amusing in a million years because it was so petty, could, in an auditorium, generate howls of laughter. And when they sat there in silence, this silence could be indicative of a variety of very distinct moods. Boredom, indifference: then it was as though what was said dispersed and disappeared like smoke. Responsiveness, interest: what was said hung in the air and it was as though there were a greediness in the room, which was a fantastic and exhilarating response to have. I often read the same texts, but the atmosphere is never the same; sometimes a particular passage makes everyone laugh, at others there is total silence. A scene can be explosive one evening and appear flat and meaningless the next. Some of this depends on my delivery: as I come across as very serious, and occasionally also somber, it's as if my very presence seems to stifle the comedy, whereas when I am able to chat first the laughter comes more easily. But for the most part it comes down to the audience, its particular makeup and the atmosphere of the venue.

I threw my cigarette down, stepped on it, and made my way toward the entrance. The plaza outside was thronged with people. Right in front of the door I bumped into Vetle Lid Larssen. We had the same publisher once, but I had never spoken to him or even said hello. So what should I do? Pretend I hadn't seen him? That might seem haughty or dismissive. But greeting him didn't seem natural either; we didn't know each other.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," he said. "Congratulations on the reviews!"

"Thank you," I said.

"See you," he said, slipping inside the door. I followed him, plowed my way through all the people, located a young woman who appeared to have something to do with the event, she did, just a minute, she said, and went to find someone else who took me backstage. Narrow corridors with black walls, sudden high-ceilinged areas full of wires and hoisting equipment, doors all over the place, and then a makeshift room behind some half-walls where we were to wait before going onstage. A bowl of fruit, some pots of coffee, and bottles of mineral water. Cathrine Sandnes, who was the emcee, was there, she gave me a hug and said something and laughed, she was one of those rare people who laughed all the time, and Dag Solstad, who was going to read after me, sat there with the head of a book club and some others I didn't know. I said hello and poured myself a coffee. I asked Cathrine how her children were doing, she told me a bit about them and showed me some photos on her phone, she asked after mine, I said they were fine. I couldn't remember when I had met her first, probably it had been with Espen and Frederik, I seemed to recall we were watching a football match and she was there, and someone told me she was the Norwegian champion in some martial art. She worked for *Dagsavisen* then. She had also interviewed me once; afterward, walking to the hotel, I remember we had talked about the mysterious expression "in form" – the immensely successful phase sportsmen and -women can experience when all the shackles fall off them – with respect to writing. As a writer you can also go through a phase where nothing works and then all of a sudden you are in the zone, and everything works. It is all in your head. Football, writing, tae kwon do. Cathrine was now editor in chief at *Samtiden*, married to Aslak Sira Myhre, whom I remembered from Bergen, initially I knew him only from a distance, as an ultra-left-wing student politician, afterward I got to know him better because he had been Tore's best friend when they were growing up in Stavanger and was an obvious model for the most important minor protagonist in Tore's novels about Jarle Klepp. I had written an essay for *Samtiden* and had a little to do with Cathrine then. Over the years we had run across each other a few times and she hadn't changed in the slightest. Her most prominent character trait, at least the one that was most obvious, was that she was completely fearless.

She wasn't affected by the terrors and tensions that abound in the art world. As was the case now, standing in the midst of a crowd of people, chatting and laughing with them on all sides.

She led me onto the stage, explained what she had planned: first of all, a brief introduction, then I would come on, stand there, she would ask a witty question about the title, and then I would read.

The blood drained from my head as I stood on the stage gazing at the empty auditorium in front of me. My face must have gone white with fear. We went back through the corridors and into the makeshift dressing room. I poured myself another cup of coffee, glanced warily at Dag Solstad, who was sitting on a chair a couple of meters away. I had met him several times before, most often in a publishing-house context, but I had never managed to say a word to him, not even about the weather. I wasn't afraid of him, it wasn't that, it was that I couldn't view him as a man of flesh and blood. He was already a writer when I was born, and not only that, he had already been hailed as the greatest writer of his generation. Throughout my life he had been "Dag Solstad," the great writer; so as a social fixture he was as well established as Gjensidige Forsikring insurance, the Ringnes Brewery, or the cup final, a status which incidentally he shared with Jan Erik Vold, who had also always been there, on TV and in the classroom, they were in a sense representatives of the writing fraternity, iconic images – the mild-looking man with the strange voice who read the poem about the loaf of bread and the bespectacled man with the unruly hair who mumbled and snuffled when he was asked about something. So there was an immense distance to be covered when I grew up and started reading their books in earnest, as works relevant to the present, and the wonderful part about this, when the iconic image breathes with life because you suddenly invest yourself and your experience and knowledge in it, can be compared to how your perception of your own parents changes when you become a parent yourself: suddenly their distant lives, their incomprehensible behavior, reflect something deeply human and universal, and they come to life. In this way "Dag Solstad" had come to life, but not as a person, only as a writer, for if there was one thing that characterized Dag Solstad's literary work it was that he wrote iconic books; they expressed something unclear and invisible in such a way that they became clear and visible, not just once but again and again. So the unmasking of "Dag Solstad" that the reading of his books brought about led only to another mask, for as icons the books weren't a reflection of the writer but the writer's time, and perhaps also contributed to forming it. One of his books opens with a person who is alone and out of shame raises his hands to his face. Reading that, I thought I had done a much better job and with greater profundity in my debut novel, in which the main character is constantly ashamed and no stranger to the gesture and impulse that occasions the shame. In my hubris I even suspected Dag Solstad of having lifted it from my book. Back then I hadn't understood the value of the iconic, it was too alien to me, nothing in my life and writing coalesced to form an image, everything overflowed its banks. Now I understand. The iconic is the pinnacle of literature, its real aim, which it is constantly striving to achieve, the one image that contains everything within but still lives in its own right. The lonely man raising his hands to his face: the shame. The man who sets the scene for his own paralysis: inauthenticity. And the most pregnant and terrible of all of Solstad's images: the father witnessing his son accepting money to drive his friends around. That must be why Solstad was so preoccupied with Thomas Mann and Henrik Ibsen in his later books: they are the last great iconic writers. Mann's sanatorium in *The Magic Mountain* is the perfect setting for a novel, it is both a symbol and a place, in the same way that *Peer Gynt* and *Brand* are symbols and characters. All literature wants to go there, to the one essential symbol that says everything and is at the same time everything. *Heart of Darkness*, *Moby-Dick*, *Riverrun*.

I lifted my cup to my mouth and sipped the hot coffee, then lowered it as, to my mortification, tiny brown drops were running down the outside. I looked out at the auditorium, took another sip, wanting to chat with "Dag Solstad," but I didn't know about what. Once someone had said I just wanted to chat with the greats; ever since then I had been reminded of that remark whenever I was standing next to one of the "greats." Was it true? Did I want to chat only with them? Not *only* perhaps, but I had to admit I did want to, they had a magnetic appeal, being in a position to say something to them was a privilege, that was how it felt. On the other hand, it was also fawning. There was no doubt about it. Fawning and crawling.

I sought his eyes and met them.

"Do you have any opinions on Peter Handke?" I said.

It sounded a bit abrupt. But "Dag Solstad" didn't appear to notice. He shook his head and said actually he didn't. He had read some of his books, but that was a long time ago and he couldn't say he was particularly interested in Handke, no.

"I'm in the middle of reading a fantastic book by him now," I said. "*My Year in the No-Man's-Bay*, it's called. Have you read it? Think it came out in the eighties or maybe the nineties."

"No, I haven't. It's good, you say, is it?"

"Yes, it is."

That was it. There were a lot of people around, conversation flowed, people drifted in and out and soon it was time to go onstage. Solstad didn't move, he wasn't on until half an hour after me, and when the technician had attached a mic to me I stood behind the curtain, beside the flashing mixing desk, waiting for the applause to die down and Cathrine to introduce me. Then I walked across the stage, she asked her question, the audience laughed, I waffled something trite, she took a few steps back, and I started reading. After I had finished I went backstage, removed the mic and hurried into the foyer, which was still full of people, crossed the plaza, and dashed up onto the footbridge, also crowded, in some places so packed that I had to stand and wait, until, on the other side by the train station, I found a taxi and gave the driver the address of Thorenfeldt's photographic studio in west Oslo. We drove through the glittering, sunlit autumn streets and after I had paid and got out I saw a man waving at me from a doorway around fifty meters away. I half ran over, was led into the studio where Hanne Ørstavik and Ingvar Ambjørnsen were waiting, the former wearing a vintage dress, from the 1920s or the 1930s perhaps, and the latter a white dinner jacket with a white top hat. Thorenfeldt himself appeared and shook hands, he was a portly man who obviously laughed a lot, at least he was now. I was given a pile of clothes, all white, stepped into a cubicle and put them on. The trousers were much too big, they hung off me like a sack, but with suspenders they were fine, the assistant said when I emerged, and away we went. We lined up for the photo, Thorenfeldt played some Frank Sinatra at full blast, laughed and shouted as we three squeezed together and posed, with and without hats, and finally Hanne was given confetti, which she threw into the air as a kind of finale. It was all over in ten minutes. The photos were for a chain of bookshops, as far as I could make out, and at first I had been dubious, which was my way of declining, it meant nothing to me since I had my literary credibility to think about, which this would undermine at a stroke. I wasn't that type of writer, I had thought, but then I allowed myself to be persuaded after all, it was important for the book, and "no" was one of the words I found hardest to say, I was too weak for that word, the thought of disappointing someone always outweighed any consideration of my credibility, so there I was, in the studio of a photographer who was used to working with celebrities, dressed up as some kind of literary revue artiste. And it had been fun. It had been fun to dress up, it had been fun to have my photo taken, it had been fun to stand there posing amid the laughter and blare of music. It helped that I was doing it with Ingvar Ambjørnsen and Hanne Ørstavik, I respected them both, and if they had signed up it couldn't have been that bad. It was a sellout. Yes, it was, but what had I actually sold? My soul. But I had already lost that anyway.

After the photo shoot I had a cup of coffee with Hanne at a nearby sidewalk café. We first met in the mid-nineties, I had done an interview with Rune Christiansen for *Vagant*, and he had invited me to the Oktober summer party. Espen was there, he was an Oktober writer, Mom's brother Kjartan was there, he was an Oktober writer, and at the table where I was assigned a place Hanne was there, who was also an Oktober writer. We chatted during the meal, but as I felt so inferior, being the sole nonwriter there, I moved to Espen's table as soon as we had finished eating, and stuck close to him for the rest of the evening. The next time I met Hanne was just after I had made my debut and she reminded me of that evening, of how impolite I had been, moving away from her as though she wasn't worth talking to. Since then we had met at various literary events at the publishing house, after

I had moved from Tiden to Oktober. She was a novelist to her fingertips, uncompromising with regard to her books, and incorruptible. Rare qualities, both of them. As a person she was sensitive and there was something vulnerable about her, and perhaps it was the impossible equation, the uncompromising, incorruptible essence versus the openness to impressions of the world that made her novels so perfectly rounded and yet so testing. We had never talked at length apart from on one occasion a few weeks earlier, at a dinner held by Oktober after a press conference, when all our social inhibitions were suddenly thrown to the wind and we got down to the nitty-gritty. I talked about what my life was really like; she talked about what her life was really like. The openness had been restricted to that moment, now we just talked about our books for the most part and after a quarter of an hour I got up, the plane would be going soon, and I took a taxi to the train station, from where I caught the express to Gardermoen, checked in at the last moment for the Copenhagen flight, and finally plumped down onto a seat, alone.

The desperate rush through the departures hall reminded me of another time when I'd had to run to catch the plane home. At that time I had been carrying Vanja. She couldn't have been more than twelve months old. I had been invited to my uncle's child's confirmation ceremony, which was to take place outside Oslo, and as Linda was pregnant with Heidi and didn't want to fly, I had gone with Vanja. I wanted to show her to the family. Everything had gone well, except on the plane home when she had screamed without interruption for half an hour, and even my suit jacket was soaked with sweat. Now, the race across the airport having jogged my memory of the previous occasion, it struck me that that was probably the last time I had seen my family. Admittedly I had seen Gunnar and his sons once since then, in Mom's garden in Jølster, but that had been only for a few minutes. The confirmation had lasted all day, and all the people I had known all my life behaved in their own idiosyncratic ways, which I knew so well. The dynamics between the two brothers, all the wordplay, all the hackneyed phrases. Their children, who were becoming adults. Representing Dad and having Vanja with me made the occasion an enjoyable experience.

Holding Vanja in my arms, sensing the person she was, filled me completely as I sat in the stationary plane waiting for our turn to take off. My love for her seemed to collect in one point, overwhelming and uncontrollable, it hurt so much tears came to my eyes, and then it relinquished its hold on me and sank back into the depths as the plane began to taxi onto the runway. The sun was low, the shadows were long, I leaned back and closed my eyes in an attempt to doze. Of course it was impossible; too much had happened in the past two days. But now it was all about getting off this plane, onto the next, off again, a taxi to the city center, and then I would have a different world around me.

When we were up in the air and the Østland forests beneath us were becoming more and more distant, the passenger in the seat next to me, a woman in her late twenties or early thirties, blond with muscular arms, picked up *Dagbladet*, took out the magazine section, and started flipping through it. As soon as I saw that, I turned away and looked out the window. A few seconds later, in a diversionary move intended to appear as if I was opening the air vent above the seat, I glanced at the page she was holding steadfastly in front of her and discovered to my despair that she was reading the article about me. I glimpsed a photo of me before turning away again with my cheeks burning. She couldn't have realized that the man who was featured in the interview she was reading was in the seat beside her, otherwise she would have looked at me and said so, wouldn't she? If the krone dropped during the flight she would know why I had turned away so obviously and the situation would be embarrassing for both of us; she would have unmasked me, I would have been unmasked. But I couldn't tap her on the shoulder either and say: That's me you're reading about! That would have sounded completely stupid. If she had kept flipping through, it wouldn't have been so bad, but now she was reading every single word while I sat beside her, only a few centimeters away, with my head averted as far as possible. When she finished the interview I would have to continue hiding because the predicament was not over, even if the reading was.

She spent at least ten minutes on the interview, I was able to confirm after several sidelong glances at the silly magazine. It was odd that she didn't notice as my body must have been giving off all sorts of signals. But no, while I stared out the window for the long hour from Oslo to Copenhagen she quietly occupied herself, reading a bit, eating a bit, reading a bit more. Oh, what a relief it was when the plane landed, came to a halt, and she got up and went down the aisle and I could finally straighten my neck, breathe out, and relax.

Linda was waiting in the arrivals hall when I came out. She had dressed smartly and was happy. We kissed, checked in, and spent the hour before the plane departed having a beer in the café where I had been that morning. It felt decadent, I never drank when I traveled because there was always something I had to do on my arrival, and Linda and I seldom drank together anymore either because we always had children around us.

It was a feeling of freedom. For the next two days we could do exactly what we wanted. No children, no writing, no readings, no interviews. Just us two. The cloud hanging over everything, the book I had written about us that Linda hadn't read yet, I cast from my mind. There is a time for everything. She would get the manuscript on our return. For the moment she knew nothing and the weekend would be spent within that nothing.

The sun had gone down when we boarded the plane. The atmosphere in the bright cabin was quite different from what it had been on the Oslo-bound plane because the language on all the signs and advertising stickers was foreign, the faces of the cabin attendants another type, but also because of the darkness which, as we rose through the air, soon shut us in and defined the space with such incredible clarity: here we were, high above the ground, on our way down Europe to one of its old capitals while nameless, unknown towns lay like luminous jellyfish in a sea of darkness beneath us, and what the sharply defined space said was "travel," in the same way that a train compartment said travel, a ship's cabin said travel and for that matter a cabin on a zeppelin said travel. Not travel as movement but travel as mythology. Travel in the twenties and thirties; travel in the fifties and seventies. And not

Europe in the sense of geography, but Europe as mythology. It was fantastic that the towns had been there in the Middle Ages, indeed that they had been what was the Middle Ages, what was the Renaissance, what was the Baroque, not to mention the world wars in the previous century, it was fantastic that they were still there, scattered across the continent beneath us, and they were so different, had such different auras and meanings, permeated by time, each in its own way. London and Paris, Berlin and Munich, Madrid and Rome, Lisbon and Oporto, Venice and Stockholm, Salzburg and Vienna, Bucharest and Manchester, Budapest and Sarajevo, Milan and Prague, just to name a handful. Prague, it was Golem, the man-made man, and it was Kafka. It was the Faustian Middle Ages and the nineteenth-century dual monarchy, it was the communist 1950s and the capitalist 2000s of the unsophisticated and vulgar Eastern European variety.

What was the difference between reality and our perception of it? Did reality exist, was it beyond our reach? For perception-less reality was also a perception.

What did the moods and impressions these names evoked mean? They meant nothing. But neither did our lives, if we took away our perceptions of them.

The hotel was by the river, beside the old bridge, and our room had windows overlooking the water. It wasn't luxurious, no minibar or TV, but it was classy in the same way that the old hotels along the fjords in Vestland are classy, those that have retained the interior from the turn of the previous century, as they had done here, unless they had recreated it, that is. We put down our luggage and went out to eat. It was nearly ten, so we chose the first – and the best – restaurant, on the other side of the bridge, with tables along the river illuminated by small lantern-like lights. It was hard to grasp, at least for me, that we were here, beside the black flowing water with the old bridge arched over it, the castle towering up behind us, it was as though everything that moved around us was somewhere else, even when we were crossing the bridge a short time before and had our feet on it, that had been the feeling.

We ordered a bottle of red wine and clinked glasses. Linda's dimly lit face blazed in the darkness, her eyes glittered, she placed her hand on mine and a warmth spread through me. The food arrived, we ate, from behind us came the sound of Norwegian voices and the feeling that we were completely free was gone, suddenly there were people who could see us. Linda noticed the change in me and asked what was wrong. I said there were Norwegians here and that I was beginning to weigh everything I said on their scales, hear everything with their ears. She said that sounded terrible and I had to stop doing it. I said I would try. Then I told her about what had happened on the plane. She laughed at me. We paid and wandered around the town before going back to the hotel. The next morning we woke up early and were unable to sleep in, even though we tried, our circadian rhythms were in tatters after five years with small children, instead we had breakfast and went out into the morning-empty, Sunday-quiet town which was slowly getting warmer, had a coffee at a café and on our way back a few hours later we bought tickets for a ballet that evening, Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, which we thought must be wonderful here in old Eastern Europe. In the evening we dressed up, I put on a white shirt, a tie, and suit, Linda a dark dress, and then we left for the theater. I imagined marble staircases, balconies clad with red plush, men in tailed coats and women in white evening gowns. I had found instructions for how to get to the theater on the computer in the lobby, but I didn't print them out, and when we arrived in the area we walked around for a while, unable to find the street. With only ten minutes before the performance was due to start we began to run. Linda asked a woman in a kiosk where the theater was, she didn't understand, Linda showed her the ticket, she pointed, we set off in the direction she indicated, nothing, we came into an open square, no theater, we crossed it and ran down a narrow street where there was nothing but apartment buildings, turned, ran back, crossed the square again, Linda asked someone else, this time a fat man with a dog, he spoke English and said it was in the parallel street, we rushed off in that direction, found the name of the street, ran up and stopped, there it was at last. But instead of the large palatial theater I had imagined, something like the opera house in Proust's novel, we were standing in front of a building that looked more like a cinema of the run-down, lugubrious variety. Surely this couldn't be it? But, yes, it was, the name on the elegant, ornate tickets we had been given matched the name above the door. We entered, and the shabby music-hall feel of the building became even stronger. The auditorium was small and dowdy, the stage tiny, there was no orchestra pit, let alone an orchestra. The audience was meager and seemed for the most part to consist of disoriented tourists, but not as disoriented as the two of us, who had dressed up and were attracting interested looks as we made our way along the row of folding chairs to find our seats. Oh no, I said to Linda, what have we got ourselves into here? The dancing might still be all right, she said, taking my hand as we sat waiting. Around us the lights dimmed, but not much, and in front of us, on the stage, the lights came on at the same time as someone put on the CD they were going to dance to. The music came from two loudspeakers on a stand on either side of the stage, and after a few minutes without anything much happening two young ballet dancers jumped out, they must have been sixteen or seventeen, probably students, and from their dancing bodies came nothing, all their movements seemed to stay inside them as they gyrated and jumped and sallied back and forth across the stage, every step a thud on the floor. I was none too fond of ballet, I was there for Linda's benefit and squirmed with embarrassment at all the awkwardness and lack of grace unfolding in front of our eyes. Linda had spent so much time in front of the mirror preening herself. It was the only full evening we had in Prague and we were going to spend it here of all places. I looked at her. She looked at me. Then she smiled. I think it's the worst show I've ever seen, she whispered. And that's saying quite a bit, I've seen a lot of bad dancing. Shall we go, I whispered. Let's wait until the interval, she whispered. And we did. We found a bar instead, where we sat for the rest of the evening chatting and getting drunk. The next morning we slept in, had lunch somewhere at the foot of the hill where the castle stood, in a courtyard, and then we walked up to the castle, visited an art exhibition, and afterward went to an outdoor café on the margins of the castle precinct, overlooking a forest below. It was warm, like in summer, we both had a cold beer, suddenly she took out a pen and wrote down the song she had sung at my fortieth, six months earlier, after which she passed it to me. I had asked for it some months ago but had forgotten. I'd had a party at home, there were twenty-odd guests and I had let it be known that I didn't want any speeches. Espen, Tore, and Geir had taken no notice, so when Linda stood up I was expecting another speech.

"Vanja once said there are no grown-ups in this family," she said. "But I think you're well on the way to becoming one and I hope I'm not far behind. But I'm not going to make a speech. I was thinking of bursting into song. And as I never learned to play an instrument I was thinking of playing the ukulele."

She took a few steps back, and when she reappeared she was holding a ukulele. I knew she couldn't play and feared the worst. But it transpired one of the parents at the nursery school had taught her, she had learned the chords of a song, and whenever I had been out during the previous month she'd practiced.

So there she stood, playing and singing a song to me. It was the one she handed to me in the castle café and I read it with tears rolling down my cheeks.

Only once I saw that man
My eyes were transfigured
He moved like the wind
Swift and bold, master of his fate
He looked at me and smiled
He saw me blush and smiled
And he walked on by
But he did walk by

Then I saw the man again
My eyes were transfigured
He beamed like the sun
He was to turn my life around
He touched me and smiled
He touched my hand and smiled

And he didn't walk on by
No, he didn't walk by

The days have turned to years
And my eyes are transfigured
Such a man, such a man is he
A touch of his hand made my life complete
He looked at me and smiled
I saw his lion heart and smiled
Karl Ove, my beloved
I love you so, I love you so.

I had never even entertained the idea of having a party on my fortieth; it had been absolutely out of the question. But in early autumn the previous year, September 2008 to be more precise, when we had been visiting Yngve in Voss, Linda and Yngve had brought up the subject. We had been sitting on the veranda in the evening, after the children had gone to bed, each of us with a glass of red wine in hand. The sky above us was pitch black and ablaze with stars. The air was cold and clear.

"We've been talking about your fortieth birthday," Linda said, looking at me in the faint light from the veranda door.

"Have you?" I said.

"Yes, we have. We've decided you should have a big party and celebrate it properly."

"Invite everyone you know," Yngve said. "And maybe Lemen and Kafkatrakterne could play."

"But that's the last thing I want," I said. "I couldn't imagine anything worse."

"We know that," Linda said. "But you've been hiding out for long enough, haven't you?"

"But there's nobody to invite."

"There are lots of people," Yngve said. "You know more people than you imagine. If you give it some thought."

"Possibly," I said, looking at Linda. "If it were up to me I'd celebrate it with you, like any normal birthday. That's nice, too. You come in with candles and presents and sing 'Happy Birthday.' That's enough celebration for me."

"Of course," Linda said.

"But this isn't for you," Yngve said. "It's to give everyone you know a chance to make a fuss over you. And to have a party. If you send out invitations in plenty of time so people can plan, book hotels, and planes, and so on, I'm sure everyone'll come. I'm definitely up for it anyway."

"That I don't doubt," I said with a smile. "But you didn't celebrate your own fortieth."

"And I regret it."

"So what do you say?" Linda asked.

"No," I answered.

Something about the suggestion did appeal to me though, it was true what Linda had said, I'd been hiding out for long enough.

Why had I done that?

It was a form of survival. In my terrible twenties I had tried to involve myself in the life around me, normal life, the one everyone lived, but I'd failed, and so strong was my sense of defeat, this glimpse of shame, that little by little, unbeknown to myself as well, I shifted the focus of my life, pushed it further and further into literature in such a way that it didn't seem like a retreat, as though I were seeking a refuge, but like a strong and triumphant move, and before I knew what was happening it had become my life. I didn't need anyone else, life in my study and the family was sufficient, actually, more than sufficient. It wasn't because I had problems with the social world that I withdrew from, no, it was because I was a great writer or wanted to be one. That solved all my problems and I thrived on it.

But if it was true that I was hiding, what was I frightened of?

I was frightened of other people's judgments of me, and to avoid this I avoided them. The thought that anyone would like me was a dangerous thought, perhaps the most dangerous one for me. It never occurred to me, I didn't dare think it. I didn't even think that Mom might actually like me.

Or Yngve or Linda. I assumed they didn't, not really, but that the social and family bonds we were entangled in nonetheless meant that they had to see me and listen to what I had to say.

If I had been responsible for only myself there would have been nothing to consider. I would manage whatever the circumstances. But I had three children with Linda and didn't want them to grow up in a home that was hidden away, didn't want them to believe that hiding was an acceptable way of engaging with the world. All I could give them was what I was giving them now, and this wasn't given through what I said but what I did. I wanted them to be surrounded by people, I wanted them to become independent and fearless, able to develop their full potential, by which I mean to be as free as possible within the unfree limits of this society. And, most important of all, I wanted them to feel secure in themselves, to like themselves, to be themselves. At the same time they had the parents they had, I thought, and we couldn't change our personalities in any fundamental way, which would have been both senseless and catastrophic: having two parents who pretended to be something they weren't would obviously just bring more misery. This was about our living conditions. They were fixed, but not immutable. The way I had behaved during the first three or four years of having children, when, much too often, I took out my frustrations on them, must have affected their self-esteem, the one thing in them you, as a parent, mustn't fuck up. I had got out of this, it hardly ever happened anymore, we never argued in front of them now and I never lost my temper, but I said a silent prayer almost every day that this hadn't left any marks, that what I had done wasn't beyond redress. I imagined that their self-esteem was a beach, I had left my footprints there, but then the waves washed ashore, the sun shone, the sky was blue, and the water, so fantastic at adapting to its environment, covered everything, erased everything, salty and cold and wonderful.

I thought about this, but I knew I should never intervene directly, I should never let these concerns, which all parents feel, take on a form that they would notice and react to. Vanja wasn't even a year old when she began to close her eyes if strangers visited, and where did that come from? Was it genetic, a shyness so great that it forced her to shut out everything? Or had she picked it up from us, the atmosphere in the house, the way I behaved with other people? It continued, she hid from strangers, and if she couldn't do that she closed her eyes, the last occasion at the age of three and a half years old in the stroller one afternoon, we met one of the parents from school, Vanja slid down and pretended she was sleeping. It didn't matter, but it bothered me nonetheless, I just wanted her to be happy. The worst that could happen was that she noticed my unrest. I shouldn't tie them to me, shouldn't allow my concerns to be noticeable, I should just try to fix everything quietly. I had to snap out of my prevarications, my evasive looks, my reclusiveness, my life closeted in the study.

Linda had much of the same in her. But with her it was changeable: an introverted, depressed, and passive period in the daytime when she was unable to do anything but lie on the sofa and watch undemanding films was followed by an extroverted, enthusiastic, and very active period when she suddenly would swing the children around as if nothing in the world could be more natural. So there were two of us with problems adjusting to our surroundings. A mother and a father. Their mother and father.

When we got married, in the spring of 2007, the wedding had been as minimal as possible. Linda's maid of honor, Helena, my best man, Geir, and his girlfriend Christina, Linda's mother, Ingrid, and my mother, Sissel. Five people attended our wedding in the town hall, lasting two minutes, plus Vanja and Heidi. An hour later only five people sat around the table we had booked in Västra Hamnen and ate with us. No speeches, no dancing, no fuss. That was how I wanted it, I hated being the center of attention, even with people I knew.

Did Linda want it like that?

She said she did, and I believed her, but later I realized that she might have wanted a bigger wedding. For me the fact that we were marrying was the most important; for her the emphasis was more on the way we did it.

In the evening we went to Copenhagen without the children, stayed at the Hotel d'Angleterre, had dinner at a nearby fish restaurant, and the next day flew with the children to the Canary Islands, Linda pregnant with John, and spent two weeks there, at a terrible holiday center for Scandinavians where they showed the Norwegian nine o'clock news on TV in the bars and sold *Dagbladet* in the lobby. We arrived absolutely exhausted, schlepped the enormous pile of luggage, double stroller to the waiting buses, the children hungry and thirsty and snarling with irritation, drove through the barren, desert-like landscape, from which the holiday bunkers and shopping malls had extracted all hope, and arrived an hour later at the place where we were going to stay. Rows of two-story concrete blocks, a parched lawn, asphalt, and two big hotels, all inside high fences, next to a pile of rocks, full of Scandinavians and Brits, this was the location for our honeymoon. I was so wound up with frustration and Linda was so exhausted that she began to cry when I growled at her for not being able to find the key when we were standing outside the door. Vanja got angry with me; I shouldn't talk to Mommy like that. Heidi looked frightened. We went inside, the two rooms were dark, but there was a balcony, which was something at least. I ventured out to buy some food, close by there was a sort of supermarket. When I returned Heidi and Vanja were in their swimming suits. For them this was a fairy tale come true, so, I realized, if I pulled myself together, they would be happy.

For us it was anything but a fairy tale. In fact, the very antithesis. There was nothing enchanting about it, there was no magic, not so much as a hint of allure. We fell into a rhythm: out of bed at half past five when Heidi woke up, play a movie on the laptop to kill the first uneventful hours, shop for breakfast when the extortionate supermarket opened, eat, go down to the pool and swim with the children until lunch, have lunch in the restaurant there, which catered for several hundred customers and served hamburgers, sausages, and spaghetti, with waiters who hated us, then take Heidi home for a nap while one of us went with Vanja and sat in a café drinking coffee while she drew with crayons and ate ice cream. Go swimming again when Heidi woke up, play for a while in one of the two small playgrounds, eat at one of the four restaurants, and then take part in the evening entertainment for the children. This was provided by a happy young Swede, maybe nineteen years old, who played songs on a stereo that the children were supposed to sing along to, he threw in a few comments about a clown coming later and asked if they were enjoying themselves. The clown was the star turn, he came, danced around, and handed out lollipops to everyone, then he was gone. A couple of times we took the children to the Teddy Bear Club, they were too young to be left on their own and too shy to do anything but stare at the young person dressed up as a teddy bear or draw pictures.

One evening toward the end of the first week there was to be a birthday party for the clown and all the children were invited. Vanja who, along with Heidi, stared wide-eyed at the clown every evening, and didn't see that behind the mask was a Swedish kid with, at best, one semester of drama under his belt, was really looking forward to the party. She put on her nicest clothes and went there with her mother full of excited anticipation while I strolled with Heidi along a path beside the sea. We had arranged to meet up at the evening event. Heidi sat calmly in the stroller looking into the distance. Her eyes were large, in photos her face was all cheeks and eyes, in character she was gentle and outgoing. When she was born Vanja clung to her mother with a passion and Heidi was left to me, I carried her around the apartment, first the one in Stockholm, then the one in Malmö, so often that she never really weaned herself off it, she still wanted to be carried. I wanted it too, there were few things I liked more than having her in my arms, and even if I knew she should walk as much as possible, to become independent and self-reliant, all it took was a pair of outstretched arms for her to be back. As was the case this afternoon as well. With the stroller under one arm, Heidi in the other I walked toward the café on the headland, only twenty meters or so above the breakers, which both she and I stared at hypnotically as we passed. At the café she had an ice cream, and the concentration she ate it with was a relief because no matter how close I felt to her there was always an element of self-consciousness or perhaps even shyness in my relationship with her, which was also true of Vanja when I was on my own with her, just different, as she was older and more verbal. It felt as though I always had to perform with her, we couldn't just walk in silence, so I filled it with little comments and questions. What a relief when she laughed! Only for the pressure to return in the ensuing silence. All this was emotion, but rationally I knew it was OK to go through quiet periods with your children, that they absolutely did not have to be entertained all the time, they had to learn it didn't matter if nothing happened, and that expectations of something special didn't come from them but from me.

What kind of person is shy with his own children? And what does it do to the children?

Getting really close to Heidi, which I did this evening when she suddenly placed her soft cheek against mine and smiled, was too much to endure. I walked faster and almost ran down the narrow asphalt path beneath the tropical trees, the wind from the Atlantic gentle and fresh against my face and the lights from our holiday center glowing far ahead of us in the falling dusk.

The clown's birthday party, which Vanja had been looking forward to all week, had not been as she had imagined. At first the staff refused to allow Linda in, the whole point of the exercise was that parents would not be present, the idea was that they should have a few hours on their own, so if Linda had time for Vanja, this was not the place to be.

"They didn't want to be seen," Linda said. "They didn't want us there because it would've shown them up."

"The clown wasn't there, Daddy!" Vanja said. "He didn't go to his own birthday party."

The children had each been given a party hat and sat around a table drawing a picture for the clown's birthday. They were then given a glass of soda and a hot dog and a piece of cake, which they ate in silence. They asked the staff when the clown was coming, he would be there soon, they were told. Then they played for a while, without the clown or any real enthusiasm since they didn't know one another and despite encouragement from the staff. Vanja didn't want to join in, she sat on Linda's lap and kept asking when the clown would be coming and why he wasn't there already. Finally the party was over, they trooped out, over to the stage where all the other children were sitting waiting for the clown, who did finally make an appearance, performing his standard routine with one exception, he collected the drawings from the children who had been at his party.

Vanja didn't understand this. How could the clown not turn up for his own birthday party?

We couldn't of course tell her the truth – that the pathetic tour operators didn't give a shit about the kids and didn't want to waste resources on them – so we said that Coco, which was the clown's name, had been pleased with the drawings, and the cake had been good, hadn't it?

And so the days passed on our package tour. Even though we disliked it intensely, both of us, something developed that we only became aware of later, when we talked about it, and the atmosphere on those evenings, sitting on the balcony reading and talking while the children slept indoors, suddenly became something we longed for and would happily experience again. The lapping of the sea, the immense dark sky above us, strewn with stars, the sounds of the tropical night. I read Gombrowicz's diaries there, they were fantastic, and this merged into the world of Scandinavian strollers, worn-out parents of small children, and pee-warmed swimming pools in a strange, almost alluring way: this was life too! This is how it could be too. Embrace it! But while we were there ennui was the dominant mood apart from two moments, one when I was on a dolphin safari with Vanja, out at sea, and the beautiful creatures playfully plowed through the water just below the railing where we stood, and not only I, but Vanja too, thought it a magical sight. When we talked about it afterward it turned out that her attention had been caught as vividly by the man who, on our return journey, went white in the face, rushed to the railing, and threw up. I could still feel how she had placed her little head in my lap and fallen asleep, and the rush of pleasure it gave me. And the picture of the Knossos dolphins I had seen once in a museum on Crete came to mind, the simple but almost unbelievable joie de vivre that lay in that fresco. Such simplicity was difficult to imagine in northern European art from that period, which was ornate to a far greater degree, and in the preornate era, in the Stone Age with its simple rock carvings, the simplicity of the line drawings was only on the surface, for humans and animals were interconnected in other, profound, and to us incomprehensible ways, the thinking behind this art was ritual and magical, whereas the Knossos dolphins were only dolphins. This fact basically ripped the bottom out of the theory I had just read, and loved, because it turned one perception of the world on its head, namely, the Italian nuclear engineer and pseudo-historian Felice Vinci's idea that Homer's *Odyssey* actually took place in the seas between Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Like so many others, Vinci had been puzzled that the geography in the *Odyssey* was so much at variance with the real geography of the Mediterranean area, even if the names were the same. Ithaca was described in a way that did not fit Ithaca as it was, and it was the same everywhere. When Vinci for some reason looked north he discovered that the geography there fit the descriptions to a tee. Aeaea was Håja in northern Norway, Thrinacia was Mosken in Lofoten, Scheria was Klepp in Rogaland, the Peloponnese was the island of Sjælland in Denmark, Naxos was the island of Bornholm, the northern part of Poland was Crete, Faros was the Swedish island of Fårö, and Ithaca was the little Danish island of Lyø. If you went to Lyø you would see Homer's description perfectly matched the topography of the island. The notion was beguiling and it couldn't be rejected out of hand either as it solved a number of problems regarding the epic poem, for instance the fact that they light a fire in midsummer, which is odd when you know how hot the days are in the Mediterranean at that time of year, or the fact that the sea is often ascribed hues that are alien to the Mediterranean as we know it but more normal in northern waters. Vinci also had an explanation for how the whole transformation from the north to the south had come about: the people Homer describes lived for a long time in the north, but then, because of the change in climate, they were forced south, down to the Mediterranean, where they simply gave places the same names they had used in their earlier home. Hence the geographical mismatches between the book's Ithaca – which was Lyø in reality – and the real Ithaca. Ithaca was "Ithaca" or New Ithaca. But what really flew in the face of the notion, I now realized, with Vanja quietly breathing on my lap and the wind blowing straight into my face, surrounded by that strangely intoxicating mix of gasoline and salt, and slightly seasick though happy nonetheless, were the cultural differences between places. It is not only people who define the culture of a place; the place itself also defines the culture of a people. There is a direct line between the Knossos dolphins and the horses in the Parthenon friezes or between the smiling kouroi and the magnificent bronze statue of a bearded man, presumably Zeus, which was found at the bottom of the sea off the coast of Greece in 1928, or between the first Doric temples and Aristotle's philosophy. I am talking about the joy of experiencing the world as it is, as it presents itself to the eye. For that is what the Greeks did, they set the world free. The radical nature of Greek art, which deals with the world as it is, with no links to any secret world or any deeper truth, can in consequence probably only be compared with the idea that man was the son of God. One of the most interesting things about the development of Greek art is how the demand for authenticity seemed to increase, as though every move to make the world more visible was bound up in a new way with the invisible, which only then was made apparent and subsequently rejected. The archaic statues, with their inscrutable smiles, were created from the same matrix, whereby the identical, nonindividual aspect is also a nonhuman dimension, and if you imagine them in front of a temple or a grave, out in the world among people and not in a museum, they must have had a formidable, intimidating effect, for the nonhuman in human form, that is death or the divine. Their time is not ours. Their place is not here. The classical statues the Greeks made some centuries later are individual through and through, with none of those frightening nonhuman qualities about them, they point neither to death nor the divine, but are wholly human. There is however a dignity and beauty about them that in a sense places them outside time, they are elevated, ideal, representatives and universal, which later generations attacked in the Hellenistic Period, when attention was focused on divergence, including its ugly or unattractive sides, and nothing was elevated, take for instance the bronze bearded boxer sitting on his own with cuts to his arms and legs and a broken nose, apparently at rest after a boxing match, his head cocked, looking to his right, scowling almost or a little aggressive, as though his peace has just been disrupted by a call or a sarcastic remark. He looks slightly stupid, but the strength and latent brutality of his body seem to eclipse that, stupidity is not what defines him. Here, in this statue, made by one Apollonius in the last century before Christ, there is nothing that points to anything beyond this particular moment, what we see is everything, nothing is hidden, neither death nor the divine, nor man as an idea or ideal, this is the world as it is, no more, no less. But is it art?

What is art?

The conflict between what we know and what we don't is played out in all art, that is what has driven it over the centuries, and that situation is never fixed, never stable, because the moment we find out something new, something else new appears of which we know nothing. In their art, the Greeks were the first to ignore completely what they didn't understand, they concentrated on what they knew. There aren't any mysteries in Greek art. The Pyramids are an enigma, but not Doric or Ionic temples. Onstage this became a theme: Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* is about a man who doesn't know and about what happens to him as he is gradually enlightened and finally discovers the truth. The question of whether the tragedy lay in ignorance or knowledge is central because this was Greek culture's own great issue. But in the play there is both what Oedipus knows and what he doesn't know, and the emphasis is on his reaction to the unknown, not on the unknown itself. And Greek mythology, the whole pantheon, consisted of gods it was impossible to take completely seriously, they were too human for that, and the allure of the underworld, which is so strong in many other mythologies, not least Norse, is quite insignificant in Greek mythology, where the dead are shadows, in other words a darkness we are familiar with. What we see is what we are. But Plato, doesn't he look to a world behind this? Yes, in a way, but that world is no different, it is the same one, only stronger, as an object is stronger and more real than its shadow.

I found it difficult to imagine that an art such as Greek art could have been spawned in Polish forests or the Danish heathlands. Why, I didn't quite know. Many people have gone into this in the past, indeed I have myself read several interpretations of the southern and the northern temperament and climate by the great Swedish poet Vilhelm Ekelund, and even though it might be frowned upon to speak in these terms now, to say that culture was influenced by climate, as those who maintained this seldom did so without hailing northern clarity and simplicity as opposed to southern deviousness and peacock-like vanity, that was how it was, I thought to myself, only vice versa: clarity belonged to Mediterranean culture, lack of clarity to northern European culture. A forest where everything is hidden, everything is connected, and everything is always a sign of something else is not conducive to ideas of openness, clarity, and simplicity. That Norse culture became obsessed with ornamentation and interwovenness and American Indian culture with animals and always balked at objects in themselves is not in the least surprising and demolishes Vinci's otherwise fascinating idea that Odysseus ravaged the Skagerrak and the Baltics. This was what was going through my mind on the boat, which was full of tourists, while a voice announced over the loudspeaker that a whale had been spotted in the vicinity, but it had dived a few minutes ago and probably wouldn't resurface before we were back in the harbor. I told Vanja this when she woke up and we were about to disembark, she was disappointed, she wanted to see a whale so much, but contented herself with the thought that it had been out there with her. I praised her for going to sleep when she felt seasick, no one else had done that, I said, she was very clever, I said, and for the whole of the following year she remembered that and returned to it several times, the others hadn't gone to sleep, so they had been sick, but I went to sleep, do you remember that, Daddy?

We walked through the harbor area to the little beach in the middle of the town. I had swimming things in my backpack, but Vanja didn't feel like a dip, she wanted to go home to Linda and Heidi, so after she had polished off an ice cream in a café and I had bought her a pair of heart-shaped sunglasses we got on the bus and were soon speeding along the road, as it wound its way like a shelf around the cliffs over the sea, the sun burning high above us. Before I had paid for the sunglasses in the shop I spotted a clothes stand at the other end, and as I made my way there with them the assistant shouted, almost screamed, at me, the sunglasses, you have to pay for the sunglasses! That annoyed me because pilfering was not in my nature, to put it mildly, and I also had a child with me, so why did she think I was stealing? When I said this to her she didn't even apologize.

"Why weren't there any sharks?" Vanja asked, not looking at me, she was staring out to sea, so vast and blue and deserted, quivering with the reflections of the sun.

"I suppose they must have been somewhere else," I said. "And they might be a bit scared of dolphins, don't you think?"

I had the idea that dolphins held sway over sharks from *The Phantom*. He had two dolphins on the island of Eden, which pulled him along on his water skis. One of them was called Nefertiti, but the other one? Dolphi? Anyway, if sharks came, they drove them away.

"Why are they frightened of dolphins?" Vanja asked.

"I don't know," I said. "They're stronger, I think."

She accepted that. I studied her, the little head, her blue eyes, the slight squint as she stared out to sea. Was she thinking about sharks, dolphins, and whales? If she was, what were her thoughts? She was three and a half years old, her vocabulary was limited, and what she didn't know or understand was endless. How did that feel?

I smiled and tousled her hair. She was so lovely.

She looked at me seriously. Then she smiled too and looked out the window again.

Had she done that to humor me?

I stared at the craggy mountainside flashing past the windows on the right like a film. Maybe her thoughts were basic and undeveloped, but they must have filled her mind in the same way mine did. They must have been just as important for her as mine were to me. So it couldn't be the understanding that thoughts produced that was the point of them, their objective content, but just their interaction with feelings, sense impressions and consciousness. Whatever was connected with the sense of oneself. So why push your thoughts so far and measure yourself by that yardstick? Intelligent, not intelligent, brilliant, not brilliant?

That awful sales clerk.

I stretched a leg out into the central aisle and leaned back. The trip had gone well. Vanja was happy, and the unease I had felt in the morning, that she might get bored and yearn for Linda and Heidi, had completely gone.

Something important, close to me, flagged itself up.

What was it?

Something I had been thinking about.

I looked out the window.

Something out there.

The sun?

The dark blue sea?

The slightly curved horizon? The feeling of being on a planet whirling through space?

No, no. The boat we had been on, Vinci's theory about Homer.

That was it.

What was so important about that?

Let's see . . .

The bus braked sharply, I looked ahead, there was a big white semi in front of us on the bend. We backed up.

"What's the matter, Daddy?" Vanja said.

"We have to back up because of a truck," I said. "Feel like some chewing gum?"

She nodded.

"It's adult chewing gum," I said.

"Does it taste like toothpaste?" she asked.

"Yes, just like it," I said, putting one of the small tablets into her outstretched hand. Popped three in my mouth as the truck slowly passed the windows. The peppermint taste spread like a miniature storm in my mouth.

Ah, yes. It made no difference to Vinci's theory that Mediterranean art had got close to the world in its representation of it and torn it free from all fetters. If Odysseus's adventures had taken place in the north, the accounts of them need not have been written there. And was this not what constituted the battle in the *Odyssey*? A battle between the mythical world represented by the Cyclops, Circe who turned the crew into pigs, the song of the Sirens, in other words a magic reality, and the new, as yet unrealized, nonmagical world from which Odysseus with his reasoning powers and ingenuity comes and which he brings with him? Horkheimer and Adorno had understood this conflict as the very dialectic of enlightenment, the place where reason liberates itself, and the barbarism of the Second World War as the place where it comes crashing down again. They were clear-sighted, it was brilliant, but I had never gone along with the implicit idea of progress in it, that the enlightened world was better than the unenlightened world, reason better than unreason, perhaps only because my own thoughts were obscure, unclear, superstitious while, at the same time, intelligible and sensible. I felt the irrational was always as important, or as dominant, as the rational. Inside me all of this ebbed and flowed, and all my thoughts, even at their most precise, were invariably colored by feelings and urges. Oh, the Sirens, they also sing for us, death lures us too, the song of decay and destruction never ceases, for in it lies the new, that which is to come, this is how life is organized. We can develop culture, we can elevate it higher and higher and we can shut out the song of the Sirens. But people are not identical with the culture in which they live, although it is easy to believe they are, as we are born into it and grow up in it. A sophisticated culture has to be sustained, it requires a great effort from all and sundry, as though they are living beyond their capabilities, until the culture's structure is strong enough to carry itself, which is treacherous as a lack of effort makes the construction invisible and we merge into the culture in which we live. Then it becomes natural, it is the only option, there is no beyond anymore, which is where the Sirens are, and barbarism becomes incomprehensible, evil, nonhuman. How can a brilliant literature professor become one of the worst war criminals in the Balkans? It's a mystery! Incomprehensible!

Knut Hamsun knew this. In almost all of his novels the enchanted and disenchanted worlds lie side by side, with the insight that is gained thereby, that all of this is of no real consequence since in the end life is empty and meaningless. But this too can be celebrated, and maybe this is what his books do.

"I've finished, Daddy," Vanja said, taking the chewing gum out of her mouth. I put out a hand and she placed the gum in it. I tore off the outside of the packet, wrapped the strip of paper around the gum and put it in my pocket. Far below us lay a little town of newly built hotels and holiday homes, shimmering white in the bright sunlight.

"Is it much farther?" Vanja said.

"No," I said. "Half an hour maybe?"

"How far away is it?"

"As far as the first part of *Bolibompa*."

"What's Heidi been doing?"

"How should I know! I've been with you all day."

"Did she get an ice cream?"

"I would think so. But you did, too."

"Yes."

We came into a biggish town full of dirty white-brick houses, unlit neon signs, and northern Europeans in holiday mode. Sand dunes were visible between the outermost rows of houses, above them the sea, blue and calm. The last kilometers were built up all the way: houses, supermarkets, garages, hotels, a whole forest of hotels. The bus was going fast, soon we would be heading down the hill to the last bay before our hotel, where we had gone for a walk one afternoon when we could no longer stand being in the compound and found a restaurant right by the sea. The waves had foamed and crashed against the terrazo wall, the wind made everything flap and bang, the shadows were long and sharp, the connection between the light over the countryside and the slowly sinking, burning globe in the sky hard to understand. The restaurant, overlooked by a hotel, was from the fifties or maybe early sixties and already in disrepair. Both Linda and I liked it, the atmosphere of transience and slow demise was irresistible, we sat down and ordered, but the girls were restless and irritable, so it was a case of gulping down the food and getting out as fast as possible.

The sixties, that was forty years ago. Not exactly ancient history. Nevertheless, even mass tourism was lent an aura of passing time.

Up the hill, into the right-hand lane and down to the big hotel complex where we were staying.

"There are Mommy and Heidi!" Vanja shouted.

And indeed, there they were, walking up the hill, Linda with her big belly pushing the double stroller, in which Heidi sat leaning back in one of the seats with her legs dangling, wearing a brightly colored summer dress. The bus stopped, we got off, and Vanja ran up the hill to meet them. I was curious to hear what she would say, often it turned out that she had experienced quite different things from me, but this time it was just that she had seen some dolphins and had fallen asleep to stop herself being sick.

"How did it go for you?" I said, coming to a halt in front of them.

"Fine," Linda said. "We've had a good time."

"Are you tired?"

"A bit. Nothing serious. I had a nap with Heidi."

"OK. Shall we go and get something to eat?"

She nodded and we strolled down toward the center, where the restaurants and shops were. They were concentrated around a kind of patio, half covered by a roof, with a little fountain in the middle. The floor inside the shops was the same as on the patio, terra-cotta tiles, and the lack of any distinction made me feel uncomfortable, in the same way that the sight of lawn turf being laid does. We found a table in the restaurant at the top end, ordered spaghetti bolognese for the children, I had a hamburger, Linda a pizza. The sunlight glinted and glistened on the metal railings running around the restaurants. People wearing swimming trunks and suits, with Crocs on their feet, *Foppatofflor* in Swedish, walked to and fro beneath us, many pushing strollers. The low sound of Euro-disco music came from the speakers above our heads. Vanja banged her knife against her glass and then Heidi followed suit. I told them to stop. Children plunge into everything, sound too, it never bothers them; if you have a lot of children in one room, such as at a birthday party, they can shout and scream and laugh amid a total cacophony, a noise level that is unbearable for adults but that they don't even notice.

Over the past few years I have become more and more sensitive to noise, it was as if the slightest little bang or clink went straight to my soul, which shook and trembled, and one day it struck me it must have been the same for Dad because if there was one thing he reacted to, if there was one thing he couldn't stand, it was noise. Footsteps across the floor, doors banging, cutlery clinking against crockery, children chomping their food. Mom, on the other hand, had never been bothered by noise. Perhaps she was more at peace inside herself, perhaps she was more closed to the world, perhaps it was only that her tolerance levels were higher. But Dad really lived on his nerves, nothing was at peace inside him, one sudden noise and he exploded.

Now it was my turn.

Not so loud! No, no, no! Stop it! DO YOU HEAR ME? BE QUIET!

Vanja slipped down from her chair and crawled under the railing. Heidi followed her, and soon they were both lying on their stomachs by the fountain splashing the water with their hands. I took out a pack of cigarettes and lit up. Linda sent me a miffed look.

"I am pregnant, you know," she said. "Couldn't you at least go and sit somewhere else?"

"Take it easy," I said. "I'm going."

I got up and headed for one of the tables farthest away. If I was sensitive to noise, Linda was sensitive to smells. It was like being married to a bloodhound. In her present state smoke for her was torture. But I was still annoyed that she had been so miffed. She didn't have to be so pissed off, for Christ's sake! I had barely had a chance to have a cigarette all day. How many had I actually smoked? Three? Yes. One in the morning, one in the café with Vanja, one now.

A waiter with a tray in one hand stopped in front of our table and put down the glasses of mineral water and soda. Linda looked up at him and smiled.

Down by the fountain Vanja and Heidi were giggling. Vanja dipped her hand into the water and flicked it at her sister, whose dress was already drenched at the top.

"Vanja!" I shouted. "Calm down now!"

She looked up at me. Several other people did too.

But at least she stopped, and the next time I looked over they were hanging from the metal railing on the other side.

After eating we went to the exit at the other end of the shopping center, past the restaurants, clothes shops, and souvenir boutiques, at Vanja's request we stopped in front of a big amusement arcade with plane simulators, car simulators, war-game machines, and one-armed bandits, continued past a couple of empty retail outlets, stopped again by a long counter where tickets for activities and excursions were sold. We had talked about getting out of the compound the following day, perhaps finding a good beach somewhere. An amiable-looking man of about my age came over to us.

"Do you know of a good beach nearby?" I asked.

Yes, he did. Taking out a brochure and showing us pictures of a magnificent beach, he said it was some distance away, but there was a minibus going there the following morning. I asked how much it cost. He replied that it was free. Free? I echoed in surprise. Yes. The beach actually belonged to a hotel, it was new, and all we had to do to get the free trip and the beach chairs was to commit ourselves to viewing the hotel and promise to tell our friends about it when we got home. That was voluntary too, of course, but it would be a great favor to him if we did, he said, as he would a get a bad reputation if everyone he sent just went straight to the beach.

"Please have a look at the hotel first and then you can go to the beautiful beach."

I exchanged glances with Linda.

"What do you think? Shall we? So that we get out a bit tomorrow?'

"Sure, why not?" she said.

The salesman handed us a form, we filled in our names and address, he gave us a ticket, we said goodbye, and returned to the compound, to the fenced-in playground behind the main hotel, where we stood side by side watching our two children go down the slide and play on the swings while people in sodden swimming suits with wet towels over their shoulders came past in a steady stream on their way back from the pools. In an hour's time they would go out again, couples dressed in short-sleeve shirts and cotton dresses, red-faced from the sun and the party atmosphere, on their way to have dinner at one of the restaurants, some of them holding their children's hands, some alone. The thought that many of them probably considered being here fantastic, indeed almost like paradise, and might have saved up for ages for this very holiday, moved me, there was something wonderful about it, as well as something sad, because the place was terrible, constructed only to shovel in money from sun-starved Scandinavians, a kind of advanced form of exploiting the unwary. The worst part was what it turned me into. Was I – someone who despised all this – any better than they were? Wasn't I actually the idiot here? They were happy, I was unhappy, but we'd paid the same money.

In the evening, after the children had gone to bed, I put on my running shoes and jogged up the hill, across the footbridge to the barren lava-black plain beyond the interchange. The idea was to get into the mountains and then run a little there to see something different from roads and hotels on my holiday. I followed a narrow asphalt road. The heat rose from the ground. The sun shone onto the mountains ahead of me. There wasn't a soul in sight. I was out of shape and ran slowly. In front of me a bus rounded the bend and came toward me. As it passed I saw it was full of elderly tourists. Where on earth had they been? My breath coming in pants now, I continued upward, the road went into a tunnel, another tourist bus came toward me, the roar of the engine reverberated against the bare rock face. At the other end was a little valley. There were more buses in a large gravel parking lot by an enclosed area that turned out to contain a Western town, as I had seen them on TV when I was growing up. If I hadn't known where I was, the deserted, sun-scorched countryside and the run-down wooden buildings could have tricked me into believing this was somewhere in the Wild West and not an island in the Atlantic off the coast of Africa.

I kept running. My T-shirt was slowly getting soaked, the sun sank into the sea, and when I returned to the compound it was almost completely dark. In the hall of our apartment I opened the door to the bedroom where Vanja and Heidi lay asleep. Their regular breathing, their limp arms and legs, and their total lack of awareness to their surroundings, where almost anything could happen without them reacting, had fascinated me from my first moment with them. It was as though they lived a different life, were connected to another world – to the dark, vegetal realm of sleep. It was so obvious where they came from, the unseeing existence inside their mother's body, and they clung to it long after their birth, when they just slept and slept. Their state wasn't dissimilar to when they were awake because their hearts were beating, their blood was circulating, nutrients and oxygen were being supplied, blood corpuscles created and destroyed, in their insides fluids and organs gurgled and pulsated, and even their nerves, the lightning of the flesh, shot through their own dark pathways as they slept. The sole difference was consciousness, though even this was present in sleep, except that it was turned inward rather than out. Baudelaire wrote about it once in his diaries, I recalled, what courage it took to cross the threshold into the unknown every night.

They lived as trees live, and, like trees, they didn't know. Tousled and heavy with sleep they would open their eyes the following morning, ready for another day, without giving a second thought to the state they had been in for almost twelve hours. The world was wide open for them, all they had to do was run out into it and forget everything, as the premise for openness is forgetting. Memory leaves trails, patterns, edges, walls, bottoms, and chasms, it fences us in, ties us up, and weighs us down, turns our lives into destinies, and there are only two ways out: insanity or death.

But my children were still in the open, free stage. And then I go and obstruct them! I was strict, said no, told them off! Why was I so eager to destroy the best thing they possessed? Which they would lose anyway.

I closed the door, took off my shoes, and was about to open the bathroom door when I changed my mind and, instead of taking a shower, took a beer from the fridge and joined Linda on the balcony, where she was reading. She put her book aside when I appeared. I sat down and lit a cigarette, but my lungs, which had just put in a hard shift, weren't up to it and I coughed for a long time.

"Why don't you stop smoking, Karl Ove?" Linda said.

I scowled at her and took a swig of beer.

"I want the children to have a father for as long as possible," she continued.

"I do too," I said. "Grandma said once I'll live to be a hundred. I believe that implicitly."

At last my lungs adapted and I was able to draw the smoke deep down.

We chatted about what had happened that day and what we would do on the next. Linda was sleepy, the dual life, the child in her belly, was taking its toll, and after a while she went to bed while I sat up reading. I was reading Witold Gombrowicz's diaries, and although I hadn't exactly been looking forward to it all day, it had been at the back of my mind as a vague presentiment of something good. I underlined sections as I read, which I seldom did anymore, but so much in these diaries seemed significant to me, and that was so rare, that I kept thinking I ought to reread them to remember and reflect on later. At regular intervals I put the book down, lit a cigarette, and gazed up at the enormous vaulted sky or down at the lights from the row of bungalows or at the trees along the avenue leading to the two swimming pools whose still surfaces were not visible from where I was sitting, but the mere thought of it had a calming effect. The reflection from the street lamps lent the green of the treetops an artificial tone, as though nature here, and not just the architecture, was man-made. But my mind didn't follow my eyes, didn't take note of either shapes or colors, drunken Brits or young Scandinavian families on their way home across the lawn – it drifted off on its own, in the dark shadows of consciousness, excited about Gombrowicz, to whom it didn't give another thought, didn't muse on but treated like a dog treats its owner after a long day's loneliness. Wagging its tail, licking, barking happily. With my heart and soul I knew these writings were important and my own writing had to go in that direction, into the emerging, the developing, the ever evolving. So I had to go down beneath the surface, beneath the ideologies, which you can only stand up to by insisting on your own experience of reality, and not by denying it, for that is what we do, all the time, deny the reality we have experienced in favor of the reality we have learned, and nowhere was the betrayal of the I, the unique and individual I, greater than in art, as art has always been the privileged domain of the unique. It almost seemed as though the prerequisite for creating art was to renounce art. In which case, that would be the most difficult of all because the creation of art wasn't loaded with value beforehand, and no one, least of all the artist, could know whether what was produced was just shit or something original and priceless. In the last years of his life Van Gogh suddenly became a name, the enormous progress he made from painting to painting was plain for all to see, and the light, which no reproduction in the world can recreate, given that it would miss its very essence, was ultimately rendered with an almost morbid abandon and beauty, which everyone who sees these pictures knows to be true to life, knows is demonstrable: this is exactly how it is. He hardly ever painted people, the rooms and landscapes are unpopulated, but not accidentally so, it is more as if the beholder is lost to them, hence dead. The way the dead see the world, that is how Van Gogh painted it. In order to get there, to the stark nothing of our lives in the midst of a world ablaze with color, he renounced everything. As he wanted only to paint, he renounced everything when he did that. And who, hand on heart, can say that he or she is willing to renounce everything? For everything does truly mean everything.

Well, I certainly couldn't, that's for sure.

Gombrowicz?

No, not everything. A lot, but not everything. He writes that the flight of art has to find its counterpart in the sphere of normal life, in the same way that the shadow of the condor spreads across the ground below. He writes that Gordian knots should not be solved with our intellect but with our lives. He writes that the truth is not just a question of argument but of attraction, that is, the power to attract. And he writes that an idea is and remains a screen behind which other, more important, things go on. There were no complicated truths. And they must have come at a price. The price was high, it was isolation, but the payoff, freedom of thought, was high too. In the ruthlessness of his thoughts he was akin to Nietzsche, and like Nietzsche's texts Gombrowicz's were descriptions of a path, not the path itself. If he had written about his sexual escapades with young men in the Buenos Aires harbor quarter, the joys and humiliations of these nocturnal adventures, the shame and the seduction, about waking up one Sunday in his filthy accommodation with the South American sun shining in through the window, about his many jobs, including one as a bank clerk, about his wounded pride, about his fantasies of nobility, in short, if he had described all the circumstances from which his thoughts – and through them his soul – rose, and in practice connected the highest (for even thoughts about the lowest rank among the highest in the diaries) with the lowest, that is, the fluff in his navel, the worm up his ass, the blood in his piss, the wax in his ears, or just an autumn day strolling in a park in Buenos Aires with a book by Bruno Schulz under his arm, he would have been the world's greatest writer, the modern-day Cervantes and Shakespeare, all rolled into one.

But he couldn't. He was free in thought but not in form, not quite.

Could I?

Fuck off, Karl Ove. You stupid little shit. I didn't even reach Gombrowicz's boot laces. The mere idea of saying something as honest and true about Norwegian literature anywhere near as honest as he did about Polish literature gave me a stomachache. Yes, my hands trembled at the very thought, that I could actually describe everything as it was. That all I had to do was just go ahead and do it.

What a treacherous thought!

"Just" my ass!

But Gombrowicz pointed, and said: that's how it is here, better go that way.

Perhaps I could do that?

If only I'd had a really profligate, sleazy past in the docklands of Buenos Aires, lived at the bottom like a crab, and gorged myself shamelessly on everything I came across, preferably killed someone with a rock to the head, as Rimbaud may have done, and, like him, fled to Africa and made a living as an arms smuggler, yes, anything but this, on a hotel balcony in the Canary Islands with two small children and a pregnant wife sleeping on the other side of the sliding-glass door, and all that this loaded the future with in terms of propriety and responsibility.

But there too Gombrowicz had given me a little hope, lit a barely perceptible flame in the great darkness of my banality. Didn't he write, "Physical comfort can sharpen the sensibilities of the soul, and behind the cozy curtains, in the suffocating sitting rooms of the middle classes, engenders a toughness of which those who attacked tanks with Molotov cocktails could never dream."

Oh, to hell with everything.

It would soon be four years since my last novel came out and I hadn't written anything of note in the meantime. Fuck all, in fact. For close to a year I've been fiddling around with an opening to a novel in which Henrik Vankel, the protagonist in my first novel and the intended writer of the second, wakes up in a hospital after a suicide attempt. I had left him in a bathtub in a house on an all-but-deserted island at the end of the previous novel, just after he had slashed his face and chest, and the idea was he would complete what he had started and cut an artery and slowly his blood would drain away, and his life too. I described how his eyesight was overrun, how there was something vegetative about the waning clarity, something growing and spreading inside him, it was death, and then the knocking at the door. Far, far in the distance, like outside a dream. Later it transpired it was the neighbor's son, one of the island's four other inhabitants, who had dropped by for a cup of coffee. A naval vessel lay anchored just off the coast, he contacted it, they took Henrik on board, and saved his life. I didn't believe in this story for a second, the part about the ship was particularly dubious and stupid, but there really had been a ship anchored up when I was living on the island, and it had made a great impression on me because it was somehow completely faceless, it just stood there in its world, with its cannons, not a single person to be seen on board. One day a little rubber dinghy was launched, it came into the bay in front of the house where I lived, four men in uniform pulled it ashore and ran inland. The dinghy lay there, beached, the whole day. In the evening it was gone. The next day the ship was gone too. All this was charged with meaning, so to speak, because both the ship and the crew of the dinghy stood out so incredibly clearly in an otherwise uneventful life on the island, they were out of the ordinary in every sense, although I didn't know what the meaning was. The events arrived sender unknown, out of nowhere, and the mysteriousness of the clarity fascinated me, it was like a poem. At the time a Russian submarine had sunk somewhere in the Barents Sea, the members of the crew were alive, but the boat couldn't be saved, and they died within a few days. While I stood brushing my teeth and surveying the mist-wreathed island with its yellow grass, dark brown rocks and crags, the surface of the water black and still, there were several hundred young Russians in a death trap somewhere out there at the bottom of the sea. At this very moment. When I joined my neighbor in his boat to go to the main island to buy some provisions, I saw the front pages of the newspapers as openings in the world. *Kursk*, *Kursk*. Every radio program started with an update on the situation. They were going to die in days, hours, minutes. I walked around the island, I sat reading, they were trapped in the deep. So all hope was gone, they must be lying there, every last one of them, at the bottom of the sea, like dead fish. Did they bang their fists against the walls in their last moments of life? Did they stagger around screaming with rage and despair? Did they lie there, motionless, waiting for the inevitable?

They died, and then they were forgotten, new accidents and disasters captured the world's attention. I too forgot all about it until I began to write about Henrik Vankel's last days on the island. Then I reflected that the events represented two diametrically opposed phenomena. One was the openness of our times, in which we are informed about everything, even about those dying at the bottom of a distant sea, *while it is happening*. The feeling this produced was one of constriction, a sense that we are never left in peace, we are always seen, there is no longer anywhere we can be alone. The way these incidents were dramatized created a familiarity with them. The second event, concerning the naval boat, wasn't dramatized at all, it was just something I saw, unprocessed, there was nothing familiar about it, it was an absolute mystery. From all this I concluded that writing had to move toward the unfamiliar, what we know but cannot describe. Actually that was true for everything because even if everything were explained and understood, it would always exist as a phenomenon as well, something in itself, closed off and apart.

The world had to be closed again.

But I was getting nowhere. I began to write about what happened in the grandmother's house when Henrik Vankel's father died and he was there with his brother, Klaus, but I didn't have an ounce of faith in it, everything was artificial and for show. I spent three weeks describing how Henrik took his luggage off the carousel at the Kristiansand airport, when Klaus went to pick him up, then I rejected it.

That was how far I'd got. For this reason, reading Gombrowicz was humiliating, the standard was so high, and to make things worse I agreed with just about everything he wrote.

I picked up the book and resumed reading. I had got to the last part, where Gombrowicz has left Argentina and moved to France. All the power, all the tension, and all the radicalism had disappeared from his prose, suddenly his style is drained of life and any remaining sharpness seems a little tired, mechanical, and repetitious.

What happened? Had he got old or was it the loss of exotic surroundings that did it? Europe is an old continent and that is where he came from, where he grew up, it was in him. In those days he was on familiar ground, he was strong, he was young. Could it be that this vitality, which otherwise would have died along with his curiosity, in his forties to judge from others, could it have been prolonged by his foreign adventures? Or was it just that he was dying in a dying culture, a bit like the composer in Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*?

I read for an hour. Then I went indoors and got into bed, in my running gear, I couldn't be bothered to change. The next morning I put on a film for Vanja and Heidi, *The Little Ghost Godfrey*, showered, had a smoke on the balcony, and went down with the others to the hotel entrance, where a minibus pulled up ten minutes later. We showed the tickets we had been given, placed the folded stroller and the bag of swimming things in the back, and got in. There were two other couples with us. Soon we were whizzing along the same cliff road Vanja and I had been down the day before. No one said anything, I gazed across the sea, squinting. Heidi started to cry, her face was ashen, was she carsick? She lay with her head on Linda's lap, Linda stroked her hair until she fell asleep while, luckily, Vanja was unaffected by any potential jealousy and stared across the sea, which lay like a floor beneath the roof of the sky.

Less than an hour later the minibus drove up a paved road to a resplendent luxury hotel on a hill, alongside verges of flowers, rows of palm trees, and lustrous green lawns. The driver stopped the vehicle, opened the door, and we – the motley package-tour family from Malmö – got out into the already oppressive heat. A woman with a name badge on her chest stood at the entrance looking at us. I unfolded the stroller, ashamed of all the stains on the canvas, looked over at her, and smiled politely. We're just going to the beach, I said. But we were supposed to take a look at the hotel first, I understand?

"Come this way, please," she said.

Vanja and Heidi stood looking around, slightly wary in these strange surroundings. Linda had her eyes fixed on me. She smiled when I met them.

We walked through the swinging door and into the reception area. The dark tiles on the floor shone in the light flooding through the enormous panoramic windows, the air was cool, the people working behind the counter wore suits or uniforms. Elevators went up and down all the time, not inside invisible shafts, but on the outside of the walls in glass tubes. Inside, there was a kind of shopping arcade with small, exclusive boutiques on both sides. It resembled an ocean liner, I thought, one of the gigantic luxury liners where no expense is spared and everything is available on board.

The woman with the name badge showed us into an area to the left of the reception desk with sofas and chairs, where a few lost tourists in holiday garb were sitting, and a counter where we were given a form to fill in. Name, address, telephone number.

What on earth was all this about?

We filled in the information, gave back the form, they said we could sit down and wait, we would be called when the time came.

Called?

Vanja and Heidi climbed up onto the stone ledge running along the inside of the window, crawled along on all fours, stood up suddenly like monkeys, and pressed their hands against the glass. Don't do that, I said, you'll leave marks. They ignored me, shouted to each other, crawled farther along. I checked to see if they had caught anyone's attention, they hadn't, and I sat down beside Linda, who was leaning back with her hands over her protruding belly. A TV screen hung from a column not far away, showing pictures of what I presumed to be the hotel where we were, probably the lower floor because there was a beach, the people there were suntanned and slim and seemed to be having a good time. Behind them was a building with terraces all the way up, filmed from a distance. A palace, a golden beach, and in the sea beyond a water-sports paradise.

Heidi knelt in front of a large flowerpot picking up the Leca pebbles from inside. I walked over to her, moved her away, and put the pebbles back while Vanja pressed her lips against the window, and I walked over to her and lifted her down. Can't you two come and sit with us for a bit, I said, but they couldn't, they wanted to go to the other end of the concourse where the avenue of shops started, there was an aquarium, and I went there with them, picked them up in turn so that they could see the fish close up, while glancing behind me from time to time to see what was happening. The people who passed us looked affluent, and I wondered what it was that made me think that, because it was the morning, they were on holiday and walked around wearing everyday shorts or skirts. Could it be something about their self-confident posture? Whatever it was I felt inferior and, with the children's arms and legs all over the place, lacking in authority and dignity.

That's Dad, Heidi said, indicating an unmoving yellowy-brown fish with an enormous lump above its head. And that's Mom, Vanja said, pointing to an elegant orange fish with a long veil tail. And that's me! Heidi cried. She directed a little finger at a tiny blue and yellow fish, beautiful as a jewel. That's me! Vanja said, and pointed to a red and white clownfish. Nemo! I'm Nemo!

"OK," I said. "Now we should go back. Come on, you little clowns."

They ran after me, taking their own illogical routes across the floor, and pulled up right behind the sofa where Linda sat, very abruptly in fact, for there, only a few meters away, stood a teddy-bear-like creature – as tall as a man with an enormous head – which, when it caught sight of us, started to walk our way. Ill at ease and probably afraid, but also fascinated and excited, they stared at it with innocent blue eyes and mouths agape. He stopped in front of them and stretched out a hand, but neither Heidi nor Vanja realized that they were supposed to hold it. He held a paw in the air as though he had suddenly remembered something, turned, and shuffled over to a table, then came back with two disposable cameras, which he handed to them.

"Mommy, Mommy, what's this?" Vanja said after he had gone.

"A camera, I think," she said.

"Can I see?" I said.

Vanja passed hers to me. It was a disposable underwater camera.

"You can take pictures underwater with this," I said.

"Can we?" Vanja said. "I want to do it! When are we going swimming?"

"Soon," I said.

"Why did we get it?" Vanja asked.

"I don't know," I answered. She raised the camera to her eye. Behind her a middle-aged man wearing jeans and a blazer came toward us. He was semi-bald with dark hair at the sides and holding a thin folder in one hand.

"Linda and Karl Ove?" he said.

We nodded, he stopped and shook our hands, told us in faintly accented Swedish to follow him and he would show us around. We walked down the arcade, he paused in front of a wall full of pictures, all of celebrities. Norwegian, Swedish, and the occasional American.

"They've all stayed here," he said.

"You don't say," I said.

He stretched out a hand, and we went down a long corridor. Tiles, mirrors, gilt balustrade.

"What do you do back in Sweden?" he asked.

"Karl Ove's a writer," Linda said.

"Linda is too," I said.

"How interesting," he said. "Might I have heard of you?"

"Karl Ove's quite well known," Linda said with a smile.

Why did she say that? Jesus Christ, how foolish.

"Ah!" he said. "Then we'll have to take a picture of you afterward and hang it on our celebrity wall."

"I'm not sure about that," I said.

He laughed out loud.

"I was only joking, sir," he said.

Red-faced with embarrassment, I looked down at the floor in front of me.

"I realized of course," I said.

"But perhaps you *will* be famous one day, you know. Then we'll hang up a picture of you. I promise you. If you become guests of ours here, that is!"

"Mm," I said.

He came to a halt by an elevator and pressed the button, which glowed dimly. Heidi stared at the light. Pressed the button. At that moment the door opened and an expression of shock spread across her face.

The elevator was almost completely covered with mirrors. I inadvertently glanced at myself for a brief instant. I looked like an idiot. The white T-shirt, bought for 49 kronor at Åhléns two years before, loose at the neck and a bit too tight around my waist where the fat bulged out, and the military-green three-quarter-length trousers with all the pockets and dangling laces, also bought at Åhléns, for 149 kronor, which in my imagination I had seen as pretty cool gear, and the worn-out Adidas, once white now gray, which I wore without socks, became in these luxurious surroundings a sort of curse, it was impossible not to feel deferential, undignified even, as the elevator sank to ground level.

"Where on the island are you staying then?" he asked.

Linda gave him the name of the hotel complex. He nodded.

"How much did you pay in all? For everything?"

"Twenty-five thousand," I said. "Then costs for food and so on top of that."

"That's not cheap," he said as the elevator came to rest and the doors slid open. The heat hit us as we exited. We were at the foot of the hotel, right next to the beach.

"Let's go this way," he said. "To that island. It was made when the hotel was built."

"Really?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "No expense spared here. Our prices are still low though. It's based on an entirely new holiday concept. It's a standard hotel in one way – you can rent a room – but it's also possible to buy a room or a suite if you want. Forever. You pay a one-time sum and then you can stay here every summer for the rest of your life.

"Oh?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "It's brilliant. It costs a lot less than an apartment would cost here. And at the same time you get so much more for your money. We're talking real luxury here."

Heidi had had enough. She stretched her arms up to Linda.

"I can't carry you, you know, my love," she said.

"Baby in your tummy!" Heidi said.

"That's right," Linda said.

"How old are your girls?" he asked. "How sweet they are!"

Vanja turned her head away, I lifted Heidi up and started to walk across the terrace, past an Italian café and ice-cream parlor, where two elderly ladies with wrinkled suntanned skin were sitting in bikinis drinking coffee, both wearing sunglasses and sun hats.

"Vanja's three and a half," I said. "Heidi's one and a half."

"And when are you expecting the next one? You are, aren't you?"

"Yes, we are," I said, with a glance at Linda. "In the middle of August, right?"

She nodded, walking a few paces behind us, holding Vanja's hand.

"And you live in Sweden?"

"We live in Malmö," Linda said.

"It's a nice town," I said. "Big enough and a little offbeat. But what about you? How come you speak Swedish?"

"I worked in Sweden for many years," he said. "In Stockholm."

"Oh!" I said. "We did too. Where did you live?"

"In Nacka," he said.

"In Nacka!" I said. "We've been there a lot. Some friends of ours live there."

"It's a small world," he said with a smile. "It's very nice there. I love Sweden."

"Mm," I said, putting Heidi down. "Now you can walk yourself. We want to go over there. Vanja, can you hold Heidi's hand?"

When we were on the island, which was like a park with trees and fountains, he wanted to know if we'd heard about the hotel. We hadn't. What about the concept then? It was in fact Norwegian, he said, and mentioned the name of the entrepreneur. I shook my head, then, to my surprise, Linda said she had heard of it. I looked at her. Had she really? He wanted to know where she'd heard about it, whether some friends had told her, she said she had seen a TV program. Was she making that up? If so, why?

He started to talk about the hotel, how elegant and luxurious it was, how the sand on the beach had been transported all the way from the Bahamas, the restaurants and shops were top class, all the rooms were magnificent, even those in the lowest price range, and there were always lots of Norwegians and Swedes here. All the time he was talking, beneath the dark blue morning sky, the sun beating down with such intensity that my shoulders, cheeks, and the bridge of my nose were burning, and the light seemed to neutralize all the nuances of the countryside around us, all this time I was keeping an eye on Vanja and Heidi, who wandered ahead of us and behind us. And the longer he was with us the more unkempt and dirtier I felt. He was silver-tongued and pleasant, had a kind of management air about him, and could well have been if not the hotel manager then perhaps his deputy. It was beginning to pain me that he was spending so much time on us. The idea was of course that we would talk about the hotel to our friends. But it was inconceivable that any of our friends would stay at this hotel, certainly not mine anyway, so we were wasting his time. I didn't know how to express this to him. At the same time it was as if he trusted us, as if he realized the way we dressed didn't convey the whole truth about our personal qualities, and I tried to reinforce this by being as friendly and jovial as I could. And, I told myself, I really *would* mention this hotel to people when we got home. We owed it to him, I thought, as we strolled along side by side. The sun didn't seem to have any effect on him; apart from a shimmering film of moisture on his forehead and above his top lip, the heat left him untouched.

At the far end of the island he stopped and turned. From here you have a wonderful view, he said. The best apartments are at the top, all with large balconies, as you can see. The less expensive ones are farther down, but they are all spacious and of a high standard.

"Yes, it really looks wonderful," I said. "Absolutely fantastic."

Linda looked at me.

"What do you think?" I said.

"Yes, it's very nice."

There was a negative tone to her voice and I felt a twinge of irritation. But he probably didn't notice anything. Only those closest to her could interpret the tiny variations of mood and temper that constantly emanated from her. No, not even them. Only I could.

"Perhaps we should go back," the man said. "Then you can see one of the apartments from the inside."

"I'm not sure that's necessary," Linda said. "We've formed a picture of what they're like now."

He looked at me, and I smiled apologetically.

"It wouldn't do any harm, would it?" I said. "We can have a little peep, can't we? Don't you think?"

She nodded, reluctantly it had to be said, but she assented, and I called the children, who of course didn't want to go. Vanja was beating the surface of the water in the fountain with a little stick she had found, Heidi was lying on her stomach with her hands deeply immersed in the water.

"Hey, girls, we're going now. We just have to see one room. There's an ice cream for you afterwards."

"Don't want one," Heidi said. I grabbed her around the waist and lifted her up.

"No!" Vanja said, and ran away. Heidi kicked and struggled. I laid her over my shoulder and ran after Vanja. Fortunately Heidi was laughing, that wonderful bubbly laughter she had come out with ever since the first few months of her life. I put her down, took a few quick steps, and caught up with Vanja, who had become jealous of her sister.

"I want Mommy," she said.

She always wanted Mommy, regardless of what I did. Sometimes I thought it was because I was so hard on her and unreasonable; sometimes I thought that was just the way it was.

"She's over there!" I said now. "All you have to do is walk!"

She squinted into the sun, and her mouth opened as though connected with her eyes in a secret, to her unknown, pact. I knew the mannerism from Linda. When I had been most in love and my insides burned like a forest fire it had been as though the slight movements of her lips passed straight into my soul. I had never been as open as I was then. The whole world streamed through me.

Vanja turned and ran over to Linda, grabbed her hand and snuggled up to her. Heidi had sat down on the ground; I lifted her up and followed the others.

In a corridor at the top of the hotel the man asked us to wait, he just had to check if the room was empty and had been cleaned.

"I want to go to the beach," Vanja said.

"Soon," I said. "We just want to have a look at this room."

"Why?" Vanja asked.

"Good question," Linda said, and smiled at her.

At that moment the man reappeared and waved us into a room. Open windows, curtains fluttering in the Atlantic breeze, light colors, shiny stone floor, the feeling of trespassing as Heidi and Vanja walked around, no sandals on the sofa, do you hear me, don't pull at it, no, be careful now, you might break it! He took us onto the large balcony, the sea blue and heavy and glittering in the sun, the sky vast and deep, the cliffs along the coast to the south in shade. The cars on the road there tiny, like busy insects. He said all this could be ours if we wanted, and without it costing us that much. I asked how much. He repeated that you pay a one-time sum and you could be here for a few weeks every year. It was like buying a stake in an apartment or in a mountain cabin, he said with a smile to me. No maintenance, no cleaning, everything taken care of, so we could have a luxury holiday every year for the rest of our lives. As parents of small children we deserved that, he said. Live in a paradise like this every single summer. And if you prefer to buy a stake in one of the smaller apartments you retain all the rights and the full service, of course.

He asked us to follow him. Making us such an offer meant that he actually believed we could afford something like this. That was why he was spending so much of his time on us. So at least he hadn't thought we were a traveling flea circus, as Linda was wont to call us. In the corridor he told us how much the cheapest apartment cost, and the most expensive. The price wasn't out of the question, at least not for the bottom of the range.

We were ushered into a huge carpeted conference room full of men in shirts and ties and women wearing blouses sitting in front of computers, many of them engaged in conversation with clients like us. There were several TV screens showing pictures of the hotel and the countryside around, there was a lounge with brochures displayed on a low table, the air was cool, almost cold, the atmosphere one of professionalism and efficiency. He guided us to a high table where there was a thick folder he asked us to peruse. It turned out that if you bought a stake you didn't have to come here every year because there were other equally luxurious hotels all over the world where we, if we paid the one-time fee, could stay free of charge. We wouldn't have that option if we bought the standard holiday home or mountain cabin. Now he would leave us alone, there was something important he had to do, but he would be back.

I thumbed through the folder, Linda took care of the children. My eyes lingered on a hotel in the Alps. The photo had been taken in the autumn, before the snow had fallen, and the sight of the countryside, the steep rock faces with the green conifers and the melancholic glowing foliage at the bottom, the fences and country roads, and the old, white-walled hotel awakened a great yearning in me. Oh, to be there. I turned the pages, there were hotels in Mexico, Italy, France. We could travel around the world every summer or autumn, the whole family, it would be a magnificent experience, at least for the children. Perhaps my mother could stand security so we could get a loan? Or I could get a bigger advance from the publisher?

I called Linda and showed her the photo of the hotel in the Alps. I suppose she must have seen how excited I was because she said it was lovely, but that we couldn't afford it. Don't say that, I said. We can probably wangle it somehow. It is actually a good opportunity. Not the hotel here necessarily, but all the others. And it's not a lot of money. Not really.

"We don't have any money," Linda said. "And I have a problem with the feel of this place. I've had enough of the upper crust in my life."

We sat down. It felt as though we were in a large prestigious law firm or at the European headquarters of a multinational company. The man who had shown us around appeared at the other end of the room a few minutes later and beckoned us over. Our relationship changed when we sat down on one side of the desk and he, with all his piles of papers and folders in front of him, on the other. We were his clients. He asked us what we thought of all we had seen, was this for us? So he assumed that we were affluent enough to enter into a deal. It felt good that he could see past our clothes and style. He was taking us very seriously. I said we were definitely interested. Perhaps not in this particular hotel, but all the others and the fact that you could move around. You could, couldn't you? I had to know for sure, I said. Yes, that was correct, he said. So would we be able to manage the financial side? I wasn't sure. It depended. Would you like us to look at it together? he asked. Yes, we can do that, I said as the children began to move around in territory that grew bigger the more secure they felt. What is your income? he asked. I told him how much I earned, the scholarship plus my monthly consultancy fee, and added that in the good periods, when I came out with a new book, it was much higher. Then I could earn several hundred thousand in one go. One way of doing this was to take out a loan now and then pay it off as the money came in. That is one option, yes, he said. How much are your monthly expenses? I told him, and he wrote it down and looked up at me. Do you have any savings? If not, it will be hard for you to get a loan on this. No, we don't have anything else, I said. But it would be possible to get someone to stand surety for us, I think. Do you think you could arrange that now? You can call from here free of charge.

I looked at Linda.

"That would be a bit stressful," I said. "Can't we do this when we get back home? Just take some papers with us and then read them at our leisure?"

He shook his head and smiled.

"What I'm giving you now is a special offer. You're entitled to it because you're here. It requires you to make up your minds rather quickly. There's a lot of interest, you know. We can't reserve it just for you."

"But we can't tie this up here and now," I said.

"Do you think you have the means to go through with this? If you know you have, you can sign now and juggle the finances when you get home. But you have to be absolutely sure."

"We can't afford it," Linda said. "Nowhere near."

He gave a sigh of resignation and leaned back.

I looked at her.

"We can try," I said. "We can do it if we want."

"But do we want to? I couldn't imagine coming here every summer for the rest of my life. It sounds like a nightmare to be honest."

The impoliteness of what she said cut me like a knife.

"I think it's really nice here," I said. "But the hotel here isn't the point. It's all the others we gain access to. Actually, I think it's a very good idea."

"But we can't make up our minds now. We have to think it over!"

I looked at him.

"Can we think about it? And then contact you from home?"

"As I said, the offer is only valid for today. But who was it you thought could stand surety for a loan?"

"My mother possibly," I said.

He pushed the phone over to me.

"You can give her a call now," he said. "Then we can clear this up right away."

"We need more time," I said. "We have so little money that such an outlay has enormous consequences for us. We'll have to think about it."

I spoke in an almost pleading voice so that he would understand I wished things were not as they were. But it didn't help. When I said that, he seemed to change personality. All his amiability was gone, his kindly eyes went black, he rose to his feet, his movements stiff with irritation.

"If you don't have any money, what are you doing here?" he said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"If you go out and turn right you'll come to a *terraza*. Take a seat and a colleague will come and take care of you."

He turned and walked over to one of his colleagues. I felt like running after him and apologizing again. Or telling him we were joking, of course we had the money, give me the contract and we'll sign. Instead I stood up, lifted Heidi, and we made our way to the exit with the defeat stinging and aching inside me.

"Let's just get out of here, no?" Linda said. "We don't need any more of this."

"We promised we would wait for his colleague," I said. "Out there, didn't he say?"

I nodded toward a *terraza* behind a glass partition. We went out, sat down at one of the tables. No one came, Heidi was tired, it was her bedtime and she whined while Vanja nagged us for an ice cream and to go to the beach.

"Let's go," Linda said. "Come on."

"No," I said. "We promised we'd wait. So we wait."

The man who was to take care of us was young, wore black Prada sunglasses, a white shirt, and a tie. He had the same folder as his older colleague, placed it on the table in front of him and said in English he had an offer for us. We could have a two-week stay at the hotel at a much reduced price, almost half price in fact, he said.

"We came here for the beach," Linda said. "We were promised tickets for beach chairs today. We've already been here for two hours."

He looked at me.

"We don't have the money, I'm afraid," I said.

It was true, I had five thousand kronor left in my account, at most. It had to last us for the next four days.

He got up. His movements too showed signs of irritation.

"Then I'll get you your precious tickets," he said, and was gone.

"I'm utterly exhausted," Linda said. "And hungry."

"I understand," I said. "But we can eat at one of the cafés down there and then you can relax on the beach afterwards. Heidi's fallen asleep. And I can take care of Vanja."

The salesman didn't return for half an hour. Mute, a scornful grimace on his young face, he placed the tickets on the table and left. We had something to eat, Heidi slept in the stroller, I went for a swim with Vanja, who used up the whole roll of film in thirty minutes. Even though the sand was fine-grained and golden, and the water in the lagoon an exotic green, it felt as if we were there on sufferance and could be thrown out at any point. We hadn't shown ourselves to be worthy enough. But we couldn't go home, not until the taxi came for us and the other Swedish couple, who were now lying a few beach chairs away and, unlike us, seemed to be enjoying life.

"I would never have believed I'd be glad to get back here," I said as, some hours later, the minibus turned off the main road and drove down to the hotel. "But I am."

"Me too," Linda said. "Imagine you actually considering buying a time-share!"

"Yes, it's unbelievable. But the worst is that I didn't catch on. I didn't get what was happening until afterwards! But you did, right?"

"Yes. I wondered what you were up to."

"I was taken in hook, line, and sinker. Oh, the thought of it is so painful! Accepting the tickets in the first place without realizing what was going on. An hour in a taxi. Who would pay for that without any hope of gain?"

Linda laughed.

"Yes, go on, laugh," I said. "We won't breathe a word of this to anyone, OK?"

"OK!"

In the evening, after we had been to see Coco the clown on the stage by the pools, and the children had gone to bed, we sat on the balcony and talked at length for the first time in ages, me with my feet on the railing and a bottle of beer in my hand, Linda with her hands folded over her voluminous belly. We decided never to go on such a vacation again, it was pointless, neither one of us enjoyed it, everything was done for the children, based on some notion of the family and the ideal of a normal, healthy father and mother and two children by the pool, on a beach, in a Spanish restaurant, suntanned and happy, all of which, however, paled the closer we came to the reality of it, and in the end, once we were actually there, went up in smoke. We should have rented a house, I said, somewhere we liked, it wouldn't have been any more expensive. I agree, Linda answered. I don't like this any more than you do. But the worst, I said, is that I find myself on two levels the whole time. One level is the children's because they are having a really good time, they can't see through all this, for them Coco is a genuine clown, a fairy-tale figure. They have no idea that the waiters despise us or that they show Norwegian TV and sell *Dagbladet* in the kiosk, for them this is a fantastic place, and I have to keep thinking that too, if you see what I mean. This is a world for children, not for adults. And then I think that almost our whole culture is too. That it's actually for children.

I looked at her.

"But that doesn't bother you?"

"Yes, it does. Of course it does. Was I inattentive?"

"A bit. But it doesn't matter. You have other things on your mind. I understand that."

"Not at all," she said.

"What were you thinking about?"

"Heidi. It feels almost unfair for her to have another sibling when she's so small."

"It's only good for her."

"Maybe."

"It is as it is anyway," I said, on my feet to get another beer from the fridge. The effect of the two I had already drunk lay like a veil of well-being over my consciousness, and another one, I knew, would charge it with a faint sense of anticipation, which a couple more would dispel, whereafter everything would be good. A couple more and I would convert my mood into actions, anesthetized against any objections and common sense, and then, if I went out, everything inside would be glittering and sparkling.

Oh, how I loved drinking.

I loved it.

The longing to do so came only when I had drunk a little, then I seemed to remember what it was like and realized what I really wanted, which was to drink copious quantities, drink myself senseless, unconscious, as deep down in the shit as I could go. I wanted to drink myself out of house and home, drink myself out of family and friends, drink myself out of everything I loved and held dear. Drink, drink, drink. Oh my God, just drinking and drinking, night and day, summer and autumn, winter and spring.

I opened the fridge door, held the cold, slim beer bottle, whipped off the cap, and took a couple of long swigs before going back to the balcony.

"Do you remember when we saw each other for the first time?" I said, sitting down. "What would you have thought if you'd known you were going to marry and have three children with him? That foolish Norwegian?"

"My heart would have melted," she said with a smile.

"Come off it," I said.

"But you're right about you being 'that Norwegian.' Ingmar had talked a lot about you beforehand. Almost all of it was about you and your book, so I was well aware you were coming."

"But you didn't want me," I said.

"Of course I did. Just not at that moment. I was heading somewhere else. If it had happened then, we wouldn't be sitting here now."

"No," I said. "I remember going into the common room, the one with the big fireplace, everyone was there, and I just had to leave. I couldn't take being in the same room as you or rather I couldn't stand seeing you talking to others and having a life beyond me."

"I didn't even know you!"

"No. But that didn't matter. So I left and sat on the steps outside the hut where my room was, and prayed to God that you would follow me out. I never pray to God – I haven't since I was a child – but I did then. Make Linda come to me, I said. Dear God, can you do that? And then the door opened! And you came out! Do you remember?"

She shook her head.

"I thought I was dreaming. You came out, you closed the door behind you, you started to cross the yard, over to where I was sitting. At that moment I believed in God. I thought he had intervened. But then you didn't turn in my direction, you just kept going, to where you were staying. You said hi. Do you remember?"

"No."

"You were just going to get something."

"Oh, Karl Ove," she said. "Now I'm starting to feel bad!"

"I'm not surprised."

"If I'd gone over to you, we wouldn't be sitting here now."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Because you fell ill? Because you went to the hospital?"

"Yes."

"Maybe I would've been there with you. Have you considered that?"

"Maybe. But I didn't want that. I was a very different person then."

"You were. When I met you next, in Stockholm, that was my first thought. Your whole personality was different."

"In what way?"

"There was none of the hardness in you. The performance side of you was gone. Mm, how should I explain it? You'd been tough, cool, self-confident. Yes, you'd had your own very distinctive personality. That was the feeling I had. And when I met you again that was gone."

"My own what?"

"Your own distinctive personality. You were enough as you were."

"You didn't recognize me?"

"No, but I'm not talking about who you actually were. I'm talking about how you appeared to me. I was utterly defenseless against that. As you know."

"Yes, but that wasn't what you got. I'm sitting here now with an enormous belly. And those two children in there. It doesn't feel as if I have anything of my own."

"I know. It's better though. It's so, so much better."

She fell silent.

I drank up the beer and fetched myself another.

"A penny for your thoughts," I said. We had switched off the light outside, so she was sitting in near darkness, the glow from the window like a faint stripe across one side of her face.

"I'm thinking about everything I've lost," she said.

"Better to think about everything you've gained," I said.

"There's so much contempt in you," she said. "I know you look down on me."

"Look down on you? I certainly do not!" I said.

"Yes, you do. You think I do too little. I whine all the time. I'm not independent enough. You're sick of this life of ours. And of me. You never tell me I'm beautiful anymore. Actually I don't mean anything to you. I'm just someone you live with who happens to be the mother of your children."

"No, that's not true," I said. "But you're right that sometimes I think you don't do enough."

"My friends can't understand how I manage to achieve all I do. Two children and pregnant with a third. I don't think you have any idea how much that really is."

"Your friends don't know anything. You shouldn't listen to them. They're just trying to comfort you. It's like the time Jörgen came home, you know, you told me about it, when you and Helena were sitting on the sofa drinking tea. 'Sitting here whining again, are you,' he said. Do you remember that?"

There was a hint of a smile, but her eyes were cold.

We said nothing for a long time. The faint sound of the sea lapping against the shore hung like a veil over the artificial landscape below us. Muted voices from the balconies beneath and the odd shout or gale of laughter from the restaurants farther down.

I lit a cigarette, took a swig of beer, and grabbed a handful of peanuts from the bowl on the table between us.

This was what she usually said when we had a fight and she tried with her frenzied attacks to rip the heart out of my chest. That I looked down on her and I should leave her and find myself another woman, someone who was nice and independent enough to leave me in peace. That I was staying with her out of pure duty and it wasn't enough for her. She knew what she was worth and she was worth much more than this.

But this had not been a fight. She hadn't tried to rip the heart from my chest. She had said what she said calmly and firmly, as if it were a fact of life. And I had only objected as a matter of form.

I knew she would soon get up and go to bed. I felt a kind of panic grip me, the air had to be cleared, Linda placated, the situation could not remain unresolved.

She placed a hand on the railing.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"What about?"

"Everything."

"You shouldn't be," she said. "Right now I'm actually enough as I am. But of course this changes. Sometimes being pregnant makes me feel strong and I think I can manage everything alone if need be."

"That's the first time I've heard you say that," I said.

"And then it completely goes and I feel I'm utterly dependent on you. Then I get so frightened. Do you understand? I feel I have nothing myself. If you go, everything goes. It's a terrible feeling. And I see that is *precisely* what you like least of all. And if you did go, that would be the reason. But I can't do anything about it."

"I know."

"And you're longing to get away."

"I am not. I want to be here. Hand on heart."

She didn't say anything.

"I read something in Gombrowicz yesterday that I've been thinking about," I said. "It's about why we don't allow ourselves to be surprised by anything, how we can walk round a corner without being curious to know what is waiting for us there. How we can sit in a restaurant and not be curious about the soup we've ordered, how it will *taste*. That's what my problem is. Do you understand? I take everything for granted. And it's a poison. I don't look down on you, I think you're wonderful, but when I take everything for granted and there's no reaction it gets on my nerves. That's what I mean. It gets on my nerves."

"Do I get on your nerves?"

"Come on, you know. When I'm grouchy and pissed off, of course that's what happens."

She got up and went inside. I followed.

"Surely you understand what I mean!" I said. "I'm not making some great statement. I'm just trying to explain something."

She undressed without looking at me and got into bed. I sat on the edge beside her.

"What do I do that gets on your nerves?" she said after a while.

"It's not something you do," I said.

"You have to tell me and I'll stop doing it," she said.

"But it's nothing specific, don't you understand?"

"Is it all our life together?"

"Oh, come on! You know what it's like to feel out of sorts. There's something inside you. Right? That's what I was trying to describe. It's something inside me."

I stroked her back. She lay perfectly still, looking into the distance.

"What shall we do tomorrow?" she said.

"I don't know," I said. "But I'm not that keen to spend the whole day here."

When she lay on her side like that you could see her stomach wasn't just a stomach, there was something inside, an object, and the biological reality, she, this human female, was duplicating herself piercing the veil of notions that her personality, the woman she was for me, all we had experienced and thought together – cast over everything. As though we lived one life in our language and ideas and another in our bodies.

"No," she said. "Couldn't we go on the trip to Las Palmas we'd talked about?"

I nodded and got to my feet.

"Yes, let's do that. Sleep tight."

"Don't stay up too long."

"No."

"Sleep tight."

I walked through the apartment, switched on the balcony light, sat down, and gazed into the distance. I wasn't thinking about anything special, but I was filled with the emotions aroused by what Linda had said and the way she'd behaved. After a while, maybe twenty minutes or so, I took out

Gombrowicz's diaries again and looked for the passage I had mentioned to Linda.

> *For some time now (perhaps because my life is so monotonous) I've occasionally been seized by curiosity with an intensity I've never experienced before – a curiosity as to what might happen the next moment. Right in front of my nose – a wall of darkness out of which at any moment a menacing apparition might reveal itself. Around the corner . . . what is lurking there? A person? A dog? If it is a dog, what size, what breed? I am sitting at a table and in a minute the soup will be served . . . but what kind of soup? Art hasn't yet addressed this basic experience in any comprehensive way, man as an instrument to transform the Unknown into the Known does not figure among art's greatest heroes.*

He wrote that one Wednesday in 1953. I associated it with something I had once read by Deleuze while I was a student in Bergen and it had become a sort of landmark for me, which I came back to again and again: the idea that the world is permanently in the making, that it is constantly evolving around us, but that this ceaseless creation from moment to moment merges into what we already know about the world. Of the two forms of understanding we have developed – science and art – science pertains to certainty and calculation whereas art, by emerging from nothing, pertains to the moment and the uncertainty that lies in its constant creation. No artist had worked more with this than Cézanne, it was his principle and vocation, and the reason for his immense influence on his contemporaries. With a predetermined concept of what space is you can paint various objects without the space being changed, the system is invariable and unshakable, this is how we see, and hence this is how space is. In Cézanne's paintings the opposite is the case, here it is the objects that make the space, space is something that is made, and its making is relative. Then it is as much about the eye that beholds as what the eye beholds; the convention of space, which is usually invisible, becomes visible.

For fifteen years I had been doing this, seeking out thinkers who confirmed this idea, especially Nietzsche and Heidegger, but also Foucault, who was more preoccupied with social rather than existential structure and thereby deepened the discussion. The problem was that I hadn't moved any further, hadn't budged from the spot in the fifteen years that had passed since I studied literature and the history of art in Bergen. Basically it flew in the face of everything. Inception, creation, emergence, the eternally new – just not in me or in my understanding.

I got up and went to the bathroom for a piss. My urine was light-colored, almost completely clear, and I was reminded of my father's, which I had seen whenever he had forgotten, for some reason or other, to flush in the morning. It had been dark yellow, almost brown. It was frightening. I had connected the color with his mind. And with masculinity. My own pale, almost colorless, urine was feminine, his dark urine masculine. His temper was also masculine. My terror was feminine.

I flushed the toilet and returned to the balcony, stood for a while and gazed across the lawn.

No, I didn't look down on her, she was wrong there. But she demanded so much of me, so unutterably more than any other person ever had, and she didn't realize. Sometimes it was so exasperating that it threw me into a state akin to insanity. I became so angry that nothing else existed apart from anger, without my being able to give vent to it, I held it inside me, and the way I was then, when my fury engulfed me and was absorbed into my body, when my movements rumbled with rage, could of course be confused with contempt. No, it *was* contempt. For a while it was, but the moment would pass and then something else was waiting. Was this something else the true state of affairs? Did we actually get along? Did I really love her? Christ, no, everything shifted and changed and ebbed and flowed, one thing was no truer than anything else. We got along fine and we got along badly, I loved her and I didn't love her.

The night before our wedding I asked her to wash the kitchen floor. I had already washed every single one of the other one hundred and thirty square meters. On her knees with a rag in her hand, she looked up at me and said this was not how it was supposed to be, that she had to wash the kitchen floor the day before her own wedding. No one else would put up with it, she said.

It was unfair, she said. I answered that it was our floor and we were the ones who had to wash it, wedding or no wedding. I said nothing about this being only the second time she had washed a floor in the five years we had been together. If I had she would have lost her temper, would have said she had done all sorts of other things, she was the one who held the family together and she did more than anyone else she knew. I would have replied that she was living a lie, and then it would have gone on and on, so I said nothing. The following day I said *Yes* to her and she said *Yes* to me and we gazed at each other with tears in our eyes.

It is through feelings we connect with one another and it is the feelings which are good and bad, not the days.

I seemed to sense something behind me and turned at once, but the room was empty.

May as well go to bed, I thought.

Sink into a world that was beyond the world, the wonderful void.

I woke up in a bad mood. I always did, but as long as I had the critical first half an hour in peace, got a cup of coffee down me, and smoked a cigarette, it passed of its own accord. It was half past five. I pulled on the T-shirt and trousers I had worn the day before, walked barefoot into the living room, where Vanja and Heidi were sitting with bowls of muesli in front of them, Heidi on a high chair, Vanja on a normal one, which made her so low her chin barely reached over the table. Linda stood at the counter slicing an apple. Without saying a word I poured water into the kettle, sprinkled instant coffee into a cup, poured milk and muesli into a bowl, took it with me to the balcony, closed the door and sat down to eat, with my back to them. The sky was gray, more fog than mist, the air cold. After I had gulped down the breakfast mixture I went back in, filled my cup with boiling water, got my cigarettes and lighter from the shelf in the hall, and went back out. My body was cold, my joints were cold, my soul was cold. Behind me someone banged on the window, I turned, it was Vanja, and she pushed the glass door open.

"Go back in," I said. "I'll be along soon."

She squeezed through, stood by the railing, and looked across the empty lawn.

"Go back in, I said."

"No," she said with a pout. "Why is no one out?"

"Because you get up so early. No one else gets up at this hour. It's still nighttime."

"It's morning," she said.

"OK, OK," I said. "But it's very *early* morning. You'll realize how early it is when you're an adult. Where are your glasses by the way?"

"Inside."

"Go and put them on. Then you can both watch a movie."

She did as I said, and soon they were on their chairs in front of the laptop. Where movies were concerned they were insatiable, they could sit without moving for hours devouring whatever was on the screen. When Vanja was eighteen months old she watched her first movie from beginning to end. I remembered that because we traveled to Gotland the day after, it was the summer of 2005, the movie she saw was *Pippi on the Run*. I watched it with her, dropping off now and then, so it took on a dream-like quality, and ever since, as we had seen it many, many times, I connected it with a kind of dreaminess, the way all the impressions from those days, when we lived in the apartment in Regeringsgatan, came back to me in all their detail. Watching films with her, I always had my eye on the background in the picture, the houses, the forest, the road, the beach, and I found just enough of interest in it to watch a ninety-minute children's movie without getting bored. If it was a film from the seventies, such as *Karlsson on the Roof* or *Elvis! Elvis!*, my interest increased because the times, which were discernible in everything, were the first I could remember, they were when I grew up, they were my whole world, and now they were gone. The seventies, that sad, unsophisticated, restaurant-less, impoverished decade with rest stops and gravel roads, VW Beetles and the Citroën DS, one TV channel and one radio channel, when everything was state-owned and almost nothing commercial, when the shops closed at four and the banks at three and no one who earned money from sports was allowed to participate in the Olympics, those times were gone, and, seeing how the world had moved on, it was incredible to think that once upon a time all this existed. Even a tiny glimpse of that world filled me with pleasure and sadness. Pleasure that I had been alive then, sadness that it had disappeared. The beginning of *Karlsson on the Roof*, where Svante is playing in Tegnér Park in Stockholm, muddied the waters because I walked through this park almost every day and recognized all the houses and streets, they were the same, yet they weren't, they were no longer in the 1970s but the 2000s, and the question I was unable to answer was: where had the seventies gone? In my head, apparently, in the heads of all the others who had once been alive then, but only there? What was time in a film? What was time in a photograph? It became even more puzzling when we watched *Elvis! Elvis!* because Linda's mother had been in that film, she played the teacher, a woman in her midthirties, and it was impossible, absolutely impossible, to connect the woman in the film with the woman who was our children's grandmother. Her appearance was different, her body language was different, even the sound of her voice was different. Was it the same woman?

Nostalgia is an illness, but it belongs to the person through whom time is filtered, unpredictably and individually, with all the flaws and defects inherent in human beings. The era that had passed is located in pockets of consciousness, some hidden and unseen, like ponds in remote forests, some bright and familiar like houses on the forest edge, but all of them fragile and changeable, and they die when consciousness dies. Films were a curse because they belonged to everyone, and they were mechanical and unchangeable, storage space for an era, corpses passed from one generation to the next, and still so new that the consequences were unpredictable. Already there were thousands of films in which all the people who had taken part in them were dead. This was a new way to be dead, with your body, life, and soul captured on camera forever while the body had decomposed long ago and was gone. Films were a graveyard, a necropolis, but still a work in progress, for what would they be like in two hundred years, in five hundred years, in a thousand years? In my grandparents' time it had been only actors and famous people, by and large, who were immortalized on film, and that was easy to relate to, that *their* images would live on. But now everyone filmed everyone else, every day thousands of films were posted on the Net, and after we were gone how would it feel to our successors to be able to see us all the time? They would be swimming in dead bodies in quite a different way. This would inevitably change the whole view of death, the perception of what it meant to be dead, and ultimately the view of what it meant to be alive.

And time? What would happen to time if the past piled up? Would it eventually be so overwhelming that it would drive out the present? We could already see one consequence of this, that trends from earlier eras were returning, that the eighties, which in a different world would only have existed in individual consciousness, bound up with individual life, was recreated in collective forms of expression: fashion and music.

Despite these feelings, we still let the children watch almost as many films as they wanted. I wasn't proud of it, and I didn't like it, but the calm that settled over the apartment was too wonderful to resist. Besides, in my defense, I thought, they learned a lot from what they saw.

Well, maybe not from *The Little Ghost Godfrey*.

If the island were a person and the road an artery, we got on the bus on one of the fingers, I mused a few hours later as I gazed inland at the black rocky landscape; the road was narrow and the roads crossing it were also narrow and disappeared between the mountains in this deserted region. And the activities that took place here, in low brick buildings behind wire fences, were of no interest to anyone except for those involved. Then the road widened, there were more cars, we came to large intersections with bridges and roads that wound around and met others, the traffic infrastructure grew, the complexity increased, the intervals between signs became shorter, soon there were buildings and life everywhere, we were approaching the center, the place all and sundry flocked to, the heart of the island. We glided past sidewalks thronged with people, surrounded by cars, in streets that became narrower and narrower until we arrived at a large concrete bus station, where the bus came to a halt and we alighted.

The transition from the deserted, uneventful countryside to the center of a town is the same everywhere, whether it is from Tromøya to Arendal, Jølster to Bergen, Cromer to Norwich, or Norwich to London. It was like falling, the speed increased the closer you came to the hub, and even though it was an external phenomenon, it was impossible not to experience subjectively, which seemed to cause your insides to vibrate with activity too, that is how open we are to the world, it flows ceaselessly through us and leaves its mark on not only our thoughts and ideas, but also on our moods and emotions. There is no other way I can explain the pleasure that arose in me as we strolled into town and sat down at a sidewalk café, Linda and I with a coffee, the children with an ice cream; it was as though I had come out of myself, as if after a long, hard winter, everything suddenly was wonderful and carefree, I started chatting away, I might even have been laughing in the sunshine, why? Everything was the same. Linda was the same, the children were the same, the sun in the sky was the same one that had been there for the ten days our holiday had lasted. What wasn't the same were the surroundings. Parks with wizened old men dressed in dark suits sitting on benches in the shade, often smoking, always elegant; small, crooked seventeenth-century brick houses, cobbled streets, big dilapidated churches in open squares, priests and nuns fluttering past, old women in black, either skeletal or voluminous, sitting on a chair outside a door or on doorsteps inside an archway. Avenues of palm trees, buses full of tourists rumbling past, semis, trucks carrying cement mixers, tradesmen in pickups or small vans, boxlike cars from the eighties, sparkling new aerodynamic sedans, mopeds – endless mopeds. Functional sixties and seventies architecture, resplendent eighties architecture, restrained nineties architecture, almost dystopian with its great expanses of dark stone and glass.

The town wasn't big, but it was a capital, and it was Spanish, though separated from Spain by a sea and hence different, not in anything major but in the minor detail. You saw signs of the old days everywhere, as though time hadn't wrought such great changes here, hadn't flooded the town and changed it radically, as it had done in other Spanish cities, where the past was fenced off, preserved in specimens, but here it had just seeped in all over the place. In addition, the fact that the sea made its presence felt everywhere made me think that Las Palmas was like the old South American colonial towns, where I had never been but whose atmosphere I nonetheless believed I could recognize and which I had longed to see all my life.

I said as much to Linda. We were ambling across a cobbled square in front of a white church, Vanja ran over to a marble lion and climbed up it while Heidi crouched down in front of the water in a little fountain.

"There's something South American about the atmosphere here, don't you think?" I said. "It's as if you can imagine this is Buenos Aires. Not that I've been there, of course. It's just the feeling you get. A bit offbeat, slightly run-down, colonies, palm trees, but also modern. Spanish, but not Spain."

"I know what you mean," she said. "It's wonderful."

"It is."

"You're so happy. That makes me happy too."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I should be like this all the time. There's no reason to be any other way."

"We're not going to move to Buenos Aires then?" she said.

I laughed.

"No, seriously. Why not?"

"There's nothing I'd like to do more," I said. "But for someone who fears the slightest change I can think of better alternatives than moving to Argentina with three small children."

"It doesn't *have* to be like that," she said. "It might be fantastic. It might be just what we need."

"I'd do it at the drop of a hat."

"That's agreed then? We move there? At some point in the future, I mean."

"If you're fine with it, there's no reason not to," I said.

We followed one of the narrow, shaded streets, discovered a museum devoted to Columbus's expeditions to America, and entered, it was like an augury. An atrium with the sun flooding in, flowers along the walls, a little fountain with a murmur of running water in the middle. The museum was located in the surrounding rooms, we walked through them, dark and cool after the bright light outside, full of charts, models, a few artifacts from ships or the days of sailing glory. Heidi was tired, she shrieked at the slightest thing, so after a quick circuit we agreed I would go for a walk with

Heidi in the stroller to get her off to sleep while Linda and Vanja stayed there.

I walked down the shady side of the street, which opened, in narrow shafts, onto sun-filled yards or dark, tableau-like shopwindows where it wasn't always easy to establish which branch of commerce it was: a wooden torso dressed in servant's livery, was this attire an antiquity or an item that was sold to hotels? We emerged into a square, went to the right, and crossed a wide boulevard with trees that afforded some shade. Heidi was quiet, but her eyes were open.

"You need to sleep now, my girl," I said.

"No," she said.

"Well," I said, pushing her across another street into a park and out on the other side, where the modern center started. Something about the light above the part of town we had just left reminded me first of Stavanger, then Bergen. Not the light itself, I immediately realized, but the proximity to the sea, the feeling of how close it was.

What effect did this have on my thoughts?

The streets, the market squares, the houses, the apartments, the shops, the cafés, all the people occupying them and who occupy your mind as well.

Then the exoticism all around you.

How frightening it must have been for Columbus and his men when they docked at the harbor here, the last outpost before the unknown. They didn't know what lay out there. How terrified they must have been!

I leaned forward and looked at Heidi, who still had her eyes open. I placed my hand on her chest.

"You can sleep if you like," I said. "You're tired, aren't you?"

She didn't say anything, she didn't react to my touch, just sat still staring at everything around us. H&M, Sony, Adidas, Zara. Glass gleamed, music blared from the open doorways, and as we passed them I could also feel that particular coldness that air-conditioning has. There were people everywhere. But no one with a stroller. I was the only person pushing one!

No, I wasn't. There was one. Black and attractive, with a little infant inside wearing a lace dress. The woman pushing the stroller was young and walking beside another woman, perhaps her sister, they were talking earnestly and intensely about something in the midst of a stream of besuited men and shorts-clad tourists. Then they were gone. I walked the length of the pedestrian street and by the time I reached the café where we had been that morning, next to the park, Heidi was asleep. I parked the stroller by a table, ordered a double espresso, and flipped out a cigarette, retrieved the Gombrowicz book from my backpack, but only managed a few lines, it felt wrong to read where there was so much to look at.

A suntanned man in his sixties with thinning sandy hair was reading a newspaper at a table close by. It was *Verdens Gang*. He looked up and met my gaze.

"Are you Norwegian?" I said.

"Yes," he said.

It was so rare for me to initiate a conversation with a stranger. Apart from when I was drunk, of course. Now I felt so light and carefree that it was the most natural thing in the world.

"You too?" he said.

"Yes. Well, I live in Sweden, but I'm Norwegian."

"Here on holiday?"

"Yes. I take it you aren't?"

"No, I live here. The climate, you know. Sun and warmth all year round. I was sick of shoveling snow."

"I can understand that," I said.

He took a long swig of beer and lit a cigarette.

"And it's so lovely and cheap here. Buying a packet of cigarettes doesn't spell financial ruin."

"Do you live here in town?"

"Oh, no, no. I live farther north. I have a place in a little town there." He wore a lightweight gray jacket, a blue shirt, and a pair of Dressmann-style trousers underneath. He wasn't exactly scruffy, but nobody would call him well dressed. His shirt was wrinkled and I spotted a couple of dark stains on the breast of his jacket.

I told him the name of the hotel complex where we were staying and asked if his town lay nearby. He shook his head, took another swig of beer, and wiped his lip with a finger.

"I live on the other side."

"Many other Norwegians there?" I asked.

"There are a few of us, yes."

"So do you go home in the summer?"

"Many do. Not me though. I'm a resident."

There was an air of loneliness about him, perhaps also of unhappiness. The well-meaning friendly glint in his eye vanished as soon as he turned away.

"Are you happy here?" I said.

"Yes, I am," he said. "I don't have to shovel snow anyway."

"No, that's true," I said.

"We do actually get a little sometimes, but it doesn't settle, you know. It melts right away."

"Yes," I said.

He pulled another cigarette from the packet and raised it to his mouth. The hand holding the lighter trembled slightly.

I pretended to start reading again to give him some peace. But I was aware of his presence the whole time, whether I was staring toward the park, along the pedestrian street, or down at my book. He was my father's age, and although he hadn't reached the same state as my father, something about him was the same.

They came here to live in peace for their remaining years.

I looked down at Heidi, placed my hand on her head, just to touch her.

Once, a couple of years before he died, some friends of Mom's sister Kjellaug ran into Dad in the Canaries, in a bar, as far as I remembered, they had recognized him while he had no idea who they were. They'd started talking, he said he was a seaman but he'd come ashore now.

When Mom told me that, she had smiled because, as she put it, there was a lot of truth in what he said.

In the park a girl came up the dusty path, a boy on a bench sat up straight, he was almost glowing, and sure enough the very next moment they stood in an embrace, then they sat down next to each other, full to the brim with conversation and gestures. I glanced at the man beside me, he was reading the sports pages, then he looked up at the waiter, who placed another beer on his table.

I leaned back, stared up at the cloudless blue sky, lit a cigarette, inhaled, and blew the smoke out with relish. I always smoked Chesterfield abroad, it was my favorite brand, but they weren't sold in either Sweden or Norway apart from at Sørensen Tobakk on Torgallmenningen in Bergen, where they had been so expensive I could only afford them when my student loan arrived.

A beer would have been a pleasure.

But not with Heidi asleep in the stroller.

Anyhow, I would have to get back to Linda and Vanja soon.

Another quarter of an hour.

I caught the waiter's eye, he came over, I ordered another double espresso, took my notebook and a pen from my backpack, described the trees in the park, first the shadows they cast over the parched, dusty ground, tried to make out what color the shadows *really* were, if the green of the sparse grass or the faintly reddish soil rubbed off on them, then I made a note of the dry, cracked, and probably brittle bark on one tree, the smoother, shinier bark on the second, and then the way the trunk seemed to cleave into branches, thinner and thinner until they became the small, trembling twigs at the farthermost ends. The way the sunlight seemed to be poured out over the leaves at the crown, as if from a bucket, and trickled down through the layers of foliage until it dripped down onto the ground below.

When I moved to Stockholm I went for a walk in Haga Park one morning with Geir, my new friend, it must have been mid-May because it was warm, but I still hadn't got together with Linda. We had walked from the Copper Tent and down the hill, along the big grassy slope where people lay sunbathing everywhere and into a more wooded area. I had started talking about all the fantastic trees that grew here. How individual they were, each with its very own shape, yet how alike, they shared the same features, both as trees generally and within the various species. How alive they were, just standing here in our midst, although we never thought of them as such, as living beings, or ever talked about them. Most of them were much older than we were, I said, some of these are from the nineteenth century, maybe even the eighteenth. Isn't that incredible? They are here, like us, but in a very different state. A very different form of life. We wonder whether there is life in outer space, what sort of weird and wonderful forms of life might exist there while we walk around among these fantastic creatures every day!

Geir burst into laughter.

"You know what everyone looks at these days, don't you?"

I shook my head.

"There are women lying all over the place. Many of them are beautiful. And most have only a bikini on. And there's you, looking at trees! Wake up, my boy!"

"There's no contradiction in that, surely?"

"Yes, there is. One is biology within the human domain. The other is biology outside the human domain. You're human."

"That's someone talking who can feel the sap rising. The difference is not as great as you imagine."

"Oh yes, it is. I don't know anyone who effuses about trees. No one! And over time I've gotten to know a lot of people."

"It doesn't mean I don't think about women."

"Are you offended?" he said with a laugh.

"A bit maybe," I said. "I don't think it's as unusual as you make out. There's even a weekly magazine about it."

"Oh?"

"Yes. *Woman & Tree*."

"Ha ha ha. I can remember someone who used to run around this park hunting for trees. A friend of mine in sociology. He had to organize a stag night and the idea was they were going to play volleyball here. He ran around with a tape measure looking for two trees exactly the same distance apart as the net posts on a volleyball court. He's the biggest pedant I've ever met, so he wouldn't accept any approximations. No, the measurement had to be exact. I hardly need to tell you it took him an incredibly long time to write his thesis."

"He's an aberration. Talking about trees as you walk past them isn't."

"Sure it is. He stayed within the human domain. A game, a relationship between two entities. You talk about trees per se. To me all life is social. I'm not in the slightest bit interested in what lies outside. It's pointless."

We'd had this discussion at regular intervals over the four years that had passed since then. The material world with its stones, grains of sand, and stars or the biological world with its lynxes, beetles, and bacteria didn't interest him in the slightest unless it could tell him something about humanity. I, on the other hand, was always drawn to those realms where consciousness and identity were no longer operative, both inside the body – where the self appeared to go in two directions, toward the particular, in other words, all the processes that sustained themselves, as though humans consisted of many different animals, coordinated by one of the oldest and most primitive parts of the brain, and toward the general and shared, as all these organs and processes were the same for all – and outside the body, that is the world the body became part of the moment it ceased to exist. Geir did not accept any of this, and if his voice or facial expression didn't become weary with impatience whenever I talked about it, this was purely a result of his interest being focused on *me*, the social creature preoccupied with such matters.

The man at the neighboring table got to his feet, folded up his newspaper, tucked it under his arm, and glanced over at me.

"Have a good holiday," he said.

"Thank you," I said.

He walked briskly down to the pedestrian street, stood slightly stooped waiting for a green light at the crossing, and the next time I looked he had been swallowed up by the town.

On the way back to the museum I kept an eye open for a restaurant where we could have lunch, found a nice old one full of elderly islanders, but its rustic charm was outshone by the neighboring restaurant which had a little *terraza* where customers were served, beside a busy main road admittedly, however that was compensated for by the shade from the trees and the crooked walls of the building, against which a waiter leaned with a cigarette between his fingers while his colleagues ran in and out with trays full of food and drink.

When I entered the atrium of the museum Linda and Vanja were sitting on the bench by the wall squinting into the sun.

"Well, we've been having fun and games," Linda said as I pressed down on the stroller's brake.

"Oh yes?" I said, sitting beside her.

"Would you like to tell him, Vanja?"

"I dropped my shark down the cannon," Vanja said.

"No, you threw it down on purpose," Linda said. "We couldn't get it out," she said, turning to me. "And you know how attached she is to it."

"Yes, I do," I said.

"Then we went in to see if we could get someone to help us."

"In those cannons there?" I said, nodding toward the two big verdigrised cannons by the opposite wall.

"Yes, exactly. Columbus's cannons."

"Are they?"

"Yes. The cannons that were on the ships that discovered America. That's where our daughter dropped her shark hairbrush."

"What happened then?"

"There was a huge fuss and palaver. All the staff came out to help. They lifted the cannon down and it banged against the wall and the cannon cracked. But in the end the shark came out. You should've seen their faces when they saw that what we'd lost was a hairbrush!"

"Good thing I wasn't here. I would've died of shame."

She laughed.

"But they didn't seem to mind. They were just happy to help. You know what it's like with children here. They love children so much they'd do anything for them."

"Are you sure? They're not inside now, fuming? I mean, cracking Columbus's cannon?"

"I got my shark back!" Vanja said, narrowing her eyes and smiling.

"But now I'm starving. Shall we go and get something to eat?" Linda said.

I nodded, got up, and wheeled over the stroller. Vanja jumped up and then our little cavalcade trundled out of the museum.

Throughout our meal the wind tugged and tore at the tablecloth. The paper napkins flew into the air several times, but one of the waiters always managed to pick them up before I could get to my feet. We talked about the future awaiting us in Buenos Aires, and it was nice, perhaps the nicest time since we had moved to Malmö the summer before, and everything, including our lives, was bathed in the light of newness. After we had eaten and were waiting for our coffee, I told her about the restaurant next door, how beautiful it was with its thick brick walls and wooden benches and, with Heidi in her arms, she went in while I sat with Vanja, who was busy blowing down her straw, making her soda bubble and froth, but she didn't seem to be doing it for fun, her expression was rather one of preoccupation and stubborn perseverance.

I racked my brains for something to say to her.

Cars whooshed past on the road. A nun appeared at the entrance to a street and was gone again. The tall, slim conifers swayed in the wind. I took an apple from my backpack and placed it on the table between us.

"Did you know that some apples can talk?" I said.

She looked up at me without moving her head. Her eyes were skeptical, though not totally dismissive.

"When I was walking with Heidi I heard a voice in my backpack, you know. I'm not sure, but I think it was the apple. If so, we're so incredibly lucky because there are hardly *any* apples that can talk. But I think this one can. Do you know how small the chances are of that?"

She shook her head, her eyes fixed on me.

"They can't speak human language. That's obvious. You didn't think they could, did you?"

She shook her head again.

"They speak applish. Look, if I shake it a bit, it might say something. Shall I try?"

She pushed her glass away.

"It can't speak," she said. "You're teasing me."

"No, I'm not. It's very unusual. That's probably why you've never heard of it."

I gave a start.

"There! Did you hear it?"

She stared at the apple, shaking her head. I lifted the apple to my ear and made big eyes.

"It said something," I said.

"No, it didn't," she laughed. "It did not."

"Yes, it did. Here, *you* listen."

I held up the apple and she leaned over and put her ear to it.

"Can you hear anything?" I said.

She shook her head.

"Daddy," she said. "Apples can't talk."

"It just did," I said.

"What did it say then?"

"I'm not sure. It was applish. But I think it said, 'I'm so lonely.'"

"You can't speak applish."

"Yes, I can. Not very well. But I understand a little."

"How did you learn it?"

"I picked bits up here and there. There were lots and lots of apple trees where I grew up."

"You're teasing me."

"Listen. Did you hear that?"

She gave a tentative smile and shook her head.

"It said, 'What a lovely girl. What's her name?'"

"My name's Vanja."

"Vanja," I squeaked.

"That was you," Vanja said. "It can't talk."

I began to feel sorry for her.

"You're right, it was," I said. "Did you think apples could talk?"

"No," she laughed.

"Are you sure?" I said, lifting the apple to my mouth and taking a bite.

"Don't eat it!" she said.

"But I was just teasing you," I said. "It's only an apple."

"OK," she said.

The waiter came with two cups of coffee and two bowls of ice cream. Vanja started hers as soon as he put the bowl in front of her. I said thank you and looked up, but he didn't meet my gaze, walked over with bowed head to the table beside us, set the plates on his right arm, stacked the glasses, which he carried in his left hand, and disappeared into the darkness of the restaurant.

"I want to blow," Vanja said.

I pushed the cup over to her, she blew, I took a sip. Linda appeared from around the corner, still carrying Heidi on her hip. She looked flustered.

"I fell over inside," she said. "Right onto my side. With Heidi in my arm as well."

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"A little," she said, putting Heidi in the high chair. I pushed her ice cream over to her. "It's a tiled floor. I think Heidi got a bang too. Or perhaps it was mostly a fright. Anyway, there was quite a commotion in there. Everyone rushed over to help me. Not so strange, I suppose. A pregnant woman with a child in her arm falling on the floor. I toppled over. Like a boat heeling to one side. Then all these kind people came running over to help me to my feet and they brushed me down and asked me how I was."

"Sounds very dramatic," I said.

"It was. And I felt so helpless. Suddenly not being able to walk. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes."

"You don't see any children here. God knows where they are. Not here anyway. Then I come along with a child in my belly and one in my arm and right in front of everyone, bang. I felt so Scandinavian."

In the bus going home Vanja slept with her head in Linda's lap while Heidi sat limply on mine dozing. Her little body registered all the bus's jerks and jolts as at first we drove from traffic light to traffic light through the town, then onto the motorway along the coast where the blazing sun hung above the dark blue sea.

Happiness isn't in my nature, but happy was how I felt.

Everything was light and airy, my emotions were lofty and uncomplicated, the mere sight of a bulging wire fence or a stack of worn tires outside a garage opened my soul, and a rare warmth spread through my insides.

What effect does happiness have?

Happiness erases. Happiness erodes. Happiness overflows. All that is difficult, all that usually hinders or limits us, disappears inside happiness. In the long term it's unbearable because there is no resistance in happiness, if you lean against it, you will fall.

Where do you fall?

Into open space, my friend.

I looked at Linda, she had leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes. Vanja's face was covered with her hair; she lay like a tuft of grass on Linda's lap.

I bent forward a little and peeked at Heidi, who stared back without interest.

I loved them. This was my gang.

My family.

In terms of pure biomass, we were nothing special. Heidi weighed perhaps ten kilos, Vanja maybe twelve, plus Linda's and my weight we constituted something like one hundred and ninety kilos. That was considerably less than a horse, I imagined, and about the same as a mature male gorilla. If we lay close together our physical bulk was nothing to shout about either, a sea lion was bulkier. In terms of intangible factors, however – which was the essence of a family – in other words everything connected with thoughts, dreams, and feelings, the family's inner life, the aggregate was explosive, and spread over time, which was the relevant dimension to see the family in, it would cover an almost endless surface area. Once I met my great-grandmother, which meant that Vanja and Heidi and the new baby belonged to the fifth generation, and if fate was kind, they could in their turn witness three further generations, so this little pile of flesh numbered eight generations, or two hundred years, with all the concomitant changing cultural and social conditions, not to mention how many people it included. A whole little world was what was moving along the highway at great speed this late-spring afternoon, my own little family, which might eventually develop its own special characteristics, something typical only of us, as I had encountered many times in other families and always envied: their security and goodness and contentment.

When the children had gone to sleep we moved closer and were near each other in the darkness. Linda's eyes were wide open, the way I remembered them from the first weeks we were together, somehow bare and defenseless. Afterward we went onto the balcony, me with the beer that had become a habit during the ten days we had been there, Linda with a ginger ale. The darkness seemed to hover in the air, which became grayer and dimmer by the minute as stars appeared in the sky one after the other, hesitantly, a little shyly, as though they didn't really trust the memory of how they had shone the previous night, proud and firm and minerally unforgiving. But, bit by bit, the memory came back to them and soon the whole of the now black sky was full of sparkling lights.

"I think I'll go to bed," Linda said, getting up. "Thank you for everything today. Would you like me to switch on the light for you?"

"Please," I said. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, my prince."

The light came on, her footsteps faded into the bedroom, I sat down on the chair and put my feet on the railing. What if Columbus had turned around when they discovered America? I wondered. What if they had said they would leave the continent intact and allow those living there to continue their lives in peace? What if they had said they wouldn't exploit its riches and its people? Then America would only have existed as a concept in old Europe, in Asia and Africa. There is an enormous continent out there, to the west, every new generation would learn. We have no idea what goes on there. Nor what it looks like, what species of plants and animals exist there, or what people think about life and existence. We know nothing of this and we won't find out.

I had never considered a more impossible thought. It would go against everything we were.

But it would have been so fantastic. A secret, undiscovered continent no one had opened up or exploited but had just left in peace. What an incredible shadow of ignorance that would have cast over our European brains.

I finished my beer, stubbed out my cigarette, and stood for a moment holding the balcony railing looking into the darkness behind the light from the bungalows, at the sea that stretched into the distance.

Then I, too, went to bed.

Two nights later the plane left for home, it was packed, and we felt stressed with all our baggage and our two small children, but we got on board and after a few minutes in the air both Vanja and Heidi fell asleep. We sank back in our seats. The plane flew through the black sky, lights flashing. The mood on board was strange, many passengers were feverishly drinking and talking in loud voices and laughing, probably trying to squeeze every last minute out of their vacation, others slept. After half an hour the captain made an announcement over the intercom, asking everyone to sit down and fasten their seat belts, we were entering a spot of turbulence. Vanja woke up and started crying. It wasn't a low, whiny cry, she screamed from the bottom of her lungs. That woke Heidi, who also started crying. Suddenly there was an inferno around us. Linda and I frenetically tried to calm them down, but nothing was any use, they were caught up in something they couldn't get out of and just kept screaming. People tolerated it for the first few minutes, but after a quarter of an hour the displeasure and annoyance around us were palpable. Why couldn't we get our godforsaken kids to shut up? Why were they screaming like that? Were we bad parents? It was unbearable, and when the seat belt sign was switched off I asked Linda to stand up so that I could carry Heidi into the central aisle, she did, I undid Heidi's belt and lifted her up, she resisted, twisted and squirmed, her whole body as tense as a spring, while Vanja was kicking the seat in front of her. I squeezed through the narrow gap between the seats, bent double, with Heidi held firmly to my chest, wriggling and screaming in my ear, finally emerged in the aisle, made my way through to where there was a measure of space, but Heidi wasn't happy, she didn't want to walk, didn't want to be carried, didn't want any candy, didn't want to see what was behind the curtain, she just wanted to scream and scream, her face bright red, legs kicking in all directions. People were no longer hiding their irritation, they were staring at me with obvious animosity, a man who couldn't control his child. I forced Heidi back into her seat, the man in front of us turned and told us to stop the kid kicking him, which infuriated Linda, she's four, she shouted, I placed a hand on her shoulder, a flight attendant leaned over us with some toys, Vanja threw them away, in a rage. I was drenched in sweat. The girls were caught in a fit and couldn't get out of it, and all I could think was: what must the other passengers be thinking. It was obvious we were bad parents, why would children scream like this otherwise? Their childhood must be terrible, traumatizing. Something *had* to be wrong. I had *never* seen other children behaving like this in public. The situation was acute, we had to get them to stop, but none of our methods was helping, it was like throwing gasoline on a fire. This situation was chronic, it was a symptom of something else, which chafed away incessantly behind my sweaty forehead. I felt like "white trash" on a charter trip to Gran Canaria with my neglected children. Everything was out of control, and in a very confined area to make matters worse.

They kept it up for a good hour. Then they stopped. First Vanja, afterwards Heidi. They sat staring into space, sweaty and exhausted. I couldn't believe it was true and didn't dare move a muscle. A few minutes later they fell asleep, and seven hours later we were able to tuck them into their own beds in our apartment. Absolutely drained, we looked at each other and promised we would never, ever, under any circumstances, do anything like this again. But then, slowly and imperceptibly, all the hassle around the journey and the vulgarity of the holiday center was forgotten; what remained of the two weeks was the children's pleasure in the pool, the evenings on the balcony, the trip to Las Palmas.

John was born, and Linda stayed at home with him while I took the girls to school and brought them home every morning and afternoon, I worked at home during the intervening six hours, partly on a translation of the Bible, partly on a novel I was making no headway with, until the following spring, when I started writing about myself. Linda sat on the office chair, in the darkness after the children were in bed, listening to me reading from it, she said it was "heady stuff." At the end of the summer, which was John's first, we went to see Yngve in Voss, then my mother in Jølster, and plans for my fortieth had been forged behind my back. It was to be a small party – twenty or so people is not a lot – but for me it was overwhelming. We had set up a long table in the sitting room, and when all the guests had assembled in another room, glass of champagne in hand, and we were about to welcome them, I had thought of saying they were all characters in a novel I was writing and that everything they did and said over the evening would be used against them, but I didn't have the courage, I said nothing, Linda made the speech, I stood beside her, smiling. Tore spoke, Geir G. and Espen spoke, Linda sang, and Yngve was in despair when he realized that my wish for no speeches was being ignored and that he, as the brother, appeared to be neglecting his duty. I told him it didn't matter. Later in the evening he got together with Knut Olav, Hans, and Tore and gave a little concert, they played one Kafkatrakterne song, one Lemen song, and one ABBA hit. For the rest of the night we danced and drank, I danced for the first time in what must have been fifteen years, and when we went to bed, at about seven in the morning, I was happy and thinking this had been the beginning of something. On New Year's Eve, three weeks later, Geir and Christina got married in Malmö, and had their wedding party in our place, that too as low profile as possible: there were six adults and five children around the table. The idea was that they would stay with us for a few days afterward, but they left in the evening of New Year's Day, Linda's brother, Mathias, had called, he asked to speak to Linda, I said she was resting, he said it was important, their father had died, could I wake her up?

*

Today is August 26, 2011. It is 5:59. I am writing this in an unfurnished loft in Glemmingebro, in what we have begun to call the "summer house" as it isn't insulated. I have just been to the main house to wake Linda up; in two hours Vanja and Heidi go to school. It is a stone's throw away and there are only thirty pupils in total in the four classes. We never planned to move here, it just happened, like so much else. The plan was that we would have the house as a summer residence, come here every weekend and holiday, but only eight months after we had taken it over we moved in. So now we live here, right out in the country. I get up at four every morning, have a cup of coffee and a smoke before coming over here, into the freezing-cold loft, then I write until eight, when I take Vanja and Heidi to school, and afterward have a thirty-minute nap before resuming my writing for the rest of the day. In the afternoon and evening I'm in the garden, I have been going wild cutting down trees and bushes in the central part, where, it transpired, there were beautiful flagstone paths, completely hidden by soil and undergrowth. I removed the worst, and last week I sowed grass, which has already started coming up. On the first afternoon I cleared away the branches and twigs, tore up bushes and plants, I couldn't stop; at nine the children were hanging out the window in their pajamas asking me what I was doing running back and forth, dragging whole trees after me, and I didn't stop until close to midnight, and it has been like that ever since; once I start working I don't want to stop, and I have to force myself to go to bed to ensure I have enough strength to write the following day. That was what my father did when I was a boy, he was always in the garden working, and I was never able to understand why – what could it possibly give him? – until now. Previously I thought it was boring, a duty, and when for example I helped my mother at home or when we were at the cabin it was a chore, I always preferred to sit and read. Now I understand. From the outside, and invariably I did regard my father and what he did from the outside, gardening is the very symbol of bourgeois stasis, utterly ridiculous and superficial, an artificial way of ordering the world's chaos by limiting the world to a lawn and a few bushes and subjugating them completely. The garden is also part of your private life others can see and therefore functions as a kind of display window for those around. In other words, a façade.

Yesterday I sat in the garden reading a text Yngve had written about the Aller Værste! and their album *Materialtretthet*, in which he also interviewed the surviving band members about that period. One of them, I think it was Harald Øhrn, described himself as a vagabond, a man who had lived the life of a vagabond. That instant the attraction was back: seeing the world open up before you, always traveling, no roots, only that, the world continuing to open. That was what I dreamed of when I was in my teens, but I didn't know what it was and I never realized the dream. The band they had in 1979 was about that, the freedom to do exactly what they wanted, completely unfettered by anything that had gone before. Chris Erichsen put it best, punk was about out with the old, all history, all the old heroes, all the bygones, and in with the new, what is here, right now, this is what counts, follow it wherever it may lead. This is what it is like being twenty, everything is open, but as that which isn't open still hasn't revealed itself, you don't know about it, what it entails, until it is too late, and then the next generation has the world at their feet while you putter around in a suburban garden with children and a car and perhaps soon even a dog, if our eldest gets her way, which of course she will.

That is how I felt yesterday as I read Yngve's text with Heidi swinging under an apple tree and occasionally shouting whatever came into her head at me, for example she asked me if I knew what she was going to be when she was big. No, I said. I'm going to be a pixie, she shouted. She laughed at that for a long time. I said it sounded like a good idea, and read on. Taking life into your own hands: not studying, not working, just jamming with a few pals in a band. Or traveling down through Europe, finding a job, earning some money, always on the move.

That was the attraction. It was about being open to the world, letting what happened, happen, and not being governed by the fixed structures that education, job, children, and a house constituted, this calcification of life that came with institutions: school for your children, hospital and a care home for your parents perhaps, a job for you.

So when I was running around the garden like a crazy man, with a petty-bourgeois fire burning in my insides, not dissimilar to my father, although his beard was thick and mine wispy, his upper torso strong and mine weak, it was hard to regard this as anything other than an escape inward. Yet there was something about it that I liked. The smell of soil, all the worms and beetles wriggling and crawling in it, the pleasure of a big branch falling to the ground and the light flooding across the previously overshadowed flagstones, the children wandering over sometimes to see what I was doing or to say something to me.

I'd had the chance when I was twenty. I hadn't taken it. Now they had the chance. Now it was their turn. It was their future.

This is the voice of resignation speaking here, but also of necessity and sudden insight: this is how it must always have been. I never knew. But someone has always known, for someone has always been there. *Ulysses* deals with this as well, the difference between being the son, which Stephen Dedalus is, and being the father, which Leopold Bloom is. Stephen outdoes Bloom in everything, but not in this. Leopold has nothing of Stephen's yearnings and aspirations, he doesn't want anything else, he's at home. Leopold is a complete person, Stephen Dedalus an incomplete person. Only Stephen can create, for to create is to want everything, to create is to want to come home, and the whole person doesn't feel that unrest, that urge, those yearnings. Hamlet, like Stephen, is a son and actually no more than that. It is his father's death that triggers his crisis and his mother's desertion that keeps it alive. Hamlet has no home. Jesus wasn't a father either, but a son, and he had no home. Hamlet, Stephen, Jesus, Kafka, Proust were all sons, not fathers. So there was something about being human that they didn't know and perhaps didn't know about either. But what was it? What is it to be a father? Being a father is a commitment, so it is possible to have children without being a father. But what are you committing yourself to? You have to be at your post; you have to be at home. Yearnings and aspirations are irreconcilable with this because what you hunger for is limitless and what home does is set limits. A father without limits is no father, but a man with children. A man without limits is a child, that is, the eternal son. The eternal son takes or gets, he doesn't give, and he takes or gets because he isn't whole and he isn't his own person. It is not some accidental detail that Dad moved into his mother's house before he died; he died a son. He had abrogated his responsibility as a father, and you can only do that if paternal duty is an external entity, a role you have assumed out of obligation. I believe that is how it was for him. He didn't want to be there. He became a father at twenty and must have suppressed all his urges to break with propriety, combated all the yearnings and aspirations because that aggression, that anger and frustration he had, which characterized my whole childhood, could only exist in someone who didn't want to be there, who didn't want to do what he was doing. If that was so, he had sacrificed his entire young adult life, the years between twenty and forty, doing something he didn't want to do but was forced to do. I was sixteen, as good as grown up, when he left the family, which suggests he took his responsibilities seriously. But he was no father, he was a son. He wasn't whole, he had no inner peace, none of the inner gravity adults have. Mom was also twenty when she became a mother, but she was an adult or grew into adulthood with the responsibilities that came. She was also his mother, in the sense that she set his limits, which was what he was unable to do himself, and no sons can. This is a simple explanation, but I believe it to be true. Linda's father was without limits in a very different way: he had been diagnosed as a manic depressive, which is as good as a complete disclaimer of any responsibility for his own life, since the self cannot control the mania's frenzied activity and the depression's inactivity, there is something inside that constantly drives the self up or down, which means it is never present, it either expands into the world or implodes, and of course the disclaimer applies to the lives of his children as well. Both Linda and I were the children of sons, and we had experienced firsthand fathers without limits, Linda from the time she was quite small, me from the age of sixteen, but actually also from the time when I was quite small, as what I witnessed and experienced with respect to Dad was a limitless man setting limits, which in the absence of any inner peace or gravity were defined by the outside, and for someone born in 1944, this was the authoritarian, rule-setting father. The mother of Linda's father died when he was thirteen and he alone had been responsible for his siblings. He had been in the hospital when she died, he had been lying beside her on the bed. He'd been very attached to his mother and perhaps it was as simple as this: his attachment never weakened because her life ceased before he had cut himself free. It remained strong inside him, I suppose. I don't know, I met him only three times. Once in our apartment in Regeringsgatan, once in his apartment, and once by chance on the street. He was a warm, open person, perhaps too open for his own good. In my life with Linda he was a distant figure, I imagined she had distanced herself from him long ago because she had no choice. When she was in her midtwenties she too was diagnosed with manic depression, or bipolar disorder, as it is called, and had spent more than a year in the hospital. Her increasingly intense life was suddenly out of control, as though she had fallen over the edge. She fell into the limitless. It was one of the options in her life, one of the paths that were open to her. When we met, the manic phase had passed and was over. At that time her father was living alone in an apartment only a hundred meters from ours, somehow outside the community, because he hadn't had a job for many years, from when he fell ill, and he had organized his life in the best way he could for himself. He died alone in a new apartment, just after moving in. It was New Year's Eve. By the time Linda found out, it was New Year's Day, she sat down on the hall floor with her back against the wall. The children were asleep. She wept. Christina and Geir packed their bags and left to give us some space. In the night I woke to Linda crying beside me, I stroked her back and fell asleep again. I didn't realize that for the next three weeks she went through exactly the same thing as I had gone through with my father, when he'd died eleven years earlier. She traveled to Stockholm, dealt with the undertakers, dealt with the solicitor, pored over her father's worldly goods in the apartment with her brother Mathias, and grieved. She mourned the loss of her father, but I, her husband, wasn't there for her. I was writing. And what was I writing about? I was writing about the death of my father, which at that time, eleven years ago, had consumed me totally, darkened my life, and it still consumed me. When it happened to Linda I saw it from a great distance, and my attempts to console her and be sympathetic were mechanical. When it came to the crunch, I failed her. I told myself my role was to take care of the children and I had to write, not only for my own sake, but for the family's, we needed the money. I was also angry with Linda and had been for a long time. But sometimes you have to be big enough to rise above the trivial and the mundane, all the pettiness and self-absorption in which we live our lives, or at least I do, because now, when it really counts, when it is a life-or-death situation, the minutiae don't matter and the person who clings to them is small-minded.

On the morning before the funeral we caught a plane to Stockholm. John was a year and a half old, Heidi was three and a half, Vanja approaching five. A friend of Linda's had given us the use of her apartment, which the children reduced to bedlam within seconds. Late in the afternoon Linda's mother, Ingrid, arrived, then Linda's brother, Mathias. We shared a bottle of wine and talked for a couple of hours. Mathias, a warm, attentive person, asked me how my writing was going. I said I was busy with an autobiographical novel and he was in it. His eyes widened. Linda said with a smile that she thought I was performing a character assassination on her in the novel. I countered that she had the right of veto, if she wanted something excised all she had to do was say so. Mathias said Linda could use the veto on his behalf as well. I had such a bad conscience about what I had written that I decided there and then to delete everything to do with them. They were so kind! And on the following day they were going to bury their father and Ingrid's ex-husband. Who was I to write about them in such a vulnerable situation? The whole time we were sitting there the children kept wandering in and out of the other room, where they were watching a film on a laptop. Heidi sat on my lap staring impishly at Mathias for long periods at a time; Vanja stayed with her grandmother and ignored Mathias, while John was devouring him with his eyes and only turned away for a second when Mathias lifted him in the air, then John burst into laughter as Mathias threw him up toward the ceiling.

Mathias and Linda discussed the final preparations for the following day, we talked briefly about whether we should let Ingrid look after the children for an hour while we adjourned to a nearby café, but we decided to stay, and after mother and son had left, we tucked in the children and went to bed early ourselves. That is I sat up reading as everyone around me slept, Carl-Johan

Vallgren's new novel *Kunzelmann & Kunzelmann*, a contemporary thriller I'd bought the day before on the basis of a review it had received on Swedish TV: Ingrid Elam had said, "I don't think much of this," which was a mark of quality for me. And it was great sitting there reading in the darkened flat, under the light of a single lamp, surrounded by the breathing of tiny people, without a thought for anything except the story, which was narrated so deftly and with such energy.

The next day I put on my black suit, and got the girls into their best dresses and their winter gear, which fortunately we'd had the presence of mind to bring along, outside, a gale was blowing, a cross between rain and sleet, into the back of the waiting taxi, buckle the children in, twenty kilometers to Skogskyrkogården Cemetery, with Ingrid and Mathias, and Helena, who had come along to help us with John during the ceremony. We arrived an hour before the proceedings were due to start. Just inside the walls surrounding the chapel there was a little house, where we left our things while Vanja and Helena's one-year-older daughter, Blanca, ran between the trees playing, with Heidi bringing up the rear, a little hesitantly. Linda and Mathias went into the chapel to see what it was like and to speak to the undertaker.

While they were inside a vehicle stopped on the other side of the cemetery. One man opened the rear door, another came to help, together they carefully lifted a coffin onto a bier.

The coffin contained Linda's father.

Slowly the two men in black rolled the coffin along a flagstone path between the green fir trees, which swayed to and fro in the wind. The men came to a halt in front of the doors, opened them, and trundled the bier into the chapel. I just glimpsed them gently lifting the coffin onto the catafalque at the opposite end of the little room before the doors closed. I turned my head to look for the girls. They were running between the trees, easy to spot against the dirty gray snow covering the ground. The doors opened again, the two men in black came out, strolled over to the hearse on the other side of the fence, and got in. The rear lights went red as the engine started up. The sky above the green fir trees was a leaden gray.

The vehicle slowly passed down the road and was gone. It struck me that there was the quality of a monument about the stone chapel, despite its diminutive size. The aesthetics of the twenties, this spirit of Blood and Soil, Nordic forests and heroic deaths lay over the whole of the enormous cemetery grounds.

Linda and Mathias returned. I looked down, not wishing to intrude on their grief. Linda suggested the children should eat something, a banana or a mandarin. The fruit was in my backpack, which I had left at home.

"I forgot to bring my backpack," I said.

"WHAT?" Linda said, staring at me furiously.

"What did you put in it?" I asked. "Anything important?"

I thought maybe the book with the poem she was going to read or something vital for the ceremony. But no, only some food and diapers.

"That's just *perfect*," she said angrily. "Well, *no one* can rely on you!"

I was fuming, but the circumstances were a mitigating factor, even I understood that, in forty minutes her father would be buried, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Give me a cigarette," she said.

"I don't have any," I said.

"You're a smoker. Why don't you have any cigarettes today of all days?"

"Because you took them this morning. You put them in your jacket. I imagine they're still there."

"No," she said, patting her pockets. "Oh, yes, here they . . ."

Then she went out and disappeared behind the waiting room while Helena avoided looking at me.

"I'll take John and try to get him off to sleep," I said. She nodded, I pushed the stroller onto the path and walked back and forth with him – peering up from beneath a pile of clothes and blankets – for twenty minutes as the icy wind howled through the thin material of my suit and the slush I was trudging through soaked my flimsy shoes. On my return, with John asleep in the stroller, I was frozen, colder than I had been in years. The first mourners had arrived, I shook their hands, Linda's husband, I said, yes, we've heard about you, they replied. Fifteen of them, plus the children, stood gathered around the coffin later. Mathias laid a scarf on the coffin from the football club his father had played for in his youth, we sat down, a harpist played Bach, Vanja and Heidi stared with big eyes. But they knew they had to be quiet, and when Heidi wanted to say something to me she did so in a whisper. Mathias raised his head now and then, as though gasping for air, his face distorted in sudden grimaces. Linda had tears in her eyes, which occasionally coursed down her cheeks. When the first piece of music came, a dance band tune by Benny Andersson's Orchestra, grief also overcame me. I hadn't known him, but I knew his children, it was their grief that touched me. Vanja sat staring intensely at her mother, she had never seen this before, and sent her a smile from time to time, as if to console her. I had told her beforehand that Mommy would cry, and it didn't matter, that was how it was at funerals, you cried and were sad, you were saying goodbye to someone who would never come back. The priest gave a thumbnail sketch of the deceased's life, Mathias read out his commemorative speech, bursting into tears at the beginning and end, otherwise his reading was loud and clear. Linda read a poem. "Bridge over Troubled Water" was played. Then Vanja started sobbing. She was inconsolable and clung to Linda. Heidi, who was sitting on my lap, patted her. In the end it became so bad that I took them out and carried them down to the sentry-box house where John was sleeping. When we entered, Vanja immediately wanted to return, she wasn't crying anymore, she wanted to lay her flowers on the coffin, as we had planned to do. I carried them back, one on each arm, put them down outside, opened the doors, and went in as the ceremony was drawing to a close and the last people were laying flowers on the coffin. Afterwards Linda said it had been so beautiful when the doors opened and we entered with the light behind us, the two small children laid their bouquets on the coffin, the final piece of music was played, everyone paused and bowed by the coffin on their way out, paying their last respects to the deceased.

At the restaurant to where we repaired after the ceremony, Linda's cousins told me how it had been when her father came to visit them in the summer, how he had filled their lives for a few days with his manic energy and lust for adventure and took them fishing or for a drive, incapable of standing still for a moment.

The next day we went with the children to the island of Djurgården. While we were at the aquarium there, Mathias came in. He told us he had been to a pub after the funeral to "get smashed out of his head," as he put it. His eyes were sensitive and kind, his voice was always cheery, he always tried to find something lighthearted to say, and as we were about to leave, he placed a friendly hand on my shoulder. He had lost his father and, sitting there, I thought, it wasn't the same father that Linda had lost because being a son or a daughter is not the same, and Linda and Mathias were so fundamentally dissimilar, also in grief, that they must have had a different experience of him.

In the afternoon we packed our things and caught the train to Arlanda Airport. We arrived three hours before the departure. But the children played and were in a good mood the whole time, even though the plane was an hour late and we didn't take off until half past nine. They fell asleep the minute we were seated on board, and when we landed in Kastrup at half past ten we had a problem: how to manage two suitcases, a backpack, a big bag, and three sleepy children? On top of which, the plane had parked at the farthermost gate, probably a fifteen-minute walk from the arrivals hall. Somehow we managed to get off the plane and into the endlessly long, empty corridor. Linda carried John and held Vanja's hand, I carried Heidi and managed the two suitcases, the backpack, and the big bag. After roughly a hundred meters Linda said she couldn't go on, it was too difficult. But you're only carrying John, I said. Surely you must be able to do that, for Christ's sake. But no, her arms hurt and she was in pain, she couldn't do it.

"Help!" she shouted in a loud voice. "Help us!"

"Shhh," I said. "You can't shout for help here, you know that."

A couple ahead of us turned and looked at us. I shook my head in an attempt to signal that it was nothing serious. If one of us had been having a heart attack I could have understood her calling for help. But just because she had her hands full? For God's sake. For God's sake.

I spotted a couple of trolleys.

I breathed a sigh of relief, placed the cases on the bottom of one, put Heidi on top, and set off without waiting for Linda. "Help." If we had got lost in the mountains or a boat had capsized at sea I might have shouted for help. But at a bloody airport?

I turned, grinned, and waited for them. The rest of the trip was fine, the children were cheery despite being tired, problems only came up at the taxi rank, Linda shouted at the poor taxi driver, who became so angry that he threw our luggage down on the road and yelled back. A kind, friendly driver came to our rescue as I was wishing the ground would swallow me up, the mortification and shame of it. He asked if we'd had a long journey, yes, said Linda, were we tired, yes, said Linda, I was in torment where I sat, watching the lights sweep across the hood as we approached Triangeln Mall in Malmö and could finally get out, take the elevator, put the children to bed, and then ourselves. The last thing I did was to put Heidi's dinosaur egg in a bowl of water. So that it would have cracked and a little dinosaur would have emerged by the time she woke the following morning.

*

August 27, 2011. 8:06. I am sitting in an annex on the island of Møn, in Denmark, I have to appear onstage this afternoon and tomorrow afternoon, and I drove here from Glemmingebro last night. Linda's mother is at home with us helping out, she has been there all month. After I've finished here I'll go sit in my study in Malmö and finish the novel. On Friday I am going to the literature festival in Louisiana, outside Copenhagen, with Linda. Some aspects of her life are changing. She has started to come to terms with them. She goes for a long walk every morning, she's stopped smoking, she doesn't drink alcohol anymore, not even a glass of wine with food, she eats healthily, and for more than a month she hasn't been either up in the skies or down in the dumps, but present, inside herself, as it were.

Last night I woke to her screams.

"Help," she shouted, in a loud drawn-out cry, as though danger were looming.

I was awake at once, put my arm around her, and told her it was only a bad dream. She mumbled that she knew and fell asleep again. It was half past three, I went down to the kitchen and made some coffee, went up to the loft in the other house and started writing. I had written the passage about her father's funeral straight after it happened and had promptly forgotten it. I remembered it then because she had called for help at the airport and was doing so again now. At the time I had taken it literally, she wanted help carrying John, but when I reread the passage it was impossible not to think of something else, something greater, a cry from her inner being, to me, I had to go to her rescue. I had to put everything aside, she was in distress, I had to help.

I hadn't done that, I had lost my temper and was embarrassed.

When she screamed in the night I thought I should help her. I hope I can, I hope I am good enough. I hope I have learned.

*

August 28, 2011. 4:56. Pitch black outside. The house where I am writing is by the sea, and the first thing I did when I woke an hour ago was listen to the faint crash of the breakers below. Last night I was woken by thunder and lightning so violent that the whole countryside was lit up by the quivering electrical discharges. Lightning flashed right outside the window, the sound of thunder came with the light – immense explosions. The rain followed, also violent, torrents fell everywhere. When I spoke to the hosts later that morning they told me water had flooded in over their kitchen floor. At just before two we drove to the venue where the performance was to take place, and at several points the road was submerged to a depth of between half a meter and a meter. The countryside around was absolutely drenched. I can't remember any thunderstorms from my youth or from later life being as intense or wild as this. When we moved to Malmö the late-summer leaden horizon could be permeated by sudden angled shafts of light and the sky would rumble and boom. Presumably the simple explanation is that atmospheric conditions are different here. Surely thunderstorms couldn't be increasing in frequency and intensity with every year that passes, could they?

Last night's performance went well. There were two hundred people in the audience and I spoke for two hours, first with the interviewer, who asked his questions, then with the audience, who asked theirs. My strategy in such situations is simple: I try to be as present as possible at the moment, by which I mean not repeat myself. I try to answer all the questions as if it were the first time they had been asked, to exercise no self-criticism at all, only to say what occurs to me on the spot. Afterwards I can't remember what I've said, and I want to be alone because, in a sense, I have been on display up there, everyone has seen me, not just for a second but for more than two hours, and I have taken great risks by not pretending. It is odd that it should be so painful, but it is. When they laugh at something I say or when there is a kind of sigh, which means that I am confirming something they have thought themselves, it hurts me because I am fooling them, that is the feeling I have, they are falling for my tricks. Linda once called me an itinerant purveyor of earnestness, and that is an apt image. Mathias, who turned up at the Culture House in Stockholm when I was there two weeks ago, told his mother afterwards that I had been fantastic and that he had never seen me so warm or sincere before. And this is exactly the point. When I am with Mathias or Linda or anyone else I am close to, I am the antithesis of warm and sincere. It is therefore as though I can only be warm and sincere in front of a group of strangers and not with kith and kin. That is why what I do is a kind of trick. When I am sitting on the stage talking to an audience there is a great distance. I can manage that and appear close and warm. When I am sitting at a table afterwards and eating with the event organizers the distance to them is not as great, but inside me I feel it is. I say nothing and seem dismissive and cold, not open or warm, as before onstage. It is as though having a name enables me to be who I actually am and how I actually feel, but only in staged settings, not in normal social situations. That is why I feel so false afterwards, even though I have really been more genuine. The smiles, the friendliness, the admiration I encounter when I sign books is unbearable, not because it isn't well meant or honest, but because it is on false premises. Deep down, I have to reject it. At the same time, when the wind changes, when my star is on the wane and I have become yesterday's news, I assume I will miss the buzz when I enter a room – all the eyes surreptitiously turning to me and the waves of applause washing over me.

Another strong feeling I had afterwards was that I had betrayed the novel by talking about it in public. It isn't public yet, it is still just mine, it is a place where I go and where I am every day, a part of me, my inner being, which, as soon as the book is published, becomes part of external reality and no longer a place where I go or am. Talking so much about it as I did yesterday doesn't feel good. The familiarity between me and the novel was broken in a way. And when I spoke about it, it sounded better, more interesting and important than it is. The *Mein Kampf* essay became more important when I spoke about it, in particular, it sounded good, four hundred pages about prewar Vienna, Weimar between the wars, how times and psychology, art and politics are closely linked, and the formula for all things human, I-you-we-they-it, this was easy to talk about and had an aura of significance in that context. I talked about it because they had made an effort to attend, and it didn't feel as if I could just sit there talking about myself and my life, I had to turn the occasion into something relevant for them, to create a "we," and that was what I did. To survive the moment and reap a short-term gain, I betrayed the novel. Everything is mixed as I sit here. Good and bad, false and genuine, literature and reality, private and public. As if that weren't enough, someone has sent me a copy of *Weekendavisen*, in which the fourth book, which has just come out here, is reviewed. I skim-read it when I came home. Bo Bjørnvig had written it. He said that for the first time in the series I hadn't been quite honest, and this was noticeable throughout the novel. A slightly false note, he said. I hadn't thought about the novel since I wrote it, but when I read that comment, it came back, and I knew that what Bjørnvig wrote was true. I had not been honest in that book. I wrote it when the pressure was at its peak, at that time the first two books were out and the debate about them was raging in the media, every single day there were several articles about them, everyone had an opinion, a newspaper like *Morgenbladet* ran its entire front page and several other pages inside on the immorality of what I had done and had published not only my father's name but also a photograph of a rhododendron bush he had planted and my grandparents' house. That house isn't in the novel, I located the action somewhere completely different, and their names are not in the novel either, but in this article everything became public. Other newspapers called all the characters from the novel they could track down. I spoke to Jan Vidar: as he came out of his house he had walked slap bang into two journalists who wanted to interview him about me. I spoke to Mathias: he had come home from nursery school in Stockholm with his son and was cooking when there was a ring at the door, two journalists from Norway who wanted to have a chat about me. Mathias, who wasn't even in the novel, said no, thank you, he didn't want a chat. As soon as he had shut the door he called his mother and warned her. There were journalists heading her way. And sure enough, not long afterwards there was a ring at her door. She didn't open up. They left but returned later that evening after she had gone to bed. They wouldn't give in, and she didn't dare go to the bathroom for fear that they would realize she was home and keep ringing. They called her ex-husband, Vidar, who is more than seventy years old and still lives in a house in the forest, and asked him what he thought about me and the way I had written about his former wife. They called my mother, Yngve, Tonje, and Tore, and, where I'd grown up, four of my old friends from school talked in the local paper about what I had been like and what we had done. They called all my ex-girlfriends, and my old teachers, one of them, the only man I had mentioned by name, Jan Berg, appeared on television and talked about how it felt to be described as "evil" in the hit novel of the autumn. Every single day there was something about the books in the papers, and my photo was everywhere. My entire private life had been turned upside down; there were no limits anymore: when I was at the Litteraturhus in Oslo a *Dagbladet* journalist ran after me and kept asking the same question, had I had sex with an underage girl? That was Book 4 he was referring to, which I was writing then, and the question, which was actually like asking me if I was a sex offender, was posed because I had mentioned a conversation with Geir about this in Book 2, and I had said Book 4 would deal with my time in northern Norway. Personally, I saw or heard nothing of what was in the papers, nothing of what was said on the radio or TV, I found out secondhand, and I heard about all the journalists who had been buzzing around everywhere. They bombarded me with e-mails at the beginning, but that stopped fairly soon, then I seemed to find myself in the eye of the storm. *Verdens Gang* had interviewed the people working in the Chinese takeaway beside the entrance to our apartment, I heard, and those working in the café I frequented, and the mayor of Malmö, and the owners of our apartment, whom they asked how much I paid in rent. In this climate, with all the stones of my life apparently being turned over, I sat writing about the year I had worked as a teacher in northern Norway. It was a little place where everyone knew everyone, and it had been such a sensitive situation because I went there as a teacher, and it was one thing writing about life in the family or in my closest circle and quite another writing about the children I met at school. Of course they had shown me a kind of total, unconscious trust then, although it wasn't actually shown to me but to my teacher persona, unaware that the teacher would one day write about them and their lives. Parents confided in me about their children and thus indirectly also about themselves. When I wrote the first two novels publication wasn't in my mind; usually what I wrote and thought stayed in the novel, even when I had written something outrageous – when the novel came out it was as though the outrageous passages didn't exist, as though I hadn't written them. In my debut novel I wrote about a man of twenty-six sleeping with a girl of thirteen, she was his pupil. No one took any notice. It was a risqué topic, but the novel made it innocuous. The novel sold seventy thousand copies in total, quite a large readership, but it still didn't exist, it remained with the readers. When I reached that point in the novel, it must have been the summer of 1997, I was living in a mountain farmhouse in Jølster, writing a film script with Tore. I told him what I had written and what I was thinking of writing about. I asked him for his opinion. This was a major challenge to conventional morality, I spent two weeks thinking about it, can I write about this, and if so, why am I writing about it? Tore thought I should. I came to the same conclusion, and I wrote it, uneasy and fearful, it was as though I were doing something evil. If I had been completely innocent, if this had been a theme I had plucked from the air, it wouldn't have been so bad. But then there would have been no point writing, it would have been something I had made up, a kind of thematic detail, calculated, a provocation, and therefore artistically dead. Precisely because it pained me justified my writing about it. The more painful it was, the more justified it was. It wasn't that I had slept with a thirteen-year-old pupil at that time, but I had articulated the thought, not just once but many times, and I had been filled with a desire that was strong and so secret that I managed to repress it completely as soon as I left. While I was writing the novel, it came back, I remembered, and I knew that the right thing would be to complete the thought and enact it in reality, which wasn't reality but fiction, because that is what writing a novel is, all the tendencies there are, wishes, desires, possibilities, and impossibilities crystallize in one point, an image, an act, where everything that is immanent, hidden, and veiled, reveals itself. So I did, I wrote about my alter ego, the teacher Henrik Vankel who had sex with one of his pupils, thirteen-year-old Miriam. Up to that moment I had written perhaps two hundred pages about his life in Kristiansand, much the same as my own biography, but it was only when I reached this point, the scene where they were lying together, that it became a novel and I became a novelist because there, through a simple act that never took place, I succeeded in expressing something that was true and that I had never even been able to think, on the contrary I had relegated it to the depths from which it came. This truth is the novel's truth. The novel is a place where that which cannot be thought elsewhere can be thought and where the reality we find ourselves in, which sometimes runs counter to the reality we talk about, can be manifest in images. The novel can describe the world as it is, as opposed to the world it ought to be. Everyone who has read *Out of the World* will understand that the emotions, urges, and desires that it contains are not something the author has made up but are something inside him. But the agreement between the author and the reader, the novel's pact, is that this conclusion should not be drawn, and if it is, only in secret. It should never be spoken aloud. The term "novel" is the guarantee of that. Only in this way can what is not said but which is true still be said. That is the pact, the author is free to say whatever he or she wants because the author knows that what he or she says will never, or at least should never, be linked with the author, with his or her private person. It is a necessary pact that the books, which provoked such a sensation and such anger, broke. I wrote them because my commitment to the novel wasn't enough for me, I wanted to go a step further and commit to reality, because the contravention of the norms that had allowed me to write a novel for the first time, when I expressed what was true through the novel, was at an end for me, it was empty, a gesture, it meant nothing or I couldn't make it mean anything, I felt that I could write anything at all. To be able to write anything at all is death for an author. An author can only write something specific, and what determines this something specific is, to be precise, commitment. My commitment was to reality, what I wrote about had really happened and it had happened as described. What the "I" of the novel felt was what the author of the novel felt, so the private space was nullified, and I personally had to answer for everything written there. Doing this was no problem in Book 1 and Book 2 because once I had broken down the barrier between my "I" and my author's "I," the barrier was down for good, and the relevant rules, that events should have happened and have been experienced in reality, were easy to follow. The books had come out to an unexpectedly warm reception from the public. And this meant that they had a life of their own and became real, beyond my control, and this was new because before I had been able to write whatever I liked, controversial or not, without it becoming real. It had always stayed in the novel. Now it didn't, it lived outside, in reality, with my photo attached, which increasingly began to resemble a logo. Nevertheless I was still able to write the third book without deviating from the categorical demand for truth because the distance from the events it portrayed, in my childhood, was so great. We, that is, the publishing house and I, still changed some names and deleted some features that might have caused offense, but not many. My mother hasn't read it yet, but she has found out quite a bit anyway; her private role as a mother has been discussed in public because of the book, as though she represented wives and mothers and as though people other than herself or her closest family were entitled to criticize what she did or didn't do. But Book 4 was different. I feared I might have started something that had got out of hand. I anonymized the village where I worked, calling it Håfjord instead of Fjordgård, as it was actually called, which the newspapers were not slow to pick up on. I gave different names to all the pupils and teachers and I also furnished them with made-up characteristics or idiosyncrasies, all to escape the commitment to reality I could no longer fulfill. In this book, therefore, I committed neither to the novel nor to reality. For this reason it became a strange book, in which I do the opposite of what an author should, I cover over the truth. In *Out of the World*, which deals with the same theme, I wrote the truth by committing to the novel; in the first two books I wrote the truth by committing to reality. In Book 3 this link is weaker, only to fall away entirely in Book 4. However, everything I said about myself was true. The passages that seem most authentic because they are raw are nonetheless a kind of masquerade because I knew exactly what was going on when I was there, but not when I wrote about it. And there was one thing I wrote in the book that I had never told anyone, and this was that I hadn't masturbated, not a single time, until I was nineteen. I hadn't told anyone about the ignominy and the constant humiliation of premature ejaculation either, as it is so dreadfully tritely called. One doesn't talk about that sort of thing. But what was really dangerous, the feelings I had for a thirteen-year-old girl when I was eighteen, I didn't examine in sufficient depth, the mere mention of it meant I had to be so incredibly careful with all the rest, all those fathers and mothers, sons and daughters I had mixed with while I ached with desire in an inner world that was thoroughly sexualized. The publishing house was careful too, it was not unusual for the editor, Therese, to call me to discuss whether a character was anonymous enough or whether this or that character ought not to make such and such an utterance in such and such a way. The lawyers also read the manuscript and suggested changes. The public had me and the publisher in its grip, and the novel became a hostage to reality. This is not an excuse, and this is not my way of saying Book 4 is a poor novel, it is still full of the terrible banality and vigor of youth, it is a comedy of immaturity, and despite being conventional it is inimitable, for the simple reason that it arose under precisely the conditions it did. But it is not the truth.

August 29, 2011. 2:12. I am in the flat in Malmö, which shows signs of having been empty for close on three months: all the plants have withered, the air is dry, dusty, and there is a foul smell in the bathroom; water must somehow have been left to stand in the pipes. The rest of the family is in Glemmingebro. I talked to Vanja on the phone yesterday, she said, Dad, you're not allowed to be in Malmö until Friday, you have to come tonight. I said that if she gave me permission to stay in Malmö until Friday the book I was writing would be completely finished. She said, *Finished*? I said, yes. Then you'll have to work all the time, she said. You shouldn't eat or sleep, just work. I'll do that, I said. But when I sat down this morning, I had such a headache and felt so lethargic I couldn't work. It has happened a couple of times over the past three years, all of a sudden I'm unable to do anything, I find it an enormous strain to get out of bed, dress, and go to the kitchen to butter a few slices of bread, almost impossible. It lasts one, maybe two days and then it goes, and everything is as before. Once it lasted a week, Linda was so worried about me that she forced me to go to the doctor, although I never go. I was given a full examination and even an ECG. Nothing. I was fit as a fiddle. I knew I was, but I went in order to reassure Linda, who, I know, is sometimes afraid I might drop dead from a heart attack. It is an interesting phenomenon, standing outside everything you used to be inside, when things you normally do without a second thought become unattainable. That is what it's like to get old, I think with fear in my heart, only slower, your strength is gradually sapped until ultimately you stand outside the life you once lived and you no longer have the strength to recover, with maybe twenty years left to live. But what is living? It is doing things and being at the center of the world. If you are deprived of that, of acting, doing, being at the center of the world, a distance develops between you and the world, you observe it but you are not part of it, and this estrangement is the start of death. Living is being greedy for days, no matter whether they are good or bad. Dying is being weary of days, when they no longer matter or cannot matter because you are no longer inside them, but on the outside. Being whisked off by an illness or a sudden accident is another thing, a different death, more brutal for those around you, but perhaps more merciful for the life that comes to an end, because it happens when life is in full spate, you are in the midst of it, and there is no slow fade. But of course I don't know. The opposite might be true, that it is best to be sated with days and watch the world slowly become weaker and weaker, lighter and lighter, until eventually it disappears and ceases to exist.

In the time it has taken to write this book four people in my close family have died. Aunty Ingunn, Uncle Magne, my great-uncle Anstein, and my father-in-law, Roland. I liked all of them, they were fine people. Now they are no more. From the more distant family further uncles and aunts have died, of whom I have no more than vague memories. Geir's mother, Signe Arnhild, has died, Christina's mother, Eivor, has died, and two of Geir's friends, Marco and Peter. The latter two were young. The others were in their midsixties to midseventies. The births: my cousin Yngvild's son, Sigurd August, whose christening Linda and I went to in January in Brussels, Linda's girlfriend's first child, Annie, and Geir and Christine's second child, Gisle. Our three children, Vanja, Heidi, and John, have gone from being four years, two years, and six months old when I started writing, to being seven and a half, almost six, and four today. The remorseless wind of time, which takes away as much as it brings, has also swept through these pages.

I am not the same person as when I started either. That is I am the same person, but my relations with other people have changed. A lot was revealed when the books, and with them my private life, were made public. Everyone I know has been put through an ordeal. It hasn't been easy for anyone. It has been hardest for Linda. Being a relative, irrespective of what emotions are involved, is both a bond and a role. Yngve is a brother, Sissel is a mother, Ingrid is a mother-in-law. Whatever Yngve did, even if he killed someone and ended up in prison, he would still be my brother and I wouldn't be able to turn my back on him. Being a father myself, I understand what it is like to be a parent and I know that what applies to your brother applies a thousand times to your children. Whatever Vanja, Heidi, or John do, I will always forgive them and I will always be there for them. Anything else is inconceivable. I thought of the aftermath of the brutal massacre on Utøya in Norway on July 22, when the father of the perpetrator said his son should have killed himself. A man with children can say that, but not a father. For parents, children, and siblings there is a guarantee, that the bond between them cannot be severed. This is so because the role is not connected with acts but with the bond. At least this has always been guaranteed for me. Mom and Yngve might be hurt or saddened by what I wrote, they might be angry with me, and they might distance themselves from me, but they would still be my mother and brother the day they, or I, die. The bond is indestructible, and of course that is for good or ill. For my father, who was so closely attached to his mother, it was also problematic because he never really freed himself to become his own man. For my mother, when I was in my teens and we lived together, the most important priority was that I should be myself and feel free. The final consequence of this is my book, which completes a trajectory that started when I was sixteen. The question then was not so much who I was as where I belonged. Now the questions have merged into one and the same. And, as when I was sixteen, it has been about freeing myself. In this book I have tried to write myself free from everything that ties, perhaps first and foremost the ties to my father, but also the ties to my mother, not the emotional ones, they are indestructible, as indeed are those to my father, but from all the values and attitudes she has transferred to me, both directly and indirectly. She has had an immense influence on me, but she doesn't any longer.

Ties of friendship are different from family ones because they are formed in the social sphere and can be dissolved there. The role of friend can be for life, but it doesn't have to be. A love relationship is close to a friendship in that it too can be formed and dissolved, but the moment love involves children it becomes a family, as you will be connected with each other via the children. You can separate, live alone, but ineluctably you still belong together through them. Another decisive difference between a friendship and a love relationship is that friendship is limited, it is an exception, which is revealed in its declaration, it refers to another place, where real life takes place. Friendship is a place of refuge from which you can observe life or where something else, set free from its surroundings, can happen. You can drink, you can play football, you can go to concerts, you can go bowling, you can talk about life. A love relationship is not a place of refuge, it is *the* place to be. It means that you have greater commitments, for you share the place where you reveal yourself as you are and where neither partner can get away from himself or the other person. When I met Linda and fell in love with her, everything else faded into the background, there was only her. This was an exceptional state. When it normalized and everything else returned, the spell was broken. The limitless had limits, the abnormal became the norm, the holiday became the everyday, and we, the lovers, began to argue. We had children, that too was an exceptional state, during which everything else faded, then it normalized and everything else returned, and the everyday permeated the holiday like water permeating cloth. I had written about that. When I had written about friends or acquaintances I had described only a small part of them, the part they showed me. But nothing of what I wrote was harmful or could threaten them in any way. It might have been unpleasant, but that was because they were mentioned in a novel, not because what was written was revealing or in any way damaging. It was different with my family because they played a larger role in the novel, but the only person I examined in depth was my father, and he had been dead for almost ten years. My relatives also considered the description of my grandmother offensive, but, firstly, I did not agree, and, secondly, she was dead too, and it was her descendants who would have to react to my description of her and the publication of it, which they found insulting, but in that case it wasn't them I insulted but her memory. The description of Linda was different. We lived together, she was the mother of my children, and I knew virtually everything about her. Linda and I were a "we," it was "us two." But the "we" was not all of me, it was what I shared with her, and in all relationships you hold that which you don't share outside, that which belongs only to the "I." The moment you bring it in, it belongs to both of you. I hadn't written about our relationship but about my life within it, and in so doing brought it into the relationship, for now she had to consider my secret thoughts as joint, now we had those in common as well. They weren't secret in any criminal or underhanded way, they were secret in the sense that I didn't reveal them because they weren't relevant to what we shared. They might perhaps have had a negative effect on it. Everyone has such thoughts and everyone knows everyone has them, but in a tacit agreement they are not mentioned and constitute no part of what two people have together. The urge to crane your neck after a beautiful woman in the street, the urge to be alone, an indifference to the people your partner likes or is close to, everything that is done out of duty and not for pleasure. Beyond this, I also presented an image of her that she didn't know. She suspected it, she may even have known, but in what we shared it was not mentioned and it was therefore nonexistent, it was more like something vaguely threatening but unformed, I imagined. However, not only that, others would also read about it and form their own image of Linda as a result. They didn't know her, and that didn't matter, but the very knowledge that this is the image others would get from me would have to be integrated into her identity. Not only the new "This is how I am for Karl Ove when he is alone" but also "Now others can see this is how Karl Ove sees me," and the power of this was immense, especially for Linda, I knew, who was the kind of person who had dreams and could partly live in those dreams. The dream of love, the dream of family, the dream of a professional career, the dream of a role as writer. In the book love was pervaded with frustration, family life was a series of duties, and she was a character I criticized for not doing enough and burdening me with her limitations. I had asked her to read this and approve it.

How could I have done that?

The truth was that when I sat down to write the novel I had nothing to lose. That was why I wrote it. I wasn't only frustrated, the way you can become when you live as a parent with small children and have many duties and have to sacrifice yourself, I was unhappy, as unhappy as I have ever been, and I was all alone. My life was pretty dreadful, that was how I experienced it, I was living a dreadful life, and I wasn't strong enough, I didn't have the spine to abandon this and start anew. I often thought about leaving, sometimes several times a day, but I couldn't do it, it was no good, I couldn't bear the thought of the consequences for Linda and her life, because if there was one thing she was afraid of it was this: that I might leave her or I might die. I was also afraid of her anger. And I was afraid of her mother's anger. The terrible reproaches I would have to confront, the treachery I had inflicted on Linda and our children, I couldn't face that. But that was what made me decide to write a novel in which I threw caution totally to the winds and told it as it was. Only when the book was ready to be published did I realize what I had done and went through the manuscript and crossed out the worst. Not about Linda, but about the people around her. And then I added our love story, for that was what had brought me to where I was. How could two people who so clearly had such love for each other, whose hearts burned with love, end up in such darkness, in such misery? It wasn't the everyday grind that had darkened our existence, far from it. I didn't mind changing diapers, dressing and undressing the children, taking them to school, walking in the park and playing, cooking, doing the dishes and the laundry. What I couldn't cope with was doing all this and writing at the same time – and encountering nothing but criticism, always hearing that I didn't do enough, and whenever I wanted to do something else not being able to because she couldn't be on her own with the children. She offended my mother, she offended my brother, and she offended my close friends, and she could be so unpleasant that I was torn apart with conflicts of loyalty. But what made the whole thing so crazy was that her mental picture of what was happening was the exact opposite of reality, and that was the picture we lived by. In it she was the hub of the family, the person who drove everything and sacrificed herself. Even when I was in the bathroom scrubbing and cleaning, and she stood watching, she couldn't refrain from letting drop a critical comment, I was too fussy, at that rate I would never finish, and although she never did any cleaning, apparently she was the one who kept the apartment in order. Even when I had to take the children in two strollers to school, as well as John, because she was tired and wanted to sleep a bit more, and even though only three days before I had broken my collarbone, she was the one who wore herself out doing everything with the children. She often stayed in bed, and could lie there for days on end, she constantly had pains somewhere, either in her throat or her stomach or her head, it was always the same, she was ill, and then she couldn't do anything, on those days I had to do everything. As for me, I was rarely ill. And if I was, she refused to acknowledge it. Once, when I had a temperature of one hundred and four, she said I took to my bed for no reason, typical man, if she had the tiny ailment I had now, no problem, she would soldier on. I stared at her, mouth agape. What insanity was this? Were we living in Upside-Down Land? Me, who was never ill, whereas she, who had such a low threshold for anything disagreeable, never took to her bed for anything – was so egregious that I was speechless. Furious, I staggered to the nursery school with Vanja, hardly able to stand upright, we lived in Stockholm then, and for the rest of the day I lay delirious in my office. If anything went wrong at home, something as trivial as a lightbulb going, it would never be repaired or changed unless I did it. I could clean the whole apartment one Saturday morning and have the children at the same time, but if she had the children and I cleaned, she complained there was so much on her shoulders and so little on mine. I did all the food shopping, trudged home with all three children, and four or five shopping bags filled to the brim, I had to get everything in one trip to save time so I could write, and it was like that with everything, I didn't have a minute free because once the apartment and the children had been taken care of I had to write, apart from five minutes on the balcony, sitting alone smoking, for which she also berated me, she never had any breaks like that. It was as though she regarded the time I wrote as my own, leisure, something for me, and after I had finished and went out, I had to continue to do all sorts of things, for now she wanted her downtime. She didn't write when she could have, so it wasn't that, she didn't have a job either, and although she talked about it, she didn't do anything specific. I had no problem with that, for when she did write she wrote something essential and brilliant, and that was enough for me. The problem was that she had an image of herself as someone who was always working and constantly exhausted as a result, while I was someone who thought only of myself and never did anything. It was crazy, absolutely crazy, because I couldn't correct this picture if I tried, she just said I didn't "see" her and all she did, and that was typical of men, women did everything, but invisibly while what men did was visible. It was impossible to fight against this. Of course I saw what she did with the children, but I did exactly the same, plus all the other stuff. She also reproached me for not loving her enough and said I was selfish and prioritized writing above family life. I wrote perhaps for five hours a day while the children were at school, and I didn't write on weekends, which was strictly forbidden, so in reality I worked minimally at what brought in the cash and maximally at everything else. This situation lasted for many years. I couldn't stand it, but I had to if I wanted to keep everything in one piece. Occasionally I reached the breaking point. The first time I told her I didn't want to keep this up and I was going to leave her was the summer we moved to Malmö. We had been living for a few weeks with Linda's mother and her husband, in the mornings I went into town and worked on the Bible translation, returning in the afternoon while Linda was with her mother and Vanja and Heidi. One evening I didn't go back, I went out with Geir, that was fine with Linda, we went to the Södra Theater, the outdoor terrace there, and I got so drunk I couldn't stand up to walk to the train I had said I would catch. When I arrived back at two in the morning she was furious with me and shouted. I became so desperate that I started crying. I yelled that I couldn't take any more. I can't take any more, Linda, I said. I simply can't do this. I've had enough. I'm leaving. And I'm leaving now. After I had said that I marched into our room, threw my clothes in a suitcase, shut it, carried it outside, and set off down the forest path as Linda screamed for me not to go, I couldn't leave her, please don't go, don't go. Her tearstained face and her vow that she would change made it impossible for me to continue. I stopped, walked back, put down the suitcase, and stayed. When we were moving, only a few days later, while Linda was at Helena's, I worked nonstop for thirty-two hours packing everything we owned into cardboard boxes and finished half an hour before the moving van arrived. Then we all went by train to Malmö.

This autumn was the best we'd had since we first got together. It was the new town, the new apartment, the open sky and beautiful late-summer weather that did it, but perhaps it was also because the depths of my despair had revealed themselves to her, because our relationship opened as well, there was more room to maneuver, and once the first six months were over it became clear we were expecting another child, and the good times rolled on until they didn't, presumably they had been too much for both of us, and we were back where we had been. We argued and shouted, that was her way of solving disagreements, which I had to face, while mine was distance, the most frightening of all for her, and so the spiral wound downward again. I became unloving, dismissive, did what I had to do out of duty, took my frustration out on her, was ironic, sarcastic until she'd had enough and met it with a furious outburst, which was the most frightening response of all for me. It wasn't always like this, there were good days too, and whenever we had guests or visited someone we found each other again, then it was "us two," and the darkness that shrouded what we actually were, which was no small thing, namely soul twins, lifted. We also had children, whom we obviously both loved above all else, and we were almost of one mind with regard to who they were, what qualities they had and showed; we saw the same, thought the same, and felt the same. But the disharmony between us spilled over them too, of course, because we weren't above arguing in front of them, and when I was at my angriest with Linda but swallowed my anger and didn't want to talk, it was the children I took it out on. If Linda had stretched out on the sofa and said I should take them for a walk because they needed some fresh air, they didn't have to put up much resistance before I was shouting, almost frothing with rage, or shaking them. Once Linda and I had been yelling at each other in the kitchen, the children appeared in the doorway, in descending order of height, we saw them and quieted down. Then Vanja came in and reenacted what had happened, Dad shouted and banged the table, *there*, Mommy shouted and threw a cup on the floor, *there*. Linda and I looked at each other, her face was ashen, we both realized what we were doing. The situation could not continue like this, but it did. The only reason I could write about it was that I had reached a point where I no longer had anything to lose. It made no difference if Linda read this, she could do what she liked. If she wanted to leave me, she could. I didn't give a damn. I woke up unhappy, spent the day unhappy, and went to bed unhappy. If only

I could have an hour, a day, a week, a month, a year alone, everything would be fine, I knew that. That is for me, not for her. For Linda it wouldn't be good, I knew that too. The very thought of leaving filled me with guilt and a bad conscience, in my mind I was living a double life. I was also afraid of facing all the fury and the abyss-opening fear which my departure would create. Linda was frightened, that was the point, she was afraid, whereas I was so conflict-averse that I would rather live in despair than say how things were. And as soon as the tide turned, and we were fine again, I thought, I love her, and perhaps it was difficult just now, but it would pass. When Linda's father died I was so emotionally blunted to everything that I couldn't give her any of what she needed. I was giving everything to the novel and the children, I was giving nothing to her.

Then there was a change, something out there turned against me and went on the attack. It was as though everything inside me was in jeopardy, as though the ground beneath my feet had gone. There was something out there, and to confront it I sought courage in what I had within, my real life, Linda, Vanja, Heidi, and John, and found strength there. I knew what I had. I knew what they meant to me. I saw Linda, who she was, and I saw our children. I saw my family. I didn't want to lose it. I didn't want to lose Linda. She was everything I had. And she kept me alive. If I turned away from life, if I wanted to retreat and disappear from the world, she tugged at me, I wasn't allowed to, I had to be there for her, in the midst of life. I needed her, and I needed the children, they made me a whole person. And she needed me, and the children needed me.

Such was the situation when, some days after we had returned from Prague, this topsy-turvy autumn, I gave Linda the manuscript. When I wrote it I'd had nothing to lose, when she read it now, suddenly I had everything to lose.

She was going to Stockholm to see a theater performance, up by train one morning, back the next day. The previous night I sat wondering whether to remove the passages that would hurt her most, it would be easy to do and wouldn't detract from the novel, but at the same time I thought it had to be truthful, if not it was utterly meaningless, all of it. I wanted to show her this because it was true. That the truth was not just in a letter to her, meant for her eyes only, but in a novel, meant for everyone's eyes, made what I was asking her to do actually inhuman. Fear and guilt accumulated in my chest like water behind a dam. I tried to subdue them by telling Linda there were a lot of terrible parts in the novel and she would be angry, but my intentions were not bad. She just smiled, she could take it, she said, don't worry. She put the manuscript in her bag, stood up straight by the open front door, we gave each other a kiss, again she told me not to worry and said everything would be fine, then she stepped into the corridor, closed the door behind her, and was gone. I went to the balcony and had a smoke, walked back to my study and worked on Book 3, strolled down to the kiosk and bought some more cigarettes, returned to my study and wrote a little more, but the thought of Linda reading the manuscript was burning inside me, there was no room for anything else, and the most difficult aspect of it all was that she was reading without any explanations, without any corrections, I had to soften the blow and dialed her number. It had been an hour since she left. She answered at once. I could hear from her voice that she was sad. She said she was on the train and had started reading. She thought it was good, terrible to read, but she was coping. I told her I had been frustrated, but I wasn't now. She said, Goodbye, romanticism. She said, One thing's for sure – all the illusions about our relationship have gone now. Her voice was unemotional as she spoke, and there was something hard there, as though she had told herself to resist. I'm sorry, Linda, I said. I'm sorry too, she replied. But it won't get any worse than this, will it? she asked. Yes, I said. It will. I'll survive that too, she said. OK, I said. But now I'm hanging up, she said. OK, I said. Talk to you later.

I ate, wrote, sat on the balcony smoking, washed some clothes, wrote a bit more, and then I couldn't wait any longer, I called her. She had cried, she said, but now the train was close to Stockholm and she was looking forward to meeting Helena and maybe thinking about something else for a few hours. We clicked off, I picked up the children, made them some food, they watched children's TV, I brushed their teeth, put on their pajamas and read to them, then went to bed not long after they had fallen asleep. I took them to school, wrote, talked to Linda on the phone, she was on the train home, she had just read my description of how we first got together and her voice sounded lighter. I told her the worst was still to come and she should brace herself. She didn't believe me, I could hear, there was a smile in her voice when she said she would.

An hour later she called.

"What happened on Gotland?" she shouted.

"Only what's written," I said.

"What did you do?"

"It's all in the manuscript. I knocked on the door."

"Who was she? Why did you do it?"

"I was drunk."

"When was it? I remember when it was. I was at home with the children. Heidi was sick. How could you do that? How could you? Who was she?"

"That doesn't make any difference."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You know why."

"How can you write that in a novel and let me read about it?"

"I don't know. It just happened like that."

"Well, I don't want to talk to you anymore."

She hung up. A few minutes later she called again.

"Who was she? I want to know who she was."

"I don't know what her name is, Linda. Nothing happened."

"You were banging on her door all night."

"Yes, I'm sorry. But that's how it was."

"Heidi was sick. I was all alone."

"Yes," I said.

She hung up. I went onto the balcony, smoked, trudged back inside, paced back and forth in the apartment, phone in hand the whole time. Surfed the Net, went back out and smoked, stood in front of the living-room window and gazed across at the hotel, went back into the study and surfed, out again and smoked, shuffled from room to room, finally stopped in the children's bedroom, the innocence there would do me good, I thought, but it didn't, everything just got worse and I went back out on the balcony. I didn't have a thought in my head, not one.

She called again just as I was going to pick up the children. She was calmer. She had read the manuscript now, she said. What shall we do? she said. She began to cry as she said that. What shall we do now, Karl Ove? And suddenly I snapped. I sobbed. I said, I don't know. I cried. I said, I don't know, Linda. I don't know.

An hour later I was in the kitchen frying fish cakes when I heard the sound of the elevator outside, it seemed to come all the way up and I called to the children to go and see if it was Mommy. They didn't need to be asked twice, they had missed her, as they always did when she was away, and now they were in the hall waiting for the door to open. They pressed against her, she knelt down and hugged them in turn, stroking their backs as she sent me an all-penetrating look. She was red-eyed and pale, but still full of warmth when she turned to the children. They didn't notice the glare she had sent me.

Look what you've done, it said.

Look what we've got and you're destroying, it said.

The children clung to her as she took off her shoes and jacket and put the little suitcase by the wall. I set the table, we ate, we said nothing to each other, conversation plied back and forth between us and the children. They were excited and happy to have her back. Afterwards we sat in the living room to watch children's TV with them. After a while she looked at me and said, in English:

"The knife."

I didn't understand what she meant. She occasionally spoke English to me when she didn't want the children to understand, which I was unable to do and didn't like. That wasn't what I was thinking about at this moment, of course, only about her pasty face and red eyes, which in some way had something to do with a knife.

"In the novel," she said. "The knife."

"What are you talking about, Mommy?" Vanja asked.

"I'm just chatting with Daddy," she said. "About something he wrote."

A knife? What kind of knife? Had I written about a knife?

"What do you mean?" I said.

"The one Geir gave you," she said. "No one will understand why it's in the book if it isn't used. A pistol mentioned in the first act is fired in the fifth."

Geir? I puzzled. What did he and his present have to do with this?

"What pistol?" Vanja said.

"We're talking about a play. Drama," I explained.

"Quite a drama," Linda said.

When the TV program was over she read to the children. I sat on the balcony, my soul chilled. We would have to clear the air once the children were asleep. I had sensed her restrained anger and despair the whole time. She would give vent to them when the children were asleep.

I couldn't stay on the balcony. I didn't want her to come out thinking I was relaxing and didn't care. So I got up and returned to the living room, sat down on the sofa, heard her say goodnight to the children, their protests, she mustn't go yet, they weren't tired, they couldn't sleep. A banging noise reverberated through the apartment, it was Vanja lying on her back in bed and hitting her heels against the wall.

She went into the kitchen. Poured some water, opened a cupboard, I knew she was making tea. Just afterwards came the roar of the kettle. Then she came in with a big cup in one hand and sat down on the sofa, on the other side of the table from me. She looked straight at me. I felt sick.

"What did you mean about the knife?" I asked.

"He gave it to you so you could stab me. He wanted to get rid of me. Don't you understand? He's a vampire. He hasn't got a life of his own. He lives through you. Do you think him giving you a knife was chance?"

"It was his prized possession," I said.

She snorted.

"This isn't about Geir," I said. "This is about you and me."

"With him looking over your shoulder," she said.

"No," I said. "He's the only person I can go to outside the family. It's the same for me as it is for you and Helena."

"We don't speak like you do. I say only nice things about you to Helena. I've never said anything else."

I didn't answer. I looked down at the floor. She lifted the cup to her mouth and drank. Looking straight at me.

There was one thing I had to ask her. Something she hadn't mentioned.

"What happens if I publish it?" I said.

"Do so by all means. It's a good book. I can see that. If it hadn't been, all this would've been impossible."

"Is there anything you want me to take out?"

"No. I mean, yes. One thing. The part where you write that Bergman patted me on the head and said I was a beautiful child. That's so incredibly embarrassing you'll have to take it out."

"Nothing else."

"There were some mistakes and misunderstandings. But we can look at them later. Otherwise nothing."

She put down the cup and looked over at the balcony door. It had got darker outside.

"Who was she?" she asked.

"Who?" I said, even though I knew very well whom she meant.

"On Gotland. What was her name? What did she look like?"

"Don't go there," I said. "No good will come of it. I don't know what her name was. I was drunk. I was out of control."

"And then you did it? While I was here with Vanja and Heidi, and Heidi was ill. I trusted you."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry."

Again she glanced at the door. Then she jumped up. Her eyes were either furious or frightened or both.

"I can't stay here. I can't be here with you. It's awful. I'm off to Jenny's. You take the children tomorrow."

"OK," I said.

"I can't believe you did it," she said, and ran into the hall as fast as she could, threw on her jacket, bent down and put on her shoes. Her hands were trembling as she tied the laces, she couldn't tie them quickly enough.

"I'll call you," she said.

And then she was gone.

Jenny was a costume and set designer. She had children in the same nursery school as we did, that was where we had met her, and then she and Linda had become friends. She lived in a house with a big garden outside the center, which she had bought with a girlfriend, and Linda had a permanent offer to write there if she wanted. Sometimes she did. Sometimes, when she needed to get away, she slept over as well. So when, the following morning, the children asked where Mommy was there was nothing strange about my answer, she had left early to go to Jenny's. We were late leaving for school, it was one of those mornings when everything was difficult, and just as we were finally outside and about to cross the street, Linda came walking toward us on the other side from a gaggle of people waiting for the bus. She looked drained and exhausted. She still hadn't seen us, and when she did, as the lights changed to green and we stepped off the sidewalk, it seemed to come as a shock. It was as if she were seeing ghosts. The children caught sight of her, Vanja and Heidi let go of the stroller and raced over, John stretched out his arms.

"I thought you were at school," she said without looking at me. "I hadn't expected to run into you here."

"Where've you been, Mommy?" Vanja said. "Were you at Jenny's?"

She nodded.

"I just had to run home to pick something up."

She stood up and looked at me for the first time.

"Will you be there when I get back?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"Can I call you then?"

"I'll call later," she said.

"OK," I said. "See you."

"See you," she said, and we set off in different directions, me with the children toward school, her toward the apartment.

She came back in the evening, after the children had gone to bed. I made us some tea, we sat in the living room. Even though the despair was still present it wasn't as close to the surface as it had been. My insides were as chilled as they had been at other times in my life when I'd found myself in crises, when it is as though everything around me is burning with white heat and the only other thing left is feelings, which are completely out of control. Being in a crisis is being at the center because when everything is on the line, everything is vital. That is all that exists. This was that sort of crisis. Everything else had fallen by the wayside, there was only this, her and me.

I didn't know what to say. We drank our tea in silence. We looked at each other, we looked down.

"How are you?" I said.

"Better," she said.

"We should talk," I said.

"Yes, we must," she said.

"We must talk seriously. No pretense."

She nodded.

"I've had a terrible time," I said.

"I know," she said.

"I'm sorry you had to read about it in a novel. But the novel's not the point for me. It's life. That's what we should talk about. We can't be like this. It's impossible. We can't."

"No," she said. "I know."

"Not just for the children's sake. But for ours too. We're as far away from where we were when we got together as it's possible to be. Do you remember what it was like then? Do you remember how fantastic it was?"

"Of course I do. I long for it too."

"But we're in a different place now. You say 'goodbye, romanticism.' But this isn't about romanticism. It's about this life. It's all we have. And we have to try to make it good. As good as possible."

I got up and sat next to her. Put my arms around her. She cried. She cried and cried. I cried too. We went to the balcony and sat down in the darkness, she lit a cigarette, so she had started smoking again, I lit up too. We went into the bedroom. We stayed there the whole night, in the dim light from the hall lamp. I sat with my back to the wall looking ahead in the gloom, she lay beside me. We talked about everything there was to talk about. We were completely honest. It was as though everything we had established between us, all the images, ideas, dreams, desires, and hopes had crashed, and all that was left was the core, which we talked about. Her and me. Who we were to each other. It was like when we lay in bed in the little Stockholm apartment in Bastugatan and talked and listened to music and were completely open, completely naked, completely honest, because there was nothing to hide, not only did we have each other, we wanted each other. I wanted her, she wanted me. We could never return to that, we were somewhere else now, but it was perhaps a better place, it had a deeper feel to it because we had our children, we were a family, it was real, it was us, we didn't need any dream between us and life. She had to accept me as I was. She had to leave me in peace. She had to trust that I too wanted the best for everyone. And I had to support her because she couldn't carry on as she was, she had lost herself, slipped into a darkness where she no longer knew what was up and what was down, what was children, what was her, what was me.

At last I was calm. What had happened, had happened. There were no dangers. I hadn't felt like this since we first got together. It was like that then. There had been no tensions and we had been utterly free. Everything had been open. Now we had done what we'd planned with such passion. We had started a family, we had children, and it was unbelievable that it had been that which would cleave me to her, and her to me. But that's what had happened.

We stayed there talking all night and when morning came she went back to Jenny's. She had more to ponder alone. At twelve she called and said she'd sent me an e-mail. I walked down to the Internet café because our connection still wasn't working and read it there, in the dark between all the bright screens and the shouts from the war-game players.

Darling Karl Ove. I feel this is the only thing I can say. It is as though someone has died. Was it me? Have I died? The person I was.

You have told me so often to live my own life.

I know you are right. I'm so frightened.

You know how frightened I am.

You say you don't want to be everything for me. I sense a way to go and I'm afraid. I'm standing at the bottom and know that I have to start living.

I know nothing about this life.

I see myself with the children. I see myself cycling in the wind. I see myself abandoning things before I need to. I see the two of us in the evenings. I have to let you out of my sight and do something I want to do. I don't know what I want. I don't know what is good for me. I know that I have to make something of myself.

I want to take photos of the children. The mess in the apartment. I want to do something with the children.

You say we have to accept each other completely. I know this is right. Deep inside me I hear a clear voice. I want to quietly mourn the child I was. I want to be an adult now. What is the endless grief that pours forth when I see you breaking down this door?

I love you. I will love you till eternity. And I know that it's hard to bear all this love and all this yearning. I would like to be able to love you in a way that is good for us. I know I must let go. I am letting go, Karl Ove. I love you so much. You and the children are a miracle that has happened to me.

When she came back that afternoon and we cooked and ate as usual it felt as if we had lived through a year in the past two days. I was utterly exhausted, she was too, but at the same time something trembled inside me, and I knew that feeling, it was happiness. Whenever I felt myself tremble like this I tried to repress it, for if there is one thing I had learned in the forty years I'd been alive it was that it was so much easier to carry despair than hope.

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The whole of autumn 2009 and spring 2010 were like this, for if the two days had felt like a year, the year had felt like ten. I had three novels published that fall, and two the following spring. All of them had to be edited and marketed, three of them also had to be written, at the same time I couldn't let Linda carry the whole burden at home, so the solution was to write fast, I set a quota of ten pages every day, and if, an hour before I was due to pick up the children, I had done six, I had to write four in that hour and then go and get them. It worked fine, I liked the feeling that something new was happening all the time and never knew where what I was writing would end. The pressure to write so much made it possible, and although I didn't like what I wrote, I liked the situation, everything was open and there wasn't a gatekeeper in sight. The media pressure, which grew with every day that passed, was more difficult to manage for me, but by completely ignoring it, by instructing everyone I spoke with not to mention a word to me of what was in the newspapers, not so much as a hint, the problem solved itself. If they did despite my instructions, it was utter torture for me, such as the time I saw that my old teacher had commented on the book he was in. I read in *Weekendavisen* that he had appeared in their quotations column. The media furor had just started when we returned from our brief trip to Prague. The first novel, which had just been reviewed in the literature pages, was now being discussed in other sections, and while reviewers had read it as a novel with material from reality and had not made anything of the fact that the people I wrote about were not only characters in a novel but also existed in reality, the potential consequences of this dimension soon began to dawn on journalists, especially as this perspective had been so dominant in *Bergens Tidende*'s coverage. They had interviewed my uncle about the book and also censured it in an editorial written by Jan H. Landro. On Tuesday I called Geir Gulliksen, and at the end of the conversation he said he was about to debate my book with Landro in the culture program on NRK radio. I called him afterwards to ask how it had gone. He said it had been fine but a bizarre experience. Landro hadn't quoted any concrete examples from the book to show what was wrong with it, apart from one, which did have some emotional force because it hurt someone, but ethically and legally it was insignificant. Somewhere in the book he said I had written that as a twenty-year-old I'd had a girlfriend I didn't really love. How might she be feeling when she reads that, Landro had said, according to what Geir told me. But she's anonymous, isn't she, Geir had said. Her name isn't even mentioned! If a writer can't write about a woman he went out with twenty years before and can't say he didn't really love her, if he does it anonymously, not mentioning any names, what would happen to Norwegian literature then? It would disintegrate, wouldn't it. That was more or less what Geir told me he had said. But why on earth didn't Landro say anything about the family? I thought that was the whole point. They'd interviewed your uncle and, based on his reaction, they condemn what you've done.

I think I know why, I said to Geir. Tell me then, Geir said. I received a copy of an e-mail today, I said. Gunnar sent it to *Bergens Tidende* at two o'clock to thank them for the way they'd covered the case. I'm fairly sure Landro read it before he met you. I can't see any other explanation. So far they've communicated with Gunnar on the phone. Berdahl too. And on the phone Gunnar is sensible and clear. But when he writes he seems to lose all proportion. Landro must've suddenly realized who he's been defending. Actually, he can't do that because Gunnar will unpack his whole theory about my mother's family to them.

Really? Geir said.

So they chose principles instead, I said. But I'll pass on the e-mail. He's only sent copies to my mother, Yngve, and me this time, and to Tønder and Landro, but not the publishing house.

Send it to me, Karl Ove, Geir said. We'll talk later.

Linda's mother, came down to help us that fall, we had so much going on, and Ingrid's own mother had always gone to help her when her life was busy, she looked after Linda and Mathias, cooked, and kept the house clean. Ingrid took after her mother in this. She got up early and made pancakes for the children, they were so thin, she thought, or baked bread rolls for them, she brushed their hair, helped to dress them, and when they had gone to school with Linda, she went out to get the items she needed for what she'd be cooking that day. She prided herself on the food she made, and we were spoiled; everything was made from scratch with fresh produce from the big market in Möllevangen and the plethora of immigrant shops along the streets there. She made lunch, and when I picked up the children, dinner was ready and waiting for us. She was invaluable. Yet I had described in great detail the conflict-filled relationship I had with her in Book 2. She had received the manuscript close to the deadline, and had been obliged to read it quickly and give feedback in a couple of days. She thought it was a great novel. She said, Lars Norén, eat your heart out. But she was also annoyed with what I had written about her, I noticed that when she was at our place, the constant ambivalence toward me. One of the first days she came over to me and said, That's not me you've described in the book. You should know that. It's a character bearing my name in a novel. But you can have it as a present from me.

I traveled to Stavanger to do a reading at Café Sting with, among others, Tore, who picked me up from the hotel in his Toyota and drove me to his apartment. He'd got divorced and was now on his own. The walls were covered with books and records. Darkness was falling outside. I had a beer in my hand, some group Tore was into and I had never heard of was on the stereo. We tried on clothes. This shirt, Tore, or that one? Take that one. This jacket or that one? Take that one. Him standing in front of an ironing board in the kitchen, me in front of the mirror. And from all this, unless it was just me, arose a strong, distinct sense of going out in the early nineties, student life. It hadn't been magical then, it was what it was, neither "student days" nor "being young" nor "freedom" but something else. Everyday life. In the midst of it Tore and I read Proust, spellbound by the mythical world he described, and we discussed the very attraction of those things that had not existed during those times. Now our decade, which had meant nothing at all to us, had itself become something, and occasionally – now, for example – exerted an immense appeal.

Tore was thirty-six, I was forty. We were adults, but we behaved like teenagers, drank beer, played pop music, joked. He had two children, I had three. We had both become the only thing we wanted to be: novelists. That thought could still gladden my heart. Once we had put an advertisement in *Dagbladet*, this was during the Christmas period toward the end of the nineties. It said, The New Sentimentalists wish the Norwegian nation a merry Christmas and a very happy New Year.

"Do you remember the ad we put in the paper?" I said, sitting in a chair and smoking while he was trying on a freshly ironed shirt in the hall.

"Which ad?" he said.

I told him.

He laughed.

"Oh, yes, Jesus. That's true."

"Perhaps there's someone out there somewhere still trying to figure out what it meant," I said.

"Yes, it didn't exactly become a national movement, did it."

"Your division of books you cry over and books you don't is definitely up there too," I said.

"Tie or bow tie or nothing?" he said.

"Nothing," I said.

He put on a plaid jacket and a cloth cap.

"Shall we go then?"

I nodded, rose to my feet, and then we took a taxi to the café, where Frode Grytten had already arrived. He introduced us to his brother, who was a meteorologist or something else equally distant from cultural life. Tore and Frode had become friends. He had shown Tore respect, not all writers did, so I liked him for that reason alone.

People stared at me. As they had done at the airport. A girl came over to me outside, where I was smoking, she could hardly articulate what she wanted to say, something about me had intimidated her.

We did our readings, and afterwards we went to Cementen and drank beer, Tore told me a terrible story about his life, it was grim and shocking, an abyss. There were such abysses in his life, but they were not apparent in his manner, the way he behaved, what he talked about, yet they defined him, at least to my mind, he was someone who believed he would sink into the ground if he stood still, so he didn't.

On the plane I reflected that I had given away all of myself, I had nothing left of my own, I was a no one. Perhaps it was because I had been drinking the night before that I had these thoughts, although I hadn't drunk much, but it was enough for me to feel angst, maybe because there had been so many people looking at me, and as a result I understood what I had actually done, everyone could read everything about me, even total strangers, and think what they liked. I had put Vanja, Heidi, and John in their hands.

I met Tore again not so long afterwards, at a literature festival in Odda. I flew to Bergen, rented a car to drive along the fjord, appeared onstage with Tore, drove back to the airport the next day, and flew home. The festival organizer was Marit Eikemo, we had worked with her on Student Radio. Yngve and Asbjørn came to watch; Selma Lønning Aarø, whom I remembered from student days when she won a novel-writing competition, was there; and Pedro Carmona-Alvarez, I knew who he was, he played in Sister Sonny, sometimes wore makeup when he went out, I had never spoken to him, but I'd written about him in the summer, that is, about his latest novel, *Rust*, which had impressed me, he was there, and we sat drinking in the hotel bar, all of us, and there too I had the feeling that the nineties weren't over, they just kept going and going. At the actual performance Tore produced many old letters and e-mails I had sent him during that period, there was also one about my father, which he read out while we were all sitting onstage, and at first I was unable to comment on it because I couldn't remember ever having written it.

> *My father died two weeks ago. He passed away in an armchair in the house where he grew up, it is hard to believe, I can't believe it, and now I'm over it, now I'm here in Bergen and I'm writing to you, Tore, my friend, in Iceland. Yngve called to say what had happened, I caught the next plane down to his, and together we drove to Kristiansand the day after. I cried every day for a week. I had often wondered: what if he dies – but I had never imagined this is how I would react. So what was I grieving over? I don't know. It has nothing to do with rationality, it was just feelings, they kept gushing up, I lay alone in my grandmother's house, in tears. Now I'm over it again, now it's as if it hasn't happened.*

I was moved as I sat there because the voice came from August 20, 1998, and because it was still stricken with grief, perhaps without even knowing. It was there, onstage, that I really understood for the first time what it meant that Dad was dead. It was as though it was only then, in Odda, that he died for me. That was why the whole world suddenly became so incomprehensible.

The next morning I met the editor in chief at Spartacus, Frode Molven, in the hotel café. I'd sent him Geir's book, which after six years' toil was finally finished. It was called *Baghdad Indigo* and was a unique piece of work. It was about the human shields who had traveled to Baghdad to stop the U.S. invasion by occupying the most important bombing targets. Geir went with them, all the way from Istanbul to Baghdad, on board a red double-decker bus, and he was a human shield in Baghdad throughout the invasion. He interviewed all sorts of people in the war zone, even when the sky above them was exploding and the windows behind them were being blown out. What was war, and why was it so appealing to so many, even to those who had gone there to stop it? That formed the core of the book. Unlike the journalists, who were looked after by the regime and were either bussed around town or sat in their hotel rooms, Geir was free to go wherever and whenever he wanted. When Baghdad fell and elite U.S. soldiers were standing by the waterworks where he and a handful of other activists were staying he grabbed his backpack and lived with them for a few weeks. He interviewed them; they had come straight from the fighting and were more than happy to talk. The book was more than eleven hundred pages long, and that meant the three months it spanned had enormous importance, like something beyond time. He had captured a fragment of time. Practically no one did this anymore; journalists' reports and books from the war zone were light, noncommittal, the authors had moved on even before the corpses had gone cold. The specifics of time and place disappear in their unspecific, similar voices; conflicts merge into one, regardless of whether they take place in Afghanistan, Libya, or Somalia. When I read Geir's book it was like reading something from the Spanish Civil War in the thirties, not because the conflict was similar, but because the approach was the same as in many books from that period, namely existential. *Baghdad Indigo* was an excellent book, of that I had no doubt, so I had told Geir it would be easy to get it published. He was skeptical, he didn't want to take anything for granted, and didn't listen to me. I thought it best to send the manuscript to a publishing house before it was finished, so that they could be involved earlier in the process, it was such unusually comprehensive material. Geir listened to me, and I sent it to Aslak Nore, the nonfiction editor at Gyldendal. He had read Geir's previous book, he said in his e-mail back to me, he liked it, was interested in the topic, and was looking forward to reading the latest. He also wanted to ask me a little favor while I was there, would I mind writing a blurb for the book? Just a couple of words. Of course I couldn't say no as his decision regarding Geir's book was so important. I wrote a recommendation, however Nore not only rejected Geir's book but also went on the attack with a vengeance, calling it immoral. The second person I sent the manuscript to was Halvor Fosli at Aschehoug, but he was halfhearted, lukewarm, he never read the book, which became apparent when he said it was anti-American, which it was not, he had only skimmed it, he must have read a few lines of the interviews with the peace activists and assumed they reflected the book's main thrust. Fosli said he would talk about the book at a meeting with the other editors, which of course produced nothing. So Geir gave up on this strategy and decided to wait until the manuscript was completely finished. Which it was now. I couldn't imagine that anyone would say no. I knew Molven a little from Bergen, he seemed flattered that I had contacted him now, and Spartacus was a serious publishing house. But when we sat down in Odda he initially wanted to speak about something else. No, he didn't want any blurbs; he had in mind a biography about Axel Jensen, however, and wondered if I would like to write it. I didn't say no, even though I would never write a biography about anyone for as long as I lived, nor did I say yes. When that was clear we spoke a little about Geir's book. He said it sounded interesting and he would like to read it. We shook hands, and I walked over to Yngve, who had been sitting nearby waiting, we were going to drive to the ferry. I decided not to tell Geir that Molven had asked me to write a biography for him. There was something unpleasant about everyone on all sides trying to get a chunk of me, I owed Geir so much and I didn't want his book to be about my name.

On the ferry Yngve and I had a coffee, on the quay on the other side we had a smoke, and then he drove to Voss while I made my way toward Flesland Airport. It was autumn, the air was cold, sharp, and clear, the sky cloudless and blue, the sun heavy and drunk with light. Yngve had lent me a CD, it was the first by Dire Straits, I had it on full volume in the rental car, it was the one we played when I was in fifth grade and he was in ninth at Tybakken, and the atmosphere of that time filled my head, the Norwegian seventies, the soft snow, quilted jackets.

Alongside the glinting fjord. Past red, yellow, brown, green trees. Up the mountainside. And then, ahead of me on the road, a dog. I jumped on the brakes, but ran over it anyway, there was a thud and the dog was thrown into the ditch. I stopped the car, switched off the engine, and got out, a man came walking across a yard toward me. I looked for the dog, but it wasn't there. The man pointed. The dog was running up a path on the other side of the road. How was that possible? I had been doing at least fifty kph when I hit it. I keep telling them they should keep the dog on a leash, said the man, who was in his forties, as he came to a halt in front of me. What happened? I said. How could the dog have survived that? You hit it with your bumper. It might be hurt, but it doesn't look like it, he said. Does it come from up there? I said, nodding toward the farm above the road. He nodded. I'd better go up and tell them, I said. He nodded again and accompanied me. The dog was lying in the yard when we arrived, it wasn't squealing or anything, seemed healthy and happy. An old man was there, I walked over to him, explained what had happened and apologized, the dog seemed to be fine though. Thank you, he said. And then I walked back down, got into the car, and drove on. I thought about Vanja, as she loved dogs more than anything else. She knew the names of most breeds and we had to read to her from a dog book almost every day. If we were out and came across a dog we had to ask if she could pet it. Sometimes she asked if she could borrow my phone and take pictures of the dogs we saw. She wasn't allowed to have a dog until she was twelve, which she negotiated down to ten. Now she was eight. I was looking forward to telling her about the incident. If the dog had died I wouldn't have said a word. But it had been fine. I could tell her.

At Flesland I parked the rental car, handed over the keys, checked in, and flew home.

In the following weeks I finished off the third novel. In Odda, Tore had promised to help me with it because it was long and shapeless, that is, its sole principle of form was chronology. Tore had read it, made a few suggestions, which I had accepted, but it hadn't been enough, something more radical was needed, some twist or other. While I was working in Malmö the evening before I had to hand it in, Tore was skimming through it in Stavanger, and he called when he found a turning point around which the whole novel could revolve, and sent me lots of texts throughout the evening and night. By the morning it was finished. I had followed his instructions to the letter. Just a few days later Book 2 came out. Geir called in the morning, and even though I had told him not to mention a word that was written about me, he insisted on reading the *Aftenposten* review. You've got to hear it, he said. Come on, you can take it. But it's not what it says or doesn't say that bothers me, I said. It's the fact that it's there at all. You know how it fucks me up inside. Come on, he said. Just this once. Never again. OK, I said. And he read it to me. All I remember from it is one sentence: "Well, is the case actually statute-barred?" and I was described as "the possible perpetrator." The reviewer was wondering if I was the perpetrator of a sex offense and if the case was statute-barred. I remember because Geir was laughing so much as he read and because he repeated it several times. Have they lost their minds? he said. Have they utterly gone off their rockers? A few hours later I received an agitated e-mail from Tonje. She quoted from the same review, in which the following appeared: "For example the writer's former wife appears by name, and you can only imagine how unpleasant this publication must be for her now," and Tonje asked what that meant and why she hadn't been given the novel before it came out, if it was about her. Previously I'd sent her an e-mail where I asked her not to read the novel. I had done that because it wasn't about her, but about Linda and my feelings for Linda, and it had occurred to me that it might hurt Tonje to read about how in love I was only a few weeks after we had broken up. Now Tonje thought I had kept this from her, that I had deceived her. All of Norway would be reading about her while she was left in the dark. That I might have done something to spare her was so naïve that she didn't believe me for a second. The pressure was so great, the phone calls from the media so incessant that it was impossible to maintain this perspective. The damage was done in the book, not when she read it. I hadn't written about her, but I had written about something of which she had no knowledge and which had happened while we were together: I had fallen in love with Linda. Wham. She was the one. An arrow to the heart. But what kind of heart? Everything was a blur during those days, I fell headlong, there was no reciprocation, Linda turned away, and I cut up my face, left everything, and traveled home. It was the most intense experience of my life. I had been in a place I didn't know existed. The world was a river of impressions and I was connected to them, that was how it felt, everything had significance, I could examine an acorn for ten minutes as though it contained the secret of the universe, which it did, that was why I stared at it. In that state I saw Linda and was hypnotized by her, but nothing happened, we didn't even touch. She was becoming manic; I was, without any doubt, manic. Writing a book about my life was inconceivable without including the feelings I'd had then and what happened to me. But it was a torment for Tonje and I was the tormentor. I e-mailed and tried to explain, but that only made things worse, you cannot be both tormentor and consoler. She sent a furious e-mail to my editor, who had publicly stated that all the characters appearing in the novel had been given the manuscript to read beforehand. She had not. So, in the gloom of the Internet café reading her e-mail and all the others that had come in over the past two months, I found myself in a place I had never been before, in a world of lawyers who scrutinized every word I wrote, with threats of legal action and public accusations of lying, reviews calling me immoral and where everyone I had been or was close to suffered because of me. While I was writing I didn't think about them, but as the publication date approached they suddenly loomed large, as they really were, and the repercussions revealed themselves to me. The conflict was between the novels and their consequences. The approach I chose was to publish the novels, allow whatever happened to happen, with all the pain I'd inflicted that brought, and hope the wounds could be healed. In general terms I was able to defend this approach as I knew what I was looking for and the value of it, but not in specific cases, regarding the consequences for every individual I had written about. No one has the right to inflict injury on another person. Sitting in front of the screen in the computer games bunker, I was afraid, desperate, and sorry, but I also knew these feelings would disappear when I wrote and would therefore come and go because in the written "I" the social "we" disappeared and the "I" was free. It was only when I got up and left my desk that the "we" returned and I was able to feel ashamed at what I had written and thought, with varying degrees of intensity, according to how deeply I was in the writing process. The social dimension is what keeps us in our places, which makes it possible for us to live together; the individual dimension is what ensures that we don't merge into each other. The social dimension is based on taking one another into consideration. We also do this by hiding our feelings, not saying what we think, if what we feel or think affects others. The social dimension is also based on showing some things and hiding others. What should be shown and what should be hidden are not subject to disagreement because they are connected with the "we." The regulatory mechanism is shame. One of the questions this book raised for me when I was writing it was what was there to gain by contravening social norms, by describing what no one wants to be described, in other words, the secret and the hidden. Let me put it another way: what value is there in not taking others into account? The social dimension is the world as it should be. Everything that is not as it should be is hidden. My father drank himself to death, that is not how it should be, that has to be hidden. My heart yearned for another woman, that is not how it should be, it must be hidden. But he was my father and it was my heart. I shouldn't write that because the consequences affect not only me, but also others. Yet it is true. To write these things you have to be free, and to be free you have to be inconsiderate to others. It is an equation that doesn't work. Truth equals freedom equals being inconsiderate and is on the individual side of the equation; being considerate and secrecy are on the social side, but only as an abstraction, like an inner entity in the "I" because in reality there is no such thing as the social dimension, only single human beings, our "you" in other words, also on the individual side. Tonje isn't a "character." She is Tonje. Linda isn't a character. She is Linda. Geir Angell isn't a character. He is Geir Angell. Vanja, Heidi, and John, they exist, they are in bed asleep about a hundred kilometers away from where I am sitting at this moment. They are real. And if you want to describe reality as it is, for the individual, and there is no other reality, you have to really go there, you can't be considerate. And it hurts. It hurts not to be considered and it hurts not to be considerate. This novel has hurt everyone around me, it has hurt me, and in a few years, when they are old enough to read it, it will hurt my children. If I had made it more painful, it would have been truer.

It has been an experiment, and it has failed because I have never even been close to saying what I really mean and describing what I have actually seen, but it is not valueless, at least not completely, for when describing the reality of an individual person, when attempting to be as honest as possible is considered immoral and scandalous, the force of the social dimension is visible and also the way it regulates and controls individuals. Its power is enormous, for what I have written about have been exclusively everyday events, there has been nothing sensational about any of it, these things happen all the time, every single day, and everyone knows they do: alcoholism, infidelity, mental illness, and masturbation, just to cite some of what has found its way from the novels into newspaper headlines. The only unusual aspect in this case has been that normality has been associated with real names in a novel and communicated for what it is, something specific tied to certain persons. The novel is a public form, and therein lies the contravention of the norm, the specific and the personal have been transported into the public arena. It happens to all people in the public eye – actors, politicians, TV journalists, pop stars – but they have chosen it of their own free will and want nothing more than this. The only nonpublic people who find themselves thrust there are criminals. In this novel it has happened to ordinary people, who are not criminals. Accordingly their names have taken on criminal form, an ordinary name has crossed the bounds of normality and become so abnormal that journalists track down the person and write about them in the newspapers. What these people did, which was perfectly normal, also took on criminal form and found itself being judged. And I was the person who had turned them into criminals. But I didn't think about any of this at the time, during the many mornings I spent in the Internet café and my study, and the scant defense I was able to erect for my actions, such as that I was only writing about myself, crumbled as soon as one of the people I had written about turned and looked at me. They did it one after the other and I looked down, I looked away, I stared at a page in the novel and continued to write.

The same day that Geir read the *Aftenposten* review to me on the balcony, Asbjørn and Yngve came to Malmö. We were going to the Wilco gig in Copenhagen that evening and they would be staying with us over the weekend. I shook Asbjørn's hand, then Yngve's, and made a point of looking them in the eye, and I knew they were thinking that I was thinking about what I had written about this very thing. They'd brought candy for the children, and Asbjørn had framed the cover photo that he had taken in his capacity as a book designer and we had used for the first novel, and gave it to me along with a pile of books he had doubles of. Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*, which I only had in English, Pascal's *Pensées* – I had the old, much-abridged edition – plus many more. They had also brought the day's papers with them. I held up a hand and turned my head away, but Linda took them, she was curious, and even though I said she shouldn't, she sat at the kitchen table reading them while Ingrid looked over her shoulder. I saw the front-page headline: EXPOSES FAMILY – ALCOHOL AND MENTAL PROBLEMS, and I saw the headline inside: EXPOSES WIFE. Then I returned to Yngve and Asbjørn, who were putting their luggage in the living room. We went to the balcony and smoked a cigarette. Asbjørn said he'd been a bit wary when he heard that Linda's mother would be here, he wasn't quite sure what the atmosphere would be like between us after what I'd written. I said she was the larger-than-life type and it would be fine. But it was Ingrid rather than Linda I wanted to keep away from the newspapers. Because Linda was her daughter, and now the papers were saying I had hung her daughter out to dry with her mental problems. And ALCOHOL, that couldn't refer to anyone else but Ingrid. I knew how deeply this had hurt her as she had told Linda so, and she had also maintained it wasn't true. The pain was there, still smoldering and glowing. But a pile of newspapers was one thing, a book another, and an article in the press about it a third. It was getting closer all the time. For Swedes Norway was a distant country, but if the book came out in Sweden, in her own language – a decision hadn't been taken yet, but it was likely – it would impinge on her life and the consequences would be real.

Linda left to pick up the children, and when Asbjørn walked past the kitchen on his way to the bathroom, he saw Ingrid reading the newspaper, she looked up and gave him a thumbs-up. He laughed when he saw that. I wondered what she was thinking. That it was good for the book that it was receiving attention, and thus for the family, her grandchildren, who might finally get a house to live in? And a car to be driven around in?

Half an hour later, when the children came in through the door, they behaved differently from usual. As always when there was a visitor in the apartment, they reminded me of animals. Alert, watchful, cautious, they sniffed around. Hm. Unfamiliar shoes. Unfamiliar jackets. Best to be on your guard here. Vanja was the most guarded, Heidi the next, and John definitely the least. He smiled at everyone. We ate at the table in the living room, the children slipped down from their chairs after a few minutes and disappeared into their room with their bags of candy. I was happy, I always was when I was with Asbjørn and Yngve, although it was a bit odd because it was the two of them who were friends and formed a unit, I was more of a spectator or a distant associate, and not Yngve and I, who were brothers and had the same blood. The dynamics between us were exactly the same as they had been in Bergen when I arrived there in 1989, they were the experienced, worldly-wise ones, I was the novice who didn't know his way around, and nothing of what had happened in our lives since then had changed that. Perhaps that was what I liked, not being in charge, tagging along, being the little brother.

Heidi came in, sent Asbjørn a mischievous look, and asked him what his name was again.

"Asbjørn," he said.

"Isbjørn," Heidi said. Polar bear.

"No," Asbjørn said. "Asbjørn."

"Isbjørn," Heidi said, laughed, and ran off to join the others.

"Actually we're all characters in a novel sitting around this table," Yngve said.

"That's true," Asbjørn laughed.

"We should set up a web page for characters in a novel so that we can discuss our experiences," Yngve said.

"I can be the moderator," I said.

"What was it like to read that you'd been exposed?" Yngve said, looking at Linda.

"No problem," Linda said. "The worst part is being in the paper, if you know what I mean. Then people believe I've been exposed. Otherwise I'd just have been a description in a book. And, of course, that's not the same."

"In fact you two are the only ones who have censored me," I said. "Over such trivialities though. I wrote one thing about you," I said, focusing on Yngve, "I was sure you would be proud of. But no. So, out it went."

"What was that?" Asbjørn said.

"I can't tell you," I said. "But it was something to do with a note we once put on his door."

"Groupies must leave before breakfast?" Asbjørn said.

"Maybe," I said. "And Linda said she really hadn't whipped the donkey at the fun fair."

Ingrid laughed.

"I don't want that on my record, that I whip animals. Anyway, it didn't happen."

"No, it really didn't," I said. "I must've been trying to capture the atmosphere of aggression."

"Thank you for the meal," Asbjørn said, looking at Ingrid. "It was fantastic."

"It was," I said.

We got up and took our plates into the kitchen. Then we went to the balcony for a smoke, Linda and Yngve in the two chairs, Asbjørn and I standing with our backs to the railing.

"This vaguely reminds me of my fortieth," I said. "Wasn't everyone out here at some point? I just remember us standing here packed in like sardines. And I thought about that crack."

I pointed to the crack in the wall, which presumably was just on the surface because if not the whole balcony would have crashed down.

"Oh shit," Asbjørn said.

"Helena thought everyone at the party was so *rar*," Linda said in Swedish. "She returned to it again later. The man sleeping in the children's room, wasn't he fantastic? And the one who didn't say a word all evening, what was up with him? And the one . . . you've got the idea."

"Well, we are," Yngve said in Norwegian.

"Are what?"

"*Rar*, strange," he said.

"*Rar* in Swedish means nice," I said.

The Wilco gig took place in the old theater in Copenhagen, we had bought tickets separately, so I was sitting right out on the edge of a balcony close to the stage, but the sound probably wouldn't be very good, I thought as I took my seat, while Yngve and Asbjørn, I discovered after painstakingly scanning the audience, were like two birds on a perch under the ceiling, where the sound would probably be much better.

I sat back in the seat, which was upholstered in red velvet, and gazed across, not focusing on anything in particular. I was exhausted, and it was good to be surrounded by other people and to have peace and quiet. I hadn't been to a concert since I lived in Norway. It was a big thing when a band came to town then. Now David Byrne could play in a pub two hundred meters from our apartment and I wouldn't go. I had lost music, which had once meant so much to me, it was no longer relevant, a bit like watching TV. Now and then it returned with the force of an ax biting into ice, bringing a sense of grief for everything else I had lost on the path I had trodden.

The warm-up band was Norwegian. They stood in the middle of the stage, which wasn't theirs, they'd rented it, and for some reason I was reminded of a tent pitched in a parking lot, that was what they made me think of. Their sound was low and the lights remained on. But they were pretty good. Hukkelberg, I think that is what they were called.

I looked across the rows of seats and saw the two of them sitting at the top, glowing, sort of, they were the only two faces I recognized in a sea of strangers.

After reading Proust it was impossible not to see such an old theater as an underwater scene, a kind of coral reef with mussels or shells for seats and fishtails or jellyfish tentacles for women's dresses. The way he transformed everything and imbued it with magic is no longer possible, I thought, because everything has already changed, everything is already something else, pervaded by fiction as it were. We can strip down reality, layer by layer, and never reach its core, for what the last layer covers over is the most unreal of all, the greatest fiction of them all, the true nature of things.

The lights dimmed. A spotlight focused on the stage. Jeff Tweedy, chubby, almost a bit fat, came straight to the microphone, started playing at once and sang in a pure, clear voice, effortless. You could never count on this with English bands, at least not those I had seen live in my time. The exception was Blur, whom I saw with Tore at Sentrum in 1993. Everything they did was not only pitch perfect, but also full of the energy only young people have who want something and suddenly realize they can actually achieve it. But Wilco was American, the music wasn't for show, they were inside it. The other band members came on, they played for an hour and a half, maybe two, it was so peaceful sitting there, and at times the music had such an emotional intensity that I lost all control and just cried. Afterwards, excited after this excursion back into early adulthood, we met outside and went and got drunk. I'd told them that trains ran all night, but when we arrived at the station, it was closed and we had to take a taxi the whole way to Malmö. Over the bridge the night felt like enclosing walls, the lights shivering as they lit up more and more meters of grayish asphalt, I felt as if I were in a dream. The next day the angst was immense, but I still went out with them, we ate at an Asian restaurant and Asbjørn regaled us with stories he'd heard from a doctor friend, who had told him about all the objects people stuffed up their asses when they were alone and then were unable to retrieve.

In late autumn my first novel was nominated for the Brage Prize and I flew to Oslo with Linda to attend the award ceremony. After we had dropped off our luggage at the hotel she went to the hairdresser's to have her hair done, or styled, maybe the term is, while I popped into the publishing house to talk to Geir. On my return I knocked on the door and Linda opened up sporting her new hairstyle.

"What do you think?" she said. "Honestly."

At first I didn't answer, I went into the room and sat down. Did she want me to confirm what she herself thought and say it was great or did she want, as she said, an honest answer?

I thought it looked terrible and had a feeling that she might think so too.

"It looks like what a fifty-year-old might consider nice," I said.

"Yes, doesn't it. Isn't it awful?"

"It is."

"Good. Then I'll wash it out and go as normal."

Elisabeth, who worked at the publishing house, came to pick us up, then we took a taxi to the ceremony. Big building, lots of people, a room for the nominees. To my horror, I saw an *Aftenposten* journalist that I had written about in Book 2, and I hadn't minced my words. As soon as he saw me he came over and introduced himself. Did I remember him? Indeed I did, I said. He laughed and said it was an honor to appear in my book, even in the way he did. And then he said, But you were wrong about one thing. I'm not a privileged Oslo West kid. No? I said. I'm sorry. And then I noticed

Kjartan Fløgstad, my old hero, the gentleman socialist writer I had also written about. I introduced Linda, he introduced his wife, we exchanged a few words while I kept looking around, I didn't want to be here, I couldn't stay here, I couldn't stand this. Ragnar Hovland, my old writing teacher, he was there. I stood around, and then I persuaded Linda to go out for a smoke by the entrance where people were still streaming in. The darkness was good, the rain was good, all the wet, slippery brown leaves on the grass were good, but not the feeling that you were being watched, that wasn't good. When we sat down at the front, where two seats were reserved for us, beside Kjartan Fløgstad and his wife, a photographer leaned over from the balcony and took a photo of Linda. She didn't see, I said nothing, maybe I was wrong. The show started, there was music, there were readings and sketches, and I was close to throwing up because I could see the stage and feel the audience at my back, and if I won I would not only have to go up there, but also say something. Unfortunately it was me who had to go up. The statuette was as heavy as a murder weapon. Holding it in my hand, I had planned to say that many people who had read the book probably imagined that I would shed a tear, but I didn't dare, so I mumbled something about a character in the novel I had met in the bar, and talked about the time I had moved away from home and what books I had been reading then, which had been written by the other nominees. It was true, Roy Jacobsen had just brought out *The New Water* that year, and I had bought it and the first book by Fløgstad I had ever read, *Dalen Portland*. I thanked Linda and said she was the most generous person I had ever met, and I was happy I hadn't said anything about shedding a tear, my voice cracked a little when I spoke to Linda, she had been looking up at me from below. Then I went back and sat down. I wished that Fløgstad had been the one to rise to his feet and go up and accept the statuette, a thousand times over, he could also receive awards with dignity, I assumed, unlike me, who only wanted the floor to swallow me up in my shame and humiliation. Afterwards everyone repaired to a big Irish pub nearby. I sat with Linda and Frederik and some of his colleagues in the courtyard, the rain dripping down the walls and tent poles, or whatever they were called, the supports holding up the temporary roof. Frederik had met Linda the summer we got together, at the time he was visiting us with Kjetil and Richard and we all went on a pub crawl. They were talking now, I stared into the distance drinking beer, I occasionally answered a question from the others, that was how life had become, I was someone you asked questions. A well-known writer came over. We said hello, I was embarrassed, I knew he didn't like what I wrote. He had mentioned this once and been ironic, which made this even harder. But he didn't want to say just hello and congratulate me, he wanted to talk, and he spent at least five minutes refining his attitude to me and my books, he couldn't say straight out that he didn't like them, that they were bad in other words, but nor could he not say that, so what came out of his mouth was impossible to grasp. Why he was saying what he was saying? Was it something social that had to be cleared out of the way before we could talk? Or were there some aesthetic reflections which he thought it important to state, so that I wouldn't believe he was there on any other premise? He stood there for so long that his role imperceptibly changed from that of someone who had come over to say hello to someone who had a seat at the table. He was pleasant, he always had been, but why was he at my table? Did he like my books? Apparently not. Did he like me? Perhaps, perhaps not. But the odds of him coming over to my table because I was a reclusive author who tinkered with words in a valley in Vestland were low, I suspected, unless this reclusive author was considered the pick of his colleagues. Then he would have come. As indeed would I. Once I had been talking to a writer and her husband at a table in a restaurant in a tiny Norwegian town during a literary festival, and Lars Saabye Christensen sat down at the same table, I glanced over at him, didn't quite catch what my conversation partner said, and as soon as I got the chance I turned to him, didn't we have the same publishing house in England? I did that despite seeing that she had noticed my glances at Saabye Christensen and understood exactly how my mind was working. It still wasn't too late to save the situation, but my desire to talk to him was greater than the certainty that I was making a bad impression. At the same festival the emcee and I were rebuked by the wife of one of the writers because the emcee had devoted more time and emotion to my book than her husband's. This mixture of the highest and the lowest and most basic that literature can be is typical of the writer milieu, and it's hardly surprising, there are few areas of life where people invest so much of themselves to gain so little. The year I made my debut, late one evening I was sitting with Erik Fosnes Hansen in a hotel room, flattered to be talking to him, even if I hadn't read anything by him since he made his ridiculously young debut with *The Falcon Tower*, a novel I read when I was at *gymnas*, I happened to mention *Vagant* and it was like waving a red rag to a bull. *Vagant!* he yelled. He had sold hundreds of thousands of books, they were published all over the world, he received good reviews everywhere, but not in *Vagant*, they barely considered him a writer, this tiny literary magazine that in reality consisted of a handful of young people who gathered in cafés in the East End of Oslo. He despised them. Wishy-washy chitchat and academic intellectualism, he said. Why? He didn't say, but I imagine a lack of acknowledgment on their part might have played a role. When my first book began to sell I was worried about my status. For a while joining the editing team at *Vagant* saved me, and it was quite perfect from a strategic point of view, there I was both a big-time and a small-time writer, wriggling my way upward and meeting more and more names on the way, until one rainy autumn evening I ended up in one of Oslo's Irish pubs and the big names came to me. Knausgaard had become a trademark, a logo, the newspapers had been full of it that autumn, and now I could feel how much energy lay in its proliferation. People looked at me. People apologized to me before saying anything. People didn't dare speak. People came over when they were drunk. It was remarkable. And it wasn't the books I had written because they were pretty run-of-the mill – two sons who bury their dead father and a frustrated father of small children who strips himself naked for the reader – it was the name and all the resonance it contained now.

I liked it that a well-known author came over to our table that evening. It gave me a feeling of power. This feeling meant that I could say what I liked or refuse to say anything at all, it didn't matter, nothing would change as a result. When I met him for the first time I was a student in a writing course that he taught; when I met him for the second time I was a student with hubris, going around and interviewing all of Norway's famous writers. I had to put in an enormous effort even to be worth his time; when I interviewed him I had prepared for several weeks and done nothing else but. I had devised smart, probing, worthy questions which some years later I realized were totally transparent and laid me bare, and this was not only the case with him but everyone I met: final-year students, professors, writers, editors, and journalists, and as I was so immensely prestige-oriented, the bigger or more prestigious the name, the more I exerted myself. Oh, the time Professor Buvik not only remembered my name but also asked me a question during a lecture. The first time I met Jonny Halberg, Tone Hødnebø. Henning Hagerup. Eldrid Lunden. Thure Erik Lund. Ingvar Ambjørsen. Cecilie Løveid. Olav H. Hauge. Marit Christensen. Øystein Rottem. Kjartan Fløgstad. Ole Robert Sunde. Georg Johannesen. Kjersti Holmen. Erlend Loe. Åsne Seierstad. William Nygaard. Kjetil Rolness. Einar Økland. Frode Grytten. Trond Giske. I'd understood that the only way of managing was to act as if this didn't mean a thing, as if you were completely uncorrupted, while inside you were thrilled by the meeting and hoped someone would notice. It wasn't until I was sitting in this pub that I realized there was some movement and a goal, my name was suddenly so emotive that others were behaving toward me as I had previously behaved toward other emotive names. Not that I didn't understand what they were doing, I knew from my own experience, I knew all about the base, all too human art of fawning. That is why I also understood that it had nothing to do with me, for I had been the same, with my tongue hanging out of my mouth for all those years, making myself appear better than I was by behaving how the uncorrupted behave, which was no more than a more sophisticated form of corruption, I had been the same. All that had changed was the name and the associated image. I had always done readings for a fee of fifteen hundred kroner, but now I was being offered sixty thousand for a forty-five-minute gig. I turned it down, not because I didn't want the money, but because I wanted to have something that was worth more, namely integrity; not because I was someone with integrity, but because I was someone who was doubly corrupt. Yes, I was so corrupt that I no longer cared what *Vagant* might think about what I wrote, as, in the values hierarchy, not caring ranked higher than caring, and the hierarchy was all I cared about. That is how it was. I had sold my soul twice, it was nothing worse than that, I was at the top. If you showed you wanted to be at the top and basked in the glory, you weren't at the top after all because you were only at the top if your integrity was intact and you said no. No to newspapers, no to TV, no to social gatherings and performances. You were only at the top if you said no to the top, but not even that was the absolute top because there were those who really didn't care, who sat alone and unsung in some valley writing their stubborn, angry, uncompromising prose – if we are talking about authors at the pinnacle – and who would be happiest not even sending their work to a publishing house but burying it in the forest and starting on the next.

When the evening was over, Linda and I, holding the statuette in one hand, walked to the hotel arm-in-arm. She was hungry, I went down to the 7-Eleven to buy some food for her, and on the way back I burst into laughter, it came from nowhere, and I stopped and turned to the wall. Ha ha ha, I laughed. Ha ha ha. Then I carried on walking, through the rain and darkness, over the shimmering asphalt, to the hotel, which was the Savoy, where I stopped again and lit a cigarette, the last before going to bed. I didn't know what I had been laughing at, but just the thought of it made me laugh again. Ha ha ha. Ha ha ha. Ha ha ha.

I was still chortling when I entered our room. Linda had gone to sleep. I sat down on the bed and placed my hand on her brow. You wanted something to eat, didn't you? I said. But she was too far into the darkness of her soul, so I pulled a chair over to the window, sat down, ate her food, and drank a Pepsi Max looking out the window and watching the rain fall and the lamp hanging from a thin wire across the street swing back and forth in the wind.

*

One weekend at the end of May 2010 I rented a car and drove to the cabin outside Malmö to sort out the chaos there. Linda had put the property up for sale, there had already been one viewing, but no one had been interested, and no wonder, nothing had been done to hide the neglect. The thought of it, how everything had gone to the dogs, had been on my mind for ages. After emerging from the last roundabout and entering the subdivision area, which extended on both sides of the street and consisted of several hundred small cabins with small gardens, almost all impeccably maintained, the thought weighed more heavily on me than before. The fact that I was actually here and would soon be coming to grips with the mess was like a light inside me. Not a flame or a shimmer, more like a clearing you approach in the forest, the expectation of it.

There was supposed to be another viewing the following day, and if I could tackle the worst of the neglect it was not impossible that someone might make an offer, they might even be drawn to its dilapidated state and the idea of fixing it up.

The sky was gray and wintry, and the people I saw along the road, some kids on bikes and a woman pushing a stroller and carrying a heavy Co-op bag, were not in contact with it, the way crabs are not in contact with the surface of the sea, it struck me as I drove along at thirty kph. The leaves on the trees had just come out, but without any sun it was difficult to associate them with the life that spring always ushers in.

I downshifted and turned into the large gravel parking lot. I had pains in my stomach. This was a place you were seen not as the person you were, whatever that might be, but as how you appeared. Here I was a man with long greasy hair and a beard, wearing old black clothes, with wild eyes and restless movements, and when this tramp-like figure arrived with our three children, I saw myself so clearly through the other cabin owners' eyes, and all my inner confidence and dignity simply vanished. If someone had called social services and told them to come and rescue the children from this terrible father, possibly a drug addict, definitely dubious, I would have been on the defensive, I would have felt there was something in that and would only have defended myself halfheartedly.

I drove to the barrier in front of the gravel road at the other end of the parking lot, stopped, got out, opened the barrier, swung it to the side, got in and drove forward a few meters, got out and closed the barrier, continued my journey at a snail's pace between the little wooden cabins. The gravel crunched beneath the tires and the car glided forward like a barge up the narrow canal-like road, past gate after gate until I stopped outside ours. It wasn't as clean and shiny as the others, but was covered with a layer of greenish algae or fungus. Nor was the fence free of foliage, like the others, as was stipulated in the rules: the hedge on the inside grew between the cracks in the fence and well above the top. I switched off the engine, took out the key, and noticed the sign that had appeared on the fence since I was last here. TILL SALU, for sale, it said in blue on white. I opened the car door, got out, and closed it again. I felt the chill air on my face and hands. The gravel was overgrown with weeds, thereby breaking another of the rules, and when I saw that I felt a pain in my stomach. I wished I could have made myself not care, say to hell with the idiots who sat scrutinizing other people's gardens, this feeble-minded bunch of wrinkled old folk with sagging skin who were unable to think about anything except what was right and fair and spent their remaining years and days, replete with all the experience a long and unique life had given them, keeping a lawn manicured and foaming with indignation when others did not. I wished I didn't care about them, but I did. The truth was that I feared them and really wanted to make peace with them.

I opened the gate and went into the garden.

Why hadn't she cut the grass? Overgrown beds was one thing, they would take weeks to clear, but the lawn? What had she been thinking when she put the plot up for sale. That the first impression wasn't important? That potential buyers would ignore the neglect and think, *actually*, this is a nice place?

I turned. From the window of the doll's house on the other side of the road an old dear was staring at me. Her husband had been the chairman of the owners' association. It was his responsibility to make sure that all the cabin owners behaved as they should. So when I caught the bus here to water the grass one Wednesday evening, after a few days of desert heat, he was the one who strolled over to the fence, by chance as it were, always by chance, to ask if I knew what day it was. Yes, indeed I did, it was Wednesday, wasn't it? Yes, it was. And we have a system here, you know, regarding watering. Odd numbers water on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays while even numbers water on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. What are you? I was obliged to confess that I was an even number and therefore not entitled to do any watering. So it was a case of either catching the bus home or defying him and keeping the hose low behind the house, where no one could see me. Of course that was what I did, sitting on the doorstep and smoking, fearful that he would spot me. Or we all came here one Saturday afternoon and slept over, with the ulterior motive of cutting the grass, which was done all too seldom. And who happened to walk past our fence then but the chairman? You're cutting your grass, I can hear, he said. Yes, I am. It's gotten terribly long. Yes, he said. But you're not allowed to use any machines from four o'clock on a Saturday afternoon until Monday morning, because of the noise. We like to have some peace and quiet. However you can mow the lawn this afternoon and you'll know for next time. Oh, thank you very much, I said. That's very kind of you.

Then there were the pieces of paper they left in the mailbox after their rounds of inspection. A printed form on which they ticked various boxes according to what they had observed.

I rounded the corner of the house, and out of sight of the neighbors I sat on the doorstep, lit a cigarette, and tried to draw up a plan of action. From the highway to Denmark came a faint drone, in waves, as well as dull thuds and shouts from a football field nearby. I had never seen it, only the floodlights around it, which were switched on every evening and in the autumn and winter stood like a luminous hangar on the dark plain.

That autumn and winter I had been out here writing, alone in this great expanse of cabins, I collected water in a canister from over by the parking lot, went shopping in a supermarket a few kilometers away, knocked off page after page, three or four days in a row, returned home, stayed there for some days, then came back here. Where I was completely disconnected. No newspapers, no Internet, no TV, no radio, just a cell phone, but no one had the number. And not a soul around. In the evening and at night a hedgehog, which slunk through the garden and occasionally, if I was sitting still, nudged its snout against my shoe. During the day the birds. I sat in front of my computer wearing a hat and gloves, a jacket, a blanket or a duvet over my lap. The air was like smoke around my head in the cold light of my lamp. I wrote about my childhood and my teenage years. I had telephone conversations with Geir, whom I read to and I discussed things with, telephone conversations with Linda, who had her mother over to help with the children and who during the hours they were off at school never quite knew what to do or how to do it. The hours that stretched out before her were more frightening than rewarding, I knew. It had been like that for a long time. She had office space in a collective but was scared to go there, forced herself a couple of times but was absent for weeks at a time.

It was a nice office, she had a Mac with a voice-recognition program on the desk, pictures of the children beside it, books on the shelves for inspiration. Once she took Heidi with her and Heidi had been proud to go to work with Mommy, she had said hi to the others and sat drawing, and I could see how happy Linda was when she came home, for that day she had been like other parents, she had her child with her at work, she had shown her off to her colleagues and let Heidi see what she did for a living. Nevertheless, she went there less and less.

In Linda something weighed her down and lifted her up. She had to fight it because when it weighed her down everything was black and without hope, and when it lifted her up, it was bright and hopeful, and that colored everything, her whole existence, which kept changing dramatically in this way, even though it was the same.

When I met her for the first time she was on her way up, and at that time it didn't stop, it didn't turn, just carried on and on, there were no limits, she didn't sleep anymore, the day was endless, and finally a girlfriend found her in her apartment hunched up on a table, mumbling numbers. Linda has stars inside her, and when they shine, she shines, but when they don't, the night is pitch black. She spent more than a year in a psychiatric hospital, and when I met her and we got together she hadn't been out long. We had children almost at once, we both wanted them. I never thought about her having been ill, I wasn't frightened of it, and that confidence was perhaps what made the thought of children possible for her or at least what made it easier.

In the maternity clinic she had to put a cross by "psychological illness" on all the forms, and I saw how that conditioned the midwife's view of Linda and me, although Linda was fine now. Her mood went in cycles, she plummeted and soared, but always within a normal range, I never thought about it, that was the way she was, temperamental, and I didn't react to her happiness when she was happy or the darkness when she was depressed or full of impetuous fury, I reacted to her, to what she said and did.

She tried all kinds of methods to stabilize her emotions because this took its toll on her, everything changing, the life we lived, which was so different from the one we had before, with the responsibility for the children and all that entailed, the feeling of not being in control was the absolute worst. She feared chaos more than anything else. She was petrified of anything that smacked of irregularity because with her volatile nature the rest of what we had, our home, had to be as solid and constant as it could be. Everything was a threat to her. My time spent writing was a threat. She knew it was my job, and it gave me meaning, and when she was fine it wasn't a problem, until her spirits sank and the fear came, then it became a threat as well, and she couldn't stand up to fear, it was insatiable.

It was at its height when she was pregnant with Vanja, she was terrified of losing her, she was terrified of the imminent responsibility, and she expelled her fear in great outbursts. I responded to these outbursts, which I considered unreasonable, while being afraid of them, they were so violent, I wasn't used to such strong inner forces, where I came from everything was controlled and rationalized. Vanja arrived, peace settled over us. Linda went to school, Heidi arrived, we moved to Malmö, John arrived. There was a lot of work, but it wasn't a problem for me, whatever it was; nor was housework a problem. You just had to get on with it. I took things as they came and wanted Linda to grit her teeth as well and tough it out.

What did she have?

She had her radio training, but that was already a long time ago, and she hadn't done any radio since, getting back into it, calling the station and saying she had an idea became more difficult by the day. She had bought a microphone and an editing program, that was as far as she had got.

She also had her writing. The oldest texts were from long before we met, the most recent ones she wrote last year. They were sensationally good. She sent them to her old publishing house. They were rejected, short stories were too difficult during tough times for publishers, they said. There wasn't a market for them, they didn't have the money. She sent them to three other houses, two of them never read the collection, the third said no. My two novels came out, the third was in the pipeline, and while I was writing the fourth Linda called Sveriges Radio and put forward an idea she had for a documentary. It was a big step and a turning point, the conversation was a commitment, the producer wanted to meet her, they met and she had faith in Linda. This time something would come of it. They agreed on a work plan. Linda was excited, full of energy and ideas, we sat on the balcony after the children were in bed and talked about everything she was going to do. She went to Stockholm to interview the Swedish astronaut Fuglesang, then up to Norrland, where she visited a commercial space station and interviewed the employees.

The documentary was based on the *Hindenburg*'s last flight, she had once come across some articles from the time in a Swedish paper, from which it appeared that a Swedish journalist had been on board and telegraphed reports of the journey several times a day. He died when the airship caught fire and burned up on the other side of the Atlantic just before docking at its destination. It was a brilliant story, which would be contrasted with one about space travel.

She was away for eight days doing research and called me full of enthusiasm from her hotel room. She had ridden on a dogsled, stayed in an ice hotel, wandered around an area full of space junk. She had spoken to a lot of people and arranged to meet them, it almost seemed as though she was also friends with them as some of what she told me could only have been said in confidence.

Her voice at the other end sounded excited and full of life. I went to the balcony, sat down clad in a hat and coat, and smoked. The children were asleep. I felt a strange unease. It was as though I wasn't in actual communication with her.

"I walked around the area. It was enormous, covered with snow, and everywhere there were big chunks of metal. It was a space cemetery. Can you imagine that, Karl Ove?"

"Sounds exciting," I said. "Did you interview anyone?"

"No, I just walked around with the microphone talking about what I could see. But I know it was good. It was so fantastic there."

"OK."

"And now the stars are so clear. Can you imagine what it's like up here?"

"Do you have to get up early tomorrow?" I said.

"Yes, oh, the man from the ice hotel, sorry, I just have to tell you this before I forget, he said we absolutely have to come up here together. We can have a room for free."

"An ice hotel? You're kidding."

"It's very special up here, you know. In a way, it's magical."

"OK. Linda, I think I'll have to go to bed now if I'm going to have any chance with the kids tomorrow."

"Yes, I understand. Goodnight, my prince. I love you."

"Goodnight."

She came back home still excited by what she'd experienced and what she was going to do. She wrote a manuscript, the idea being that she would dramatize the zeppelin flight based on the journalist's reports. It was approved, a budget was set up. Linda hired actors, directed, and did the recording. She went to work at seven in the morning, came home at six in the evening. She was a changed person. I had seen her work as hard only once before, that was during the exam period at the drama institute, then she had given her all. But this was different. Now it was as though she was investing everything she had, her whole existence, as if it was now or never, not only for this documentary but for her whole life.

On the Friday evening after her first week of work we sat drowsily watching TV as the children slept.

"You'll take them tomorrow, won't you?" she said.

I looked at her.

"Why? What are you doing?"

"Working."

"Do you have to work on the weekend?"

"Yes, of course," she said. "It's important. There's a deadline."

Important? Deadline?

I started to fume inside. I looked at the TV screen for a few seconds. Then I turned back to her.

"Darling," I said. "You've always refused to let me work on the weekend because it's important we do something together as a family. I haven't worked one single weekend in seven years. And now you're going to work on the weekend?"

"How mean you are," she said. "You're so incredibly mean."

"So the family rule doesn't apply now that you've got a job?"

She got up.

"Where are you going?" I said.

"To bed," she said. "I have to be up early."

I stayed where I was, listening to her footsteps fade into the hall, I wanted to follow her and smooth things over, but I was still fuming inside, it wouldn't be a good conversation. Besides, I was actually happy that she was full of energy and determination, and in the long run perhaps there was a chance *I* would be able to work on the weekend.

Those were my thoughts. Actually it was good, actually it was as it should be.

She got up early the next morning and cycled to work. On Sunday we all went to Slottsparken, followed our usual route through the town to the first playground, which was really only a merry-go-round and a slide beneath some enormous deciduous trees whose crowns in the summer were like a ceiling, but now the branches were leafless beneath the gray sky, on to the second playground, across the park, which bordered a large residential area, where Linda and I stood beside each other in the wind keeping an eye on our children running around in their red all-weather jackets, Linda seemingly on her way down, inside herself for the first time in many weeks. At home the children watched a film while she rested and I read the Sunday papers. If she hadn't been obliged to work, with a schedule and a budget for what was a relatively large production, she would have been able to stay at home during the coming week, lie on the sofa, watch mediocre films, and sleep until the darkness and gloom disappeared. Now she couldn't, she had to work. On Monday morning she rose early and got herself ready while I took care of the children. I was rummaging through the shelves of clothes to find something for John to wear when she closed the bathroom door. Inside, she threw up. It lasted for several minutes. Then she opened the door, came out, went to the hatstand, where the coats were hanging, and put on her black leather jacket.

"Did you throw up?" I asked.

She nodded. Her face was white.

"But I'm going now. See you this afternoon. Don't know exactly when I'll be back. Six maybe."

She grabbed her bag and left while I continued to dress the children. After taking them to school, I returned, sat down, and worked on Book 4 all day, picked them up, cooked, and was eating with them when Linda arrived. She seemed drained. The next morning it was the same, she vomited in the toilet, then went to work, and the following morning again, and the one after that. I thought she was exaggerating, it was only a job after all, but of course I couldn't say that. After five years and three births, a life that consisted of nothing but children and childcare, with a few tentative attempts to get something up and running last year, this was her big chance, an opportunity for her to show what she was worth. Had it been anyone else she wanted to show I could have told her to take it easy, it wasn't that important, but she wanted to show herself that she had ability and there was nothing I could say to that. She was sick in the morning, went to work, came home in the evening, less and less confident. Her mother came down to help us and I was able to devote more time to writing.

At two o'clock on Friday I heard the front door open and ambled out to see who it was.

Linda, head bowed, was taking off her jacket without looking at me.

"Are you home already?" I said.

"I failed," she said. "I couldn't do it."

"Sorry?"

She was crying.

"I broke down in the control room," she said. "I realized I'd never be able to do it. It's just no good. It's no good, Karl Ove."

She went into the bedroom. I followed. It turned out the producer had said she should go home and take a couple of days off. The producer was strict and demanded a lot, she had understood what Linda was capable of, but perhaps not how fragile she was.

"I couldn't do it," she said. "I'm a fiasco."

Her mother came in, stopped in the doorway and retreated when she saw that Linda was crying.

"Are you sure?" I said.

"I can't get the two parts to gel," she said. "And now there's almost no time left. It won't work. It's impossible."

That was bad. A defeat after investing everything she had, it couldn't have been worse.

"Can't you make it simpler? Take a few shortcuts?"

She didn't answer. But after the children had gone to bed that evening she asked if I could listen to the little she had. Naturally, I said. In fact it was the last thing I wanted to do. I can handle my own failures, but not those of others.

She passed me the headset and pressed play.

It was good. Of course it was good. There wasn't much, but the little there was, was good.

On Monday she forced herself to go back, ashen-faced and determined. Her radio program had become a fixation, a much larger entity than itself, and when the producer said it wasn't working and would have to be completely rejigged, she collapsed again. Like the last time I thought it was really over, that she had failed, her race was run. And like the last time she gave it another shot.

Eventually the program was finished. I was invited to Sveriges Radio as a kind of test listener, and there we sat in a run-down studio in Malmö, two producers, one technician, Linda, and I.

I was almost angry when I heard the program. It was brilliant. I had believed Linda when she said it was a disaster, she hadn't given me any reason to believe anything else.

Afterwards she broke down. Over the following weeks, much longer than usual, she was in the grip of her darkness. She was quick to tears, watched films, said less than usual when we were alone together. With the children she made an effort to be as she always was with them, but I could see she was relieved when I took them out on my own. She would never do any radio again, she said. But when the darkness lifted, and light began to fill her, and her world became easier and easier, she started toying with the idea of other documentaries, she had a foot in the door.

I completed Book 4 after a week in the cabin, where I wrote night and day while the third book came out. All my old friends, to whom I had sent the manuscript, were keen to read about those days, all had consented to its publication. I received a lovely enthusiastic letter from my oldest friend, Geir Prestbakmo, whom I hadn't seen for thirty years. He described some scenes he remembered, among others, standing in a boathouse and holding a hose during a thunderstorm as we had heard that lightning didn't strike rubber. The spirit and tone of the letter were exactly as I remembered him. I spoke to Dag Lothar on the phone; he reminded me about the discussions we'd had about the connection between colors and the taste of hard candy and the summer we biked out past Eydehavn and played tennis. It felt as if I had given them our story, in a way, and not taken it. It was a good feeling. Everyone invited me back to visit them the next time I was in the area. The problems started again with Book 4. Instead of using authentic names and sending the manuscript to individuals, I used made-up names and just forged ahead with publication, I couldn't face another storm. But still people were angry. I wrote Book 5 in eight weeks, by then I really didn't give a damn, at the same time I found a tone that reminded me of the literature I used to read when I was the age I was describing, and it struck me this was the novel I had wanted to write when I was twenty, but I hadn't had it in me. Now I did. Last week Linda flew to Tenerife with our children, Helena, and her children, and I was finishing the book while the Winter Olympics were on TV, I sat on the sofa alone, cheering loudly when Northug, or "the wolf," as the Swedish commentators called him, won, and then I went into my study and carried on. When it was finished I sent it to the people I had described. Some were angry and said I had ruined their lives, I changed their names, some asked me to delete a couple of episodes as they contained a lot of dangerous things I hadn't understood at the time, and some said to leave it as it was. Tonje, who was the most important person in the book apart from Yngve, said to leave everything as it was. I asked Linda not to read it because it would be unpleasant to read about a love story with another woman. Similarly, but for a different reason, I had asked my mother not to read Book 3. After reading the second book she had texted me to say that it hurt to be demeaned. After reading Book 4 she called me and was as angry as she could be. I had written something that simply was not true, about what had happened between us when we lived in the house in Sandnes, to do with alcohol, and either I must have completely misunderstood or I'd made it up. I cut it. *Dagsrevyen*, NRK's evening news program, came and interviewed me, after it was over I returned home, got into bed, and could hardly move, I was paralyzed with fear, the interview would be on Saturday, all of Norway would see it, and I had barely managed to utter one coherent sentence.

The interviewer had shown me a magazine cover on which was written KNAUSGAARD FOR DUMMIES, and I realized as the camera focused on my face that something had happened to me in Norway that I hadn't grasped. I had become big. Some of this I had sensed in Oslo before Christmas when I went into a bookshop to do a signing, it was an event, there were TV cameras, radio microphones, camera flashes, and the shop was full to the rafters, and the line in front of the signing table, where I sat with mics by my mouth, was endless. After the signing I walked up to Litteraturhuset, the biggest room was sold out, and another room, where they had set up video cameras, was also full. Tore interviewed me, we repeated what we had done in Odda, but at that time interest had been burgeoning, here it was hysteria. Afterwards, on my way to the back room, a journalist followed me continually asking me whether I'd had sex with a thirteen-year-old. Then I went out with Tore and his girlfriend, we got drunk, and walking toward the hotel I saw the day's papers in a 7-Eleven. *Dagsavisen* had devoted its entire front page to a photo of me signing books. It was totally unreal and dreamlike, impossible to associate with me, so the cabin outside Malmö, where I headed the day after I came home, was as much a refuge as a place to write. Everything was as before, sitting in front of a computer screen. Three days there, home to the family, the Saint Lucia celebration in the school, Christmas with a full house, New Year's Eve. Out to the cabin, back to the family. No interviews, no papers, no TV, as it had been all autumn, and now I was doing the same all winter. *Dagsrevyen* was an exception, I had been awarded a radio prize for the first novel, I was due to receive it in Malmö, and for it I had to give an interview, and *Dagsrevyen* had asked if they could tag along. Thinking I had to do an interview anyway, I'd felt it didn't matter. When I was there, sitting on a chair with a camera trained on my face, it was as though the fear of everything I knew had happened but hadn't actually understood was gathered here, in this one place.

After the interview I lay in bed so frightened that I could hardly move, and I called Linda as soon as I heard her come home.

"Linda! Linda! Linda!" I shouted.

She came in, stopped at the doorway, and looked at me.

"You'll have to look after the children today," I said. "For the rest of the evening. I can't. I have to stay in bed."

She nodded.

"That's not a problem," she said.

I could see she was happy to be able to help me. After she had gone to get the children I sat up, switched on my laptop, which was finally online, and lay all evening watching a series of documentaries about the Second World War. The pictures were unique, many everyday shots of how the world's solidity and fortitude shone through the ravages of war, which made it real in a very different way. When Linda came to bed, I was asleep.

At Easter we traveled to Stockholm, rented a suite in a hotel, I had earned enough money for that, and the idea was I would make a start on Book 6 while Linda and the children visited her mother and spent time with her in various places such as the Junibacken Children's Museum, the Skansen Open-Air Museum, and the Children's Room at the Kulturhus. However, nothing went according to plan, Linda was down and couldn't manage, she called after a few hours and asked if I could take over, and I did. One day Helena and Fredrik invited us to his beautiful house. We caught the train to Uppsala, where he picked us up. Geir and Christina were also there, and after we had been shown around we sat and talked while the children were outside playing. Linda was on a high, so much so that I could hardly communicate properly with her, she was just floating, everything was fantastic. I knew that in reality she was depressed, and I was angry, I hated it when she was like this, so exaggeratedly happy, enthusiastic, and full of praise for everyone although she didn't feel it deep down. There was something false about it. I noticed the difference so easily, others didn't, they just thought she was wonderful. And she really was when she was in this state, the life and soul of every party, just not for me.

When we arrived back in Malmö I continued working on Book 6. So far I was no more than twenty pages in, but it wasn't going to take long anyway, and the plan was to finish it in six weeks. Geir's book had been turned down, it was too long and wordy for Spartacus to take the risk, Molven wrote. Now two large and two small publishing houses had said no, and we had to think in new ways. Geir had always said it would be like this, it was his experience of the world, while I kept saying it would be fine, that was my experience. How a book that was of international standing and radically different from other documentary accounts that had come out in Norway would not be published was beyond me. *Moby-Dick* wasn't turned down because it was too long and wordy. Or too immoral?

I called Yngve and asked him if he would like to start up a publishing house, e-mailed Asbjørn with the same question, both were enthusiastic about the idea, and so we founded Pelikanen, primarily to publish *Baghdad Indigo* but also with the idea of continuing afterward, translating books we liked and publishing them.

At this time I started sending the manuscript to those I had written about in Book 5. It was about the twelve years I'd spent in Bergen. The central figure was Tonje. I sat for a long time over an e-mail to her before I sent it.

> *When I sent you the first book to read, you wrote that it was a good portrait and you knew it might change later in the narrative; however, you gave me a free hand. That was then, afterward all that happened has happened – including Book 2, which you didn't get to read in advance – and now everything looks very different. What you once agreed to has developed into something else. I was thinking about that when I wrote Book 5, that is why I hardly go into who you are (to me) as a person, and almost exclusively describe you through the eyes of the lover. You have no reason to be ashamed of or to fear what I have written about you in the book, the only mistake (and it wasn't a mistake) you made was to get together with me. What you can fear is of course the newspapers and what they write. The headline "Knausgaard Suspected of Rape" is bound to appear. Naturally it's terrible for you to be associated with this. On the other hand, the book puts all the blame on me, nothing on you, every reader will understand that. If you like I can change the scene when you return from Kristiansand, remove the infidelity, and instead simply have you say it's over.*

Not long afterward I received an e-mail from Jan Vidar, he was going to Copenhagen with his family, could they drop in? Of course, I wrote back, it would be nice to see you after all these years. I spent all day cleaning up the flat, going shopping, and cooking. They came in the late afternoon, Jan Vidar, Ellen, and their three children. I had only seen the oldest two when they were tiny tots, now they were big girls.

Linda wasn't well and wasn't feeling up to meeting anyone she didn't know, so she went to the bedroom as soon as she had welcomed them. I suspected Jan Vidar interpreted that as a rejection, that really she didn't want them to be there.

We chatted all evening. He hadn't changed an iota, he was as calm and relaxed as ever. We worked through everyone we had known in those days.

Jan Vidar still lived in town and was in touch with many of them. We also talked about the books I had written, mostly about the hoo-ha around them. Jan Vidar told me he had refused all interviews up to a certain point, then as the attacks on me had increased and accusations of immorality were raining down, he gave up his resistance and defended me. I knew that, my mother had mentioned it, and I said I was pleased he had.

If there was anyone I had needed when I moved into the area as a thirteen-year-old it was him, I thought as we sat in one living room, while all the children were on the sofa watching a movie in the other. Loyal, incorruptible, considerate, independent. He had stayed, I had left. He had learned to play the guitar, I hadn't. He had three children, I had three children. The differences between us at that time had been minor, for when you are in your early teens age is decisive, the world that seems to be forming before your eyes is the same. Jan Vidar was the first person I got drunk with. He was the first person I went to parties with. He was the first person I experienced girls with. Predominantly talking about them because almost everything revolved around music and girls, but also cycling over to see them, each of us on a sofa, making out with a girl to the sound of "Telegraph Road" by Dire Straits, which was made for the purpose.

Now the small differences that existed had become bigger, but he was still the same person he had always been; the differences were in the layers of experience that time had deposited.

Jan Vidar said one thing that evening that I turned over in my mind after they had gone. It was about what my father had been for him. Jan Vidar and I were the best of friends, and for the first three years I lived there Dad had been around as well. While Jan Vidar's father became an important person in my life, always interested and present when I was at their house, Dad was nothing to Jan Vidar, a kind of shadow he knew existed and occasionally saw but with whom he never exchanged a word. He talked about a time I had just got off my bike and Dad came storming out of the house and gave me an earful for something or other. He realized he was strict and suspected I was afraid of him, but actually he knew nothing. We never talked about it. And that was odd to hear. Why did I never talk about Dad in those three years? Normally we talked about everything. Perhaps it was because there was nothing to say. That was how it was. Perhaps because there was no language to express it? I don't recall thinking about him either. I just think I reacted to him, kept him at bay, dealt with what he said and did out of a sense that everything he stood for and did was unchangeable, a bit like a power I lived under. And probably I was ashamed. That must have been why I never spoke to Jan Vidar about him. We were in our early teens, which is the age when it begins to dawn on you that there are other ways of doing things and other ways of thinking than those in your family.

At any rate I wasn't ashamed of Dad, but of the way I was. I can't remember that much about him during those years. His presence in my childhood is clear, then from thirteen until I was sixteen he is vague and indistinct, hardly there at all, he reappears full of vigor and gravitas when I was sixteen and he and Mom divorced.

In those three years he spent most of his time in the living room on the ground floor of the barn while Mom and I were in the house, and when he came in I invariably went up to my room.

No friends. No social life. Only his job, evenings at home. The occasional trip to his parents in Kristiansand over the weekend.

When we moved there he was thirty-eight. He must have felt he was a prisoner in his own life. And he must have been lonely. When I think of him, he is like a kind of shadow.

The autumn the first volume of this novel came out I received a letter from a man in Bodø who had once known my father. He didn't write much, he was more interested in writing about his own life and what the novel meant to him. When, a few weeks later, I was signing books in a shop in Oslo another man came up to me and said he had worked with Dad, and Dad had been an outstanding teacher. Then, not long before Jan Vidar and his family visited us, I got another letter from someone who had known Dad as a young man. He wrote that after reading the first four volumes he wondered how much of Dad's upbringing had affected his relationship with Yngve and me. He wrote that he had lost contact with Dad after *gymnas* as he'd moved to Bergen, where he has lived ever since, and Dad had moved to Oslo. He wrote that Dad's life had been full of bluff and lies when he had known him, and what I had written about this side of him was nothing in comparison to what he had seen. He wrote that Dad's father had been quick-tempered and moody, and ruled his son with an iron rod, often boxing his ears and not letting him go out. He also wrote about one incident when Dad had been beaten up by some kids his age and left lying on the ground, bleeding and with a split lip.

Reading that, I thought he had never had a chance. Something had been broken inside him at a very young age.

This is a dangerous notion because no one apart from ourselves has responsibility for what we do, we are humans, not creatures subject to forces that drive us here and there without offering any resistance. Unless of course being under the sway of others is part of the human condition, and being a good person is the same as being a lucky person.

My father died in a chair in his mother's house. The house was full of bottles, there was excrement on the sofa, his nose was broken and his face covered with blood. He was in the chair, dead, had been for more than a day, and during that time his mother was in the house. No one knows what she was doing. No one knows how Dad broke his nose or his face got covered with blood. But I do know for certain now that was what happened and what it looked like. If there should be a lawsuit on the basis of *My Struggle*, as my uncle Gunnar has suggested many times there will be, I have a document as proof. When I received it I was furious. I don't think I have ever been so furious. I had written about how Dad died, and then Gunnar said I was lying. What did that make me, lying about my father's death? How could he say I was lying about the circumstances surrounding Dad's death to journalists, to the publisher, and to everyone in my family, when I wasn't?

I called Kristiansand and asked them to send me a printout of Dad's medical records. Which they did. From the records it was clear that he had lived with his mother for a year and five months before he died. It wasn't quite two years, but it was a long, long way from the two months Gunnar had claimed Dad stayed there. How could he say Dad stayed there for only two months and that I was lying? And how could the *Bergens Tidende* journalist say that?

I had described what I had seen. After Gunnar's e-mail I had begun to doubt what I had seen. Now I was sure I had seen what I had seen. And that before we arrived Dad had been dead in the chair and Grandma had walked around him, he was dead, he was covered in blood, the place was full of bottles, and it had been like that for a considerable time. Then the ambulance came.

Who called it?

I called Kristiansand again and asked if such conversations were logged. They were, but the person I was speaking to didn't know how long they were kept, he would check it out, he said, and then contact me, but I never heard from him and assumed there was nothing.

Where did the blood come from? Had he fallen and then struggled up, sat down in the chair and died? That might have killed him, the bleeding from the nose, because he had an enlarged heart, which was the only detail I remembered from the autopsy. The undertaker had said the death was alcohol-related.

How could anyone say everything had been in order?

I was furious. Also because I knew I would never find out how he died. Grandma had given a variety of answers. In one she was sitting beside him and discovered that he was dead, we asked her if it was light or dark outside, she couldn't remember. In another she had fallen asleep and woken up and seen that he was dead.

But there wasn't just blood on his face, his nose was also broken, and how had he done that? There wasn't any blood anywhere in the room, I knew that, I had cleaned there, no matter what Gunnar maintained. Could he have gone outside, got into a fight, crawled home, and then died in the chair from the effort? Or did he fall indoors and hit his nose on the floor or perhaps the fireplace? That was most likely. But the blood? Grandma wouldn't have been able to clean it up, that's for certain.

I called Yngve and we talked. He said he could barely remember anything from those days. He couldn't even remember calling the doctor, which I had said he did. Could it have been me who called? I had no memory of it, I thought he had done it, but I wasn't sure. I mentioned the blood that wasn't there. Wasn't there any blood on the carpet? he said. Was there some? I said. No, I would have remembered that. No, there wasn't. I'm sure. Because the first time I realized there was some blood was when the undertaker warned us before we saw the body. Didn't he say something? Yngve asked. Didn't he just say his nose was broken? No, no, I'll never forget, it came as a shock, he warned us, there had been a lot of blood.

Yngve said he'd found another document among Dad's possessions, he had mentioned it earlier, but I'd forgotten. He went to get it from the cellar and called back. It was after a visit to the doctor. Dad had an incredibly high blood-alcohol concentration, and the doctor who had written this doubted everything Dad said, even that he was a *gymnas* teacher. There wasn't very much of the teacher about him. But he kept lying, it was typical of him to say he was about to start a job as an educational consultant.

What kind of death had he suffered?

When we were in Kristiansand and encountered the dreadful sight I immediately accepted it, that was how it was, but reading this document now, there was no longer anything to accept, I saw it from a distance, him, Dad, dead in the chair, broken nose, bloody face, surrounded by bottles, Grandma walking around. But he is her son. Her eldest son. Her beloved eldest son. Now he is dead, and he's been dead for a while, and she was with him, her dead son, she was walking around him. Is she making coffee? She had done that thousands of times. I knew exactly how she did it, I can visualize all her movements, and she, Grandma, who filled my chest with happiness whenever she paid us an unexpected visit and I smelled her perfume down in the hall, is pouring coffee into a cup and lighting a cigarette. Menthol, that was what she smoked, definitely.

Gunnar didn't want this story to be told. I can understand that. But I can't understand him saying I lied. Saying I had made it all up to avenge my mother, whom my father had left fifteen years earlier. I was so happy when they got divorced. I was so happy to get rid of him. I hated him, and I feared him, and I loved him.

That was how it was.

Now I had written a novel about him. It wasn't a good novel, but then he hadn't lived a good life either. It was his life, it ended in a chair in a house in Kristiansand because he had reached a point where he had given up all hope. There wasn't any hope. Everything was destroyed. So he died.

We could have traveled down to Kristiansand, forced him to go into a clinic, if it was possible, or somehow have got him out of the house. We didn't. I don't regret that. That was how he wanted it, and he was our father. I am his son. The story about him, Kai Åge Knausgaard, is the story about me, Karl Ove Knausgaard. I have told it. I have exaggerated, I have embellished, I have omitted, and there is a lot I haven't understood. But it isn't him I have described; it is my image of him. It's finished now.

*

In the days before May 17, Constitution Day, the school was closed for several days, and to give myself some writing time, as I had a deadline hanging over me, I went with Heidi and John to Voss while Linda took Vanja to Oslo to visit Axel and Linn. The idea was that Yngve and his children would look after mine and I would be able to work. After that I would go on a short trip to Iceland and be interviewed at Nordens Hus, and then I would go to our cabin and finish the novel there. Mom and Ingrid would help at home while I was away and then it would all be over.

It didn't happen like that.

We had been at Yngve's for only a few hours when Linda rang. I was in the living room with John and Heidi running around me, chased by Ylva, when my phone began vibrating in my jacket pocket.

"Hi, it's me," she said.

"Hi," I said. "Have you arrived?"

"Yes, but guess what. I have some good news."

"What?"

"My book's been accepted."

"Really?"

"Yes! The phone rang just before we left. It was Modernista. The editor there. He said it was fantastic. He hadn't even finished reading before he called."

"How wonderful!" I said, gazing at the scenery outside the window, which at first fell away steeply to the water below, then rose up the mountain to the peaks on the opposite side. "Congratulations! That's exactly what you needed. Now you can really relax. About work, I mean. Now you're a writer again."

"Yes. I'm so happy."

"And when will it come out?"

"Next year. It takes a bit longer in Sweden. But I'll believe it when I see it. Do you remember when Bonniers withdrew their acceptance of my previous book?"

"That won't happen again. Relax. It's fantastic news, Linda."

John stood below me and looked up. I lowered the phone.

"I'm talking to Mommy," I said. "Would you like to say hi too?"

He nodded, I passed him the phone, he put it to his ear. I could hear her excited voice, saw him nodding to everything she said. Then he passed me back the phone.

"We'll have to celebrate when we're back home," I said.

"Yes," she said. "We must."

"Great. I kept telling you how good your writing was."

"You did, but we're married."

"So it doesn't count?"

"Yes, of course it does. But you should've heard how enthusiastic he was."

The first of Linda's short stories I read was called "Universe," I had told her to send it to *Vagant*. This was several years before we got together. It had language and a suggestive power that went straight to your heart, something that was both naked and robust, helpless and supreme, beneath a bitterly cold winter sky. It was about the best thing I had read for many years, and when I noticed how happy she was when I said that I realized she had no idea how gifted she was. During the weeks when we became a couple she wrote a little essay about the Swedish poet Erik Axel Karlfeldt, and I thought this was the world she moved in. But it wasn't, the essay was an exception, she had barely come into contact with literary theory and she was ashamed of that. But that was precisely what was so good, her writing was her, and what she found inside herself possessed a different form of complexity from that which emerged when a writer was striving for it, as happens when you want the text to be something particular. Her problem was that she wrote very little and lacked confidence. Her writing came in bursts, a few hours of light, then it was gone.

An event from another world: we live in Regeringsgatan in Stockholm, we have one child, she is only a few months old and is asleep between us in bed. I read aloud to Linda from a book Yngve and I were given by my mother's parents when we were small, Asbjørnsen and Moe's collected fairy tales. I read "Valemon, the Polar Bear King." I love fairy tales, the darkness in the best of them, and Linda loves them too. Afterwards we talk about it. Linda is particularly taken by the metal claws the girl is given to climb the rock face. A few days later she starts writing. She invests the whole of her being into this girl who wants and gets the bear. What she writes about belongs to what we cannot discuss, it's impossible, but it's still there, somewhere between us. It makes me think about what is actual, what is real, how dependent we are on language and form for it to exist. That which does not have language or form does not exist, even if it is there. And that was the problem for Linda and me, that what was there between us but didn't exist, grew weaker and weaker, more and more indistinct and nebulous, as the inexpressible dimension between us weakened.

So much in life is unspoken.

Linda called again that evening. She was still happy, it was as though the happiness was a wave washing through her. Everything was fantastic. Vanja, Axel and Linn, Oslo, May 17, Independence Day. I had a warning on the tip of my tongue, I wanted to tell her to take it easy, but I didn't have the heart, of course she should be allowed to be happy.

In Voss I didn't get much work done, Heidi and John wouldn't let me sit in the loft writing, at least not for long periods at a time. I had a whole day to myself when Yngve and his girlfriend, Tone, took all the kids to her mountain cabin, but that was it. In the house below Yngve's lived Espen, it was strange, this was how we had lived so many years ago in Bergen, him below and me above, and when I saw him in the garden I shouted to him and he came up for a cup of coffee and a long chat. He'd spent the last years writing a tome about dissection. We shared a fascination with the baroque and the physical, but our attitudes to it diverged: Espen was more rational; I was more irrational. He was a poet; I was a prose writer. Perhaps what was open in him was closed in me, and vice versa. Nevertheless we had been friends for twenty years, that was what mattered most. In the evening he came over with a bottle of red wine, we sat with Yngve and drank and listened to music from the eighties. The next morning I felt so sick I couldn't get out of bed. I threw up out of the children's sight, told them I had the flu, was unable to get up until late afternoon, when I took them to a shopping mall and bought some May 17 clothes. They didn't know what Constitution Day was but were happy anyway, they had a sense that it was an important day. At home Heidi got a splinter the size of a forefinger in her foot. She screamed so loudly it must have been heard all over Voss. She was afraid of everything that stirred in nature and everything to do with blood and pain, though felt perfectly at home in the social world. There was no question of my removing the splinter, she howled at the mere mention of it. But Ylva, whom she looked up to, was finally allowed to take it out, by the following day there was already a story Heidi could tell, on par with the time she was pushed through the airport in a wheelchair.

On May 17 we stood in the rain in Vossevangen watching the procession, Heidi and John with a Norwegian flag in one hand and an ice-cream cone in the other. I had written only a couple of pages, about Hermann Broch, of what looked like was going to become an essay. Tonje, who lived in Bergen, turned up one day with a tape recorder, she was going to make a documentary about being a character in my books, she asked if I would mind answering a few questions and I couldn't refuse. She had replied to my e-mail about Book 5 a few weeks earlier and said she didn't want anything deleted. I answered all her questions and read out some passages from the novels. She left, we stayed there a few more days, and then we flew to Malmö. A couple of hours after we arrived home the handle on the door started moving up and down and I realized that it was Vanja trying to open it.

"Here they are!" I called out. Heidi and John sprang to their feet in the living room and ran into the hall as the door opened and Vanja and Linda appeared. Vanja was full of her experiences she wanted to tell us about, but also how much she had missed her brother and sister, they had never been apart for so long.

"Hi," I said to Linda. "How was the journey?"

"It was fine," she said. "But I'm a bit tired."

"Have a rest, then," I said.

She nodded.

"But first we need to eat something. Do we have anything here?"

I shook my head.

"Shall we get Chinese takeaway?"

"Yes."

I took the elevator down, bought five boxes, brought them back up, placed the contents on five plates, called the children, who didn't come, so Linda and I sat eating at the table alone.

She was on her way down. The joy had gone, her energy had gone, she ate facing me, quiet. But, I reasoned, she might be tired after the traveling and the week away.

"I did hardly any writing up there," I said. "So I'll really have to go for it over the next few weeks. That's all right, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"At least when Mom and Sissel come," she said. "But that's after you go to Iceland, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said, looking at her.

"Do you have to go? Couldn't you cancel it?"

"Are you crazy? I can't do that. And it's only one day. One day, Linda."

"OK," she said.

"If I can just get down to writing now, over the next few weeks, I'll be done for good. Then I'll have all the time in the world. I just need to stick at it. Then it's over."

"Yes," she said.

Before leaving for Iceland I had to sort out the details around the cabin, so I rented a car and drove there one morning at the end of May. Initially I sat down on the doorstep, smoked a cigarette, and studied the mess. The first job I had to do was to remove the pile of planks, drywall, pipes, and all the other scrap from the old bathroom. The car I'd rented was a Mercedes, it was brand new, and I covered the bottom of the large boot with garbage bags before loading up with trash and driving to the dump several kilometers away. It took six trips to clear the pile.

I took another smoke break on the step.

The lawn which only two years before had been flawless was now riddled with weeds. There was no longer any separation between bed and lawn. Moss grew beneath the tall hedges, and elsewhere, the soil was like an open wound. The white wall of the cabin had a dark coating, several of the wooden boards were rotten at the bottom. The paint had peeled off the window frames. One pane was cracked. The pile of building materials and junk was gone, but the soil and sand the workmen had dug up when they were laying new pipes formed enormous bumps in the grass. By the hedge there were still two buckets of shit from the outhouse days, and it had definitely ripened in the last year. I had to empty them today. And the boxes of apples in the cellar, which I'd optimistically stored two years before, had to be disposed of.

The grass had to be cut.

The hole had to be filled.

The heap of rotting garden waste had to be removed.

That would make a difference at least.

I flicked my cigarette into the hole and opened the door to the small shed where the lawn mower was kept. Took the coiled cord, put one end in the socket, the other in the mower, lifted it out, and started it.

It was Linda who had been behind the purchase of the cabin. During one of her sleepless energy-charged nights she had come across the advertisement online. The cabin had been built at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was really beautiful, a bit Swiss in style, while the garden was large and trim, with two old apple trees, rosebushes, a myriad of flower beds and massive, two-meter-high hedges around three sides. Linda had been saying for a while that we should have one; a couple at the nursery school had one, they went there every weekend of the spring and autumn, grew their own vegetables and berries, and spent large parts of the summer there. With three children and an apartment in the center of town, we had to take them for a walk in the park as if they were dogs, we absolutely should have a cabin in the country.

I should have loved her for that because she was dreaming about our family when she was talking about it. About a happy life, hanging up the washing as the children played around her on a summer afternoon. About a woman's hands covered with soil, about children who had their own little vegetable patches, who had their own paddling pool, and about her husband who cut the grass with a push lawn mower in the evening. Somewhere in the open, our own plot, our own little house, that was what she dreamed about. I should have loved her for it, but I didn't, I was just annoyed.

She showed it to me in the morning. Sitting on the chair in front of the computer clicking on the photos. I leaned over her.

"Isn't it great?" she said. "So beautiful. Almost like a doll's house. But there are two floors. There are bedrooms upstairs. The inside has recently been done up."

She turned to me.

"What do you think?"

"Well, it looks nice," I said. "But we don't have any money. Have you considered that?"

"I can get some. I will get some."

"How are you going to do that?"

"I just will. I want that place."

"It's a lot of work though. *I* don't have any time. Out of the question."

"I do. I can look after it. You won't need to do anything."

"And if we could get hold of that much money," I said, "we should buy a car. We certainly need one."

"We don't need a car in town. And definitely not if we have a cabin."

"I can't talk you out of it, I can see. And it is nice. But, as I said, we have no money."

"Can't we go out and take a look at it at least?"

"Fine by me."

There followed a few days of hectic activity on Linda's part. She made an appointment at the bank, but that led nowhere since neither Linda nor I were credit worthy, that is, once we hadn't paid some bill or other and had ended up on a list that made it impossible for us to get a loan or a cell phone contract or to rent a car, except for with Europcar, who didn't check the list and whom I therefore used whenever we needed one.

It was humiliating to sit there in the bank, feeling as if I were a criminal with a record, while the lady wearing a pantsuit, blouse, and gold jewelery had no intention of giving us a loan. Linda called her father, who not so long ago had sold his place and was happy to contribute with a hundred thousand kronor as he had never given her anything before. I called my mother, she could take out another mortgage on her house, she said, checked, and called back the next day: she could lend us a hundred and twenty thousand.

So we were a hundred thousand short.

A hundred thousand!

Where were we going to get that from?

I received a monthly stipend of fifteen thousand. On top of which I read manuscripts for a publishing house, who paid ten thousand a month. That made twenty-five thousand, which was seventeen thousand after tax. Although that was a lot of money, it stretched just far enough to cover the rent for the apartment – ten thousand – and there were five of us in the family. If there was a crisis I could call the publishing house. I had no idea how much I owed them, I only knew that it was a lot because at various times I'd received a fixed monthly advance. But I didn't dare ask about my debt. It had been three years since my previous novel came out, and I was still nowhere near a new one. I closed my eyes to anything related to money and the future. By and large this approach worked, that was the main thing.

But a hundred thousand!

"Asking won't hurt anyway," Linda said. "The worst that can happen is they say no."

"OK," I said, and e-mailed Geir Gulliksen.

We want to buy a cabin, I wrote, the idea being that I'll be able to work there, however we are a hundred thousand Swedish kronor short. I know I have had a large advance already, and I won't be upset if you say no. But please consider it.

Geir sent the inquiry to his boss, Geir Berdahl, who called me the following day to ask what kind of place this was. I explained. He said I could borrow ninety thousand Norwegian kroner. Would that be all right? Oh yes, thank you very much, I said. That's too much. Thank you again.

After I hung up, I was racked with guilt. The publishers were putting themselves out so much for me, they always had, and I was exploiting the situation, bringing family matters into the financial arrangements, allowing them to go out on a limb to help me buy a country cabin, which I didn't even want.

Now I would have to work there. That was for sure. I would have to write a lot there.

Linda was happy. We went to see the cabin, a woman in her midfifties met us, she had decorated inside the cabin with great taste, everywhere there were tiny maritime features, wooden sculptures of gulls and lighthouses, mobiles of seabirds, little ornamental cases of shells, balls of green yarn, and fishing nets. The furniture was simple and old, a nice couch with a lovely dresser, both painted blue and white, and two white wicker chairs, plus a dining table with chairs. It felt as if we were in a cabin on one of the skerries and not in the middle of an enormous subdivided community outside the third-biggest town in Sweden.

The girls loved it. After a few minutes hidden behind Linda's legs they thawed and ran around the garden. The owner said she had put so much work into the cabin and the garden, and she liked it so much she didn't really want to sell it. No, selling it was the last thing she wanted to do. But she was moving to another town and couldn't keep it any longer. She said she was pleased we had children, knowing that there would be children playing in her garden was a comfort.

She wanted 290,000 kronor for it. When we got home, we called her and offered 320,000. There were other people interested and I thought it was best to frighten them off right away to avoid a bidding war. She called back the same evening and accepted the offer.

And that was how we became cabin owners.

Linda pictured herself in a straw hat walking around the garden tweaking the flowers, I suspected, perhaps lying in a hammock in the shade and reading, the children around her, barefoot and happy, and on autumn evenings pulling up the carrots, almost colorless in the falling dusk, a pot of vegetable soup on the stove in the little kitchen. The children's excited voices and red cheeks before they fell asleep on the little mezzanine floor while she and I sat in the little living room with a glass of red wine. It wasn't like that, reality was bearing down on us like a juggernaut, all our dreams were crushed, we were arguing, the children were defiant, the garden was dug up to lay pipes and no one filled in the holes, so there were piles of soil and sand everywhere, and where there weren't any it was overgrown. The woman who'd sold it to us came back a few years later to say hello, and when she saw the state the garden was in her eyes had welled up, we were told. The neighbors scowled at us, the amount of work that had to be done increased to such an extent that we began to keep our distance because I'd been against the purchase from the beginning and made it a condition that I'd have nothing to do with it, Linda had to take care of it. She couldn't, it was beyond her now, and so there we were, with our shame and guilty consciences, her with a dream in tatters as well. Even the dream of barefoot children and a carefree life in the open air requires work.

On this afternoon in May 2010, as I pushed the mower down one side of the lawn, if indeed what I was cutting merited such an exalted term, we'd had the place for two and a half years, and nothing had gone as planned. It turned out to be difficult to have three such small children there. The staircase to the second floor was so steep that we constantly had to keep watch to make sure they didn't crawl up, and if we closed the door to be outside, one of us had to occupy John while the other kept an eye on the girls, so there was no question of relaxing, which despite everything we were able to do at home, where they had their rooms and toys and knew how to occupy themselves. Then I was always overcome by an immense feeling of claustrophobia there; I didn't like having people around me on all sides. In town I had no problem with other people, they had nothing to do with me, I had nothing to do with them. In town we were strangers to one another, here we were neighbors, we were supposed to greet one another and exchange a few words when we met, and it was impossible to do anything without being seen. To be seen as a random stranger was quite different from being seen as a particular individual, a stern forty-year-old father, and I couldn't bear that look, it made my brain boil, made it impossible for me to relax, I saw myself all the time, and if the children shouted, or cried and started fighting, it wasn't the shouts, the tears, or the fights I reacted to but being seen by others. I had internalized these other people, and I hated it. Oh, how I hated it. My head churned, I saw myself and I saw myself seeing my children, and nothing was as it was, everything was tied in knots, I was the most unfree person in the world. And I had voluntarily locked myself in here! On the other hand, it was a dream, Linda's dream, I owed it to her to live it out.

Up at six one spring morning, it is damn cold outside, the grass is wet, and there is nothing to do inside the doll's house, except wait for the hours to drag by until ten, then we can go to the shops and afterward maybe make some lunch.

If only the sea had been nearby! Or a forest. Some open expanse.

During the summer we were informed that sewage pipes were going to be laid for all the cabins. It would cost twenty thousand kronor. In the fall the whole garden was dug up and a pipe laid to the outside toilet, a small room with its own door. We had to get ahold of a plumber who could build a new toilet there and, somehow, find the money for this and the excavations. It definitely wouldn't come in at under forty thousand. Linda borrowed the money from the bank, her mother was our guarantor. The fence was taken down and the front garden dug up, in addition the lack of maintenance had already begun to have consequences. It wasn't my responsibility, I had been absolutely unambiguous in that respect: if we buy a cabin it is your responsibility, you are the one who will have to take care of it, I haven't got the time, I'd said, and because I'd said it, I wasn't going to go back on my word – except to cut the grass. As the neglect slowly spread I gloated, this was her responsibility and hers alone. I had washed my hands of the matter. No one could say I hadn't warned her! Or that I hadn't predicted it would turn out like this.

Linda's mother, who at this time was staying with us for long stretches, managed to turn up a gardener from the Balkans, who leveled the lawn and sowed new grass, and a plumber from North Africa, who was able to do the pipe job for a song, relatively speaking. How she found them I have no idea, but she was the kind who chatted to everyone, such as our neighbors, in a few days she knew them better than I did and I'd been there for more than two years. So by the spring the garden looked nice again, and we had a bathroom with a shower. I didn't care that when I turned on the hot-water boiler the shower wouldn't stop or that the pipes weren't discreetly tucked away alongside the wall, but stood out in all their chrome-metal glory and in places resembled the cryptic instruments in a Cronenberg film. We just had to accept it, we couldn't look after the place, we couldn't live out that dream, it wasn't for us. When would I ever sow carrots with the children? When would I ever weed the beds? The claustrophobia began to throb in me the moment we got into the bus to go there. We went there less and less, and in May 2010, when I was cutting the grass with the red cord wrapped around my shoulder, under a dry, gray sky, we hadn't been there since the previous autumn, and even then only sporadically, a few hours one sunny day perhaps, because it was a vicious circle: the more neglected it became, the less time we wanted to spend there, and the less time we were there the more neglected it became.

I felt an ache in my heart. We had failed.

As a family we had failed.

Or had we? Why not view the matter with a practical eye? We made a misjudgment, we bought a place we didn't have the time to keep in order, and when we realized that we put it up for sale. Why should that cause my heart to ache?

The heart cannot reason. The brain does that. And if there was one thing I had learned in life, it was that the heart is everything, the brain nothing.

That was why everything in life was always so horribly painful.

I stopped the mower and walked over to move the bench, the table, and the chairs, which were half under an apple tree. They appeared to be made of wood, but it was some synthetic material and completely weatherproof. Having done that, I restarted the mower, pushed it slowly across the uneven, undulating soft ground, which was so suffocated by moss that the blades mostly whirred over thin air. Only by the hedge, beside the overgrown flagstones, did they engage again.

The problem with people is that they are too sensitive. Almost everyone I knew or met or saw was too sensitive. Something had happened to them once and they hadn't got over it. If your father had lost his temper with you when you were a child and perhaps hit you, what does it matter now? If other kids locked you in the uniform closet in the gym, what has that to do with your present life? If you were a terrible bed wetter, a wussy little shit or your mother drank or your father took his own life, or if your parents totally ignored you, you aren't them, you are your own person and you have your own time, which is now, so why on earth do you let the past have any influence on it? Why should what your parents did weigh so heavily on your life? Why didn't we leave it at that?

What good would all these feelings and musings do?

I saw it in my own children, how small things could grow to enormous proportions in them. At first they were like animals in the sense that their feelings were closely connected with the moment, from which tears or laughter or fear or well-being resulted, and the very next it was forgotten. Then they became human, that was when things lasted and expanded. Recently, for example, Vanja had started worrying that she couldn't say her *r*'s. When she was smaller it didn't matter, she said *j* instead, so when she had to say "*trädet*" for instance, she said "*tjädet*" or "*tjolleji*" instead of "*trolleri*," and even if it brought an occasional stab to the heart, because I hadn't been able to say my 'r's when I was small, and I remembered the hell it had been, mostly I didn't think about it, it was part of Vanja, and everyone understood what she meant to say. Then she became aware of it. Dad, I can't say *j*, she said to me, looking up on our way to the school. Why can't I say *j*, Dad? Everyone else can. I answered that everyone had different *r*'s. Katinka, who spoke the Skåne dialect, had one; Mommy had a Stockholm accent and had another. And you have yours.

She was reassured by that, but not for long, now the seed was sown, now it was growing. There was such a thing as correct and such a thing as incorrect, something that was as it was meant to be and something that wasn't. One afternoon when she had been singing a song with all the letters in the alphabet, she paused just before the *r*, snorted with annoyance and started throwing things around. She went on and on about how she couldn't pronounce *r*. I could see it was terrible for her, but there was nothing I could do except say hers was good enough. But then Heidi happened to have the world's best rolled *r*, her tongue flapped against her palate and she pronounced all the words with an articulate felicity. Why can Heidi say it and I can't? Vanja said. She avoided words that started with an *r*. I remembered I had muttered about moving to England when I was older because they had an *r* I could pronounce. Not being able to say *r* had been a huge thing for me, it was as though it labeled me as a person. Now I was seeing it from the outside, and I wished I could communicate to Vanja that I loved her whatever she could or couldn't do, did or didn't do, but of course that was an impossible task, she had to resolve this herself. She had been wearing glasses for some years and had accepted it, now she was asking why so few children wore glasses and if she lost her temper they were always the first thing to go. Bang. Onto the floor with them. In school she was suddenly taken ill, she had a sudden need to sleep, the staff called and said she was sick, we knew better, something must have happened, we picked her up anyway, and at home, lying on the sofa with a blanket over her, watching a cartoon on TV, she let it slip, her best friend hadn't wanted to play with her that morning. Then she got it into her head that she shouldn't eat sugar, and refused sweets although she really wanted them. All the freedom there was in the first four to five years of life, which I had done my best to restrict, had stopped, now there was a new consciousness, and the complexity of relationships grew. I knew that none of this was important in itself, it was all arbitrary, but she didn't, for her this was everything. She was entering a system and didn't know she was.

She was six now. In three months she would be starting at real school. For the first time in my life with her I could remember what it had been like when I was her age. No longer vague or based on single memories, but clear and distinct, all the intensity of the world, which I had drawn down into my lungs with every breath as I ran around Tybakken, where everything, the smallest object and tiniest incident had a meaning all its own and rushed toward me as if seen through a magnifying glass, and where great emotion was invested in all the people I had around me. It felt as if everything was about life and death, life was stretched to the bursting point, and when I fell in love with a girl in my class, it filled me in a way I can no longer understand, least of all when I look at Vanja. Does she feel the world so intensely? I look at her and see a little girl going about her business within the framework we have set, we live here, in a city-center apartment, we send her to a parents' co-op nursery school every day. She draws and plays with the countless little animal and human figures she has; sometimes alone, sometimes with Heidi and John. She climbs trees in the park, she casts longing gazes after any dogs that cross her path. She reads her dog book, she has one of her school friends over or she goes over to their house. She swims at the Badeland complex, she has baths at home, she pushes the cart for me when we go shopping. I react to what she says and does, this is "Vanja," my daughter, whom I have seen almost every day of her life. I know everything looks different to her, inside her other laws apply, her laws, she is a person who sees the world and is filled by strong feelings for it, but hardly ever thinks about it, what it actually means. I am so numbed by all the routines we follow, by the system of coordinates that has been placed on my life, that I unconsciously assume everyone around me feels the same, not least the three small people with whom I share my apartment. Even their almost volcanic emotional outbursts I see in my terms, as irritating disturbances, desperate aberrations, obstacles in the way rather than as signs of distinct life inside them.

In this kind of life, as in everything else, there is probably a sense and a purpose: a life where you constantly relate to and empathize with those of others must be unbearable, and perhaps it is also harmful in the case of children, who need distance from the adult world in order to be able to see it and develop in relation to it. Be that as it may, this doesn't stop me thinking that I empathize too little with the lives of other people. Most conspicuously and persistently with regard to Linda. One of the many things she criticizes me for is that I don't see her. This is not quite true, I do see her, the problem is that I see her more or less in the way you see a room you know well; everything is there, the lamp and the carpet and the bookcase, the sofa and the window and the floor, but somehow transparently, no mark is left on your mind.

Why do I organize my life like this? What do I want with this neutrality? Obviously it is to eliminate as much resistance as possible, to make the days slip past as easily and unobtrusively as possible. But why? Isn't that synonymous with wanting to live as little as possible? With telling life to leave me in peace so that I can . . . yes, well, what? Read? Oh, but come on, what do I read about, if not life? Write? Same thing. I read and write about life. The only thing I don't want life for is to live it.

I put the lawn mower in the shed, which was empty as I'd had to clean it out when the bathroom was being built and I'd never put everything back. I walked over to the hedge and looked at the two buckets of shit. One had a lid, the other didn't, it was covered with a plastic bag. I had considered driving them to the dump, but first of all I was afraid the bucket without the lid might topple over or the contents would spill, because it was filled to the brim, and I suspected that even if the rental company were to allow the transport of bits of wood, drywall, and dust in the Mercedes, they might well feel differently about liquid excrement. And secondly the dump was packed with people from all over the district with their trailers, it was also full of people working there, and what section would shit come under? Garden waste? I could imagine myself carrying the buckets and one of the employees coming up to me and asking me what I was throwing away, because that is what they did, it was important that everything was disposed of in the right place. It wouldn't work. I would have to get rid of it here. The obvious option was to bury it. There was already a big hole where the pipe came in, under the bathroom. If I dug it deeper, I would be able to throw the garden waste in there as well. I had put aside some of the flagstones the plumber had taken up, they would stabilize it, I reasoned, and then I could cover the whole thing with earth.

I started digging. When I figured the hole was deep enough, I tossed branches, bushes, and rotting leaves in. Then came the shit. I grabbed the bucket with the lid first. It was heavy, so I had to use both hands. I breathed through my mouth. The stench when I removed the lid was still so pervasive that it triggered my gag reflex. The contents of the bucket were thin and liquid and dark brown. Agh, damn it. Oh shit. I poured it out, retched again. Fucking hell. I didn't have gloves, and my hands and the bottom of my jeans were spattered with shit. I turned on the hose and rinsed the bucket, washed my hands, put the hose by the edge, still breathing through my mouth, I could feel the nausea rising in my chest. I felt as if I were in an inferno, my brain was on fire, everything was bathed in a flickering light, and the whole time I was frightened someone would come and see what I was doing. But the worst was still to come because I would have to hold the bucket without a lid or handle close to my chest. Which I did, splashing even more shit over myself, but then it was done. The buckets were empty and rinsed, the hole glistened. I went to get more of the garden refuse and threw it on top. I shoveled some earth over, but I'd put in too many branches, they were springy and the earth wasn't heavy enough to keep them down. The stench was unbearable. My head was reeling. I put the flagstones on top, the branches sank under the weight and I covered it all with more earth. The branches were gone and the area was level, none of what lay beneath was visible. But the smell hovered above the ground and was apparent from meters away, and if you stepped onto the filled hole it moved beneath your feet.

I had to hope the stench would dissipate of its own accord and none of the potential buyers coming to the viewing the following day would stand just there.

I left the Mercedes in the multistory parking garage, put the keys through the door flap of the rental company, and walked home through the side streets. With my trousers stained with shit and my clothes filthy from soil and plaster, I wasn't going to risk walking along the pedestrian street, where I occasionally bumped into the few people I knew in Malmö. Sometimes I'd also been stopped by strangers, who wanted to say something about my books and the reflections they'd had. Back home, I went straight into the bathroom, tore off my clothes, put them in the washing machine and switched it on, then ran a bath and got in. Slowly the buzz of hysteria that had circled through my head for the past few hours ebbed away. For perhaps half an hour I lay in the bathtub staring up at the ceiling without thinking of anything specific, as the steam stuck like adhesive tape to the window and mirror, and in my imaginary world the bathroom turned into a tank, a room detached from everything else.

With reddened skin, fingertips crinkled like raisins, I got up, rubbed myself down, wrapped a towel around my waist, and padded into the bedroom, where I rummaged through the heap of clothes until I found a shirt, a pair of jeans, and a pair of matching socks and could finally join the others in the living room, the children on the sofa in front of the TV, Linda lying on the bed by the wall.

"How was it?" she said.

"Fine," I said. "It was a nightmare emptying the buckets of shit. Anyway, at least it's done now."

"Which buckets of shit?"

"At the cabin," I said. "Don't you remember what it was like before we got the toilet?"

"Did you empty them? Where did you do that?"

"Where they're supposed to be emptied," I said. "Have you eaten?"

"Yes," Linda said. "There's some for you in the kitchen."

After eating I began to pack for the trip. It was only one night away, so I didn't need much. But I took my laptop in case there was any time to write on the plane, and the first volume of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, which I absolutely had to read before I went to the cabin to finish the novel. At least I had to skim through it so that I knew what it was about.

"Will you put the kids to bed?" Linda said when I'd finished and sat down on the sofa. "I've been with them all day."

"Will you sort out the cabin while I put them to bed? Or what were you thinking?"

She didn't answer, just looked at me for a few seconds. Then she turned to face the wall.

"Of course I will," I said.

"Can we have a bath, Dad?" Vanja said.

"Can you manage it by yourselves?"

"Yes."

"Then you can."

They jumped up and raced off to the bathroom.

"Do you have to go?" Linda said. "I don't know if I can manage with them on my own."

"Of course you can," I said. "It'll be absolutely fine."

"Can't you cancel it?"

I shook my head. I had canceled one trip to Luleå already, this was the second attempt, and to cancel it would have been inconceivable, it would have taken a natural disaster. I had also canceled an appearance at the Literature Festival in Lillehammer, the children were going camping with their classmates and Linda couldn't take them on her own by train and bus, so I had e-mailed the organizers and canceled, the children had been so looking forward to going, it was the high point of this half of the year. But I'd become so well known in the meantime that the cancellation was not received without a murmur as before, no, Mom called to say it was in all the papers and had been an item on the TV news.

"A deal's a deal," I said. "And it's only one day. I'm back the day after tomorrow. This is my job after all. You have to respect that."

In Iceland I hardly dared phone home, I was sure she would moan and say how difficult everything was and how badly things were going. And she did, that is she didn't complain, what she said was that this was no good. This is no good, Karl Ove, she said. This is no good. It has to be, I said. Stick it out.

I returned home late in the afternoon the next day. The children came running over as soon as they heard the door open. I gave them the presents I'd bought at the airport, three cuddly toys. Linda stood at the end of the hall, looking at me. She seemed scared.

I unpacked and put the suitcase on the top shelf of the hall closet. Vanja came over with a ribbon in one hand and scissors in the other.

"Can you make me a necklace?" she said.

"For me too," Heidi said, close behind.

I cut off two long strips, tied one around the neck of Vanja's dog, the other around Heidi's neck.

"With a loop!" Vanja said.

I made a loop at the end for her hand, and did the same for Heidi. Then I went onto the balcony. The children seemed fine at any rate, I thought, things can't have gone that badly. Experience of an event wasn't the same as the event.

Linda opened the door.

"Can't you stay inside?" she said. "I've been on my own with them for so long."

"Coming," I said. "Just finishing a cigarette."

"Will you put them to bed?"

"Of course."

The trip had filled me with energy, so it was no effort brushing their teeth, finding their pajamas, a glass of water, reading a book, and resolving all the little squabbles. Besides, I was looking forward to the following day, when I would be at the cabin writing. It was mostly the thought of being completely alone and working that was appealing; when I did actually sit down and try to start, the resistance I felt was nearly insurmountable.

When at last they were in their beds and had reconciled themselves to the day being over, I went to Linda, who was on the balcony smoking in the darkness, wrapped up in the green parka I had once given her for her birthday.

She said nothing when I sat down. She gazed across the rooftops, one arm tucked into her body as though embracing herself or trying to hold herself in position, the other pointing straight ahead with a cigarette between her fingers curling smoke.

"How are you?" I said.

"Are you still going to the cabin tomorrow?" she asked.

I nodded.

"This is no good," she said. "Don't you understand? I can't manage."

"Listen," I said. "I have three weeks to finish the novel. That's very little time. I can't, by which I mean, I *cannot*, waste two more days."

"But I'm scared, Karl Ove," she said, looking at me. "I can't be with them on my own. I don't know what might happen. I can't do this. It's dangerous."

"It's just something inside you," I said. "Everything's fine. Everything's as it was before. The darkness is inside you. But we can't run our lives according to that. And I have to write."

"Don't go," she said. "Please. Don't go."

I didn't say anything. I could feel myself getting angry.

After a while, when I looked at her again, I saw tears running down her cheeks.

"Why are you crying?" I said.

"I'm so frightened," she said.

"There's nothing to be frightened of," I said.

"Sometimes when I've been on a high I've been completely out of control. I haven't known where the children were. Vanja was at a friend's house. Heidi at another friend's. John was asleep in bed. They could've been anywhere for all I knew. Do you understand?"

"That was a real high, yes. But everything was OK. Nothing happened. You dealt with it magnificently."

"And all the things I buy."

She sobbed.

"Come on, Linda," I said. "Pull yourself together now. We're adults. We can't stop working because we're sad. I'm going tomorrow, you're here with the children over the weekend, and then Ingrid and Sissel are here next week. You can let them take over. Two days. You can manage that. I have to finish. You'll manage fine with the children. I know you will."

"Not now though," Linda cried. "Not now."

"Yes, you will," I said. "You're strong, it'll be fine. I can deal with everything, so you can too. It's just that you've got it into your head that you can't. You give up. And that's no good."

She looked at me, despair in her eyes.

"You have to," I said. "Because I'm going anyway. And both your mother and mine are coming to help."

"Not tomorrow," she said. "I'll be on my own with them."

"That's true," I said. "And you'll manage fine. You just have to want to. And when I've finished we'll go to Corsica. It'll be great. But first of all I need to finish the novel."

I stubbed out my cigarette and went in. She stayed outside. I pulled out the big suitcase, packed my laptop, the keyboard, the headset, a pile of CDs, a handful of books, and some clothes. While I was doing that I heard the balcony door open and close. Linda stood in front of me.

"Don't leave me alone," she said.

I peered up at her and looked down again, at the zipper I was pulling on the side of the case, holding down the top with one knee.

"I have to," I said. "I have no choice."

She walked past me into the bedroom. I put the case in the hall and sat down on the sofa and zapped through the TV channels for an hour or so. When I went to bed she was still awake, lying perfectly still in bed and staring at the ceiling. I undressed and lay down beside her.

"You'll be fine," I said. "But I can't stay here. I've done it too often. And now I have the deadline hanging over me."

"OK," she said.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

"Sleep well."

"Sleep well."

I woke up once in the night, she was awake, staring at the ceiling, as she had been when I came to bed. I turned over and fell asleep again. The next time I woke it was morning. Linda was looking at me. When our gazes met her mouth opened and closed as if gasping for air. Her eyes were shiny with tears.

"You can't go," she said.

"No, I suppose I can't," I said, and sat up, put my feet into my jeans and pulled them on. "But the moment Ingrid enters the apartment I'm off. Just so that you know."

I closed the door hard behind me and went into the kitchen. Strangely enough, the children were still asleep. I got the newspapers from the front door, put the coffee machine on, and ate two slices of bread as I read the culture pages first, then the sports section. Outside it was raining, cold spring rain, it was pouring down. The children got up in the usual sequence, first John, then Heidi, last of all Vanja.

"Where's Mommy?" she said.

"She's having a rest today," I said. "She's not feeling herself."

"Me too," Vanja said. "I want to rest today too."

"Nonsense," I said. "She needs some peace and quiet. Why don't we watch some TV? OK?"

"OK," she said, and joined the other two. They sat on the sofa watching TV all morning, they did that every Saturday. I closed the door to the hall, where the bedroom was, and told them not to go in. They were used to that, but if I didn't keep my ears pricked they would sneak in. Sometimes I felt like the pastor in *Fanny and Alexander*, the evil man who keeps the children away from their mother.

At ten we heard the voice of the preacher who stood in the square below every Saturday morning with a microphone in his hand. I opened the balcony door and looked out. The bare Christmas tree lay beside the door, with yellow needles scattered beneath it. All the flowers hanging in boxes under the balustrade were withered, as were those in the pots by the wall. The table and chairs, which had been left outside for three successive winters, were now gray and rotting. Some empty plastic bags, two big and two small deck chairs leaning against the wall, faded. A plant pole had blown down during a winter storm and other bits of debris had collected there.

I decided to clean it up, throw everything away and then buy some new flowers and perhaps a table and a couple of chairs. Partly because it was needed and partly because I wanted to show Linda how easy it was to occupy the children and do something constructive at the same time. The flaw was in her, not the world.

"All right, on with your boots and rain jackets!" I said.

"Why?" Heidi asked.

"Where are we going?" Vanja asked.

Only little John was up for some adventure, and he ran into the hall to wait for me to come and help him.

"We're going to buy some flowers," I said.

"Boring," said Vanja.

"Maybe," I said. "But we're going anyway."

"Is Mommy coming?" Vanja asked.

I shook my head.

"Don't want to go," Heidi said.

"I want to see Mommy," Vanja said.

"Oh, come on, poppets. I'm in charge. And I say, Get your gear on."

"No one is in charge of anyone," Vanja said.

Where did they get that from?

I took the remote and switched off the TV. Their furious little faces glared at me.

"We'll get some Saturday sweets too," I said.

"OK," Vanja said.

"OK," Heidi said.

A quarter of an hour later we were walking down the pedestrian street in the rain, Vanja in her blue rain gear, Heidi in her purple outfit, John sitting in the stroller like a frog in his green coveralls.

Outside the flower shop there was a metal table with two chairs, I was reminded of "*wrought* iron," a term I was acquainted with only on a literary plane, a bit like "*pock*marked," which I didn't fully understand either. They were meant to have a nineteenth-century feel about them, and were probably a bit kitschy, but I liked them anyway and bought them. I also bought six green plants. I balanced the table on the handle of John's stroller, carried one chair and some bags in each hand, and nudged the stroller forward with first one hand, then the other, while the two girls trudged beside me in their rubber boots. When they realized we were heading for the front entrance of our block, they protested.

"What about the sweets?" Vanja shouted.

"But we can't go into a shop with all this!" I said.

"You should've thought about that before," she said.

"We'll drop it off and then go out again. OK?"

She nodded. I carried the table and the chairs onto the balcony while they waited in the hall, but when I returned they weren't there. Wet footprints led into the bedroom. I followed, they were standing around Linda as she lay looking up at them. She said something, but her voice didn't carry. She seemed barely able to talk.

Her face was expressionless.

"Now you come with me," I said. "Right now."

Vanja and Heidi did as I said, but John fell onto the bed. I grabbed his jacket by the collar, carried him into the hall dangling from my fist and put him down hard in front of the elevator. He laughed and looked up at me.

"Again, Daddy."

I smiled at him.

In the cheap furniture shop down from the florist's I found a white globe ceiling light that would fit the bill, and then we went to the mall in Triangeln, where there was a kiosk with a good selection of candy. After they had picked and mixed I bought them a chocolate bun in the café there while I ordered a coffee for me.

I had never seen Linda like that before. It was as if she were in a deep well and had to use all her strength to come to the surface, where the children were. There had been barely any life in her eyes.

Hmm.

I glanced across at Paparazzi, a little clothes shop which occasionally had nice stuff, Tiger and Boss suits, a Danish label whose name I never remembered, but I had bought some of their scarves and they had a good line of shirts.

"Could you sit here quietly for a moment?"

They nodded.

"I'm just going to that shop."

I got up and walked over. From the window I could see them, legs dangling from their chairs. I looked at the belts, chose a light brown one and flipped through a pile of black jeans, found my size, placed the belt and the jeans on the counter.

"You can try them on if you like," said the assistant, a woman in her fifties.

"I don't have time," I said. "My kids are over there."

When I nodded toward the café I saw John steaming toward me. I hurried out, caught him, and carried him into the shop in my arms.

"Stand here," I said. "I just have to pay."

I put my card in the reader, tapped in the code, she put the receipt in my bag with the trousers and the belt, and passed it to me.

"We have to do some shopping too," I told the girls when we came out.

"But I don't want to," Vanja said.

"I want to go home to Mommy," Heidi said.

"But we've got to, you know that. Come on. You can choose a movie each on the way."

There was a video and music shop at the other end of the mall. They ran over to the children's section as I flipped through some rows of CDs. I bought a Thåström collection, the first Järvinen record, and on a whim a Swedish band called the Radio Dept. and a Swede called Christian Kjellvander. The children came back with their movies, I paid, we crossed the street and went into Hemköp, I bought some pizzas for lunch, and bread, milk, and sandwich fillings for the following day. On our way home we walked – to great protests – via Thomas Tobak, where I bought some newspapers, the Danish *Politiken*, *Weekendavisen*, the Swedish *Expressen*, and *Aftonbladet*. Back home, they started arguing about which movie they would watch first. I promised them they could watch all three, and said it was fairest to start with Vanja's since she was the eldest. They accepted that. After inserting the DVD I went in to see Linda, who was lying on her side, her head almost completely covered by the duvet.

"How's it going?" I said.

She turned around slowly and looked up at me. Her gaze seemed to come from a great distance.

"Good," she whispered.

"Have you had anything to eat?"

"I . . .," she said, and then came something I didn't catch.

"What was that?"

"I had a bite while you were out," she said.

"So you don't want anything now?"

She gently shook her head.

"The kids . . .," she said.

"What about them?" I said. "They're fine. I bought some films. They're watching them now. And I bought a table and chairs and flowers for the balcony. And a ceiling lamp for the dining room."

She said nothing, just looked at me.

"I'm thinking of cleaning it up. Throwing out lots of the junk. Is that OK? I'll tell the children not to come in here, but they might anyway."

"That's fine," she said.

"OK," I said. "It's pizza for lunch. You'll get up, won't you?"

She nodded slowly.

"Good," I said, closed the door, took my shoes to the balcony door, put them on, and went out. I studied the Christmas tree for a while, wondering whether to carry it down as it was, but I doubted there would be any room in the trash container downstairs, and leaving it beside it wasn't an option either, that was bound to lead to a full investigation. I went back inside, picked up the saw and a black trash bag, cut it up into four parts, and put them in the bag, which I carried down to the cellar. Back on the balcony, I threw all the withered flowers into another trash bag, which I then carried down. When I returned, the sofa was unoccupied. I went straight to Linda's room. She was sitting up in bed, Vanja and Heidi were pulling at her, John was jumping up and down on the mattress, she looked dazed, as though she didn't know what to do, and utterly exhausted.

"What did I say?" I said.

"It's OK," Linda whispered.

"Come on now," I said. "Mommy needs some peace and quiet."

"Are you sick?" Heidi asked. "Do you have a temperature?"

"No, she isn't sick. Just a bit tired," I said. "Aren't you?"

"I can get up for a little now," she said.

"Yeees!" John said.

Linda sat on the edge of the bed fumbling around her.

"What are you looking for?"

"My sweater."

I leaned forward and flipped back the duvet.

"There it is," I said. "Come on, all of you, let's go to the living room. Mommy will be out in a minute."

They did as I said. I stopped in the doorway, looked at her. Her movements were so slow that it didn't seem as if she would be able to put on her sweater.

"You don't have to get up, you know," I said. "It'd be better if you rested."

She looked at me.

"But now you've told them you would," I said.

I went back to the balcony, stood in the gently falling rain surrounded by the sounds of the town seven floors down, picked up everything that was strewn around, dropped it in a garbage bag, and put the new plants in the old pots. When I walked in carrying the bag on my back, Linda was sitting on the sofa with John on her lap. She wasn't looking at the TV screen, I noticed, but staring straight ahead.

"I'll run down with this," I said. "Now it's looking all right out there anyway."

When I came back and sat down in the chair in the other living room to read the papers, I heard her get up, the sound of her footsteps, and the bathroom door opening. So that was where she was going.

A few minutes later it opened again.

I got up and stepped into the hall. She was standing still, looking at me. She was crying.

"I can't do it," she said.

"Go back to bed," I said.

"I'll have to," she said.

"Go on," I said.

I fitted the lamp, not without a fight because the screws were small and my fingers so big and clumsy, I heated the pizzas and made a salad, which we ate in front of the television, all together. Afterwards they were allowed to have some candy and Linda went to bed. I brushed their teeth, they put on their pajamas but didn't want to go to bed without saying goodnight to their mother, so they charged in and Linda sat up to give them a hug. Her eyes, which were focused on the wall, were vacant as she stroked their backs and squeezed them tight.

I sat up for a few hours after the children had gone to sleep, browsing through the papers, watching a bit of TV, smoking on the balcony. Linda was asleep when I entered the bedroom, or at least her eyes were closed, and I lay down gently beside her and fell asleep at once.

The next day was Mother's Day. It was still raining, a steady drizzle over the town's buildings and streets. I took the kids to the playground. The verdant grass shimmered in the gray spring light. The colors of their rain jackets were almost obscenely bright as they walked around the playground equipment. After half an hour I dragged them with me to a furniture shop, where I examined sofas, the one we had was so dirty and worn after five years of children that it could only be used if we covered it with rugs. Then we made our way to Åhléns. I said it was Mother's Day and they could each buy a present for Mommy.

"Could you gift wrap these?" I asked the assistant in Norwegian.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Could you wrap them up?" I said, using a Swedish expression.

"Of course," she said.

The children had chosen a big towel, a pair of socks on which was written "The Best Mommy in the World," and I'd found two CDs for her. John wanted her to have a plane. They watched the girl wrap up the presents, then they headed for the toy department. I paid and was about to take the bag when my phone rang. It was the real estate agent. She had been trying to get in touch with Linda for two days now, she said.

I told her Linda was ill, and that she would have to talk to me from now on. My face felt hot, I was sure she would ask about the stench and why on earth the ground by the wall was springy. But she didn't say anything, just that there had been quite a few people at the viewing, one of them had started criticizing everything he saw and ridiculed the price, no one had made an offer afterwards. There would be another viewing this afternoon and then next weekend. We hung up, I went to find the children. They were happy we were going to give presents to Linda. We had also bought some cinnamon buns and juice.

"Mommy, Mommy, we have some presents for you," they shouted as we came in.

"Hang on," I said. "First we have to *fika*."

Fika, that was the Swedish word for drinking coffee, an old slang word deriving from *kaffi*, with the syllables swapped around.

I put the buns in a basket, took out five plates, three glasses, two cups, mixed the juices, put the coffee on, Heidi and Vanja set the table.

"Now you can go and get her," I said.

Slowly she followed them through the hall. Perched on the edge of her chair by the wall. They stood in front of her, each holding a present. They handed them to her, one after the other. She slowly unwrapped them. The towel, the socks with "The Best Mommy in the World" on them. They watched her full of expectation.

"Thank you," she said.

Her face was blank. Not a trace of emotion was visible.

Oh no, oh no.

Oh no, oh no.

"Heidi chose the towel, and Vanja the socks, and John wanted to buy you a plane, but I think it was because he wanted to play with it himself," I said.

"And then we bought some buns and juice. Heidi and Vanja have set the table. Now let's eat. Come on, everyone."

I'd spoken in such a loud voice, and quickly so that there would be so much going on around them that they wouldn't notice something was wrong and think about it.

Linda was crying when we were alone in the bedroom afterwards.

"I can't do anything," she said.

"Well," I said. "That's now. It'll pass."

"I have an appointment with the doctor tomorrow," she said. "Can you come with me, do you think?"

"Of course I can," I said.

"It's awful," she whispered.

"It'll be all right," I said. "Everything'll be fine. You'll soon be better. The kids are fine."

She shook her head.

"Yes, they are. Their grandmothers are coming too."

"You have to write," she whispered.

"That'll sort itself out," I said.

After she made the radio program, Linda had been down for a long time. Then there had been a light patch, suddenly she didn't have a care in the world. It had been good for me as it meant her energy increased and I could have more time for writing. She did a lot of shopping, and if she didn't actually hide it from me, she wasn't very open about it either. Out of the blue there were two horrible large porcelain dogs in the children's room, for example, which she had bought for them, and the windowsill in our bedroom was full of similar ornaments. I knew her grandmother had been like that, presumably they gave her a sense of security. I didn't object to her buying them for herself, but I didn't much like her drawing the children into it. This wasn't her, usually she had good taste, now something else was coming out in her. Once she had seen a young girl begging in front of Hemköp and decided to do something, she called social services and told them about her. This may have been an act of kindness, but it wasn't something Linda would normally have done. If I said to her that she'd done a lot of shopping recently, she would snort, what she bought was so cheap, almost everything was from secondhand shops. One afternoon there was a ring at the door, and there stood an antique-shop owner, she had bought a lamp in the same mawkish, heavy, ancient-aunt style, and not because it was cheap, it wasn't, but because it was so beautiful. She spoke a lot to strangers, people sitting at the next table in a café, shop assistants, and at the nursery school, she was good friends with everyone. She beamed, chatted, and kept everything on a very superficial level. There was nothing wrong with any of this aside from the fact that I never had any real contact with her, and she never had her feet on the ground. When I said that, she looked at me and said she understood what I meant. Of course, she understood everything and everything was fine. She was happy, that was all there was to it, and everything worked, she was creative with the children, and they liked the mood she brought, things happened around her. I put my dislike of this to one side, after all there was nothing wrong with it, and what could I say, that she shouldn't buy such hideous things for the children? Oh, one afternoon the girls each had a used Barbie doll in their hands, and John had a soldier. Had *Linda* bought them?

I threw the dolls away after the children had gone to bed.

When the light period was over and she began to sink, she was full of shame for what she had done, even though there was nothing wrong with it, not in itself. It worried her a lot that her ups and downs had become worse. Once she attacked me, saying I should help her, every other man would. She wanted me to help her go back into therapy. Most of all she wanted us to go together. She had wanted that for many years. She knew I would rather die than go to couples therapy, and actually I meant it. If there were a choice between couples therapy and death, I would unhesitatingly choose death. I didn't want to subject myself to individual therapy either. But something about her desperate state made me call for an appointment with a psychologist the following day anyway. We had been there earlier that spring. Linda had started crying when she explained how she felt. The psychologist listened to what she said and then he asked me what I thought and I told him. He wasn't so much interested in Linda's mood swings as her life situation, the fact that she didn't have a job and wasn't earning money, and he asked her how this problem could be solved. He was right in what he said, but I didn't understand how him saying this would help her. Subsequently Linda went to see him on her own. Then she called a doctor for an appointment and had a session with her. At that time her mood was a great deal better. Now the situation was different, I had never seen her like this before, not even remotely. She had lost her grip and had fallen so far into her inner darkness that nothing around her had meaning any longer. That was how it seemed to me. She loved our children more than anything else, but not even for them could she come closer to the world.

After I had dropped off the children at the school the following morning, I made some breakfast for Linda and took it to her in the bedroom on a tray.

I had often done that the first year we were together, as nothing made her happier. But then I stopped, I didn't want to put in any more effort to make her happy.

She sat up in bed. She ran her hands across the duvet, back and forth, it was uncanny, they were like the movements of an animal. Then with one hand she lifted the bowl of muesli, with the other she dipped in the spoon and transported it to her mouth. She was so slow that I turned, opened the blinds, and glanced over at the hotel.

Something had broken inside her, I reflected.

She ate half the muesli, then she put down the bowl.

"Are you full?" I said.

She nodded.

"Let's go then, shall we?"

She nodded again.

"Do you want to have a shower first?"

"I can't," she said.

"OK," I said. "You don't have to."

I took her arm and helped her up. She stood looking at the open closet, where her clothes were. The same desperation appeared in her eyes now as when she had looked at the children.

I took a pair of blue jeans and a gray sweater and laid them on the bed by her.

"Is that all right?" I said.

She nodded.

"I'll be waiting in the hall," I said, and left.

We took the elevator and walked arm-in-arm to the taxis outside the Hilton. Her movements were heavy and slow, as if gravity were greater for her than for anyone else. And perhaps that was indeed how it was.

Something had broken inside her, I reflected again.

We got into a taxi, I said the name of the street and the number, the driver signaled to move into Föreningsgatan, which we followed as far as the Concert House, where we turned right, crossed the bridge over the canal, and came into the lower part of town, where we seldom went, we lived our lives between our apartment in Triangeln and the nursery school in Möllevangen.

Outside the door to the building I asked what the code was. She said it mechanically – she remembered all these things so much better than I did.

We took the elevator up, entered a large waiting room. Linda walked slowly to the reception window. I put a cup on the grill of the coffee machine, pressed the button for black, looked around while the cup filled.

Two people were sitting there, heads bowed, trying to occupy as little space as possible. One, a woman, perhaps fifty; the other, a man, perhaps thirty. The woman was pale, plump, dressed colorlessly. The man was also plump, had a sparse beard, greasy hair, and glasses. Beside them sat a woman talking loudly on her phone. A man came in, short hair, dressed formally, health sandals on his feet, presumably a doctor. He stopped in front of them as I took my cup for a sip, he said a name, the middle-aged woman got up, they shook hands, she followed him down the corridor.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" I asked Linda, who had joined me.

She shook her head.

"Shall we sit down?"

She nodded. Slowly she took the few steps to the sofa, looked at me, I nodded, she sat down. I sat down beside her and held her hand in mine. The woman was still on her phone. There was a radio in the background, I looked up, a speaker under the ceiling. Someone was talking and laughed, it was one of those morning talk shows that were aired everywhere people worked: hairdressing salons, taxis, garages. I thought it inappropriate, it must cut straight into Linda's heart, the life she was excluded from.

I gazed at her. She didn't appear to notice.

I remembered once being in a taxi on our way to a hospital in Stockholm, Linda was terrified the child she would soon be giving birth to was dead, and the radio was on in the taxi. Although I knew the light mood was an agony for her, in the zone of the ultimate horror, on the border between life and death, I didn't dare ask the driver to turn off the radio, I was afraid he would be offended.

I squeezed her hand. She was staring into the middle distance.

"Would you like some water?" I said.

She nodded.

I got up and filled a white plastic cup with water. The sides of the cup were so thin I could feel the water, cold and trembling.

She drank it in one swig.

Around the corner came a woman perhaps a few years younger than me. She stopped and looked at us, Linda got up, the woman smiled and held out a hand. Linda shook it.

"Hi," I said.

We shook hands, and then we walked down the corridor. She stopped outside a door, extended a hand and we went in. A chair on one side of the table, two on the other. A desk beneath the window, a few unclear, neutral lithographs on the walls.

"Please, sit down," she said.

We sat down.

"How are you, Linda?" she asked, sitting with her legs crossed, a notebook in one hand, a pen in the other. Her eyes were friendly, her impression a little impersonal, perhaps because of the pad and the pen.

Linda studied her.

"Not good," she said at length, in an almost inaudible whisper.

The doctor asked several more questions, which I could see were meant to clarify the situation. Each time Linda answered with very few words after a long pause.

"Do you hear voices?" the doctor said.

Long pause.

Voices? I thought. She was way off target. Linda didn't hear voices.

Perhaps there was a list she had to go through and cross off.

"No . . .," Linda said. "Only thoughts . . . I don't want to think them . . ."

"Do you think about suicide, Linda? About taking your own life?"

Linda stared at her. Then she burst into tears.

"But . . . but I . . . can't . . . I . . . can't do that," she said. "The children . . . I . . . can't do that."

"You think about it though?"

Linda nodded.

"Often?"

Linda nodded.

"I . . . I . . . think . . . about it . . . all the time . . . If only . . . if only I had . . . a disease and could die. That would make it . . . easier. For everyone."

Tears came into my eyes and I looked down. I took a slow, deep breath. I couldn't go there. Looked at the carpet, looked at the chair leg, looked at the wastepaper basket in the corner, swallowed.

"Does it feel as if everything is going more slowly?" the doctor said.

Linda nodded.

"You don't have the energy to do anything?"

"No!" Linda sobbed.

"Can you shower? Do you get out of bed at all?"

"No. Occasionally. The children . . . I can't manage . . ."

The doctor wrote something in her notebook. Then she looked at me.

"What's your perception of Linda now?" she said.

"I don't quite know. But I've never seen her as low as this," I said, looking at Linda. "This is completely new."

"You're obviously in a deep depression," the doctor said. "We'll have to try to turn that around. Naturally you'll be given antidepressants. But we don't want you too high when it lets go either, so we have to be careful. One possibility is going to the hospital, of course. Then you'll have peace and quiet around you. At home you have the children and normal life. There might be demands on you it would be best you didn't face. Have you thought about the possibility of going to the hospital?"

Linda stared at me, horror-stricken.

She shook her head.

"I think she'd be better off at home," I said.

"Linda?" the doctor said.

"I don't want to go to the hospital."

"I understand," the doctor said. "Of course you can be at home. It might be best for you. But then I want you to come here regularly. Is that all right?"

Linda nodded.

"It's important you try to get up as much as possible. Try to do what you normally do as much as you can. It doesn't have to be a lot. A little, so that you don't spend the whole day in bed. Could you manage to read to the children, for example?"

"I don't know," Linda said.

"Then you can sit with them and watch children's TV for half an hour. And it's important you get out for some light and air. You have to try to go for a little walk every day."

Linda nodded.

The doctor eyed her.

"I have such . . . terrible . . . fears," Linda said.

"You can take something for that. A tablet for when the fear comes. It works instantly. It might make you a bit sleepy. And we'll give you something for the depression. But I'd be a bit careful to begin with. We don't want you to pick up too quickly."

She got to her feet and sat down in front of the computer. I took Linda's hand and squeezed it.

"You can pick up the medication at any pharmacy," the doctor said, getting up. "And I've written down your next appointment. This Wednesday. Is that OK?"

Linda nodded and we stood up.

"I think it's best if you're not alone, Linda. Someone should always be with you."

"Of course," I said.

She accompanied us to the door, smiled, said goodbye, and gently closed the door.

"Do you think they can get a taxi for us at the reception?" I said.

Linda nodded.

"Then I'll ask."

Linda waited by the door while I spoke to the receptionist. Down on the street I smoked a cigarette.

"It's going to be fine," I said. "It's good you don't have to go to the hospital. So you're there for the children at least, even if you don't feel up to much."

"Yes," she said.

"We can go for a little walk every day. And you can watch TV with them."

"Yes," she said.

"Is that the taxi, I wonder?" I said, looking up the road, where a black Passat was coming. It stopped beside us, and we got in.

"It'll be fine," I said. "You'll soon be free of it."

I knew the worst for Linda, the great nightmare, was going back to the hospital. The thought of the children exacerbated it, having a mother who had been admitted to a psychiatric institution, the stigma of it. I thought the same, hospitalization would define it and seal it as an illness, make it something institutional when it was actually only Linda, a darkness that filled her, and Linda, she was sitting beside me now, the mommy of Vanja, Heidi, and John. It was better for them that she was at home, that this didn't become something alien and dangerous, but something they could see.

As we sat in the taxi, on our way home, I wasn't sure. This was my responsibility. She wasn't in a state to make any balanced decisions, nor did she want to. That was why she had looked at me. If I had nodded and said, you absolutely must go to the hospital, she would have gone.

The doctor had advised this course of action. We had said no, it is better we do it our way.

"When's Ingrid supposed to be coming?" I said.

"I don't know," Linda said softly. "This afternoon sometime."

"That's good," I said. "Then she's here for the children, and they have something else to think about. They must have people around them now. I think that's important."

"Yes," she said.

The taxi slid in by the front of the Hilton and came to a halt, I paid, we got out, I held her arm as we crossed the road and headed for the pharmacy.

Back at home, she went to bed, and was asleep in minutes. I walked from room to room for a while, had a cigarette on the balcony with the door open in case Ingrid called, sat down in my study and switched on my computer, when she was asleep she didn't need me, but when I saw the essay I had been doing in Voss, about Turner and Claude Lorrain, I realized this wasn't the right time and turned the computer off.

I went into the bedroom to see her. The whole weekend she must have been lying there longing for death while we were in town shopping.

There was a ring.

I hurried to the hall, lifted the intercom receiver.

"Hello," I said.

"Ingrid here."

"I'll open the door."

I waited until I heard the elevator stop, then opened the door.

"How is she?" she said, coming out of the elevator.

"Not so good," I said.

I motioned to her suitcase, which she let go of so that I could carry it in.

"We've just been to the doctor's. She said it was a deep depression. And suggested that she ought to go to the hospital. But Linda preferred to be at home. I'd prefer that too."

"Was she a good doctor?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Ayayayaya," she said with a sigh.

"Yes," I said.

"Is she asleep now?"

"She is."

"And the children? Are they worried?"

"No, I don't think so. They haven't noticed much. They're at school as usual."

"That's good," she said, leaning forward to take off her shoes. I was a few meters away from her and wanted the conversation to end. She was angry with me because of what I had written about her in the second novel, and now there was this, with her daughter. At the same time she was dependent on me – I lived here and was the father of her grandchildren – as I was on her and the help she could offer.

She looked at me.

"I thought you could sleep in the living room," I said, turning to carry her suitcase there. "Is that all right?"

"I can sleep wherever I can," she said. "Also with the children, if Sissel wants to sleep in the living room."

"She can sleep in my office," I said.

"Ye-es," she sighed. "But it's good to be here anyway. It's going to be great to see the children."

"They're looking forward to seeing you," I said.

As I was about to leave to pick up the children that afternoon, Ingrid joined me, she wanted to surprise them, I suppose. In the elevator we said nothing. In the street we stopped and looked at each other.

"We can't leave Linda on her own," I said.

"I was thinking the same," Ingrid said. "You go and I'll stay with her."

How was it possible, I thought, as I continued up Södra Förstadsgatan? How could I have forgotten about her? How could I have forgotten that she shouldn't be on her own?

It was just as bad that I had been out so much over the weekend. It was as though the gravity of the situation hadn't hit home. As though everything was normal and what was happening inside her as she lay in the room, excluded from the rest of the family, was only in parentheses.

"Did Grandma come?" Vanja asked. She had run over as soon as she had seen me behind the gate.

I nodded.

"She has, yes. She can't wait to see you."

I strolled across to the nursery school staff and exchanged a few words with them. Everything had gone well, they said, the children had been happy and content. I had thought of telling them Linda was depressed, so they would keep an eye on the children, in case something out of the ordinary occurred, but both Vanja and Heidi were standing next to me and I decided to wait until the following day.

We bought fruit, milk, and yogurt at Hemköp, they were impatient, wanting to get home now that Grandma was there. She would have presents with her, wouldn't she?

When she was with us she always cooked, did the shopping, and kept the kitchen clean. She stretched herself as thin as she could for us, of that there was no doubt. If I hadn't written the book everything in my relationship with her would have been good, but it lay there like a shadow, and we couldn't talk about it.

Strangely enough, it was John who was shy with her when we trooped in through the door. But it didn't last long. After they had unwrapped their presents they ran into Linda to show her. I followed, watching closely. Linda looked at them, sat up, and tried to smile. How nice, she said.

"Come on now, you little varmints," I said. "Mommy has to rest a little."

It wasn't difficult this time. I closed the bedroom door, and then the hall door. Ingrid was in the kitchen cooking.

"When would you like to eat?" she said.

"Anytime," I said. "Whatever suits you."

"Five?" she said.

"That's fine," I said.

I poured the coffee I'd made but forgotten into the thermos and was about to go onto the balcony when the phone rang.

It was an Oslo number and I took it.

It was Elisabeth from Oktober.

"Am I disturbing you?" she said.

"Not at all," I said.

"You're writing, I hope?" she said with a laugh. "But it's good I've managed to get ahold of you. We need to discuss the launch. Number five will be out soon."

"Yes," I said, closing the balcony door and sitting down.

"Have you thought about how you would like to do it?"

"Only in terms of as little as possible."

"In principle you can choose to do whatever you like. There is enormous interest, of course. But I have a suggestion. *Aftenposten* has been trying to get an interview with you for ages. What about doing that? And nothing else?"

"Sounds good," I said.

"I think it will be."

"There was one other thing. The Book Fair in Oslo this autumn. It would be great if you could come."

"When is it?"

"Mid-September."

"Should be possible," I said.

"Great! Now I know. We can sort out details later. Thank you, Karl Ove."

I put down the phone and poured myself some coffee. The last time Linda was ill it had lasted for more than a year.

I hadn't even thought about that.

What if it just carried on?

I stubbed out my cigarette and went back in. Checked that the children were fine before going into the bedroom. She wasn't asleep, she was lying in bed with her eyes open looking at the ceiling.

"How's it going?" I said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

She turned her head to me. Her eyes were as good as vacant.

"The kids are fine," I said. "They behaved as they usually do at school. And they're happy Ingrid's here. John was a bit shy at first, but he soon picked up."

She looked at me as though she wanted to say something.

"Do you have the energy to get up for dinner?" I said.

She gave a slight nod.

"And to watch *Bolibompa* with them afterwards?"

She nodded again.

"That's enough," I said. "If you can do that, it's great."

I stood up. I felt unable to withstand her gaze.

"I'll come and get you when it's ready then," I said. "OK?"

She nodded, and I headed for the living room, where I sat down with two of the morning papers I hadn't read yet.

The next day, when I returned home after taking the children to school, Ingrid was sitting on Linda's bed and talking with her. There was a tray of food between them. A bowl of muesli, an egg, fruit, a slice of bread, a glass of juice, a cup of coffee. Linda looked at Ingrid as she had looked at me the past few times, from somewhere deep inside herself. It was as though everything that was said disappeared in that gaze. Everything seemed to vanish into endless space, where it was so small it made no difference, yet it was all she had and therefore clung to. She looked and saw me, then she looked and saw Ingrid.

"They're off at school now," I said, stopping in the doorway.

Ingrid got up.

"Are you done?" she asked Linda. "If so, I'll take the tray with me."

I knew she didn't want to impose, and our bedroom was a boundary she would cross only with extreme reluctance, but I hadn't been at home and she had gone in because Linda was her daughter.

"Would you like to go for a little walk?" I said after Ingrid had left.

Linda nodded and slowly got to her feet.

"Shall I find you some clothes?"

She nodded again.

I laid out a pair of trousers and a sweater and went into the hall to wait. Passed her a jacket, put out some shoes, took her arm when she was ready, and walked beside her to the lift. She stared at the floor as the elevator descended, probably to avoid the mirror.

Outside, the sun was shining. The trees between the market square and the road were green, thick with leaves. People walked to and fro across the flagstone square, cars whizzed by. We ambled toward the park.

"I love you, Linda," I said.

She gave a start and looked at me.

"Things are terrible now, but they will be good. I promise you. You just have to hold on tight."

She continued to stare into the distance.

"I know it's absolutely unbearable, but you have to stick it out. Then you'll be fine."

We went over the road at the crosswalk, walked along the sidewalk, past the Mexican restaurant, the hairdresser's, the denim shop. The sky was blue, the grass in the park over the road green. People sat dotted around, some with bikes by them.

"You're a fantastic mother, Linda," I said. "I know you think you're letting the children down, but you aren't. You can't do anything about this. It's just something that happens inside you. I promise you."

She looked at me with the same semi-absent, semi-imploring gaze. She said nothing. We crossed the road, entered the park.

"Why don't we sit down for a bit over there?" I said, nodding toward the stone wall beneath the trees in the middle of the park.

"Everything's going to be fine," I said.

An elderly woman with a dog strolled past, behind her came a young woman on a bicycle, she had a backpack on her back and gave us a wide berth. From the playground came the voices of children. Three or four parents were with them, I saw.

We sat down on the wall.

Linda burst into tears. She sobbed aloud, her shoulders shook. I put my arm around her and rested my head against her neck.

"It's going to be fine. I love you. It's awful now, but it'll pass."

The people sitting on the lawn around us glanced over. A gust of wind blew, the leaves on the trees rustled. Linda sat bent over, crying with all her heart, something seemed to have crashed inside her.

I stroked her back.

What darkness are you in now, Linda?

What darkness are you in?

"I love you. You're a brilliant person. You're a wonderful mother. This is going to be fine. You have to hold on."

Gradually the tears subsided. I held out my arm, she slipped hers inside, and then we got up and walked down the gravel path, as slowly as an elderly couple. I was racked by restlessness.

Ingrid came into the hall as we took off our coats.

"Well done, Linda," she said. "It's so good that you managed the walk."

"Do you want to rest a little?" I said.

She nodded. I accompanied her into the bedroom.

"Would you like a radio? Then you'll have something to listen to while you lie here." She shook her head.

"I just want to sleep," she said.

She lay down, pulled the duvet half over her head, and closed her eyes.

"OK," I said. "I'll come back in half an hour to check you're all right."

I went for a smoke. I looked down as I passed the kitchen, where Ingrid was sitting with the newspaper open on the table in front of her, I didn't want a conversation. I knew she liked me, but I presumed what I had written overshadowed that, and I knew she probably drew a straight line between what Linda was going through and what I had done. I didn't know she was thinking that, but I had a strong suspicion she was.

We talked about what we would have for the evening meal. We talked about Linda, how we should try to get her out of bed as often as possible. We talked about the children and who should do what for them. But we didn't talk about her, we didn't talk about me, and we didn't talk about what I'd written about her.

Looking down, I slunk past, telling myself Linda was the priority for both of us now.

Sitting on the balcony, I caught the sound of the phone ringing. I rushed in and answered it. It was the real estate agent. She had just done another viewing. There had been seven people, but unfortunately there had been no offers. She would be doing another viewing this weekend. She said it would probably sell. I said that was good. She said there seemed to be something wrong with the shower, one of the people at the viewing had turned it on and they weren't able to turn it off, and then water had spurted out from the pipe. I said that was right, there was something wrong with the shower and the pipes. I would have to get someone to look at it. Good, she said, and we hung up.

I looked in on Linda. She was asleep, I came back out, went to my study, where I could be at peace. Switched on the computer. Flipped through the book of Claude Lorrain pictures I had bought in New York when I'd been there only a few weeks earlier. It felt like several years ago. I had fainted at a venue in Manhattan after doing a reading. I hadn't eaten all day, was so nervous, and I had drunk a beer with my American publisher, and when we were standing outside and she introduced me to an elderly Egyptian writer, who was holding court, suddenly I couldn't stand upright but had to go to the steps and sit down. I held my head in my hands and felt the blackness gathering inside me and rising, a wave of inescapable numbing weariness and giddiness. The elderly Egyptian, who was a great poet and justifiably held everyone's attention, came over to me, friendly all of a sudden, put his arm around my shoulders and asked if I was all right. I said I was, and he went back to his circle. Now I couldn't even sit, so I stood up and staggered over to the publisher and said I had to go home, at once, and she said she would find a taxi. I couldn't even wait, so I lay down on the sidewalk and closed my eyes and was gone. I came to again when she placed her hand on my shoulder and I realized I couldn't have been out for more than one or maybe two minutes. But people were staring at me where I lay. I managed to struggle to my feet, she opened the door of the waiting taxi, gave the address to the driver, and then off we drove through this immense town.

I had seen a picture by Claude Lorrain in New York, and I was writing about it now. Strangely enough, I wrote with ease and focus, everything else vanished until, after lifting my head and looking at the blinds covering the window in front of me, shimmering with spring light, I suddenly thought about Linda. I switched off the computer, got up, and poked my head around the door.

She was sitting up in bed. She was scratching at the duvet and looked up at me. Leaning forward and scratching at the bedcover. Then she seemed to be brushing something away. All this frightened me, her movements were so unfamiliar.

"I have such fears, Karl Ove," she said. "I'm so afraid."

"Can't you take one of the tablets you were given?"

"Yes, but the effect doesn't last very long. And then it just gets worse."

"I can go and get one. What were they called again?"

She told me. I went into the kitchen, one shelf was completely taken over by her medication, I found the box she wanted, poured a glass of water, and carried them in to her.

She took a tablet and leaned back.

I lay beside her.

We didn't say anything. I held her hand. I thought about what I had written, and the feelings Lorrain's pictures evoked in me filled me with a kind of peace, which I then immediately repressed, what sort of monster was I to think about that while she was lying beside me wanting to die?

"Would you like anything to eat? Fruit or something?"

She didn't answer. I looked at her.

"Grapes?" I said.

She nodded, I got up, went into the kitchen, which fortunately was unoccupied, put a small bunch into a bowl, and took it back to her.

"Still no radio?" I said, putting the bowl down beside her.

"I'm not up to listening to anything."

"Not even music?"

"No."

She pulled the duvet over her and turned her head to the wall.

On our way home from school Vanja wanted to know if Mommy was still sleeping.

"Yes, she is. She's not feeling well, you know. But it'll soon pass."

"It'll never pass," Vanja said. "She's always sick."

"No, she isn't," I said. "But right now she is. So she needs her rest."

"I do too," Vanja said. "I want to rest with her."

"I'm sure you could," I said. "If you keep still and stay quiet, that would be fine."

"Me too," Heidi said.

"That's OK," I said. "But just one at a time. Shall we say that?"

But this didn't go too well. Vanja started nagging Linda to get up, and Heidi was no better.

Vanja refused to leave the room and it ended with me having to carry her out. I tried to turn it into a joke, some fun, but she was very angry.

I sat her down in her room. She wanted to run back and tried to dodge past me.

"Vanja," I said. "It's true that Mommy's ill. She needs some peace and quiet. It'll soon be over. I promise you."

"It won't," she said, and looked down at the floor.

"Come on. Let's go and watch a film."

"I don't want to."

"What do you want to do then?"

"I want to see Mommy."

"I understand. And you will be able to. But not right now."

She sat down and started moving all her toy figures around as though I didn't exist. I watched her for a while, then left.

The next day we went back to the doctor. She asked more or less the same questions she had on the previous occasion. Linda was equally monosyllabic.

"What we have to do is reverse the depression," she said after a while. "One way to do that is through ECT, electroconvulsive therapy. I know it sounds terrible, but the fact is it works. In a sense it applies a brake to the process and gives the brain a kind of new start. Is that perhaps something you could imagine trying? It's thoroughly safe, you know. And it will stop this."

Linda turned to me when the doctor said this, and her expression was the same as when she had looked at me the first time the doctor had suggested going to the hospital.

Her mouth opened and closed as though she were gasping for air, and her eyes streamed with tears.

"No," she said. "No."

"I don't think so," I said. "I think we'll just have to ride this one out."

"I understand," the doctor said, looking at Linda. "The most important thing is you have to get out of bed for a while every day. You've been walking, so that's good. If you have the strength it would be good if you could do some of what you normally do."

"I don't do anything," Linda whispered.

"I beg your pardon."

"I don't do anything."

"It's not so easy to see when you're depressed," she said. "It's like you don't do anything and so you're not worth anything. But I imagine there's something you like doing more than anything else, isn't there?"

Linda shook her head.

"You don't have any hobbies, something you particularly like doing?" Linda shook her head again.

"You like films," I said. "And reading."

"They're too much for me," she said.

"Well," the doctor said. "I wasn't thinking about big things. If you can put on the dishwasher, even if it's only for a couple of glasses, that's good."

Linda nodded.

"How's it going with your children? Do you spend any time with them?"

Linda shook her head.

"Yes, you do," I said. "You've watched TV with them."

"That's good, Linda. Perhaps you should try to read to them as well. Do you think you could manage that?"

"Yes."

She read to them that afternoon, one after the other, as she didn't have the energy to deal with all three of them at once, and they would only have vied for her attention. First she read for John while Heidi was in the hall waiting her turn, then Heidi, and last of all Vanja. After that she slept. A pattern was beginning to crystallize in these new days of hers: while I took the children to school, she had breakfast in bed, then she got dressed and went for a short walk with either Ingrid or me, slept, got up and had lunch, started the dishwasher, slept, read to the children when they came home, slept, got up and had her evening meal, watched TV with the children, slept. Every so often I wrote a little, but not much, just a few lines every day. Elisabeth called, she had an agreement with *Aftenposten*, they would send a journalist next week.

"The journalist's name is Siri Økland," Elisabeth said.

"But she works for *Bergens Tidende*. Wasn't it supposed to be someone from *Aftenposten*?"

"Yes, it was, but they work together. The big regional papers. They often print the same articles."

"OK," I said.

I had actually decided I would never do any more interviews for *Bergens Tidende* because of the way they had behaved toward me when the first volume came out and because of the way they had treated me and my books since. Everything they had written had a negative slant; sometimes it was sarcastic to the point of mudslinging, sometimes morally indignant. I hadn't read the paper myself, but both Mom and Yngve lived in the area *BT* covered, so I had an impression of the tone they used. When I was in Odda I had received an inquiry via the event organizers regarding an interview for *BT*, and the journalist had assured them it would be done with propriety, it wouldn't be slanted in the way things had been so far. This was so outrageous that my jaw dropped when I read it. First of all they pissed on me, then they asked if they could have an interview, and promised they wouldn't piss on me again.

But I really didn't want to create problems for anyone. I trusted Siri Økland and, besides, the deal was already agreed. Publishing an interview she had conducted couldn't be damaging.

Linda wasn't getting any better. Whenever I was alone with her I told her the same, I said I loved her, I knew she was having a terrible time, but it would pass and everything would be fine. It was as though everything I said disappeared inside her, it just dissolved in the darkness and was gone. She never answered, nor did she look at me as I spoke. We walked to the little park, sat there for a while, walked back. I realized this was probably going to be long term, and the next time we went to the doctor I asked for a sick note so that we could cancel the trip to Corsica and get our money reimbursed. She read to the children every afternoon and was worn out afterwards, but I was so happy she could do it, this was like a lifeline, a vital minimum for the children, which meant they weren't marked by what was happening to her. That is to say, this was the case for Heidi and John, they accepted everything as it was, while Vanja, on the other hand, was filled with a mass of conflicting emotions she didn't know how to handle. One evening she had a furious outburst. Linda was sitting in a chair in the living room and Vanja started hitting her as she shouted.

"You're ugly! You're ugly! You're ugly!" she yelled.

I lifted her off Linda, she kicked and wriggled and tried to hit me. I had to sit down with her and hold her tight for several minutes before she quieted down and was still. Afterwards, sitting alone in my study while everyone was asleep, I cried. I don't know why, I just cried. At school they said everything was fine, they couldn't see any difference in their behavior. Vanja was the oldest child there now and had come into her own. She also had a new best friend, they would start in the same class in the autumn, we had chosen this school for precisely this reason, and they talked forever on the phone in the afternoons. And she had a strong attachment to her grandmother.

Children do what is necessary for them, they take what they need, compensate and counterbalance, all without realizing this is what they are doing.

One morning Linda came into the kitchen. She was trembling and in tears. She held a credit card in her hand.

"I found this on the floor," she said. "It was on the floor."

She cried as she said it.

"You don't keep things clean," she said. "Everywhere there's chaos."

"It's my credit card," Ingrid said. "It must've fallen out of my pocket."

"It was on the floor," Linda said in a trembling voice. "You're so messy."

She turned and slowly shuffled back to her bedroom. I followed her.

"It doesn't mean anything," I said. "I appreciate that you think everything's in chaos. But it isn't. Everything's under control. Completely. Don't give it another thought."

She was shaking. I wondered if it was a side effect of all the medication she was taking.

"You'd better get some sleep," I said. "But the credit card doesn't mean a thing. It's not what you think. Everything's under control."

"No, it isn't," she said, lying down.

"Yes, it is," I said. "It is. Actually everything's fine. We have three great children. They're beginning to grow up. They're doing very well. You've had a book accepted. You're a writer. We have money. We could buy a house if we wanted. You see, everything's fine. Everything is actually good."

She looked at me as I said that. Her eyes were large. It was as though she knew nothing of what I had told her. As though it were new to her.

Then she closed her eyes, I got up and said I would be back soon. I went into the kitchen, tipped some coffee into the filter, and switched on the machine.

That evening Ingrid asked me if I had the second novel in audiobook format. I nodded. She asked if she could borrow it. That was the last thing I wanted. Why would she want to go through it? What else could I do but find her a copy and hand it over.

She always turned in early, about the same time as the kids, closed the door, and was on her own until the next morning, when she got up and made pancakes or baked bread for the children. I usually watched TV for an hour after everybody had gone to bed unless I was in my study leafing through one of the art books. This evening I could hear she hadn't fallen asleep as she usually did. When I turned in, she was still awake. The next morning she said she hadn't slept a wink all night. She had been listening to the novel I had written. She said I had sent it to her just before it was about to go to press, she hadn't had time to read it and hadn't understood the Norwegian. That was why she had told me what I'd written about her was fine. She had trusted me.

As she said this she was standing in front of the stove making pancakes. I stood with a cup in my hand, on my way out to smoke a cigarette. I was afraid of her. But I couldn't go, nor could I defend myself, I had to stand there and listen and concede she was right. And she was too. It was her prerogative. She was furious with me. But in the bedroom we had Linda, whom she loved and who she feared would die, in the living room we had her grandchildren, whom she loved and for whom she would do anything, even sacrifice her own life, of that I was sure. Linda was my wife, her grandchildren were my children. She was distraught, and so was I. I couldn't make excuses for myself. I couldn't defend myself, all the right was on her side. The only argument I had was that she had been given the book to read in advance, and she had approved it, but now that was invalid because it was true what she said, she'd only had a few days because the manuscript had been sent to the wrong address.

That was all she said, but I knew her, she was furious, sad, and afraid.

Beneath everything lay the unspoken reproach that it was because of what I had written that Linda had lost her bearings and was in bed. I felt it all the time. It came from both me and her. She was lying in there, and I was keeping everyone away from her. I was keeping the children away from her, and I was keeping Ingrid away from her. It was a terrible feeling, filled with gloom, because it was my fault she had ended up there, in the bedroom, in bed. I hadn't taken care of her. Had I done so, this wouldn't have happened. But I had done the opposite. I had made sure the pressure on her had been unbearable. What she was struggling with was her identity, who she was. Once before, when the pressure in her life had been immense, everything had unraveled, and she had fled into a kind of fantasy version of herself and then plummeted into the darkness. There was no connection between the person she was and the person she wanted to be or thought she was. The difference between the Linda I first set eyes on and the Linda I met two years later was enormous. She had caught up with herself, I had thought. She was whole or "wholer." Having children was something she could feel at ease with, what had to be done and who she had to be were obvious, there was no choice, that was how it was and that was how she was. Then I had written that life was an illusion, a notion, inauthentic. And not only that, I had talked at length about life to everyone. Her life, our children, our problems. And not only that, this particular book exploded in the public arena and was on everyone's lips. It hit her where she was most vulnerable, in the question of her identity, who she was. I held up a mirror, and not only did she see herself there, but so did everyone else.

After the books had come out her therapist had called her once from Stockholm, I answered the phone, her voice was ice-cold as she asked to speak to Linda. She knew Linda inside out, she knew exactly what she was struggling with and understood how dangerous my experiment was.

Every time I walked through the hall into the bedroom I had the same feeling, that I had damaged her and now she was hiding. We had lived together for almost ten years, and my premise was that we were like everyone else and our conflicts were like everyone else's and Linda had to manage as everyone else did. I had seen her outbursts, I had seen her attempts to control me, but I hadn't seen her fear of losing everything, the feeling that she was standing on the edge of a precipice. I had seen buckets and cloths, washing machines and bags of diapers. I had seen strollers and children's clothes, baths and cots. I had seen how close Linda was to the children, she gave them everything they needed, but I hadn't seen what it had cost her. Now I could see, for she had lost her grip and was sinking. She was sinking deeper and deeper, and she was drawing further and further away. Everyday life was beyond her reach now. She could see it from the depths of where she was, and if she exerted herself to the maximum she could stretch out a hand and touch it, be there for a few minutes, have a child on her lap, no more though, nothing of what a life consists of, and which is so easy, so unbelievably easy, giving them some fruit, telling a joke, asking them about something that interests them, dressing them, going with them to the park. All this is easy, and therefore nothing we appreciate while it is happening; it is only later – when the children are bigger – that it can hit us, what we did when they were two or four, both they and we are different people now, and the people we were then are lost forever.

This is how it is. Life is easy, life is a game, until the bottom falls out, and you fall, you are in the hospital and you plunge into the darkness, then it is suddenly impossible, then it is suddenly unattainable. Linda could see this but was unable to do anything about it, her thoughts, even when her children were jumping around in there, were about her not being worthy of life, we would be better off without her, she was destroying everything, and she continually fantasized about dying, which was so radically removed from us, who wanted to live, this was unbearable.

Ingrid accompanied Linda on walks to the park, I saw them, the daughter with her head bowed, her plodding movements, her empty eyes, the mother with her arm entwined in hers, encouraging, chatting, positive. I accompanied Linda on walks to the park, I told her I loved her, she was having a terrible time now, but it would pass, and everything I said disappeared inside her, there was no resistance, her inner life was like an abyss and the darkness so dense that nothing could lighten it. Nothing. Not even those she loved most – Vanja, Heidi, and John – could lighten the darkness.

My mother came, we had arranged a long time ago that the two grand mothers would be at home and help while I sat in the cabin writing the end of the novel. That was no longer relevant, but we still needed them, for now we were in dire need.

Mom and Ingrid had always got on well together, as different as they were, and they did so now too, as the tensions at home increased, because almost everything that lay between us was unsaid and unprocessed, bordering on unconscious, traces were evident in our body language and our voices, impossible to pinpoint yet hugely present.

In the evenings, when everyone was asleep, I sat up talking to Mom. It felt like betrayal. It shouldn't have felt like betrayal because I was being torn to shreds and needed someone to talk to, but it still felt like betrayal because I was guilty of what I was being torn to shreds over, and it was not me who was suffering but Linda, so I had no right to the relief I gained from talking to someone who was unconditionally on my side.

Mom said Linda was in a much worse state than she had imagined. She sat on the sofa knitting while I sat in the chair with my feet on the table and a cup of coffee in my hand. She didn't say this was what she had feared when Linda and I had got together, but I knew it was the case and thought it strange I had never been afraid of this outcome. I had been sure everything would be fine. My philosophy had been to follow your heart. Not your mind, not rationality, not money, but your heart. My first thought when we got together had been that I wanted to have children with her. Not one, not two, but three. And we had them. When I wrote about us, I had also followed my heart. It was cold then.

I called the travel agent and canceled the trip to Corsica. The plan had been that we would be there for a week at first, just Linda, Vanja, Heidi, John, and I, then Yngve and his kids, and Asbjørn and his family would join us there the following week. The departure date was the day after the deadline for the novel, the trip was supposed to be the reward for everything. Now I could forget the deadline, the novel had been set aside, it meant nothing. The real estate agent called regularly, she was doing viewings during the week and on weekends, she put ads in the papers and on the Net, people came, saw, and no one wanted it. I went for a stroll in the park with Linda, she put plates in the dishwasher, slept, watched TV with the children, read to them. Sometimes the fear in her grew so strong that she turned white and was incapable of moving, then she took an extra tablet and entered a kind of twilight state where she could sleep. Oh, Linda, Linda. Enough was happening around the children, with two grandmothers there, by and large they were happy, they had already got used to their mommy being ill. I didn't know what to do. Occasionally my anger spilled over, it rose inside me, couldn't she pull herself together, get up, and take hold of her life? I love you, it's terrible now, but it'll be fine. We went for a walk, she put on the dishwasher, had lunch with us, watched TV with the children, read to them. I knew that all her thoughts were black. I knew she wanted to die, but she couldn't.

Evening meal in the kitchen. Ingrid, Sissel, Vanja, Heidi, John, and I. Linda in the bedroom. Without looking at me, Ingrid said:

"Have you considered the consequences of writing about your children?"

"Yes," I said.

"How it will be for them when they grow up? Everyone knowing who they are? Have you taken that into account? That they're vulnerable?"

This is her daughter, I thought. Let her be angry at me.

"I don't think there's any danger," I said. "I don't think that any of what I've written is dangerous."

It sounded hollow, she looked at me, we continued to eat, the children slipped down from their chairs, they hadn't noticed anything unusual, there hadn't been any raised voices.

The next day was a Saturday, the sun was shining and we were all going to the park, we had packed a picnic basket and taken a large blanket, it was the first time Linda had been out with the children since I came home from Iceland. Ingrid and Sissel and the children were waiting for us outside, I didn't know that, I was walking arm-in-arm with Linda through the corridors in the cellar and emerged at the back of the building, which was closer to the park. I assumed they were already there.

After waiting for a quarter of an hour, Linda's mother had lost her temper and cursed me, Mom told me later that night, when everyone was in bed. Mom was also angry, it was her son Ingrid had cursed, but I said it didn't matter, and I understood Ingrid. She had every right to be furious with me. But she also liked me, and that was perhaps harder to understand.

All this was kept from Linda. When she came all the tensions between us ceased, then we concentrated on her. Of course I said nothing about it when we were alone, even if that was exactly the kind of thing we discussed normally, other people, the relations between them. Linda saw other people – that was a gift she had. Now there was nothing left of it in her. She rarely spoke, the little strength she had she devoted to the children. Nor did I tell her that Book 5 was due to come out soon. I was expecting a storm because I had written about a rape allegation I'd been subjected to once, and bearing in mind all the other trivialities I had written that had ended up as front-page stories I considered it inconceivable that this would not suffer a similar fate.

I had also received some furious e-mails from people I'd written about and whom I had accordingly made anonymous. But the woman who said I had raped her, she existed, she lived in Bergen, and it wouldn't have surprised me if someone had located her and interviewed her, although neither her name nor anything else was mentioned that might identify her.

For this reason, the day I was to be interviewed by Siri Økland I said nothing about it to Linda, who was in bed after going out for a walk with her mother, this time all the way to Pildamm Park, only that I had an interview and it would take an hour, maximum two. She said OK, and then I left for the Art Exhibition Hall, where I had done almost all the interviews for the first four books. Siri Økland was waiting there with a photographer. The interview went well, although I was constantly on the defensive, constantly entrenched, it was obvious that what I had done was wrong. Afterwards there were photos outside, in the street, and then I came home. Ingrid was out picking up the children, Linda was asleep, Mom was in the living room reading. She looked up when I entered.

"So how's it going here?" I said.

"Well, it's been good," she said. "Linda got up while you were out. She joined us in the kitchen. She talked for an hour."

"Really?"

"Yes. She cried and talked about how she felt."

"What did she say?"

"She said she couldn't do anything and she wasn't doing anything. She said she was utterly useless. She couldn't handle the children on her own, she didn't have a job, and it didn't look like she was going to get one either. She was desperate."

"But she talked," I said.

"Yes, she talked."

One morning Linda had made her bed and was sitting on the duvet with her back to the wall when I went in, and although the look she sent me was still desperate, she appeared to be different and stronger than the day before. I couldn't put my finger on what it was. Perhaps it was that not everything just vanished inside her, not everything just streamed inward, but that something also came out. She'd made her bed, she was sitting on the duvet, and she met my gaze.

"I tried to read a little," she said.

"Oh yes?" I said.

"Can't do it."

"That doesn't matter," I said. "It's good you're up. Feel like going for a walk?"

She nodded. We ambled through the small park, crossed the road, followed the wooden fence along the old stadium into Pildamm Park, turned, and strolled back.

Instead of lying down and sleeping as soon as we arrived, she asked me to put a radio in the bedroom. I did, found a channel with classical music, closed the door behind me, and went into the study. Not long afterwards the phone rang. It was Yngve. He said *Bergens Tidende* had a big spread about Book 5. Well, several spreads. Including an article about the rape allegation.

"They close the article by saying *BT* has her name," Yngve said.

"What the hell do they mean by that? Is it a threat?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Anyway, the book hasn't come out yet," I said. "There's a release date."

"Doesn't look like they've taken any notice of that," Yngve said. "And it's the same negative slant."

"I'll give the publisher a call. See you."

I called Elisabeth. She said that what had happened was that they had given a copy of the manuscript to Siri Økland, as she would be interviewing me. The condition had been that the manuscript was only to be used for that purpose. They had promised and then proceeded to break their promise. Elisabeth had spoken to Siri, she was very sorry, she said she had nothing to do with it, they'd ordered her to hand over the manuscript. Elisabeth was livid. It wasn't unusual for a newspaper not to stick to the release date, *Verdens Gang* never did for example, and as a result they didn't receive the books to be reviewed in advance. But this time *BT* had been given the manuscript because they were the only ones to have a prepublication interview, and they had made an agreement and given their promise. Which they broke without a second thought. Why? They probably reckoned they had the right to treat me as they liked because in their eyes I had done something deeply immoral.

"But they haven't printed the interview yet?" I said.

"No, they will on the launch day."

"I'll pull it in that case. What do you think?"

"I think we should. I'll call them at once."

I hung up, strode to the balcony and took out a cigarette, then went back to the bedroom, where Linda was lying with her eyes closed. She opened them when I entered.

"How did it go with the radio?"

"I can't take anything in. Not even music."

She cried.

I lay down beside her.

"You're better already, Linda. You're closer now than you were only a few days ago. It's a question of letting go. I'm sure of it."

"I'm so afraid," she said.

"I know," I said. "But everything's fine. Everything's fine."

She lay back and pressed her head against the mattress.

Her movements were quicker; there was something new about her now.

I picked up the children from school, walked through Triangeln Mall and out the back, where the playground was only a block away. Vanja and Heidi stopped by the railing alongside the parking lot, which they wanted to climb, I took a deep breath and said yes, John sat with his head back staring up at the sky, where the white vapor trails from two planes formed a cross.

My phone rang. It was Elisabeth.

"I've spoken to them several times today," she said. "The last time the editor in chief called. They're going to publish the interview anyway."

"But I want to pull it!"

"That makes no difference. They're invoking the right to freedom of expression."

"What! Are they crazy?"

"Dad, Dad, look," Heidi shouted. She leaned back, held on with only one hand, and theatrically threw the other out to the side. I smiled and gave her a thumbs-up.

"Freedom of expression? They've committed a breach of contract. They've ignored the release date. And then they want to publish on the basis of freedom of expression?"

"Yes, that's basically it. They've got lawyers and the whole box of tricks. They're going to publish anyway. We can't do anything."

"I'm never going to do another interview with that newspaper for the rest of my life. I never want anything to do with them."

"I absolutely agree," Elisabeth said. "And I doubt they'll get any interviews with other Oktober authors for a while either."

"Anyway, thank you," I said.

"We'll talk later. The reviews will be in soon. But you never read them anyway, do you."

"Geir will brief me, I imagine. All right, bye."

"OK, bye."

I hung up and put the phone in my pocket.

"Come on," I said, and started to walk. Stopped, turned. "Come on now!"

They slowly balanced their way toward me.

What two-faced bastards. Oh, how I hated it. Oh, the righteous indignation. Oh, fucking hell. Freedom of speech my ass.

May they burn in hell.

At the playground Vanja and Heidi headed straight for the tree they called the "climbing tree." John wanted to go on the swing, I pushed him, occasionally grabbing him by the feet when he came back, then he laughed, and he laughed even more when I raised him by the feet and swung him back as hard as I could. Now it was out, I thought, now everyone knew. Tomorrow the papers would be full of it. KNAUSGAARD SUSPECTED OF RAPE. I had told the events of those days only to those closest to me. I had been so frightened it would be in the papers. It never had been, but now I had written about it, they could just help themselves. But if I hadn't, some people would have known that I was going easy on myself, I was holding back on one of the most consequential incidents of my life, and by writing about myself I had given everyone else the right to write what they liked about my life. It would have come out sooner or later.

I lifted John from the swing and put him in the sand. He didn't want to play on his own, and walked beside me to the bench on the other side of the pit. I lifted him up and sat him on my lap, wrapped my arms around him, and rested my head on his neck.

"My little Johnny boy," I said.

"Don't, Daddy," he said.

"OK," I said, straightening up. "Can you see the girls?"

He pointed. They were sitting among the leaves.

What were they doing?

Talking perhaps. I could dimly hear Heidi's characteristic laugh and Vanja's put-on voice.

A quarter of an hour later we made for home. Linda was in bed when we arrived, but after the children had taken off their shoes and run into the bedroom she got up.

"Mommy, can you read to me?" Vanja said.

She nodded, took a book from the pile on the desk, sat down, and the three children were a jumble of limbs around her.

The next morning I was sure there would be journalists outside. *Bergens Tidende* had written about the rape allegation, it was out there, and even though no journalist had, so far, been here to see me – the nearest they had come was to take photos of the apartment and interview people in the vicinity – they had contacted everyone I knew and I assumed it had to be only a question of time before they came here. And now there was a story that would lure them out.

I dressed the children, put John in the stroller, checked on Linda, who was dozing, said we were off, leaned over and kissed her on the brow, rushed back to the children, opened the elevator door, pushed the stroller in, and pressed the cellar button. If there were journalists outside I would meet them with the children, and there was a rear entrance to the building they wouldn't know about, I thought, pushed the stroller along the corridors, dragged it backward up the steps, opened the door, went out, followed Föreningsgatan, and took the backstreets up to the nursery school.

On the way home I stopped before the market square and scrutinized the area around the entrance. No one resembling a journalist there. I felt a little stupid. I wasn't so important that they would keep a watch on the apartment building where I lived.

I had become paranoid, I mused, walked over to the fruit stall and bought a couple of kilos of grapes and some apples, took the elevator up, sliced an apple for Linda, put it in a bowl with some grapes, and took them in to her. She sat up.

"How's it all going?" she said.

Oh, how happy that question made me.

"Fine," I said. "Eat now and rest a bit, then let's go out for a walk, shall we?"

"OK."

"I'll just give Geir a call first."

"Angell or Gulliksen?"

"Angell," I said, taking the phone with me onto the balcony and calling him.

"Do you know what's in *Dagbladet* today?" he said.

"No," I said. "Damned if I want to know either."

"It says you can get ten years in jail."

"Oh."

"Yes, you can say that again. First *Aftenposten*'s reviewer wants to have you imprisoned and now *Dagbladet*."

"Right now I wouldn't mind," I said. "Being in prison, I mean."

"I thought you already were."

"Ha ha."

"How's it going down there actually?"

"In fact, better. Linda's a bit better. Not much, but the little bit suggests it's on the turn."

"Poor Linda," Geir said.

"Yes," I said. "She's been through hell."

I hung up. When I returned to the bedroom Linda was in the shower. I lay down on the bed. She came in, took some clothes from the cupboard, and dressed. We walked in the park, it was raining, we sat on the stone wall beneath the dripping trees without saying anything, and then we headed for home and had lunch. She filled the dishwasher, turned in, and lay listening to music, I wrote a few lines about Olav Duun. After half an hour I got up and went in to see Linda.

"Would you like some water or anything?" I said.

She turned her head slowly and looked at me.

"No, thank you," she said.

"What's the music?"

"I don't know."

There was a clatter in the kitchen.

"It's good you're listening to music," I said. "A few days ago you weren't up to it. You're making progress. Slowly but . . ."

I smiled. She looked at me.

"It's all going to be fine," I said.

She looked at me.

"I love you," I said.

She looked at me. Everything I said and did disappeared into that look.

She turned her head back and stared at the ceiling.

"I'll go and do a bit more writing," I said. "Back soon."

My mother traveled home, Ingrid traveled home, it was summer. Linda got up several times a day, read books, managed to do more with the children, and almost imperceptibly slipped back into a life she shared with us, and even if there was still something dejected and gloomy about her, there was a big difference, she was no longer outside the family, for which she had a few moments at the end of the day, but inside it. I went online and searched for a holiday home in Österlen. We had to get out of the apartment, we wouldn't manage a long journey though, so Österlen was perfect, it was only an hour away by car.

I found a vacancy and phoned the owner of the house, transferred some money into her account, rented a car for a week, and then we packed it to the gills and drove to the east coast. The town was called Hammar, the house stood beneath a steep hill; on the side away from us, out of sight, lay the sea. We parked the car outside the house, met the owner, who showed us the three small rooms we would be staying in, I unloaded the luggage, and then we climbed up the hill to have a look around. The sun was out and the sky was a cloudless blue. The hill was green, and from the top of it the sea that stretched out below us was glittering and misty. We clambered down the steep, thirty-meter-high, sandy slope. Linda didn't want to at first, but I held her hand and led her down. We sat next to each other on the beach, it stretched for kilometers in both directions, while the children paddled in the water, there wasn't a soul around.

Linda was silent, but she was here, she had walked here. The hill was too steep for the children and Linda to climb back up, so we trudged along the beach until the incline was gentle enough and then along a path up the grassy slope, climbed over a fence, and reached the top again. The countryside beneath us was completely flat, full of fields and farms as far as the eye could see. Seeing this and driving through it made me feel happy. Over the past year we had been here quite often, renting a car over the weekend, at first driving around, then we had started going to viewings. We were looking for a place that we could use on weekends and during school holidays. I loved this countryside, not just what was here with the rolling fields and long low houses, but also farther inland, the forests and lakes. It wasn't mine, it didn't exist in me, and perhaps that was the reason for the attraction.

We walked back down and had something to eat, the children were in bed, and Linda and I sat outside as the dusk thickened around us, and crows occupied a tree only a stone's throw away, they came flying in from all sides, there must have been more than a hundred of them, the whole tree was black, the air was filled with their shrill cries.

We went to the beach the next day and were there for a couple of hours before we drove to Simrishamn and had lunch. Beside the restaurant there was a real estate agent's, we went in and were given a brochure of all the houses that were for sale in the district. On the way home we drove to one, it was nice, but it stood alone in the middle of a plain and made a cold, desolate impression. Once home, we had a barbecue and then watched the World Cup before going to bed. This became the pattern for the week. Beach, town, viewing, barbecue, football.

On the third day, on our way to Simrishamn, Linda started laughing in the backseat.

I turned around quickly.

"Long time since I've heard that sound," I said.

On the fourth day, on our way home in the afternoon, we drove to a house in a village a few kilometers inland. As we came onto the road where it was supposed to be, I decided this place wouldn't work, it was obviously a residential area and we wanted a holiday home, alone and free, nothing that could remotely remind us of our subdivision hell.

We parked by the house, Linda said there was no point going in, there was nothing for us, I said we might as well take a peek while we were here.

We got out of the car and walked around the corner.

Christ, this is the one, I thought.

Two houses stood at right angles to each other, like a little L. There was also a third house, much smaller than the other two. Between the houses was a large well-established garden. It had to be at least fifty years old. In some places it was completely overgrown, but it was beautiful and perfect for the children as it had a variety of nooks and crannies that were connected in a labyrinthine way.

"What do you think?" I said, looking at Linda.

"It's lovely," she said.

"I think it's brilliant," I said. "Shall we buy it?"

"Maybe," she said. The slightly indifferent tone to her voice had more to do with her mental state than the house, I thought. John left his water pistol in the garden and that was a sign we'd have to go back. I arranged a viewing with the real estate agent and two days later we were there again. We said we would give it some thought. We drove home, were there for a couple of days, and then we flew to Norway and stayed with my mother for two weeks, and by then Linda was on the upswing, toward a lightness and joy, she talked a lot, laughed a lot, had lots of ideas and great energy, and it was fine, it wasn't too much.

I called the real estate agent and put in a bid for the house. There was a bidding round, I didn't give a damn about the money, I wanted the house, and two days later it was ours. We would take it over in October.

Earlier that summer Mom's cousin Hallstein had called her to ask if I would do a reading at an event they were having, I'd said yes because I had imagined a kind of book day in the old dairy that was now an art museum opposite Mom's house, with an audience of maybe sixty or seventy. The villages around Lake Jølstravannet were small and more than twenty kilometers from Førde, the center of the district, which was no great size either.

The day before the reading arrived, I hadn't given it a lot of thought, but hours before it was supposed to begin cars started parking outside. When I put on my shoes, walked around the house and crossed the road with the book in my hand, I ran straight into a large gathering of journalists and photographers. I was greeted by TV cameras and flashes. They had been waiting for me.

"What have you spent all the money on?" one asked.

"I've bought a washing machine, a tumble dryer, a dishwasher, and a TV," I said.

Hallstein shook my hand and led me in. The room was packed.

"Do I have time for a cigarette?" I said.

"Of course," he said.

The journalists flocked around me again. More questions. Behind them came Mom, Linda, and the children crossing the road. They stood at a distance watching what was going on. The children were wide-eyed. Heidi thought I was going to sing, she said. *Verdens Gang* took a photo of the kids without me seeing and printed it in the paper the following day. I called Elisabeth and asked if they were allowed to do that. I couldn't do anything myself because I had written about other people and so I no longer had any rights as far as my own life was concerned. I could accept this, but I didn't like it. Elisabeth called back, she had spoken to *Verdens Gang*, they had promised never to use the photo again. Mom had bought the papers, wanting to see what they said, and Vanja caught sight of the photo of herself, she was angry, she looked ugly with glasses on, she said. You're the prettiest girl in the world, I said, but to no avail, her eyes narrowed and didn't light up until all thoughts of newspapers and TV dissolved in the real world down on the little beach where they swam in the water on their inflatable dolphins.

The previous evening I had done the reading and talked a little about my relationship with Jølster, where I'd written parts of all my books and which also came up in everything I'd written. While I was talking I saw Vanja standing at the back looking at me. Hallstein asked a few questions, then I signed books and walked back across the road where those members of my mother's family who were there had gathered.

It had been absurd, I had been there every summer for nigh on twenty years and no one had ever been interested in what I wrote or said, and then all of a sudden the place was bristling with cameras the second I crossed the road.

Linda and I drove up into the mountains the next day to spend the night in a cabin. The river in the middle of the valley, the mountains on either side, the white peaks under the gray sky, the water that was perhaps three kilometers away. Not a soul around, just Linda and me sitting at the table outside the cabin, the dense forest stretching upward, spruce and fir trees.

I told her about the summer before I started at the Writing Academy, when I had been in that very place for a week on my own trying to write. I told her this was where Grandpa had courted Grandma for the first time. The sun set, we sat outside the cabin chatting in the dusk, surrounded by the faint roar of the waterfall high up in the forest.

Linda had been captivated by the nature in Vestland from the first moment she ever saw it and had almost fainted at the beauty of the fjords and mountains; she had been visiting my mother to produce a radio program about the seventeenth of May. She talked about it now. They had seen porpoises in the fjord, that had been a good sign according to Mom, and they had seen deer in the forest, that had been a good sign, too. She had been pregnant with Vanja then, but hadn't known. Anfinn, who was married to Grandma's sister Alvdis, was the son of a horse dealer and as compact and powerful as a bear, and he had told her about the time when he went hunting whales and had shown her all sorts of weird and wonderful objects he had kept from those days. We had visited them every summer since, they'd been at both Vanja's and John's christenings, but that winter Anfinn had died. It was their cabin we were borrowing. I told Linda about another of Grandma's sisters, Borghild, also dead now, who had known all there was to know about everyone in the family, both those who were alive now and those who weren't. And how Tore and I had written a screenplay here and we had gone down to visit Borghild, and she stared at Tore through a magnifying glass, which made her eye enormous.

It was precisely this countryside I had described in *A Time for Everything* and where I had set the story of Cain and Abel and Noah. The mountains before Ålhus in Jølster and Sørbøvåg by Mount Lihesten in Ytre Sogn. My maternal grandparents were in it, and Linda's mother and Linda and Yngve and I, however all with biblical names I had taken from a family tree and no longer remembered.

I had known this landscape for as long as I could remember, but it had never been mine, I had never belonged here. Perhaps because I demanded too much from what it meant to belong. I didn't feel I belonged to Kristiansand either and although I related to the countryside on the island of Tromøya, I never felt I had the right to call it my own, we were newcomers. And I had missed that all my life, coming from one place, belonging to a place, being able to call a place home. Geir used to say the definition of home was a place where no one could deny you access. And then we used to discuss whether "Hell is home" or "Home is hell." Connecting home with a landscape and not a state of mind was my most reactionary feature, but it was also the most deeply rooted.

The following day we drove into the valley behind Mom's house with the kids, parked the car where the road ends, and walked until they couldn't take any more. We stopped, had a bite to eat and drank some coffee, and then we hiked back. They had grown up in Malmö, unused to mountains and waterfalls, yet they took it all as a matter of course, although there was also something inadequate and helpless about them as they stood beneath the immensity of the mountains and the depth of the sky.

Linda began to feel depressed again, she talked less and less, by the time we visited Jon Olav and Liv at the end of the holiday she was hardly speaking. On the way home to Malmö we dropped in on my old friend Ole and his girlfriend Brita in Bergen, I hadn't seen them since I moved to Sweden, the only thing to detract from the joy of talking to Ole again was that Linda was feeling low. But she was still a long way from how she had been. A few hours before the plane was due to depart I called for a taxi and the woman on the switchboard inquired whether I was Knausgaard, the author. I said I was and hated myself for it. The taxi was a minibus, which the children considered exciting, having it all to ourselves. At Flesland Airport people looked at me, some came over to say something about my books. One of them, a woman in her late fifties, said she'd been to all the places I had described in Sørland.

"How big Vanja and Heidi are!" she said, and laughed.

"Yes," I said.

"But I won't pester you anymore. Have a good journey home. I suppose you're going to Malmö, aren't you?"

I nodded.

"Bye," I said with a smile.

Vanja looked up at me.

"Do you know her, Dad?" she said.

"No," I said. "Never seen her before."

"But how did she know who we were?" she said.

"I've written a book about us," I said.

"You've written a book about us?" she said.

"Yes."

"What's in it?"

"All sorts of strange things," I said. "You'll have to read it when you're older."

We passed through security, people stared at us. Once through, we went to a Narvesen kiosk to buy the children something for the flight. My face was everywhere. On the new paperbacks, which I hadn't seen, Thomas's photo of my face was on the cover.

"Dad, that's you!" Heidi said, pointing.

"Oh it is. What do you know," I said.

Once home, I got back to work. Vanja would be starting school in a few weeks and had been given permission to attend the nursery school until then. We had promised her she would have her own room when she started school and as the only extra room we had was my study, I'd moved my desk and all my books into a living room. That was as far as I'd got. The room had to be painted, a desk, bed, and wardrobe needed to be bought, as well as pictures she could hang on the wall. The plan was to paint one weekend and then go to IKEA the next. Vanja was nervous it wouldn't be ready, but I assured her that everything would be ready the night before she started.

Linda's depression lifted after a few days and everything was as usual at home. She said she would take the children to school and pick them up so that I could work straight through. I was happy about that. I got up at six in the morning, went right to the living room, closed the doors, and knuckled down, barely hearing the others getting up and leaving, I surfaced to say hi to them when they returned, ate with them, and worked until ten.

Linda had a friend from Stockholm staying, they had known each other for fifteen years or so, from when Linda worked at the Stadsteater in Stockholm. Her friend was a stage director and had recently made a short film from a script Linda had written. She had her one-year-old son with her and they planned to stay for a week. Locked in the living room from morning till night, I hardly saw them. An autumn publication was still a possibility if I hit the deadline.

"She's absolutely fantastic," Linda said about her friend one evening when we had a few minutes alone. "She gets stuff done. When she decides to do something, it always happens. That's the exact opposite of me. But we can help each other. We've already come up with lots of ideas. It's wonderful having her here."

"I'm so pleased," I said.

"And you can work as much as you like at the same time," she said.

"Yes," I said. "You're generous to me. Don't you go thinking I don't realize that."

One afternoon, on my way to check my e-mails in the bedroom, I met them in the hall, they had been out shopping.

"They were all on sale," Linda said. "And I didn't buy a lot."

"Relax," I said. "I didn't say a word."

"When I'm with her," she said, nodding toward her friend, "I feel totally secure. She knows me so well. She knows exactly where the limits are, what's good or bad for me."

Her friend smiled.

"Linda charms the pants off all the shop assistants. Once I had to leave the shop, I was so embarrassed," she said.

Linda laughed.

"Was that why you left? Really?" she said, and looked at me. "Nothing expensive, nothing over the top. Would you like to see?"

"No, I can take a look later," I said, and went into my study.

The place was a mess again, the living-room floor was almost totally covered with toys, clothes, and towels, the same was true of the children's room and the hall. Of course I couldn't say anything, it was my responsibility as well, and normally I would have thought the mess can stay where it is until we have a blitz, because I had to work, I couldn't waste even a couple of hours, but when we had visitors it was different, I was ashamed of the way we lived.

I said so to Linda.

"Don't give her a thought," she said. "She's used to mess. It doesn't bother her *at all*. And we're working too. We have lots of plans. And they will come to fruition. She always achieves what she sets out to do. She's so good for me."

There was a tone she had that always emerged when she was on a high, but which in some way or other was more obvious now. A breezy, noncommittal tone, which brought with it an infantile side, not much, just a touch, but enough for me to find it irritating, for at these moments I wasn't in communication with her, we were not operating from the same base. Sometimes I told her, then she just smiled and said she understood what I meant and she would try to be more present. When she was growing up she always had an element of the adult child in her, the child who saw through adults and retained her composure amid their chaotic lives, I'd gathered from what she told me, but especially from what she had written, where the adult child was a recurring figure. Now she was an adult, and it was as though the opposite was happening: she wasn't assuming an adult role as a child but a child's role as an adult. Oh, it wasn't so much in evidence, only a tiny, tiny bit, something in her had stopped caring about any consequences, was no longer so careful about what was said, whether it was true or not, small dislocations of reality to make her appear funnier, grander, more entertaining. If she said something in front of the children that they shouldn't know or hear and I reproved her, she immediately corrected herself: Dad's right, that was silly of me.

I hadn't been aware of this element in her personality, I had never seen it until this spring, it suddenly emerged and it wasn't good for us because then I had to assume a role toward her, I became the person who corrected and set limits, and that was the last thing on this earth I wanted to do. There could be days, perhaps a week, when she was as light as light itself, and then it was gone from her character, like a comet leaving the firmament. Then she became "normal" again, then she became "Linda." It was easier to relate to the periods when she sank into the darkness because it didn't touch the person she was, we could communicate even though she was depressed. She was distraught that this was how she was, continually being raised to the heights and dumped back down, it made it almost impossible for her to work, for example, and forced her to go to places she didn't want to be.

I was, like Linda, pleased that she had her friend staying, she was a few years older than me, I imagined, and a responsible adult who really liked Linda and had seen enough in her life to appreciate the unusual qualities she possessed. In all the mess they had a really good time, I heard them chatting and laughing together, discussing and planning. Linda did everything with the children, trying to make up for the time when she had been so depressed she hadn't been able to do anything, I supposed.

Some slightly disturbing incidents took place. Twice Linda talked about me to her friend, she didn't know I was within earshot and would never have said what she did otherwise, the tone was confidential and the confidences were addressed to her friend not to me. Above all else I hated other people talking about me, so that was unpleasant in itself, but it wasn't disturbing. The disturbing element was that she didn't know I could hear. The first time was in the hall outside our bedroom while I was in bed on the other side of the door, actually she knew that, how could she possibly have said something in secret about me in a loud voice three meters away from where I was? The second time was similar, they went to the balcony, I was in the second living room, I heard Linda tell her friend in a loud voice to leave everything where it was, it was Karl Ove's problem. It didn't matter that she said that, it mattered that she said it as if they were completely alone. She had begun to ignore the consequences of her actions.

The next morning, when I was working in one of the living rooms, I suddenly heard a din in the other. Linda had put on a record. It was a quarter to six, and she had turned the volume up loud. "Forever Young," the old eighties hit, she was playing it at full blast at an unearthly hour.

I ran out to the stereo and turned it off.

"What are you doing? Do you know what time it is?"

She looked at me.

"Almost six. Relax. It wasn't on that loud."

She looked at me as though she were a teenager and I were the most narrow-minded middle-class parent she had ever seen. And perhaps she was right about that.

"Why are you up so early anyway? Didn't you go to bed late last night?"

"Yes. I couldn't sleep. I have so much on my mind. There are a few projects I've started. And you get angry when I lie awake and toss and turn, and then the children come in and want a glass of water or to sleep with us."

"I don't get angry. I'm asleep."

"You sleep through everything. I don't. And then you go to the kitchen to eat in the middle of the night and slam doors."

"But can't you lie down here, in the living room, at night? Alone? Then you might be able to sleep."

"The children find me anyway," she said. "They don't want you at night. Just me."

"That's not my fault, is it?" I said.

She looked at me and rolled her eyes.

"Do you know what it's like not to be able to sleep?" she said.

"No," I said. "I'm afraid I don't."

This was one of our most done-to-death topics of conversation.

"I have to work now," I said. "Couldn't you try to sleep a bit more? At least until Johnny wakes up?"

"Yes, I suppose I can," she said as though she were doing me a favor.

She went to bed late, got up early, and was still full of energy. She glowed with it. I walked past the kitchen at nine in the evening, she was sitting there with a black bowler hat on her head and wearing some clothes I had never seen before. She looked like she was in *Cabaret* or some musical or other. She smiled at her friend and when she noticed I was there turned to me with glittering eyes.

I went to bed and fell asleep at once, I had worked all day, then woke up to a bang, it was Linda coming in.

"Can't you be a bit quieter?" I said. "I was actually asleep."

"Can you believe this guy?" she said. "That's the best I've heard yet."

She flounced back out and slammed the door hard.

I got up and rushed after her. She was lying beside Vanja in her bed. I stopped in the doorway. She looked at me with eyes that shone white in the darkness.

"Come and lie down, Linda. I didn't mean what I said. I was asleep and woke up a bit abruptly."

"No," she said. "I'm sleeping here tonight."

"Come on. Come and sleep with me."

"No."

When I got up the next morning she was sitting in the kitchen with a cup of tea in front of her. It was five o'clock.

"Haven't you slept?" I said.

"No," she said. "I'm so tired now. I'm dying for some sleep."

"I can understand that," I said.

"I have an appointment with the doctor today," she said. "Maybe she'll give me a stronger sleeping tablet."

"Yes," I said.

"Will you come with me?"

"Is it vital?"

She looked at me.

I nodded.

"Of course I'll go with you. When is it?"

"At eleven."

"OK," I said.

We set off at a little before half past ten. In our small covered entrance she lit a cigarette, looked at me, and slowly blew out the smoke.

"Ready to go?" she said.

I nodded.

She strode out, I had to walk almost as fast as I could to keep up. Her face was determined, closed, her strides quick.

Along the pedestrian street, over the bridge, and into the little park on the right.

"I've been thinking about something," she said, lighting another cigarette. "It might be a good idea to go to the hospital just for one night. They can give me some stronger medicine. And I'd have peace and quiet there. No children. What do you think about that? It'll be like going for a health cure. I'd get food and a bed and someone would make sure I sleep."

"Is it that bad?" I asked. "Are you so tired?"

"I long for sleep so much it's unreal," she said.

"Then do it," I said. "I'm sure it'll be good."

"I think so," she said.

We were a bit early and had a coffee at a 7-Eleven nearby. She was still as determined, I was reminded of the image she often used when she wrote, she was a soldier. Black leather jacket, black jeans, black shoes. A small black backpack on her back. Wan, determined face.

"So you can just tell the children I'm sleeping at Jenny's tonight," she said.

"Yes, that's probably best," I said.

Her friend was leaving that afternoon, so it was good timing.

"I suppose we'd better go now," I said.

The doctor came out the moment we sat down in the waiting room. She radiated the same qualities she had the first time I met her. Friendliness, caring, impersonal professionalism. I was also the same, I assumed, but Linda was a very different person. Then everything had been slow, every movement an effort. Now she was bristling with energy and impatience when she sat down. Nothing could go fast enough. She started talking long before the doctor had taken a seat.

"You said there would always be someone here I could talk to," she said. "But I called and you were on holiday. And there was no one else to talk to! That's not good enough! I needed you! I really needed you!"

She began to cry.

I didn't understand a thing and looked at her, then at the doctor, who was taking notes on her pad.

"I'm very sorry about that," the doctor said. "There was a misunderstanding. You should've been given my colleague to talk to."

"That's not good enough," Linda said. "I've been so frightened."

She sobbed.

"I've been so frightened!" she repeated.

The doctor looked at her without saying anything.

"How are you?" she asked at length.

"Things are moving faster and faster," Linda said. "It's as though soon I won't be able to hang on, if you understand what I mean."

"Are you sleeping?"

"No. I hardly sleep. Can I be admitted to the hospital and have some sleeping tablets? For one night only."

The doctor nodded.

"I think that's a good idea," she said. "I can sort it out right away, so that you can go straight there, if you like."

"I just have to go home and pack first."

"Of course. But it's a good idea, Linda. I think it'll do you good."

I tried to understand what was going on as they talked. Why did she burst into tears? She hadn't said a word to me about her fears and hadn't shown any of what she was showing now.

The doctor told Linda which ward she would be in. She was given a slip of paper with the address on it. They set a new appointment, which was also put on a piece of paper.

"If there are any problems, ask them to call me," she said. "But I'll arrange everything from this end, so they know you'll be coming."

We rose to our feet, shook her hand, and went down to the street.

Linda was happy again.

"I'll come home tomorrow morning. The children won't even notice I've been away."

"That's not a problem," I said.

We hurried through the streets, she was excited, I was bewildered but in a way also reassured, perhaps because of the way the doctor had reacted to her. It had been accepted without question that she could sleep one night in the hospital and surely that was how it should be.

Linda packed a few things into a backpack, said goodbye to her friend and me, I didn't need to accompany her, she would take a taxi, then she was in the elevator with a smile on her face, and gone.

I started to clean up the apartment. Linda's friend helped me. We had never actually talked, now we did. I told her what Linda had said, about her house being a mess and how that didn't bother her. She laughed and said that was probably how Linda would have liked it to be, but she was only projecting her own desires onto her. Once Linda had visited her in Stockholm, she said, many years ago, then she had been as high as she was now, she'd taken a bath with her friend's little daughter and more or less demanded to be treated like her.

What I didn't understand was how she could accept that. She'd accepted it at the time and had accepted it here. But this clearly wasn't Linda. And I refused to give any room to what wasn't Linda. I didn't want to see it. But her friend obviously didn't have the same demands for authenticity.

We worked our way through the rooms as we talked about Linda's mother and father, me and my father. She knew something I didn't, I thought. Everything related to Linda's excesses was beyond me, it was part of the unknown, and I felt prejudiced, limited, and very, very ordinary.

When the place was clean and tidy, she packed her things, lifted up her son, who had been playing on his own while we were busy and had hardly got in our way, put him in his stroller, and headed for the train station.

It was a strange feeling to be alone. Usually I liked it, but now Linda wasn't out somewhere, she had been admitted to the hospital, and for some reason or other this made me feel lonely.

For the first time it struck me that usually I wasn't alone, I always had Linda there.

I went through the fridge, tossing out everything that had passed its sell-by date, and I did the same in the cupboards. Then I took out a bag of chicken fillets from the freezer, left them to thaw on a plate, emptied the dishwasher, and had a smoke on the balcony before going to pick up the children. It was Friday, our ice-cream day, and I took them to the café in the mall as usual.

"Mommy's not at home," I told them. "She's sleeping at Jenny's tonight."

"Why?" Vanja asked, putting the little orange plastic spoon and its heap of blue ice cream with thin red stripes into her mouth while studying me.

"She's working," I said.

"Is she coming home tomorrow?" Vanja asked.

"Yes."

"What are we doing tomorrow?"

"I don't know," I said. "What would you like to do?"

"Go to the park," Heidi said.

"No, that's boring," Vanja said.

"It is not," Heidi said.

"We can do that," I said. "But we don't need to make up our minds until tomorrow."

"Carnival," John said.

I smiled.

"You don't miss a trick, do you," I said.

"Yes, the carnival," Vanja said.

"Yes. Me too," Heidi said.

"That's decided then," I said.

After I had put them to bed the peculiar feeling of loneliness returned. I watched some TV, retired early, woke up to sounds from the kitchen, which turned out to be John banging around, he had dragged a chair to the counter, turned on the water, and filled the sink with washing-up liquid.

I made him some breakfast, saw to Heidi when she got up, and last of all Vanja. It was Saturday, their TV morning, while I sat beside them in a chair reading the newspapers. At half past seven the phone rang. It was Linda.

"How was it?" I asked.

"It was fantastic," she said. "I've never slept so well. And they've been so nice to me. There are some fantastic people here. How's it going at home?"

"Fine. When will you be home, do you think?"

"Ah, that's what I was going to tell you. The doctors here say they'd like to keep me in for one more night. To get the best possible effect. I don't think that's such a stupid idea. Then I'll be able to rest properly."

"Yes, that sounds wise," I said. "But what should I tell the children? It might seem a bit odd if you're at Jenny's for two nights and don't come home in between."

"Can't you just tell them I'm in the hospital?"

"Yeah, but then they'd want to know why."

"Tell them the truth. I'm here to get some sleep."

"OK. I'll do that."

"I love you so much, Karl Ove."

"I love you too," I said. "You enjoy the day, OK?"

"OK. Give the kids a kiss from me."

I pressed off and went in to see them. All three sat staring at the TV without taking any notice of me.

"Mommy just called," I said. "She won't be home until tomorrow."

"Why not?" Vanja said.

"You know she's been sleeping badly the past few nights, don't you? Now she's in the hospital so that she can get some help. She'll be there tonight."

"Can we visit her?"

"Well, it's only one night. She'll be home tomorrow. Let's go to the carnival, shall we?"

Folkets Park played a major role in the lives of our three children. It had a big pond, in which they splashed around and paddled during the summer and on which they skated during the winter. And a large terrarium where the parrot in the Pippi Longstocking film was spending the autumn of its life, plus a few motionless crocodiles. And a little ice-cream stall and a mini zoo with rabbits and pigs. As well as a riding center, where Vanja sat on a horse for some months of her young life, and a wonderful big playground. Not forgetting a café with a dance floor and a rock 'n' roll club. But the biggest attraction of all was the carnival. It was second rate, but the children couldn't see that and whenever we went to the park in the summer months we had to agree before starting out that there wouldn't be any discussion of the carnival today. This day was one of the few when I didn't say that. Instead I said that they could each choose three rides. If there was the slightest protest we would go home, was that understood? Yes, it was. Standing outside the entrance to the fair they would have promised me anything under the sun.

"I want to go on the mewy-go-wound!" Vanja said.

"Merrrrry-go-rrrrround," Heidi said.

Vanja flew at her, I had to grab her arms and lift her up.

"Come on, let's go for a walk and have a look around before we decide. Who wants to go on the caterpillar roller-coaster?"

"Me!" John said.

"Not me," Vanja said.

"What about the bumper cars?"

"Can I?" Vanja said.

"Yes. But you'll have to go on your own. I have to look after Heidi and John. Do you dare?"

She nodded. And immediately she drove around the oval track with an expression that was part terror and part joy. Afterward we all had a ride on the caterpillar. And then I drove one of the veteran cars on rails with John while Vanja and Heidi stood watching. Finally they got on two separate merry-go-rounds. Once that was done we walked to the playground, where they ran into two friends from class. I stood with the parents for a while, they kept an eye on the three of them while I went for a coffee, on my return we talked a bit about football, the man from one family supported Hammerby, which had sunk down the table like a lead weight after winning Allsvenskan, the Swedish premier league, the previous year. I liked him but couldn't meet his eyes, he was mentioned in Book 2 in a way that was not uncontroversial. He congratulated me on its success and I realized he had not been curious enough to read the Norwegian version anyway.

I spent half an hour trying to encourage the children to make a move homeward.

Vanja was unusually quiet.

Not far from Hemköp I found out what was bothering her.

"Why can't I say *r*, Dad?" she said. "After all, Heidi can. And I'm bigger than her."

"I couldn't say *r* when I was little either," I said.

"When did you learn then?" she said.

"At about your age," I lied.

"I don't want to start school," she said. "I want to stay in nursery school."

"Of course you do," I said. "But when you start school, you won't want to stop there either. It's the same as with nursery school. You're a big girl now."

We did some shopping, then wended our way home, they watched a film, had pizza in the evening, and then took a bath. As I was about to tuck them in a chorus for Mommy rose.

"She'll be back tomorrow," I said.

"Do you promise?" Vanja said.

"I promise," I said.

The next morning I was woken by the phone ringing. It was six o'clock, I saw, and hurried to pick it up.

"Hi, it's me," Linda said. "Good morning."

"Hi," I said.

"How's it going at home? What did you do yesterday?"

"We went to the carnival," I said.

"What are they doing now?"

"They're asleep."

"Oh, right, it's still pretty early."

"It is. How are you? When are you coming home?"

"It's going very well here. I just need a few things from home. Especially my laptop."

"I asked you when you were going to come home."

"I don't know. We're taking one day at a time."

"You're not coming back today?"

"They say I ought to stay here for another week. Then we'll see."

I said nothing.

"There's Nanna. Hi, Nanna. She's fantastic. Strict but good. Motherly. Well, you know. Solid as a rock whatever happens. She's on nights."

"Linda, are you going to be there for another week?"

"I think so. It's voluntary, though, so they can't keep me. If I want to go, I can. But it's so good for me here. It's exactly what I need. A few days of peace and quiet. It doesn't matter, does it?"

"No, of course it doesn't."

"I'm so hungry. I'm waiting for breakfast. That's why I called. I get a bit restless. If only I had my laptop, then at least I could write."

"Right," I said.

"Now they're bringing breakfast. I'll call you back. Bye, my prince."

I turned the phone off and went into the bedroom, lay down on the bed. From the children's room I heard a strange sound. A few seconds passed before I realized what it was. Someone was jerking the door handle up and down as fast as they could. I got up. Someone was knocking on the door and shouting Dad! Dad! I opened it. It was John. He had tears in his eyes.

"Couldn't you open the door?" I said.

"No!" he said.

"Come on. Let's have a little breakfast."

I was frozen inside as I sat down and watched him eat. I hadn't understood a thing. I had actually assumed she was there to sleep. Like a naïve child. I had imagined they would administer some strong medicine in slightly more controlled circumstances and she would come down from her high as soon as she'd had a good night's sleep. God knows where I'd got that idea from, but that was what I had imagined.

She had been admitted to the psychiatric hospital, she was all alone there, and I had barely considered that.

I was her husband, for Christ's sake. Her closest next of kin. I had to go there, I had to talk to the doctors, and I had to see her. Just to let her know I was there for her, for her and for the children.

What an idiot I had been.

I was utterly brain-dead.

But how could I go there? I couldn't take the children with me. Obviously that wouldn't work. And I didn't know anyone in town who could take care of them. Or yes, I did, but they had their own kids to look after. And I didn't want to ask anything of anyone.

John had lost interest in food, now he was pushing a cornflake through a pool of milk on the wax cloth.

"Are you full?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "Thank you."

"You're going to do well, with such wonderful manners," I said, lifting him out of the chair. Removed his diaper and threw it into the bin under the sink. "Do you want to be in the buff for a while?"

He nodded and trotted off into the living room. I found the children's channel on the TV, went into the other living room and phoned Linda.

She answered at once.

"Hi, *Hem*," she said.

She used to say that because *hem*, Swedish for home, came up on her phone whenever I rang.

"Hi," I said. "I should've been up there to see you by now, to talk to the doctors and so on, but now I'm wondering whether it would be all right if I came early tomorrow morning. Right after dropping the kids off."

"Yes, of course," she said. "They'll be pleased to meet you. I've told everyone what a wonderfully handsome husband I have."

"I'm sorry about all of this, Linda."

"There's nothing to be sorry about. I'm absolutely fine. It's like being in a mountain hotel. And I get proper sleeping tablets. I pass out like a clubbed seal."

"That's good. You have to sleep and rest. I'll see you tomorrow. Call me if you feel like it. I'll take my cell if we go anywhere."

The chill in my guts didn't leave me that day, it returned at regular intervals.

I was Linda's closest relative, I was her husband, and she was alone in a psychiatric hospital and I hadn't lifted a finger to help her. She had been there for two days now. With no help, no support, all on her own.

As soon as Vanja got up, she asked me when Mommy was coming home.

"She just called. She said she has to stay in the hospital for a while yet."

"But you promised!"

"I know. But she's there to sleep the right way. Do you remember when she was so tired this spring and slept all the time? Now it's the opposite, now she can't sleep at all. It's not a problem, but she has to be there for a few more days. But do you know what?"

"What?"

"We'll visit her in the hospital tomorrow. That'll be nice."

"Is that definite?"

"Yes, of course."

After I had dropped off the children at school the next morning, I walked the few hundred meters to the big hospital complex. I had been there only once before, that was when John was born, almost three years ago to the day. Then I'd rushed home to get Vanja and Heidi, and they had laughed and fooled around in the hotel room for relatives, patted John's head and placed a rubber dinosaur on top of it, which I took photos of, and they remembered for that very reason.

Linda had given me directions, which I'd written down on a Post-it. It was a long block reminiscent of the sixties, right at the end of the complex. I walked in, took the elevator up, and rang the bell outside the door, which was locked. While I was waiting a woman came down the stairs. She looked at me.

"Aren't you a writer?" she said.

"Yes," I said.

"You wrote *Min kamp*, didn't you? Imagine seeing you here."

"Yes," I said. "Nice to meet you."

The door opened, a nurse stared at me. She was wearing a white uniform.

"Hi," I said. "My name's Karl Ove Knausgaard. I'd like to visit Linda."

"Hi," she said. "Come with me. She's over here."

I followed her down the colorless corridor.

I had worked in a ward like this when I was eighteen, and I recognized the style. A refectory, a cage-like office with a big window, a recreation room, a long corridor with doors on both sides. Gray linoleum floor. Furniture with the unmistakable imprint of institution.

Four or five patients sat watching TV. Trembling, taciturn, pale. A couple paced to and fro, filled with a nervous, restless, aggressive energy. They were young; the ones watching TV were middle-aged and old. Linda came out of one room. She lit up when she saw me, gave me a big hug and a kiss on the lips.

"This is my husband!" she said loudly to everyone there.

"Well, you do have a handsome man, Linda!" a lively old lady called out.

"He's the best writer in Norway," Linda said. "It's absolutely true."

The patients sitting there, disabled or slumped, all with dark, vacant eyes, looked across at us.

"You should see my room," Linda said. "It's so cozy."

She led me into a room. There were two beds, on one sat an overweight woman; she got up as soon as she saw us and left. Linda said her name and smiled.

"This is where I live," she said, extending her arms. "But I need a few things from home. I've written a list. Or perhaps you can bring them with you next time? Look there!" she said, pointing to the wall where two drawings hung.

"Two twins drew them," she said. "They remind me of myself when I was young. They're twenty at most. Princesses of the night. They don't sleep either. They're acrobats. They're absolutely terrific."

She pressed against me.

"Isn't it cozy here?" she said.

"Yes," I said, taking a step toward the window. "But I was going to talk to the senior nurse. Don't you think it would be best to do that right away?"

"They'll come and get you," she said, patting the duvet. "Sit down."

I sat down beside her. She put her arm around me and wanted to kiss me. I leaned away.

"I'm not in the mood."

"Never mind," she said. "I understand. Look here."

She got up and took me by the hand to the window. She wanted me to see all the ornaments on the windowsill. Porcelain dogs, porcelain cats. A photo of Vanja, Heidi, and John. A Robyn CD, stood upright to show the cover, some stones, some toy rings.

"And that's my cuddly toy. A Moomin. I cover him with the duvet every night before I go to bed."

She pointed to a little box on the floor where a cloth figure lay.

There was a knock at the door. The same nurse who had opened the door for me escorted us to the office. There were four people inside. Linda and I sat down on chairs between them. The doctor responsible for Linda, as far as I could judge, wearing a brown suit, extremely jovial, asked her some questions in broken Swedish. One of the others was also dressed in normal clothes, the remaining two wore white uniforms. Linda answered all the questions with wit, in detail, and at great length. They smiled, all of them, I could see she was a kind of favorite.

"There's just one thing I *have* to say," Linda said. "I know this won't sound good because it'll give the impression that I'm an elitist, or something like that, but if you ask me how I'm getting on it's an inescapable fact that some of the nurses in the ward are so . . . well, I'll have to be careful now, but they're a bit on the slow side, they don't always understand things right away, and that can be wearing for me. I'm a writer, I do radio, I'm a professional woman, and I'm used to a certain level, if you see what I mean. But there's practically no one to talk to here."

I felt a strong urge to duck, I didn't, I retained my composure and watched her as she spoke.

"It is as it is, Linda," the doctor said. "But now your husband's here. He may have a few questions to ask. Do you?"

"Two," I said. "And they're of a practical nature. We have three children.

They have to see Linda of course. How shall we do it? I'm not so keen for them to come here."

"You could meet in the park," the doctor suggested. "That would be all right, wouldn't it? Otherwise there's nothing to stop you, Linda, going out every other day, or every day, and going home. Perhaps not today, perhaps not tomorrow, but in the foreseeable future."

"And that's my second question. How long is she going to be here, do you think?"

I looked at Linda as I said that, it didn't feel good to refer to her as "she," but I couldn't find a way around it. She just smiled as if to say, Look what a clever husband I have.

"It's impossible to say, my dear man," the doctor said, getting up. "But we'd like to stabilize you a bit, Linda, before you go home."

"The medicine isn't working," Linda said, looking at me. "From what I understand I'm being given big doses, but they're not working at all."

"Well, there's a lot of energy in you."

"OK," I said. "We're not talking days then?"

"Probably not," the doctor said. "Now I'm going on holiday, so there'll be another doctor coming tomorrow. But she's even better than me, so that won't be a problem."

"Are you going on holiday?" Linda asked.

"Yes," he said.

"And just as I was beginning to like you," she said.

He laughed, shook hands, and the whole entourage followed him out.

"I wanted to talk to you," the senior nurse said. "Could you come to my office for a moment?"

"Yes, of course," I said, looking at Linda.

"I'll wait in the room," she said.

I accompanied her to the office.

"Do you need any help?" she said. "You have a right to some social help. Someone could go to your house, do the shopping, cook and clean for you."

"No," I said. "No, no, no. I don't need it. Absolutely not. I'm fine."

"OK," she said. "If you should change your mind, let me know. How's it going with the children?"

"Fine."

"Do they know she's here?"

"Sort of. We've told them she's in the hospital to sleep."

"OK. I think it's a good idea for you to take them to the park and meet Linda there, as we mentioned."

"Is today OK? Actually I've promised them they would see her today."

"That's fine. Come here after school. When do you pick them up?"

"At three. No, I'm wrong, half past three. So if we say a quarter to four here?"

"I'll make sure she's waiting at the entrance."

"Thank you," I said, and went to Linda's room, knocked, and opened the door. Linda came toward me and took my hand, pulled me to the bed.

"What do you think of the doctor? Isn't he great? Eastern European. Hungarian or Romanian or something like that. Shame he's going on holiday. Typical."

She looked at me. I bit my lip to stop myself from crying, got up, and stood in front of the window.

"Karl Ove, shall we go out for a cigarette?" she said.

"Sure," I said. "OK."

"They've got coffee here. Visitors have to pay five kronor, but I'll see if I can get you a free one."

"I don't mind paying," I said.

She filled two cups, poured milk in one, called for a nurse.

"We're going out for a cigarette," she said. "Open up, open up."

We walked along the corridor with him, to the opposite end of the building from where I had arrived, he unlocked the door and we took the elevator down, came to a paved area with a shed where two old men were smoking.

Linda stopped and lit up. I did too.

"I'm so happy to be with you," she said. "You make me so happy, Karl Ove."

She stood up on her toes and we kissed. She clung to me, I took a step back, she let go, glancing down the road to where a vehicle was coming.

"I'm well looked after here," she said. "Don't you think?"

"Yes," I said. "But you mustn't stay too long."

"No," she said.

An ambulance drove slowly past.

"They're in and out all night," she said. "It's exciting."

"Mm," I said.

I watched the ambulance, she held my face and straightened it as if to say I had to look at her.

Our eyes met. She stretched up and kissed me.

"I'll have to go soon," I said.

"Yes, I know you have a lot to do," she said.

"But we'll see you this afternoon," I said. "I'll bring the children and we can meet outside."

"It's nice sitting in the park," she said.

"We can buy ice cream," I said.

"Yes!" she said.

"Bye," I said.

"Bye," she said.

As I turned I welled up. I cried all the way home, almost blinded by tears, but when I was at home, sitting on the balcony and smoking, my eyes were dry. A situation had arisen and it had to be dealt with.

I was booked to do a four-day reading tour around Gothenburg, I would have to cancel that. I had lots of gigs at the Oslo Book Festival, I would have to cancel them. I had two spots at the Louisiana Literature Festival, I would have to cancel them. And then I would have to call Ingrid and Mom and ask if they could come to stay for a while, not because I needed any help, but because I wanted the children to have someone else apart from me. Anything that would divert attention from Linda's absence was good.

I went inside and called Ingrid. I told her how the land lay, that Linda was ill and I would have to cancel everything for the next few weeks.

"It wouldn't be possible to arrange to do all the jobs on one day and organize a babysitter for that day?"

"Yes," I said. "That should work."

I e-mailed Stefan at Nordstedts and asked if he could cancel the arrangements I had. No problem. I e-mailed the organizer in Gothenburg and said I would have to cancel the tour. They e-mailed back and said it was fine, but couldn't I make one of the days, the one in Gothenburg? They had already advertised it and would prefer not to cancel. I wrote back and said that was fine. I didn't contact Louisiana, in fact I wanted to do that one, and Copenhagen was so close I could travel back in the evening.

I called Ingrid again, she was happy to come and help, but not before the end of the week. I called Mom, she would manage to get away somehow and come down too, but probably not before the following week.

Heidi ran toward me as I entered the gates to the school.

"Are we going to see Mommy?" she shouted.

"Yes, we are," I said.

John saw me, pulled himself off the wooden tricycle, and ran over too.

I lifted him up, put him down, and turned to the staff.

"How has it been today?" I said.

"It's been fine. The older children have been to the theater."

"Oh that's right," I said.

"John slept for an hour, more or less. But it was almost impossible to wake him today."

"He gets up very early," I said.

Vanja was on the swing with Katinka. I walked over to them. Heidi came along, holding my hand.

"We're going to see Mommy!" she cried.

"I know," Vanja said.

"Are you coming?" I said.

"I just have to get a drawing," she said, and ran inside.

I put John in the stroller in the meantime. I wondered what she had drawn. When Linda had been depressed Vanja had drawn a little girl and a mother with a heart between them and written, "I love you, Mama." This time it was a house with a tree beside it and a flower bed, drawn in the way I remembered from my own childhood.

We walked up to Södervärn and into the hospital complex. Vanja had been there several times before, to see the optician, and had positive associations with the place.

"Where's she staying?" Heidi said.

"Over there," I said.

"Do they sleep here?" Heidi said.

"Yes, they do."

"Are there lots of people who can't sleep?" Vanja said.

"Not so many," I said. "But there are some."

Linda was leaning against the wall beside the door. When Vanja and Heidi caught sight of her they set off at a run. I lifted John from the stroller so that he could chase after them.

"My children," Linda said, and bent down to embrace all three of them. "Vanja, Heidi, and John. How I've missed you!"

Linda straightened up and looked at me.

"Hi," she said. "Shall we go and get some ice cream?"

I nodded, and we set off. There were buildings on both sides of the road, but behind the psychiatric department there was a lawn. We walked past, turned left, at the end of the road there was a kiosk.

"What have you been doing today?" Linda said.

"We've been to the theater," Vanja said.

"Not me," Heidi said. "I was at school all day."

"You're so lovely," Linda said.

"Why can't you sleep, Mommy?" Vanja said.

"I don't know," Linda said. "But it's not serious. Look, there's the kiosk."

She opened the door and went in. As soon as her attention wandered from the children her face assumed an extremely distant expression. I could see she wanted to be somewhere else. She wanted to be with the children, but when they were there, she wanted to be somewhere else.

She bent down to them as they stood by the chest freezer.

"I want a Daim," Vanja said.

John pointed to a cone. Heidi to a tub.

She took the three ice creams, placed them on the counter and paid.

Then we moved on. It was as though Linda was holding back almost everything she had inside her. I could see the glow in her eyes, but the children noticed nothing, I could see that too. We sat down on a bench by a little pool at the other end of the hospital complex. The children sat beside us eating their ice cream. When they'd finished they played by the water's edge, John carried over a big branch he had found, which he threw in. Heidi crawled onto Linda's lap, she sat caressing her and staring into the distance.

"I want to sit on your lap too," Vanja said. Linda put Heidi down and lifted Vanja. Usually this would have led to a spat, but not today.

I moved to another bench and had a smoke. After I'd finished the cigarette I got up and put the ice-cream wrappers into a nearby bin.

"We have to go now," I said.

"Has it been half an hour?" Linda said.

I nodded.

She got up, I put John in the stroller, and then we set off.

"My room's up there," Linda said, pointing to the top of the long building.

"Is it nice?" Heidi said.

"Yes, it is," Linda said. "It's really nice."

"Can we see it?"

"I don't think they allow any children up there," I said. "It has to be very quiet."

"That's true," Linda said. "Perhaps it's better if I meet you at home."

"How long are you going to be here?" Vanja said.

"I don't know," Linda said. "But I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye, Mommy," Vanja and Heidi said.

The following day I arranged with the senior nurse for Linda to come home for an hour. She wasn't allowed to walk on her own, so I dressed the kids and we went to pick her up. As on the previous occasion, she was waiting outside the ward. She was heavily made-up. And a little unsteady on her legs, so I supported her with one arm and pushed the stroller with the other. Must be the medicine, I thought. She had such energy, they had said, medicines were ineffective against her mania, and they were giving her as much as they could. The children were chatting away as usual as we walked, past the big building site which would be the new underground train station – where people cycled and walked over the gravel-covered asphalt along the wire-netting fence after a day's work – past the end of the hotel first, then the side, across the road, through the door, and up and into the elevator.

Linda watched children's TV with them for a few minutes. She had John on her lap, with Vanja and Heidi snuggled up beside her. I made the simplest meal I knew, spaghetti and meatballs. After a little while Linda came out and headed for the hall. I thought she was going to the toilet, but she opened the door to the bedroom.

When the food was almost ready I looked in on her.

She was sitting in front of her laptop writing on Facebook.

"You've only got forty minutes left," I said. "Can't you stay with the children?"

"Soon," she said. "Just doing this."

I returned to the kitchen. Soon afterward she walked into the hall. I heard the balcony door open and close. I set the table, filled a water jug, cut some tomatoes into boats and placed four on each plate. I tipped the meatballs into a bowl, poured water into glasses, and emptied the spaghetti into a dish.

"Food's up!" I shouted.

No one moved.

I made a beeline for the TV and switched it off. The children followed me into the kitchen and sat down. I went to the balcony, where Linda was sitting with her feet on the balustrade smoking.

"Food's ready," I said.

"Coming!" she said.

As we ate she spoke to Vanja, Heidi, and John as she always did. I could see she had to pull herself together to do so and radiated a nervousness and desperation when the conversation flagged.

After the meal we all went into the living room. The children snuggled up to Linda, she put her arms around Vanja and Heidi and had John on her lap. But her eyes were frantic. She put John down on the floor and got to her feet.

"Where are you going, Mommy?" Heidi said.

"To the bathroom," she said.

She didn't come back, and I strode out to see what she was doing. She was writing on Facebook.

"We have to go now," I said. "It'll take a bit to dress them and so on. And you have to be back by seven."

"You don't need to accompany me," she said. "It's absolutely unnecessary. How far is it? A kilometer? Not even that. I can do it on my own."

"But they said you shouldn't walk on your own. They expressly said I had to be with you."

"That's just standard procedure," she said. "A rule for people who really can't look after themselves. I can. I'll walk back on my own so that you and the children can stay here."

"OK," I said. "Let's do that then."

I went into the living room.

"Come and say goodbye to Mommy," I said.

John slipped off the sofa and ran into the hall. Heidi followed.

"Vanja?"

"Bye, Mom!" she shouted.

Linda bent down and hugged Heidi and John. With an unsteady step and a bag hanging off her shoulder, she walked into the living room, where she leaned forward and kissed Vanja on the head.

When she opened the elevator door she looked at me and winked, kissed her fingertips and blew me a kiss.

At just after nine the hospital rang.

A nurse introduced herself and asked me if I was Linda's husband. I confirmed that I was.

"Is she with you now?" the nurse asked.

"Linda? No. She left for the hospital two hours ago. Hasn't she arrived?"

"No. But didn't you accompany her? That was the deal we made, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. But she seemed so centered. And we don't live that far away."

"She'll be refused any leave if the rules aren't adhered to."

"I understand."

"Now you know," she said.

"Yes," I said.

I hung up and called Linda's mobile. It wasn't on. I tried again a little later, and since it was still off then as well, I went to bed.

The next morning I called her ward. Linda was there. She had arrived at around midnight, the nurse said. She called Linda, and Linda came to the phone.

"Hi," I said.

"Hi," she said. "I've got a new nurse. You should meet him. Turns out he's read *Mein Kampf*. Hitler's, that is. I think he does martial arts and has a combat dog. But he's nice. I think he might become a good friend here."

"Linda," I said. "Yesterday you were supposed to go straight back to your ward."

"Oh that," she said. "I've already discussed that with the nurse. I just wanted to go out for a little walk. Nothing dangerous. I'm here of my own accord, you know. They can't actually stop me."

"Where did you go?"

"Møllevangen. Around there. Are you going to visit me afterwards?"

"Yes, after I've taken them to school."

"Good! It'll be good to see you again. Could you bring some money with you? I've run out."

"OK," I said. "Will do."

I rang the doorbell upstairs in the gray building. A young nurse opened up. We shook hands, I followed her in. Linda was sitting at a table in the dining room with a bearded man around thirty years old. I realized this was the man she had been speaking about. She stood up beaming with pleasure when she saw me, came over, and put her arms around me.

"This is Mats," she said. "I suppose you two have a lot to talk about."

"Hi," I said, shaking his hand.

"Hi," he said, and he must have noticed my obvious lack of interest because the first thing he said was that he had to go and do something.

We went into her room. The ornaments on the windowsill had multiplied. The photos of the children she had brought with her when she first came suggested she'd known her stay wouldn't be for one night. No one else had thought that except for me. Me and the children.

She talked about nurses and patients as though they were people she had known for many years. She talked about the ward as though it were a romantic sanatorium in a Thomas Mann novel. She talked about all her plans, everything she was going to do, and showed me a notebook in which she had already written quite a number of pages.

"What was it like being at home yesterday?" I said.

"It was great to see the children," she said. "But I can't manage so much all at once. There's something in me that wanders off. There are such strong forces in me and I can't resist them."

"You were wonderful with the children, Linda. It makes me so happy. I can see how much it takes out of you. But you have to carry on doing it. Do you think you can?"

She nodded.

"Are you coming here this afternoon?"

"Yes. Let's do what we did last time."

"Do you have any money on you?"

"Yes, but not very much. Two hundred. Is that enough?"

"No, not really. But I'll take it. Shall we go and have a smoke?"

We stood outside for ten minutes smoking, Linda found it impossible to stand still, I saw that she could hardly wait for me to go.

"See you later then," I said.

"Yes, see you," she said, and turned to two other patients standing there as I set off. At home I took my bike out of the cellar, it was a DBS I'd chosen from a selection of probably better bikes, only because the name reminded me of my childhood, the spring light, the smell of the sea between the spruce trees. I cycled to Flüggers Färg on *Köbenhavnervägen* and bought some paint, brushes, and foam rollers. When I got home I put the first coat on Vanja's room while crying so much I could barely see the wall. I painted three of the walls light blue, as Vanja had wanted, and the fourth white. Then I painted the long wall in what would soon be Heidi and John's room light green. That had been Heidi's suggestion. I cleaned the brushes and rollers, called Linda and asked how she was doing, she said very well, but she was bored. I said that was the point of being there, she was supposed to get bored and not do so much. She said she knew.

After the brief conversation I went to the balcony, surrounded by the sounds of the city and the warm August air, I inhaled the smoke into my lungs and thought about what was happening to Linda. It was clear she had complete awareness of herself, she agreed to everything I said to give me the impression she was closer to me than she was in reality: as soon as I was out of sight she changed direction and wandered into town. She would say she loved me, but as soon as I was there she felt an obligation she couldn't deal with, because it tied her and it was these bonds she was fleeing.

She had been as low as it was possible for any human to be, she'd been unable to articulate this and was overcome with thoughts of death, an unbearable state that lasted for weeks. It was obvious she wouldn't be able to control the light inside her afterwards, which made everything easy and good, but she had to follow it because beneath the light, at the end of the wave carrying her further and further upward, was the darkness. She knew that. Once she had told me that a nurse had said to her during a manic spell, Remember that really you are sad. But what was the "really" and the "not really" in this? What was Linda, what was depression, what was manic?

That afternoon Vanja came rushing up to me as I opened the nursery school gate.

"Dad! Dad! I can say *r*!" she shouted.

"Wow," I said. "Is that true?"

"Rrrrrrrrrrrrrr," she said. "Crown prince!"

"How did you do that?"

"I don't know. I just did."

She had tried to make a kind of gurgling Skåne *r* at the back of her throat without success, and she had tried a tip-of-the-tongue *r*, which sounded like a whistle, closer to *th* than *r*, the one I'd had to use until I was sixteen, which had deeply shamed me.

Now she had suddenly succeeded.

"Absolutely wonderful, Vanja," I said. "And just as you're starting school!"

I didn't say anything about the painting I had done, I wanted to surprise them. They were really pleased, especially Heidi, she lit up when she saw the room. Vanja, as usual, was a thought ahead.

"I'd like a picture of a dog on *that* wall," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Tomorrow I'll do a second coat and when it's dry we can buy some pictures."

"I'd like one of a cat," Heidi said.

Painting their rooms felt as if I was betraying Linda because it was an unconditional blessing, and I had no right to it, something good was happening here while she was in need, it was like going behind her back. Yet I had to do it for my own sake, it was an obvious compensation, and for the children's sake, who had to be kept as far away as possible from Linda's needs.

On the way home from school we stopped by a picture-framing shop. Vanja chose three pictures of a dog, Heidi chose one of a cat and one of Babar in a red plane, and then I chose a motif from Tove Jansson's *Who Will Comfort Toffle?*: Snufkin under a blue sky. We hung up the pictures, had something to eat, and set off to get Linda from the hospital. She swayed a little as she walked and seemed exhausted, spent. At home we watched kids' TV, she saw half the program before going to her bedroom, checking her e-mails, and logging on to Facebook. Afterwards she went to the balcony for a smoke. When she came back in, we had to go. She rushed to pack her things, the children put on their shoes rather reluctantly, and then we set off for the hospital, John in the stroller, Vanja and Heidi on either side, Linda at the front. She gave them a hug each, and when she straightened up I saw her eyes were moist. We said goodnight and walked home.

The following morning we had another meeting with the doctor. Linda put on another show, she was charming, lively, made everyone laugh. She showed great self-awareness and joked about her manic state. She just wanted everything to move faster. Faster, faster, faster. She couldn't sit still, she couldn't stay on the same topic, had to interrupt, intercede with something new. If I said anything she stared at me impatiently, finished my sentences for me, knew what I was going to say long before I said it, presumably also before I knew it myself. In that sense she was brilliant, in an elevated state, special to her, magnificent. But the fact that she didn't care about what lay beneath, the slowness and the dull-wittedness, the sluggishness and the ugliness, or didn't want to see it, meant her brilliance was a cover-up and became a place for herself, the only place she could bear to be. Thoughts of the children belonged there and perhaps also of me. But when she was with the children these two levels conflicted and it was intolerable for her, I saw how she had to fight to keep everything together when we visited her. Everything in her personality was in turmoil, her ten-year-old self could manifest itself, her teenage self could manifest itself, her erotic self, which was usually hidden and only revealed itself to me, could manifest itself, her boundless star-spangled poet self could manifest itself, her boastful, excessive self could manifest itself, for her personality was no longer under control, there was nothing to keep the various elements in check, the center had lost its hold, her manic forces hurled everything out, she wanted to rise, everything in her wanted to rise, and she rose higher and higher while becoming more and more exhausted. In all of this, the rising higher, the light that caused her to rise, there was one thing she never rose above, and that was her commitment to her children.

A lot became clear to me during these days. What Linda dreamed of was to live a perfectly ordinary life with a perfectly ordinary family. To have an ordinary job, go to the cabin on the weekends and work in the garden with the children running around her. But she was no ordinary person. She was the least ordinary person I had ever met. During all the years of childbearing, breastfeeding, and having little ones she had fought. Her struggle had been very different from mine; hers had been life or death. I had written that I was living an inauthentic life, I was living the life of someone else, and I might well have been, and this tormented me, but it didn't threaten me. It did threaten Linda. Her whole personality, the one I had settled down with, and her whole language had been erased in the life we'd lived. That wasn't the case with me. I had written, I'd had my language and, not least, my distance. She hadn't had any such distance until now, rising above all the ties and obligations and wanting to be utterly free. But the freedom was false, the freedom was a deception, the freedom was a circus in daylight. She saw it perhaps as glittering lights, she saw it perhaps as magical, but when I looked at her what I saw was the exhaustion, the unsteadiness on her feet, the worthless, the false, the hospital tristesse, all the people who had no hope and therefore had nothing.

I informed the staff at the nursery school that Linda had been admitted to the hospital and we had told the children she was there to sleep. They said they hadn't noticed any changes in the kids, they were as they always were. One of the staff said that our children had strong personalities. But no one adapts as quickly as children, and for them it was nothing special that their mother was in the hospital to sleep and they visited her every afternoon. They treated the subject of sleep as the most natural thing in the world, at first they had lots of questions, what did they actually do in the hospital, gradually their curiosity waned, that was how it was.

The school staff told me just to ask if I required any assistance. Also the parents we knew and had told that Linda was ill offered their help. It wasn't necessary, I said, and this was true, apart from one afternoon when I was going to Gothenburg to do a reading and needed a babysitter. A woman at the nursery scool was happy to lend a hand, so after I'd taken the children there, visited Linda at the hospital, and made a sausage stew for the evening meal, I caught the train north. The babysitter brought them home, fed them, put them to bed, and was sitting up for me when I returned at midnight, a bit annoyed that I'd arrived two hours later than I'd said, which I attempted to compensate for by paying especially well. If I had said how late it would be she might not have wanted the job, I had thought.

I had read a passage from the first novel, about inauthentic life, how I could lose my temper with the children and shake them, almost completely out of control. The moment I began to read I realized it was a mistake. I could sense what people were thinking, that no child should be treated like that, and I was a bad father who thought I was better just because I admitted how bad I was, I was seeking absolution in literature. Fortunately I was able to leave the event as soon as I'd done the reading, disappear into a waiting taxi and then a train compartment.

On the way back home, the real estate agent called. Not a nibble yet. We agreed to drop the price even further. I could hear that she too was heartily sick of the cabin.

In the midst of all this John's third birthday loomed. Both Vanja and Heidi had been allowed to have parties with guests from the start, while up to then John had been forced to celebrate with us. He hadn't known any different when he was one or two, but now that he was three I had been wondering for a while whether to invite some children over from the nursery school, to give him a party, but I came to the conclusion this was far too ambitious. Instead he would celebrate it at school in the usual way, with one of the parents bringing a cake and making a fruit salad, and then at home with cake and presents after the evening meal. Linda wanted to join us at the school, she had asked the doctor, who had said it was fine. I was not convinced it was a good idea. There was a shrill side to her now, which came out in social situations, and I was not keen for Heidi and John to see it.

She rang the doorbell of the apartment at eleven.

She'd had a haircut and dyed her hair black. She wore heavy green eye shadow, a red skirt, purple tights, and high heels. She was smiling, but looked utterly drained.

"What do you think of my Frida Kahlo look?" she said.

"You look good," I said.

"Shall we go and get some cake? And fruit?" she said.

"Can we have a cup of coffee first?" I said.

"Yes, of course," she said.

I wondered how to tell her. After seeing her, I knew there was absolutely no question of her organizing the birthday at the school.

"How are you?" I said.

"I'm very well. A bit tired though maybe."

On one wrist she had an enormous watch.

"You bought yourself a new watch?" I said.

"Yes! I took the biggest they had to remind myself to be punctual. Otherwise I can't handle it. They get so angry with me then."

"And the green strap?" I said, nodding toward her wrist.

"That's to symbolize that I'm totally free. Whenever I look at it I think about it. About being completely free."

"Very nice," I said. "Mm, Linda?"

"Yes?"

"It might be best if you don't go to the school. It'll be very intense, you know. And what you need is peace and quiet. It's much better if I go, and then you can come in the afternoon and celebrate at home. What do you think?"

"Yes, it'd be wonderful not to have to go," she said.

"That's good to hear," I said.

"But can I buy him some presents? I can do that, can't I?"

"Of course. We can do it together."

"Actually I've discussed everything with Jenny."

"OK."

She was back after a couple of hours, several bags in hand.

"There might be too many, but they're lovely," she said. "And I've bought something for the girls too."

"Good," I said. "I'll put them in the closet. Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"No, Jenny's waiting downstairs. See you this afternoon."

She came and we decided to skip the meal, John wanted to go straight to the cake. I lit the candles, we sang for him, the girls stood on their chairs, as they did at school. He blew out the candles. We ate cake, they were each given a present, and then John got the rest of his in the living room. Linda came in with a flurry of packets, ribbons, and plastic bags, she sat down with him and helped him to open them. Suddenly, in the middle of unpacking a large present, she got up and went to the balcony.

"Mama!" John cried. "Help me!"

I sat down with him. Luckily he accepted that, and we unpacked the present and opened the box it was in. Linda moved to the bedroom and logged on to Facebook, she was writing when I entered.

"It's gone very well," I said.

"I couldn't stand any more," she said. "I can only take a little at a time."

"I know, but that's enough."

She didn't look at me, her fingers clattered across the keyboard.

"I think it's time to go," I said.

"Yes," she said. "I just have to finish this."

Afterwards she stood up and went into the hall.

"It's John's birthday," she said. "It doesn't feel right that they have to come with me. Couldn't you just stay here and carry on with the birthday?"

"Do you remember what happened last time?"

"Yes, yes. But I'm not there now. I'll go straight to the hospital. I promise. I can't risk not being able to go out."

"Are you sure?" I said.

"Absolutely," she said.

"OK," I said.

She looked at me.

"It's always struck me that I was a sailor's wife. You went to sea and left me on my own. But now it's the other way around. Now I'm the sailor."

She laughed.

I laughed too because she was wearing her striped sweater and did a sailor's salute.

We kissed. She pressed against me, breathed in my ear, I wrestled myself free.

"Not now," I said.

"I know," she said. "Now I'm casting my moorings."

And then she was gone.

A few hours later they called from the hospital and asked if Linda was at home. I apologized, saying it had been impossible to accompany her because of the children, and I had taken a risk.

The following day I asked her what she had done. She said she had just drifted around a little. Been to a few bars, talked to people. One man she had spoken to, my age, visited her just before I arrived later that week. She said they were good friends. I had never seen or heard of him. The same applied to many others, suddenly she had a large circle of acquaintances in Malmö. That evening she was refused permission to go out, so we visited her in the park, where she was composed again, a long way from the impatient, restless teenager she had been the evening before. Ingrid came down from Stockholm; the first thing she did was visit Linda. We talked about it on her return.

"The children come first," Ingrid said. "They're the most important. They're the top priority."

"I agree," I said.

"It was like that when her father became ill. The children came first, whatever happened."

The Saturday before school started I took Vanja with me to IKEA. We bought a bed, a desk, a wardrobe, and a chest of drawers. On Sunday we bought a satchel, a pencil case, and new clothes. I assembled all the furniture, apart from the drawers, after they had gone to bed because I got so angry with do-it-yourself kits that I might have taken my annoyance out on the children if they were around.

Early on Monday morning Linda came home to be there on Vanja's first day of school. I was apprehensive about her appearance, hoping she wouldn't turn up in green eye shadow and purple tights, but she didn't, she wore a simple flowery dress and had taken care with her makeup, which, apart from the red lipstick, was neutral.

I took a photo outside the front entrance to the building, exactly as someone, presumably my mother, had done with me, outside our house, on my first day of school.

We took John and Heidi to the nursery and then we walked the last stretch to the school with Vanja. She held Linda's hand and mine. She was a little afraid, I sensed, but also full of excitement.

The atmosphere in the classroom was as I remembered from all my first days. Half formal, half uncertain. Linda talked to the teacher and other parents. Vanja stood with her best friend and stared at the other children. When the teacher called them and they had to sit on a carpet in the middle of the floor, she was undaunted, she had her friend behind her.

Linda and I sat next to each other looking at Vanja in the middle of this group of children. After half an hour Linda leaned toward me and whispered she had to go. I nodded. We agreed to meet at the little café by Möllan. Only twenty minutes later it was over as far as the parents were concerned, and I walked to the café, where Linda talked and talked and could finally go wherever her mind led her.

Toward the end of the week I was due to go to the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. After taking the children to the school, I rented a car and drove over the bridge to Denmark. The weather was magnificent. Sun, high blue sky, Indian summer. I sat outside the boathouse by the sea drinking coffee and smoking and chatting to the other authors, among them Tomas Espedal, who had shown such heart and defended me in *Bergens Tidende*, and Dag Solstad and Tua Forsström, the Finnish poet, who turned out to be a warm, generous person. There was a full house, two hundred people, and when it was over I drove back in the darkness and went to bed in a quiet apartment where everyone was asleep. The next day I did exactly the same. Linda was worried while I was away, even if it was only for the day, at the same time she told everyone I had to go to Denmark to appear at Louisiana.

The doctors suggested electric-shock therapy. They called it by a different name, but that is what it was. They wanted to halt the mania in its tracks. She was given an appointment, but when the time came she didn't turn up. She was frightened, I understood that, she didn't want it.

One afternoon she came with me to pick up the children. First Heidi and John, who we took with us to Vanja's school. Her classmates were in the schoolyard, but Vanja was nowhere to be seen.

"I'll go behind there and look for her," I said.

Linda nodded.

In a corner, barely visible, she stood with her friend, clapping their hands against each other's and singing.

"Come on, Vanja," I said.

Both of them came and we walked over to the others. Linda was speaking with one of the teachers, with Heidi clinging to her leg.

"Where's John?" I said.

"I don't know," Linda said. "I'm not responsible for them now."

Again and again I misjudged her.

I looked around. No John. I ran to the back of the school. There, by the playground equipment, he was staring at the bigger children. I lifted him up and took him back with me, and we all walked home together.

Ingrid returned to Stockholm, and a few days later my mother traveled down. She also visited Linda and was shocked by the place she was in. She said it had been like that in Norway in the sixties. The nurses had white uniforms, she couldn't believe her eyes when she saw that, Mom said. The rooms were run-down and, to a great extent, institutional. Linda's enthrallment couldn't last that much longer, I suspected, because she was becoming more and more tired, and at some point she would collapse with exhaustion and plummet into what she was fleeing.

One morning the real estate agent called, she was angry, I could hear. The key had gone, she hadn't been able to get in, she had been forced to turn people away and tell them there was no viewing. We had agreed that we'd leave the key in a flowerpot, hadn't we? I said I didn't know what had happened, but I would investigate and contact her later.

I called Linda.

"You haven't been to the cabin, have you?"

"No," she said. "But I might've done something a little stupid."

"Oh?"

"Well, I told a man here about our place. I told him the cabin was empty and that the key was in a flowerpot beside the front step. He needed somewhere to live, you see. I just wanted to help him."

"What sort of a man?" I said.

"He's been here in the ward a few times. He was going to be deported, I think, and needed somewhere to hide."

"What!" I said.

"He was nice," she said.

"What sort of a person is he?"

"He's from Bosnia or Serbia or somewhere like that," she said. "He was in the war there."

"You know we're trying to sell the cabin, don't you?" I said. "There was a viewing organized and the key had disappeared. Thank God he wasn't there. But now we need to get hold of the key. You'll have to go and get it from him."

"But I can't do that," she said. "He might be a bit dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Yes."

"Take a nurse with you then. Tell them. Take two nurses. Can you do that?"

"Yes," she said.

Next time I went I talked to the nurse who had read *Mein Kampf*. He had gone to the cabin together with another nurse and Linda. The man had turned aggressive and refused to hand over the key, he was going to live there, she'd promised him. They managed to wrest the key from him, but his actions were so threatening afterwards that the nurses called for the police. I phoned the real estate agent and tried to explain what had happened. I said there had been a kind of break-in and a man had been living there. The place was probably a mess, but I would go and clean it up, and then we could make a fresh start. The real estate agent accepted that, but not without some skepticism in her voice.

Then Linda came home.

First she phoned late at night, she was absolutely hysterical, she hadn't been given any food, she'd smashed a glass in her fury, extra staff had been called, it was humiliating, now she wanted to come home. She had gone there of her own accord, it was her right, and half an hour later she was home. She was perfectly calm, and said it was enough now, she wanted to be at home. I said that was what I wanted as well. We talked for several hours, she was as she had been before, everything was good. The next morning she was on a high and restless again, and walked back to the hospital, but nevertheless something had happened, she was closer to herself, the energy was slowly draining from her, and one evening one of the nurses there, the motherly one, knelt in front of Linda and told her she had to go back to her husband and children, this had gone on for long enough and wasn't leading anywhere. The intensity of her plea had shocked Linda, shaken her, at the same time she was on her way down, she had begun to talk at a normal speed about normal things, to tell us she longed to be with us, and then one morning she came home with her backpack, and it was over.

It was over.

She embraced her children when they came back from school and said she was staying.

"Can you sleep now?" Vanja said.

"Yes," she said. "Now I can sleep."

We stayed up chatting that evening. She was worn out, quiet, but when she looked at me, it was Linda looking at me, no one else.

"I've been on a long journey," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"Now I'm home," she said.

"Yes," I said. "But it was no big deal."

"OK," she said. "I think I called your editor. Geir Gulliksen. I told him not to put you under any pressure. And to take care of you."

"That was nicely put," I said. "Not a problem."

"And I've called Tore. And Yngve. And all my old friends. People I haven't seen for years. I don't remember what I said."

"Not a problem. And now we know where we stand. Perhaps it will happen again. It might. But we know it's not a problem. You're just on your travels."

"Away from my family."

"No. You haven't been. It's been fine. You're a hero. You coped so well."

She cried.

I cried.

It was over.

But the cabin was a problem. I had to go and deal with it. Linda didn't want me to go, the guy was dangerous, the police had said we shouldn't confront him under any circumstances if we met him. I e-mailed Aage, one of the few friends I had in Malmö, explained the situation, and asked if he would be willing to accompany me with a baseball bat or something. He called me minutes later. He was in London. He said he could go with me when he was back and I shouldn't go on my own. I said I wouldn't. But a crazed ex-Yugoslav seemed like a minor problem after the summer I'd had, so I went to Åhléns and bought some new rugs, curtains, tablecloths and cushion covers, and some flowers from a florist, detergents and cloths from Hemköp, took the bus to the cabins, which were deserted in the rain, the season was already long over. My heart was thudding in my chest as I approached our cabin. I carefully opened the wicket gate, stopped, listened. Nothing. I walked around the back. Nothing. And the door was in one piece. He wasn't here. I unlocked the door and entered. It was a mess. It stank of smoke, and there were cigarette butts everywhere. The floor was filthy. There were bottles all over the place. But nothing was broken. I threw out all the rugs, curtains, tablecloths and cushion covers, all the bottles and cigarette butts and detritus. I was on my guard the whole time, expecting the door to be kicked in at any moment and the crazed guy to come in and gun me down. It didn't happen. I washed every single centimeter, from the ceiling over the cramped mezzanine to the floor. In several places there were fairly large piles of fine sawdust. I sighed. That had to be woodworm, the whole damned house must have been rotten to the core. I decided not to say a word. I laid the new rugs on the floor, hung the new curtains over the windows, put a cloth on the table and arranged the flowerpots. The cabin looked flawless. With a garbage bag in each hand I left, the rain was pouring down and dusk had started to fall. Not a soul in sight anywhere. I threw the bags into a trash container and caught the bus home. I had a hot bath and then watched a film with everyone – *Dumbo*, the elephant with the big ears. Linda was tired but collected and present.

The viewing was held: no offers. At the next viewing someone saw the triangular piles of fine sawdust, so new ones had appeared and people had shaken their heads, I assumed. We got Anticimex in, a pest-control company, it wasn't woodworm but some relatively harmless insect, they said, which they now had under control.

The real estate agent took the cabin off the market and put it back in spring, at the first viewing there was an offer, it was low, but we accepted it, money was no longer of any consequence in this dream. From October that autumn we spent every weekend in the new house. We celebrated Christmas there, all twelve of us, the snow was meters high outside, Vanja and Heidi saw me put on a Christmas elf outfit, but were still spellbound when I came across the snow with a lantern in my hand. After Christmas I ditched the manuscript and started anew with this one. I got up at four every morning and worked until the children had to be picked up, and I have been doing that until now, as I sit here writing this. The story of last summer that I have just told looks different now, I know, from the way it really was. Why? Because Linda is a human being and her unique essence is indescribable, her own distinctive presence, her nature and her soul, which were always there beside me, which I saw and felt regardless of whatever else was going on. It didn't reside in what she did, it didn't reside in what she said, it resided in what she was.

It resides in what she is. Leaning over Heidi, whispering something in her ear, Heidi laughing her trilled laugh. Lying on the sofa with Vanja on top, laughing at something our clever daughter has said. The tenderness in her gaze as she looks at John. And her hand at the base of my neck, warm, those totally unguarded eyes of hers.

I am so happy about Linda, and I am so happy about our children. I will never forgive myself for what I've exposed them to, but I did it, and I will have to live with it.

Now it is 7:07, and the novel is finally finished. In two hours Linda will be coming here, I will hug her and tell her I've finished, and I will never do anything like this to her and our children again. Then we'll take the train to Louisiana. I am going to be interviewed onstage, after which it will be her turn, because her own book has come out and it glitters and sparkles like a star-filled night sky. Afterwards we will catch the train to Malmö, where we will get in the car and drive back to our house, and the whole way I will revel in, truly revel in, the thought that I am no longer a writer.

Malmö, Glemmingebro, February 27, 2008–September 2, 2011

To Linda, Vanja, Heidi, and John.
I love you.

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ISBN 978-0-914671-99-2
$33
53300>
9 780914 671992

P7-DIG-087